

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

### Friday Film Fest Series



### **Luther - 2003**

#### **Credits:**

Director: Eric Till

Script: Bart Gavigan and Camille Thomasson

Producer: Brigitte Rochow, Christian Stehr, Alexander Thies

Cinematography: Robert Fraisse

Music: Richard Harvey

**Cast:** Joseph Fiennes (Martin Luther); Peter Ustinov (Frederick the Wise); Bruno Ganz (Johannes von Staupitz); Alfred Molina (Johannes Tetzel); Claire Cox (Katherina von Bora); Jonathan Firth (Girolamo Aleander); Uwe Ochsenknecht (Leo X); Mathieu Carrière (Cardinal Cajetan); Torben Liebrecht (Charles V); Jochen Horst (Andreas Karlstadt); Benjamin Sadler (Georg Spalatin); Maria Simon (Hanna)

#### **A Prodigals Portrait – Allen Krumm**

Hans Luder endured more than his share of paternal angst. His eldest son, a law school drop out who was said to be a drunk and who later got in trouble with the authorities, never got far in life, being born and dying in the same backwater berg of Eisleben. He suffered from low self esteem (“poor stinking bag of maggots that I am”), was obsessive/compulsive (“I can do no other”) and was a lifelong drag on the morals and ethics of others, always encouraging folks to “sin boldly”. When he finally got a job, he botched his debut, spilling the wine and embarrassing his father.

Sympathy is in order for Hans Luder. Hard bitten capitalist arriviste that he was, all he ever really wanted was an upwardly mobile son who could care for him in his old age. A contemporary, Leo de Medici (no slouch as a capitalist himself) would have commiserated with Hans, had they ever had the opportunity to quaff a stein of bier together. Leo, having been given the papacy by God, just wanted to enjoy his acquisition.

Leo could have done so, if only it weren't for Luder Junior. The young fellow had a vexing propensity for causing trouble, especially for Leo. Over a building program, of all things! In exasperation, Leo eventually sought therapy in creative writing: “*Exsurge Domine... Arise O Lord and judge thy cause; a wild boar has invaded Thy vineyard.*” Apart from that wild boar, things might have turned out nicely.

Eric Till attempts to show us how it did turn out with his biopic **Luther**. A film about Martin Luther is in a sense almost doomed to failure, given the nature of the medium coupled with Luther's massive *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Any treatment of the man (whether as linguist, theologian, or political and social theorist) is daunting in scope and depth for the most dedicated of scholars, let alone a director attempting to popularize Luther for the general public. But suffice it to say that in Till's **Luther** we have a very

successful failure. Perhaps he internalized Luther's famous dictum and simply decided to "film boldly."

One of the problems in telling the tale of Luther is that we know so much. There is an abundance of detail, the "precious grub" of history, concerning Luther. Scholars have been parsing his life and times as well as his soul and psyche for centuries. At least part of the enduring fascination inheres in the conviction that Luther can readily function as a hinge of history; swing him one way, and you are in the medieval world; swing him the other way, and you are in the early modern world.

Daunting as the task may be, Director Till strikes a nice balance between the panoramic and the particular. This film makes clear that Martin Luther was a man passionately concerned about the specific state of his own soul. Like Jacob, he spent many nights wrestling with God. Unlike Jacob (who apparently never matriculated) this may have been in large part the result of Luther overdosing on the nominalist tradition espoused by many of his professors during his undergraduate days at the University of Erfurt.

This tradition which emphasized a *Deus Absconditus* (the hidden God, inscrutable and arbitrary) must have helped to accelerate and intensify Martin's only too natural inclination toward dark existential excursions, adding to the excess baggage of *Anfechtungen* (spiritual agonies and struggles) which he seemed to tote everywhere he went.

Joseph Too Tall Fiennes does not in the least outwardly resemble Luther, but he does succeed admirably in giving us a glimpse of the inward Luther, that intense "seeker of certainty" as Martin Marty called him, who sometimes referred to his *Anfechtungen* as "delicious despair." And Fiennes also succeeds in projecting the antitheses which personified Luther: sophisticated scholar and simple monk; triumphant believer and chronic doubter; the religious leader embroiled in the secular power politics of his day.

