

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



HALBE TREPPE

GRILL POINT (English title)

105 Min.

Music – 17 Hippies

Director – Andreas Dresen

CAST: Steffi Kühnert as Ellen Kukowski
Axel Prahl as Uwe Kukowski
Gabriela Maria Schmeide as Katrin Düring
Thorsten Merten as Christian Düring

LOVE AND REALITY

by Brian Conboy

In the most crucial and affecting of all subject matters: our loves, relationships and marriages, we are in more danger than ever of being manipulated and seduced by idealized images on the big screen. And indeed we almost always are in the world of film: the artificially imposed love-interest, fairy tale true love, the happy romantic ending, the handsome hero and the sexy starlet. These images are ever-present in cinema and given their power of enticement, what filmmaker wanting a reasonable return on his investment of time and money would want to chance a realistic and honest portrayal of relationships? Director Andreas Dresen does just that in his 2001 film **Halbe Treppe**. (English title **Grill Point**)

Our story concerns two married couples who live and work in Frankfurt an der Oder on the Polish border and enjoy a long-term friendship. Ewe owns and operates a luncheonette (Imbiss) called Halbe Treppe set on an outdoor cement staircase. His long work hours and neglect of his family are causing serious tension in his marriage to Ellen. Christian is a DJ at a local radio station and the passion has definitely withered in his marriage to Katrin. It's not surprising when Christian seeks out the affections of Ellen and the two commence a secret love affair. Suddenly their infidelity is discovered, causing a profound personal crisis in all four individuals and rocking the foundation of their lives. The four struggle with the rage, fear and anguish caused by the affair and stumble toward resolutions which astonish themselves as well as the viewer.

Crucial to the impact of the story and the intimacy of the characters of Halbe Treppe is its style of hyper-realism, a style as old as filmmaking itself with a long list of accomplished practitioners. The signature techniques of the approach, the flat unadorned lighting, and hand-held camera, are employed religiously in this film but the real essence of the method has to do with art of the actors and the use of improvisation. Dresen and his team of actors took this methodology to the furthest limit.

Originating the project without a script and with only a few general concepts, the characters, actions and dialogue were developed in a democratic process during pre-production and actual production improvisations by the actors themselves in tandem with Dresen. Their constant and absolute esthetic guideline in the process was to never move beyond normal everyday existence – never employing the threat of violence or the use of the fantastic or the extraordinary – but to find what is dramatic and meaningful in everyone’s seemingly normal uneventful life. Dresen allowed and encouraged his actors to explore their own inner selves and bring to their performances what is both real and vital in *their* lives.

Halbe Treppe achieves what most films never realize and what commercial romances religiously avoid. The universality of its themes and the authenticity of its characters give the film its special potency and intimacy. It is an honest film about the trauma and devastation of broken marriages and how people painfully reconstruct their shattered lives. It has no new or innovative insights about the human condition but manages to skillfully and successfully dramatize the most essential aspect of living: the bonds we have with one another and the devastation we endure when those bonds are broken.

Andreas Dresen was born in 1963 and began working in film and theater in Schwerin in East Germany in 1984. He has been working as a writer and director for film, television and theater since 1992. His most noteworthy films are Stilles Land (Silent Country, 1992); Nachtgestalten (Night Shapes, 1998); Die Polizistin (The Policewoman, 2000); Halbe Treppe (Grill Point, 2001); Herr Wichmann von der CDU (2003); and Willenbrock (2004).