

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Leni Riefenstahl

Credits

Production: Germany 1993.
Running Time: Part 1 – 96 minutes; Part 2 – 92 minutes.
Director: Ray Müller
Writer: Ray Müller
Producers: Hans-Jürgen Panitz; Jacques de Clercq; Dimitri de Clercq
Editors: Beate Kostner; Vera Dubsikova

Biography

Leni Riefenstahl was born in Berlin in August 1902. She started to study dance in 1918 and began dancing professionally in 1923. When her dancing career was

interrupted by a knee injury, she persuaded Arnold Fanck to give her a leading role in *Der Heilige Berg* and she subsequently became a star of the so-called mountain films of the 1920s. Riefenstahl directed her first film, *Das Blaue Licht*, in 1932. When she met Hitler, he said to her “When we come to power, you must make my films.” In 1934 she filmed *Triumph of the Will* for the Nazis, and in 1936 she made *Olympia*. Her directing career was effectively ended by World War II, but she regained a measure of fame with the publication of her photography of the Nuba tribesmen of Sudan in the 1970s. She also became a scuba diving enthusiast in the 70s. Now nearly 100 years old, Riefenstahl lives in Munich.

Précis – Allen Krumm

We are told at the outset of this documentary that it will not be merely an “updating of old prejudices.” Ray Müller strives constantly to live up to this credo and if there is a theme beyond Riefenstahl herself, it is the juxtaposition of morals and aesthetics seen through the prism of Riefenstahl’s life and work. He allows her to speak for herself, simply confronting the viewer with her claims and contrasting those claims with what can be gleaned from the historical record concerning her. Her central contention is that art and politics have nothing to do with each other. (“If an artist dedicates himself totally to his work, he cannot think politically.”)

Taken back to the sites of the films she starred in or directed, Riefenstahl alternately flares with anger and beams with pleasure as Müller coaxes her to speak of those long ago times when she was one of the most famous directors in the world. Riefenstahl is at times surprisingly candid (“Hitler really fascinated me”) and at times superficially evasive (“If it were propaganda, as many say, there would be a commentator.”) She is also funny, abrasive, domineering and flirtatious, sometimes all in the same sentence.

Müller’s unique approach makes no attempt to manipulate or control his subject but neither does he allow her to dominate. He simply seems cheerfully willing to concede

that whether behind the camera or in front of it, Leni Riefenstahl will always be the star. He also succeeds remarkably in drawing out her fierce personality in moments of anger and joy, and captures fascinating glimpses of the thinking and techniques of an undeniably great artist. "It's a feeling for links between images", she says as she lovingly watches clips from *Olympia*. At another point, describing her struggles in editing *Das Blaue Licht*, she thunders "You must find a cinematic solution."

To paraphrase the film series motto, Müller sees Riefenstahl, and takes us toward her. It is left up to the viewer to decide what to think of this "last living image maker of the Nazis." Did she betray her talent by making films for the Nazis or was she just a professional doing her job, albeit in the wrong time and place ("I'd have made the exact same film in Moscow, if the need arose.")

Was she a willing collaborator in manipulating the public with her powerful images (One needs "a beginning, an end, and in the middle something which thrills the people.") or was she simply striving for excellence ("I just observed and tried to film it well.") Riefenstahl claims that the only message of her magnum opus *Triumph of the Will* was work and peace. A contemporary named Goebbels disagreed, describing it as "the great vision of the Führer on film." What to make of Leni Riefenstahl: was she the seducer or was she seduced. Müller's documentary poses this question but leaves the answer to the viewer.

Filmography

Das Blaue Licht 1932
Sieg des Glaubens 1933
Triumph des Willens 1935
Tag der Freiheit: Unsere Wehrmacht 1935
Olympia 1938
Fest der Völker (Teil 1)
Fest der Schönheit (Teil 2) 1938
Tiefland 1940/1954

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