Peter Ustinov gives a wonderfully witty performance as Frederick the Wise, a political acrobat who had mastered the balance beam of high Renaissance politics, instinctively

employing the proper ratio of groveling, dissembling and defiance with whomever was crowding him at any given moment. Ustinov convincingly captures the figure of Elector Frederick, a connoisseur of all things human who recognized genius when he saw it. Frederick was not going to surrender his star monk to anyone. If Paris was worth a mass, this young fellow might turn out to be worth more than all 17000 of Frederick's relics.

With his usual feel for character, Bruno Ganz brings Luther's *Seelsorger* Johannes von Staupitz vividly to life. The latter strives mightily to get his patient to cough up and spit out all that noxious *Anfechtungen* by administering a spiritual dosing regime of trust in a merciful God through Jesus. Staupitz wanted Martin to see that it was possible to be *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously sinner and saint). Eventually his precocious protégé is able to grasp this quintessentially protestant presupposition. Thus did Luther apprehend the "righteousness of God" in his fabled *Turmerlebnis* and achieve the *metanoia* (repentance, change of heart and mind) God simultaneously demands of and grants to the faithful.

Johannes Tetzl most likely was the pushy super salesman that Till would have us believe via Alfred Molinas' performance. Tetzl had a quota to achieve and he couldn't afford any distractions. Katherina von Bora looked even less like the lovely Claire Cox than Luther looked like Fiennes. In fact she probably looked more like Tetzl, sans bald pate. Yet Till indulges in valid artistic license here, emphasizing the love and respect that undergirded the marriage of the former monk to the former nun.

The cinematography is fitting, faithfully serving the story and consistently fostering a sense of time and place. The script is rather protestant in spirit - we must take on faith a chronology which suffers from an excess of conflation. Nonetheless, Eric Till captures the essence of the explosive controversies that Luther sparked, controversies that in some cases endure more than 450 years after his death. Theologians are still exploring ways to repair the breach he helped to tear in the fabric of western Christendom. Historians of all varieties produce reams of Luther

scholarship probing the nature and extent of his impact on German and European history.

Till brings the power of Luther's words into focus in scenes such as the confrontation with Charles V at the Diet of Worms. Luther was a verbal volcano, his collected works comprising 65 volumes of theological exegesis and interpretation, as well as political commentary and innumerable occasional polemical works exemplified in his *Flugschriften*.

Of Luther's influence on the German language, Klopstock said: "No one who knows what a language is can come face to face with Luther without venerating him. There is no nation in which one man has done so much to form its language." Many of his words were what Luther himself would have referred to as *Tatenwörter* or deed words, words with the power to make something happen. And indeed many of his words are linked in the historical record with momentous events, some celebrated, some sobering, some sad.

As with all sincere hagiographers, Till tends to minimize the rough side of the rugged Luther. He lived in an age when vicious polemics were the norm, and there were a long list of claimants for the title of "Most Abused by Luther." The finalists include Catholics, Jews, Turks, Anabaptists, the Pope, Sulemein the Magnificent and Henry the Eighth. A dispassionate assessment reveals they are all tied for first place.

Till chooses to end his story with a scene where Luther learns of the religious settlement achieved at the Diet of Augsburg, a settlement which ensured the survival of the evangelical movement. If he had opted for a scene depicting Luther's death sixteen years later, it would have been a very brief one. Justus Jonas, a former coworker at Wittenberg, went to Eisleben to observe and chronicle Luther's final hours, and in the final moments asked him a very pointed question: "Reverend father, will you die steadfast in Christ and the doctrines you have preached?" Teetering on the brink of eternity, for once the loquacious Luther was content with one word: "Ja".

#### **Selected Filmography of Eric Till**

Voices From Within (TV 1994)  
Small Gifts (TV 1994)  
Bonhoeffer – Die Letzte Stufe (2000)

#### **Bibliography and suggested reading**

Luther: Einführung in sein Denken. Gerhard Ebeling Tübingen 1964

Luther In Context. David C. Steinmetz. Grand Rapids Michigan. 2002

Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel. Heiko Oberman.  
Seidler Verlag, Berlin. 1982

Here I Stand – A Life Of Martin Luther. Roland Bainton.  
Abingdon Press. New York 1950.