

As Ludwig headed toward middle age, he became more and more detached from and indifferent to affairs of state. The word had gone forth "... not to speak of politics anymore unless his majesty asks a question..." But in the realm that mattered, in the realm of beauty, the king never ceased to dream and early on he began to translate his inner world to the outer world by making "stone love stone."

The castle of Neuschwanstein was begun in 1869, as was the fantastic hunting lodge known as *Königshaus am Schachen*. The palaces came next: Linderhof was begun in 1870 and Herrenchiemsee in 1878. Each edifice embodied a style and paid homage to a period or person admired by Ludwig: Neuschwanstein (Romanesque and medieval); Linderhof (rococo, echoing the Petit Trianon of Louis XV); Herrenchiemsee (neo-baroque – a tribute to Louis XIV's Versailles). But each structure also bore the imprimatur of Ludwig's imagination and managed to combine exquisite traditional craftsmanship with state of the art building techniques.

But by the 1880's the realization of such dreams had put the royal treasury in the red. That unpleasant economic fact coupled with Ludwig's self imposed isolation and increasingly eccentric behavior led a group of Ludwig's own ministers, headed by Minister President Freiherr von Lutz, to a rather radical and quite convenient conclusion: the king must go.

Having a decent respect for the opinions of mankind and eager to ensure preemptive and collective *Rückendeckung* in case things got messy with the public at large, the conspirators knew they needed an unassailable justification. So naturally an *ärztliches Gutachten* was written claiming the king was crazy and Ludwig was accordingly deposed in June of 1886 and put under house arrest.

Just a day later, on the evening of June 13th, Ludwig went for a walk along the shore of the Starnbergersee with Dr. Bernhard von Gudden, the very man who had compiled the evidence that went into the official report. Both men were found dead a few hours later, floating close to the shore. Rumors abounded. Was it murder? Suicide? An accident? Each possibility entails the question of who did what to whom.

Long before the JFK assassination debates, a debate raged about the demise of Ludwig. Theories proliferated, but perhaps all the speculation would have quickly abated if everyone had simply listened to Sissi: "The king was not mad; he was just an eccentric living in a world of dreams. They might have treated him more gently and thus perhaps have spared him so terrible an end."

Despite Sissi's insight (which suggests suicide) the debate over how Ludwig died goes on. Yet there is a much more important question to consider: Where would Bavaria be without Ludwig? He gave his country some wonderful architecture and he rescued Wagner and thus preserved Wagner's music for posterity, and most of all he gave a gift that keeps on giving: his myth. People can ponder that myth when they visit Neuschwanstein or Linderhoff or Herrenchiemsee, or if they have the gumption to make the four hour hike up to Schachen.

Perhaps the best insights would come to those lucky enough to go for a sleigh ride through a snow filled alpine valley on a moonlit night. In any case, such musings can only lead to the conclusion that when it comes to the ranking of extraordinary Kings, Ludwig is first in his aversion to war, first in promoting peace through beauty, and that he unquestionably deserves to be first in the hearts of his countrymen, not least in the ranks of the Bavarian tourist industry.

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Ludwig II

By Marie Noelle and Peter Sehr

April 11th, 2014

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

Non-Members \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

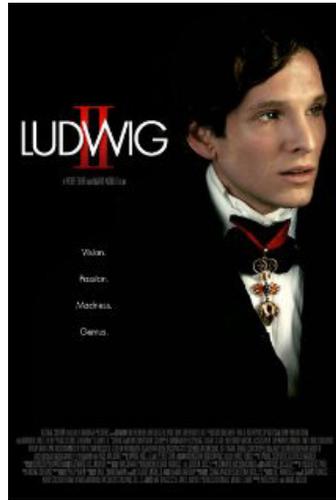
Ludwig II (2012)

Credits:

Director: Marie Noelle, Peter Sehr
Screenplay: Marie Noelle, Peter Sehr
Cinematography: Christian Berger
Music: Bruno Coulais

Length: 130 Minutes

Cast: Sabin Tambrea -Young Ludwig
Sebastian Schipper -Old Ludwig
Paula Beer -Sophie
Edgar Selge -Richard Wagner
Johann Lutz -Justus von Dohnanyi
Hannah Herzsprung -Kaiserin Elisabeth



Commentary by A. Krumm

“The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces ... we are such stuff as dreams are made on...”

