

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

### ***Friday Film Fest Series***



### **Hilde - 2009**

**Director:** Kai Wessel

**Screenplay:** Maria von Heland; Hildegard Knef

**Producer:** Jens Meurer

**Cinematography:** Hagen Bogdanski

**Spieldauer:** 132 Min. (German with German subtitles)

**Cast:** Heike Makatsch (Hildegard); Dan Stevens (David Cameron); Monica Bleibtreu (Else Bongers); Hanns Zischler (Erich Pommer); Johanna Gastdorf (Frieda Knef); Trystan Wyn Puetter (Kurt Hirsch); Anian Zollner (Ewald v. Demandowsky); Stanley Townsend (David Selznick)

Being Hilde – Allen Krumm

It is a pity Hildegard Knef didn't see herself purely as an author. She could write. Even in translation, there is an exciting rush and easy intimacy to her prose a bit reminiscent of Celine. Her imagination rivaled her *Sprachkraft*, an imagination some claim is most strikingly evinced in her autobiography. Perhaps if writing had been her only career, she could have achieved considerable ranking as a post war literary lioness.

One sees that expressive power as well in the lyrics she wrote. But those lyrics were for another earlier career when she was a *Chansonsängerin*. And that singing career came after a career on stage, and that came after her stardom in the *Trümmerfilme* of the late forties, which came before a couple of stints in Hollywood. There were so many careers, yet she only ever had one calling, that of being Hildegard Knef. She fulfilled that calling with breathtaking tenacity. And then it was over. She burned like a flame and then she burned out. Before she was fifty, she had consumed her cache of careers, along with prodigious quantities of drugs and alcohol. But she was still Hildegard Knef and there was a long afterglow.

Becoming Hildegard Knef was a steep climb. Her father died when she was only 6 months old, forcing her mother Frieda to return to Berlin, where she and Hildegard lived in cramped circumstances, first with her parents, then with Frieda's second husband. Hildegard loved her grandfather and hated almost everything else about her family life. Perhaps this stifling childhood milieu was, if not the source, at least a significant tributary of her fierce ambition.

In 1942, at the age of 16, she managed to gain admittance to the animation staff of Ufa as a *Trickfilmlehrling*. On a tip, she solicited an interview and was given a screen test. The results culminated in her being recommended to Goebbels as a suitable representation of Aryan womanhood. Goebbels reacted in the best tradition of a quintessential Hollywood studio boss: "*Die ist nett. Jedoch muss die Nase operiert werden.*"

Thus was her first career launched. A subsequent affair with Goebbels' powerful lieutenant, Ewald von Demandowsky, in the summer of 1944 would dog her steps for decades. Concerning Knef's account of her experiences in April and May of 1945 there are, in lawyerly parlance, deficiencies in the evidence. Whether she fought with the *Volkssturm* or spent several months in a Soviet prison camp are matters difficult to establish. Both Knef and her later editors seemed to concur with John Ford: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Having survived the collapse (whatever the details actually were) she met Kurt Hirsch, who was the ranking American film officer in the western sector. While apparently still living with Demandowsky in the basement of his villa, she cultivated a relationship with Hirsch. As the screenwriter Will Tremper later wryly observed: „*Nur eine Neunzehnjährige hatte damals das Recht, im Frühling einen Nationalsozialisten zu lieben und im Herbst einen jüdischen Filmoffizier.*“

From late 1945 she began to gain attention through a series of successful theater roles around Berlin. That she had never become well known under the Nazi film regime was now actually an advantage. The German film industry, emerging along with the entire country from the desolate vacuum of *die Stunde Null*, was desperately eager for fresh faces. Knef proved to be the face the public was awaiting and 1946 proved to be her *Annus Mirabilis*, as she achieved astounding fame in the lead female role of Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, the first German film released after the war. In the spring and fall of 1947, she starred successfully in two more films, and thus in a little more than two years after the war's end came to symbolize the possibilities of new beginnings in Germany.

An invitation from David O. Selznick to come to Hollywood seemed to portend even greater success. Some, including Erich Pommer, tried to warn her: "*Hollywood braucht keine Deutsche.*" But his advice was to no avail, as in rapid succession, she married Hirsch, acquired an agent, and in January 1948 left for America. In New York she met Selznick personally and signed a contract.

And then her dizzying ascent stalled. Between 1948 and 1950, while living in southern California with Kurt Hirsch, she made no films. Whatever the specific obstacles were, being German and speaking with an accent were undoubtedly coefficients in her involuntary stagnation. She was befriended by Marlene Dietrich, but Dietrich, who was a generation older and whose career was not burdened by having been a German between 1933 and 1945, was not an effective role model.

Knef made a comeback of sorts in Europe in 1951 in Willi Forst's *Die Sünderin*, although the film probably netted as much in terms of scandal as in revenue. She subsequently did appear in several big budget Hollywood movies in the early fifties, such as *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, but by the mid fifties, with Hollywood once again ignoring her, she had reinvented herself as a Broadway star in *Lace Curtains*, the musical based on Ernst Lubitsch's film *Ninotchka*.

After the spectacular two year run of *Lace Curtains*, she chose a film called *Madaleine und der Legionär* as the vehicle by which to reestablish herself in German films. Everything was wrong about the film, from the script to the direction to the timing, and it proved to be a fiasco, marking the beginning of an irreversible decline in her status as a leading actress and box office draw.

Yet her professional life, replete with such oscillations of success and failure, surged upward yet again when Knef emerged in the early sixties as a *Chansonsängerin*. She enchanted audiences with her *Weltschmerz* laden voice, a voice "...*die das Leben hart gemacht hat, aber Liebe weich werden läßt.*" She owed much in this endeavor to her second husband, the British actor David Cameron, who essentially gave up his own career to revive hers.

And then came her last career, the least expected one, but probably her true *métier*. She wrote her autobiography, *Der geschenkte Gaul*. It became one of the bestselling books in post war Germany, and was translated into seventeen languages. The American edition, *The Gift*

*Horse*, was number one on the New York Times bestseller list for eighteen weeks.

In subsequent years, a long irreversible decline set in, including two bouts with cancer and appearances where she sang to half empty concert halls. Careers are one thing, yet one has only one calling. *Alles oder nichts*...for every upward surge, for every downward plunge, that had been her constant conviction as she pursued her calling of being Hildegard Knef.