

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Sein Oder Nicht Sein (To Be Or Not To Be)

Credits:

Director: Ernst Lubitsch
Production: Filmed in 1941, released in 1942.
Producer: Ernst Lubitsch and Vincent Korda
Length: 98 Minutes
Music: Werner R. Heymann
Script: Ernst Lubitsch and Melchior Lengyel
Screenplay: Edwin Justus Meyer
Cinematography: Rudolph Mate

Cast and Role: Jack Benny (Joseph Tura), Carole Lombard (Maria Tura), Robert Stack (Lt. Stanislav Sobinski), Felix Bressart (Greenberg), Lionel Atwill (Rawitch), Stanley Ridges (Prof. Alexander Siletsky), Sig Ruman (Colonel Ehrhardt) Tom Dugan (Bronski), Henry Victor (Sergeant Schultz)

Biography



Already famous as a German director, Ernst Lubitsch (1892 – 1947) strolled into a similar status in America as if on cue. An utterly unlikely candidate, born the son of a Jewish tailor in 1892, he began acting in small roles in theatres in Berlin, working for among others Max Reinhardt. He gained exposure to film during this time as well through his work as an apprentice at the Bioscope Film Studios.

Lubitsch made his acting debut in 1913 in the comedy **Meyer auf der Alm**, where he deftly employed the popular stereotype of the indomitably cheerful Jewish *Menschentyp*. His first effort as a director came in 1914 with **Fräulein Seifenschaum** which he wrote and starred in.

Lubitsch had his first breakthrough hit with **Carmen** in 1918, where the first traces of the “Lubitsch touch” emerged. In the following years, Lubitsch experimented with a variety of genres. After the international success of his movie **Madame Dubarry** in 1922, the American actress Mary Pickford invited Lubitsch to come to Hollywood and direct her in a movie. (**Rosita**).

In Hollywood he worked with the leading actresses of that era, including Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. By 1935, Lubitsch was head of production at Paramount His most famous comedy, **To Be Or Not To Be**, was based on the play “*Noch ist Polen nicht verloren*”.

To Lubitsch or Not To Lubitsch – Karl Moehlmann

Warsaw in 1939 on the eve of the German invasion: a troupe of actors intending to satirize the Nazis is warned to desist for fear of incurring the Fuhrer’s wrath. Since *Majestätsbeleidigung* is *verboten*, there is no choice but to stage Hamlet, an equally sure audience pleaser.

The *über* pompous leading man Joseph Tura never pleases a certain young Lieutenant Sobinski with his soliloquizing. The latter always walks out when Tura declaims Hamlet's immortal opening words: "To be or not to be..."

To tryst or not to tryst, that is the answer. Tura is convinced the young man undervalues his consummate acting skills, but Lieutenant Sobinski is simply besotted with Tura's lovely wife Maria. The cluelessly cuckolded Tura epitomizes Lubitsch's penchant for employing a stock character or a ribald trope in order to lucidly expose the foibles and failings of human nature.

As a mere *Nebenhandlung*, the Germans invade, Warsaw is bombed and Poland is subjected to the brutal Nazi occupation. À la Lubitsch, the plot thickens exponentially. Lover boy Lieutenant Sobinski meets Professor Siletsky in London. The latter has been entrusted by the British to aid the Polish underground. Sobinski discovers that Siletsky is really a Nazi spy. This forces the intrepid troupe of thespians back in Warsaw to step into action to prevent key information about the Polish underground from being delivered to Gestapo Chief Erhardt.

The actors in the troupe take on the roles of several lifetimes as they impersonate a panoply of Nazis ranging from obsequious underlings all the way up the fascist food chain to Hitler. As the plot becomes positively viscous, scene after scene epitomizes the Lubitsch touch for hitting the bull's eye with acidly minimalist visual and verbal satire.

There is the troupe actor's inspired ad lib to the cascading chorus of *Heil Hitlers* ("Heil Myself"); Lieutenant Sobinski's prominently priapic exit at the outset of each soliloquy; the spluttering exculpatory rages of Colonel Erhardt to his underling Schultz; the breezy analysis of the dynamics of foreign occupation ("Yes, we do the concentrating and the Poles do the camping.") Erhardt's clumsy attempt to romance Maria Tura ("I'll give you extra butter rations") and Joseph Tura's inexhaustibly

incessant supply of conceit. Whether through dialogue or the camera, in each scene Lubitsch unflinchingly isolates and instantiates the essence of what he wants to reveal about each character.

