

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

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



### **Margarete Steiff - 2005**

**Director:** Xaver Schwarzenberger

**Script:** Suzanne Beck; Thomas Eifler

**Producer:** Arno Ortmaier; Dieter Pochlatko

**Music:** Hans Jürgen Buchner

**Duration:** 89 minutes

**Cast:** Heike Makatsch (Margarete Steiff); Felix Eitner (Fritz Steiff); Harry Prinz (Julius); Bernadette Heerwagon (Charlotte); Herbert Knaup (Margarete's father); Suzanne von Borsody (Margarete's mother)

Anyone who has ever cuddled with their own teddy bear knows how good it feels, even if they haven't pondered the dynamics of that good feeling or traced the genealogy of that teddy bear. Many cuddlers in America have probably never heard of Margarete Steiff. But cuddlers everywhere should claim Ms. Steiff as their matron saint. *Steifftiere*, her enchanting progeny, are now well into their second century of captivating children from ages three to ninety three.

Times change, manners morph, technology advances, but kids always know what they love. Print ads from the 1890s featuring *Steifftiere* fascinated kids. They wanted those wonderful animals. Television ads from the 1950s needed to do little more than show the faces of gleeful kids hugging the latest *Steifftier* incarnation. Kids without stuffed animals wanted *Steiftiere*. The *Steifftiere* displayed on the contemporary website of the company have the same effect. Kids still love *Steifftiere*. In fact, the devotion of kids to *Steifftiere* has always rivaled that of adults.

*Steifftiere* today remain the same enchanting artifacts, evocations of things wondrous and childlike, suffused with the same charm and innocence of the originals. A company executive put it well a few years ago: "Our animals show their souls". They do indeed, and perhaps they show more than a hint of the soul of Margarete Steiff, who was the original source of all this enchantment.

Her life was remarkable and remains inspiring. Suffering is said to engender creativity and that is one possible source of her creativity. But it is doubtful she would have seen it that way. She was her own affirmative action committee. She seemed to sense life was there for the taking and she affirmed it. Permanently crippled as a small child, confined to a wheelchair for life, she was supposed to remain a burden to her family. Instead she founded *Margarete Steiff, Filzwarenfabrik Giengen/Brenz* and made the family financially secure and famous.

Most of all, she knew what made us feel good. She became the mother superior of countless inner children. There is not much information on Margarete's drinking habits but she had her own *Reinheitsgebot*: "für Kinder ist nur das Beste gut genug". In 1902, at the instigation of her nephew Richard, the company introduced "Bär 55 PB" (bear 55, plush material, moveable joints). It was popular in Germany, but more remarkably, within a few years it had conquered America, where it was marketed as the *Teddybär* in honor of the incumbent President Teddy Roosevelt.

A cartoon had been published in America in 1902 about "Teddy's bear" – a bear cub the president refused to shoot, which had touched off a craze in America for toy stuffed bears. When Richard Steiff showed up in St Louis in 1904 for the World's Fair, intending to promote *Steifftiere*, he encountered this teddy bear mania, and discovered that the Steiff *Teddybär* had won a grand prize. By 1907 nearly one million *Teddybärs* had been sold worldwide.

In English, there is a whiff of condescension in the term feel-good. In dictionaries it is usually categorized as a hyphenated compound adjective derived from the verb feel and the adverb good. The phrase occurs most typically in the popular vernacular apropos entertainment. For instance, in assessing the work of Rainer Fassbinder, Edward Guthmann noted: "Everything about Fassbinder ran contrary to Hollywood notions of feel-good entertainment". In German, there is no indigenous idiom that quite makes the grade: *sich wohl fühlen* doesn't quite match up; *zu meiner Zufriedenheit* falls short; *gemütlich* is off base. So Germans have had to settle for the Denglish rendition: *der Feelgood-Faktor*. Clunky to the discerning ear, tinged with teutonic pomposity, but apparently the best that can be done.

The *sine qua non* of any genuine feel-good movie is that inherently difficult to define but very active ingredient which makes you feel good. A genuine feel-good movie leaves no aesthetic aftertaste. It makes you feel good, and allows you to feel good about feeling good.

Therefore, adept though we may be at faking sophistication when necessary, in our heart of collective hearts we love feel-good movies.

*Der Feelgood-Faktor* synergizes voice and mood and thus transcends specific genre boundaries. The spirit of feel-good can be discerned in genres ranging from romantic comedy (Bringing up Baby) to animal adventure (Homeward Bound) to unadulterated *Schmachtfetzen* (A Christmas Carol). The Heidi films, starting with the 1937 Hollywood version starring Shirley Temple, should be given a category of their own.

We love feel-good best of all when it is decidedly well done. Xaver Schwarzenberger does feel-good very well in telling the tale of Margarete Steiff. His film is bursting with all kinds of active feel-good ingredients. He gives us wistful gazes and pigtails, crushed hopes and broken wagons, breakthrough moments and new gadgets, noble doctors and mean bankers, snowflakes and salt of the earth parents. His confection saturates us in a measured excess of pure extract of feel-good.

Schwarzenberger gives us permission to relax into the remembrance of the safe realms and golden times of childhood. There is an ambient assurance that no one will be left behind and that all will be well however many painful passages there may be between the beginning and the end of the journey. No small amount of the feel-good factor in his film is due to Heike Makatsch. Not every actor can function in the realm of feel-good. Makatsch is flawless. She also is blessed with a face that works wonderfully. She makes it easy for us to get down and get childlike.

The English poet John Betjeman had a teddy bear named Archibald which was said to have been made by Steiff. This *Teddybär* was allegedly the inspiration for Sebastian Flyte's teddy bear in *Brideshead Revisited*. In one of his poems Betjeman said of his beloved teddy bear: "...I could smooth those half-moon ears / And wet that forehead with my tears." Betjeman certainly knew why

teddy bears make us feel so good. He reaffirmed this in a later line, noting that they "...never let you down."