

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Director: Torsten Fischer
Producer: Markus Brunnemann
Drehbuch: Benedikt Röskau
Cinematography: Holly Fink
Music: Annette Focks
Spieldauer: 106 minutes
Released: 2009

Cast: Jessica Schwartz (Romy); Guillaume Delorme (Alain Delon); Thomas Kretschmann (Harry Meyen); Maresa Hörbiger (Magda Schneider); Heinz Hoenig (Hans Herbert Blatzheim); Karl Heinz Hackl (Wolf Albach-Retty); Sandro Lohmann (David)

Accidentals and Essentials – Allen Krumm

Words fail when it comes to Romy Schneider. Everyday tools like adjectives fall apart and precision instruments like metaphor and simile crack and break under the strain of describing her. She was beautiful, breathtakingly beautiful; one could extemporize for paragraphs upon pages about the endlessly mysterious depths of her sparkling eyes, the beguilingly seductive innocence of her smile, the boldly gentle symmetry of her features. But here we go, clumsily aligning adjectives with her accidentals and there really is no point to it. There was something else about her, something essential, that was the true source of her enduring fascination for those who watched her movies and those who made those movies with her.

One can catch reflections of that scarcely definable *ding an sich* which she had, that essential something else, in the eyes of her co-stars. Karlheinz Böhm would look at that something and then smile and look away. Horst Buchholz seems to have had a hard time ever looking directly at it for very long. Italian guys named Fabio and French guys named Alain knew about that something else and being French and Italian were able to unabashedly look at it for very long stretches. They were unfazed by the lack of French and Italian adjectives for it.

Directors saw it as well and were eager to saturate their films with that essence. Orson Welles saw it. When he looked at her he saw what Ernst Marischka had seen and what Luchino Visconti and Henri Clouzot saw. They all saw that powerfully present essential something that had sovereign immunity from any *Verbalisierung*. It was just there. Entire countries saw it, and three of them had national crushes on her. The Austrians and Germans knew who she was – she was Sissi and they were besotted with Sissi.

The French were equally besotted, although being French they were never quite sure who she was for them and spent a long time experimenting to find out. But they loved her - when *Le Parisian* ran a poll in the late sixties,

she left her competitors such as Bridgette Bardot and Catherine Deneuve in the dust. The French film industry has awarded the *Prix Romy Schneider* since 1984.

Orson Welles, who knew something about being considered the best and rocketing to fame at a young age, called her the best actress of her generation. Initially for her at least, this was no mystical or ineluctable artistic calling. She simply went into the family business. Both her parents were accomplished actors and the acting bent went back several generations. Whether by nurture or nature, something trickled down to her, and whether propelled by a shove or a leap, she entered the profession in full motion and the whole motion of her allure rolled like a wave over audiences for the rest of her life.

Her first role was in *Wenn Der Weisse Flieder Wieder Bluht*, a film in which her mother was starring. She had just turned fifteen when it premiered. When the first Sissi movie premiered in Vienna just before Christmas of 1955, she was seventeen and her life changed forever. The Sissi image nearly overwhelmed her and she came to hate it. She said simply: "Sissi clings to me like oatmeal."

In the end she may never have entirely escaped from Sissi, but if that was true, it was true in large part because that essential something else was there in the end just like it was in the beginning with Sissi. Between her first role in 1953 and her last in 1982 (*La Passante Du Sans-Souci*) she made fifty nine other movies. She summarized her theory of acting, if she had one, thusly: "In diesem Beruf habe ich immer Angst, nicht alles aus mir herauszuholen. Jeder Film, in dem ich mitwirke, ist für mich wie eine Wette, die ich unbedingt gewinnen muß. Ich muß immer mich selbst übertreffen."

She thought only ten of her films were successful. Experts and amateurs alike thought otherwise. Bertrand Tavernier, who directed her in *Mort En Direct* (Death Watch) summarized her gift thusly: „Sie hatte eine Lyrik und eine Stärke die über eine einzelne Rolle hinausging.

Sie überstieg jede Form des Naturalismus und Verismus..."

A successful biopic has to strike a precarious balance. It has to hint and suggest and allude to properly indicative things and steer us in the right direction, while allowing us to make the crucial turns and leaving the ultimate meaning of a *Lebenslauf* for us to supply. If such a picture does not go far enough it descends into stale chronicle; if it goes too far it becomes a cartoon. Torsten Fischer does an admirable job of maintaining that balance. He calls his method *Skizzenhaft*. That is why it was not important to him that his leading lady did not really resemble Romy Schneider. And who could resemble Romy Schneider anyway?

Jessica Schwarz, who initially was reluctant to take on the role, in the end made the leap of faith to portray Romy Schneider and was smart enough to know better than to imitate what cannot be imitated. She charmingly does what she needs to do to introduce us to Romy Schneider. She intimates and leaves the rest to us. And she would very likely be among the first to advise us to do what Orson Welles and all the rest did: watch Romy Schneider and bask in the glow of those accidentals and catch a glimpse of that *einzigartig* essence.

When you are the stuff of legend, it behooves you to die young. Romy Schneider did her duty. She died at 43. She had suffered a series of hard blows (the suicide of her first husband after their divorce, the tragic death of her son) and maybe there were just too many hard blows in too short of a time. Some asserted it was suicide. The doctor just said her heart stopped. No one knows for sure. Perhaps it was a slow suicide, a weariness with life that devolved into a life style of substance abuse that was sure to kill her. She was buried in Boissy-sans-Avoir. Later Alain Delon, who had remained a lifelong friend, arranged to have her son David buried next to her.

There is a publicity photo of Rosemarie Magdalena Albach from 1953, before she was Sissi. Everything is there, the beautiful accidentals and that vital radiant essence that

made her so different. It is difficult to tear your eyes away from that photo. There is a photo of Romy Schneider from 1982, decades after Sissi's reign had ended, just months before she died. The ravaged remnants of those beautiful accidentals are still there, eroded, but unmistakable. The vital radiant essence shines out undiminished, just as it had twenty nine years before.