Kings come and go like the rest of us and most of them, when they go, are gone, departing into richly deserved oblivion. Granted there are a few who linger in memory largely because of the tenacious half life and often noxious *Nachwirkung* of the sum total of their deeds. Such monarchs tend to be mission oriented, functioning as hostile takeover artists who acquire large tracts of real estate and leave behind lots of corpses or rulers who are hailed by historians because they grabbed their unappreciative subjects by the hair and dragged them into the future.

But there exists a singular coterie of fabled kings who not only linger but are positively alive to us. On occasion we even speak of them in the present tense. Such kings were, and are, totally *outré*, having no truck with standard kingly activities like dynastic breeding or conquest or improving their people to death. They were mythic in their own lifetime and the myth intensifies with time. If the death of such a king is shrouded in mystery and controversy, the myth only resonates more intensely.

Ludwig II is such a king, an indelible figure in our collective historical imagination. As Paul Verlaine said, Ludwig was “... *le seul vrai roi de ce siècle...*”. Surveying the ranks of kings in the nineteenth century, one has to concede that the competition wasn't all that stiff, but that wasn't Ludwig's fault. He would have been transcendent in any century.

The Swan King, the Dream King, the *Märchenkönig* and the Moon King are all fitting appellations for a ruler deadly serious in his intent to instantiate Never Never Land somewhere to the south of Munich. Ludwig would have rejected Enoch Powell's dictum that “the supreme function of statesmanship is to provide against preventable evils”. Preventing evil is well and good, and something a king should not entirely neglect, but it is not the supreme function of a King, at least not one of Ludwig's ilk. The highest and deepest function is to pursue beauty regardless of the cost, and in the process elevate the citizens of the realm by immersing them in that beauty. Evils will then tend to wither of their own accord.

We can construe Ludwig as a Wittelsbachian version of Walter Pater, dedicated to

“exquisite passion” and believing fervently that all that mattered was “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy” and to absolutely never “sleep before evening.” Actually Ludwig did invert the latter dictum, preferring to never sleep before morning.

Obviously then, reality was mostly a drag. That was Ludwig's foundational insight. He had others. He knew war was a crock, that politics (aka statecraft) was a delicate edifice of competing lies. And he seemed to know, as many dreamers do, that life is very short. So he was always seeking those moments Pater spoke of, where “...some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us, – for that moment only...”

You have to sympathize with Ludwig's maniacal preference for a world other than the one surrounding him when he became king in March of 1864. The circumstances and events of the 1860s rendered Bavaria more or less obsolete as a candidate for nationhood despite Ludwig's desire to preserve her identity and independence. The identity survived in a cultural sense, but political independence disappeared for good with the founding of the *Kaiserreich* in 1871. The king had an *Eiserne Kanzler* to thank for this state of affairs. Imagine being scarcely in your twenties and having to deal with Otto von Bismarck in the political realm. The dynamics of *Realpolitik* could only have induced nightmares in a dream king.

Impractical as he could be, Ludwig certainly had the good sense to love his cousin Sissi, although she could only ever be his big sister. And his life overflowed with those endearing eccentricities and charming habits which are part and parcel of the aura one expects to emanate from a properly mythic figure. Possibly the most charming of his habits was his practice of taking midnight sleigh rides through the alpine valleys of southern Bavaria. Isolated woodcutters and remote forest ranges could never be entirely sure whether their sovereign would show up in the wee hours, hale and hearty and eager for a meal and conversation.

And then there was the king and the *Künstler*. Richard Wagner seduced a century and bewitched any number of individuals in the course of the sojourn he modestly called *Mein Leben*. He used and abused people freely, whether financially or emotionally, knowing this to be his duty as a great artist. He didn't need to seduce the mind or heart of the young king, as the latter already revered him. In fact Ludwig put the moves on Wagner, sending his Cabinet Secretary Pfistermeister to find the composer and bring him back to Munich in the spring of 1864.

It was very fortunate that Ludwig did, as Wagner was in a very bad way when the king rescued him, and rescuing Wagner did not come cheap. Despite the power of his personality and the allure of his art, there was an obnoxious subset of mercenary philistines who actually expected Wagner to pay them what he owed them. Within a year of their meeting, including the settlement of old debts and upkeep, Wagner had depleted the Kings bank account by about 190,000 gulden.

Factored into today's dollars that sum would amount to several million.

Although their relationship suffered serious strains in the years to come, Ludwig never wavered in his devotion to and support of Wagner and it is reasonable to believe that the Ring cycle would not have been completed without Ludwig's backing. Just a few days after Wagner's death, Ludwig declared quite accurately, if somewhat immodestly: “It was I who was the first to recognize the artist whom the whole world now mourns; and it was I who saved him for the world.”