To Be Or Not To Be provoked in some quarters the same sort of criticism leveled at Chaplin's ***The Great Dictator*** (1940). Nazi oppression was not considered a suitable subject for mockery and some felt the picture was doubly ill-timed considering the known atrocities committed by the Nazis and the death of Carole Lombard, who died in a plane crash before the movie was released.

Gestapo Chief Erhardt's line "*What he (Tura/Benny) did to Shakespeare, we are now doing to Poland.*" provoked the most indignation. Among the critics was a Miss Mildred Martin, a journalist from the Philadelphia Inquirer who called attention to Lubitsch's "callous, tasteless effort to find fun in the bombing of Warsaw". Lubitsch responded in part in a letter which was published in the Inquirer on August 25, 1943.

"Naturally, your statement that 'I find fun in the bombing of Warsaw' is completely untrue ... I have shown it in all seriousness; the commentation under the shots of the devastated Warsaw speaks for itself... What I have satirized in this picture are the Nazis and their ridiculous ideology. ... Never have I said in a picture anything derogative about Poland or the Poles. On the contrary I have portrayed them as a gallant people who ... even in the darkest day never lost courage and ingenuity or their sense of humor."

To Be Or Not To Be is still considered by some to be tasteless and vulgar. And viewed from a certain perspective, it might be said to contain more than a little "German bashing". Lubitsch's defenders will point out that like any skilled satirist, he knew that nuance had nothing to do with it. The shallow plot, the often campy acting, the exaggerated stereotyping of all the German characters coupled with all the other crudities are intentional and incessant, since Lubitsch saw laughter as

an effective weapon with which to attack human cruelty and the intransigent ignorant servility inherent in any totalitarian system. As he said in another interview: "I had made up my mind to make a picture with no attempt to relieve anybody from anything at any time."

Yet there is a surprising amount of moralizing within the sarcasm, as when the actor Greenberg launches into an edited and hence generalized version of Shylocks soliloquy from "The Merchant of Venice" at various junctures in the film. (One should recall that the Wannsee conference took place in the same year that the film was released.) The relevant portion of Shakespeare's original version ran as follows:

"Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed if you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

William Rothman once noted that Lubitsch had a "faith in the camera's powers of revelation." As effective as the scripts could be, he invariably used the camera to inject even more interpretive insight. From the synergy of script and camera, he was intent (often in the crudest psychological sense) on disrobing the characters on the screen in order to expose their all too human nature.

Hence the essence of the Lubitsch touch might be seen as his grasp of techniques for peeling back the surface layer of manners and mores to display the masked motives and meanings just beneath the surface. In revealing his characters, he intended to reveal the members of the audience to themselves. In the process he often revealed himself. If his flaw was an excess of cynicism concerning the human condition, a redeeming virtue was his ability to wittily narrate that condition via the comedy inherent in the tragedy.

Selected Filmography:

Carmen (1918), Die Augen der Mumie Ma (1918), Madame Dubarry (1919), Das Weib des Pharao (1921), The Marriage Circle (Die Ehe im Kreise, 1924), Lady Windermere's fan (Lady Windermere's Fächer, 1925), The Love Parade (Liebesparade, 1929), The Merry Widow (Die lustige Witwe, 1934), Ninotchka (Ninotschka, 1939), The Shop Around The Corner (Rendezvous nach Ladenschluß, 1940), To Be Or Not To Be (Sein oder Nicht Sein, 1942), Heaven can wait (Ein himmlischer Sünder / Memoiren eines Lebemannes, 1943), That Lady In Ermine (Die Frau im Hermelin, 1948 - fertiggestellt von Otto Preminger) u. a.

Suggested Reading / Bibliography:

Hermann G. Weinberg: The Lubitsch Touch. A Critical Study. New York 1968
Scott Eyman: Ernst Lubitsch – Laughter In Paradise. Simon and Schuster – New York
James Harvey: Romantic Comedy in Hollywood From Lubitsch to Sturges
Alfred Knopf – New York. 1987
William Paul: Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy. Columbia University Press. 1983