

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Mephisto

Director: Istvan Szabo
Script: Klaus Mann, Péter Dobai, Istvan Szabo
Cast: Klaus Maria Brandauer (Hendrik Hoefgen), Krystyna Janda (Barbara Bruckner), Rolf Hoppe (Hermann Göring persona) Ildiko Kishonti (Dora Martin), Karin Boyd (Juliette Martens), Christine Harbort (Lotte Lindenthal)
Producer: Manfred Durniok
Cinematography: Lajos Koltai
Music: Zdenko Tamassy
Length: 144 minutes
Language: German with English subtitles

My Mephisto – Allen Krumm

Alice noted during her peregrinations in Wonderland that things were getting “Curiouser and curiouser”. Sometimes a similar state can be discerned in the nexus of history and art and politics. Günter Grass would probably appreciate this. In 1981 Istvan Szabo directed the film **Mephisto**, which was based on the 1936 novel by Klaus Mann, the central character of which (Hendrik Höfgen) was based more or less on the career of Gustaf Gründgens, Klaus Mann’s erstwhile friend and brother-in-law.

Gründgens was also one of the preeminent German actors of that era, whose rendition of the Mephisto role was said to be without parallel in the history of German theater. Gründgens had chosen to remain in Germany after the Nazis came to power, eventually ascending to the position of director of the state theater in Berlin. His patron was said to be none other than Herman Göring. So we have in Gründgens, or one might be led to this impression by Mann and Szabo, a prototypical enabling *Mitläufer*, who was to Third Reich Kultur along with the likes of Wilhelm Furtwangler, what Werner Heisenberg and Werner von Braun were to Third Reich science and technology.

Klaus Mann committed suicide in 1949. Gründgens died in 1963, by some accounts having committed suicide as well. Istvan Szabo is very much alive, but recent reports (not disputed by Szabo) indicate that he served as an informer for the Hungarian secret police when he was a student at Budapest’s Academy of Theatre and Film in the late 1950s, during the communist regime of Janos Kadar.

Szabo has defended his activities from that period, saying that in one case he was able to save the life of a fellow student. Oddly, a similar claim has been made for Gründgens; a number of contemporaries have contended that his inside position with the Nazis enabled him to rescue a number of fellow actors from prison or death. In any case, as Szabo made this film about Gründgens, he certainly had the considerable advantage

of being able to draw from a deep well of personal insights and experience concerning the dynamics of compromising with a totalitarian regime.

The enduring reputation of Klaus Mann's roman a clef probably rests more on its legal and polemical *Nachwirkung* than on its literary merits. It was originally published in Amsterdam, and then in the GDR, but when a publisher attempted to bring out an edition in West Germany in the 1960s, a lawsuit ensued, instigated by Gründgens adopted son Peter Gorski, and the publication was initially prohibited, not appearing in West Germany until 1981.

As with the novel, so with the film: the importance of this work rests not so much with the quality of the film per se as it does with the historical context of its genesis, and the evolution and devolution of the real life individuals upon which the story was based, as well as the artistic creators (Mann and Szabo) themselves. To indulge in the jargon, the film is not fully realized. The dialogue is too often too pretty. It is hard to imagine even actors engaging in such structured and witty repartee in their off hours. It is also too often predictable, as if the script writer was working through a check list of things that need to be said about the Nazis, or by the Nazis. Too much of the dialogue strives too hard to move the story along.

Szabo frequently relies on set piece scenes to illustrate the moral corruption of that era, as when, for instance, Höfgen stumbles upon some Brown Shirts beating up a Jewish man in the alley, and scurries away when confronted by one of the thugs, muttering, as if to excuse them: "They are completely drunk." Or when the journeyman actor who had clashed with Höfgen drills the Hitler youth in calisthenics as the boys chant slogans seemingly lifted from "Triumph of the Will". If the claim can be made that there are orthodox narrative techniques for discoursing about the Nazi era, then Szabo is guilty of orthodoxy.

Decidedly vulnerable to a charge of over simplification as

it is, this film nonetheless has its charm and its moments. Klaus Maria Brandauer's Hendrik Höfgen exists in a nimbus of self absorption, arrogance and leering insouciance, manipulating others with his ruthless charm, an incorrigible careerist who never deviates from his lust to achieve ultimate fame. Rolf Hoppe is wonderful as the Göring character, frightening, almost, one is tempted to say, a bit Mephistophelian, overwhelming us with the sincerity of his brutal Aryan family values and his *Daseinszweck* – naked power.

In the final scene, taken to the new arena by the General, Höfgen is sent stumbling out into the middle of the field, relentlessly pursued by the search lights and then caught, like an artistic bug, in the cross hairs. Distraught, drained, defeated, Höfgen says simply: "What do they want of me...after all, I'm only an actor." This scene redeems the movie, compensating for all the preceding deficiencies. It is visually and psychologically persuasive, compelling us to identify with Höfgen's grim epiphany.

Höfgen's pleading visage tells us he knows it is too late for his bartered soul. Szabo seems to be counseling us to conclude that it is a mistake to expect too much from actors, or from politicians, or novelists, or even from directors. Among these ranks, as with most ranks of society, it was and still is a distinct minority that is willing, in such a time and in such a place, to say in a loud and clear voice: "Ich nicht." The majority of society, in that time and place, as well as in our own time and place, might well be forced to conclude, along with Mann and Gründgens and Grass and Szabo, that "...we are all Fausts now..."