

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Sissi

(Part 1 of Trilogy)

By Ernst Marischka

Nov 18st 2011 • 6:30 PM •

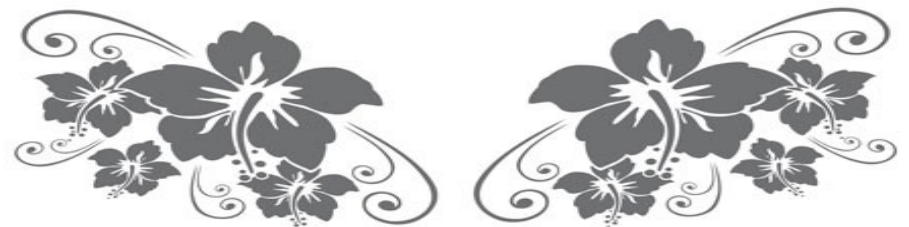
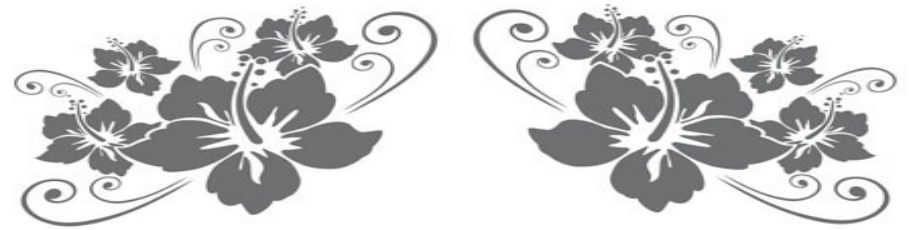
Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

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Sissi

Director: Ernst Marischka

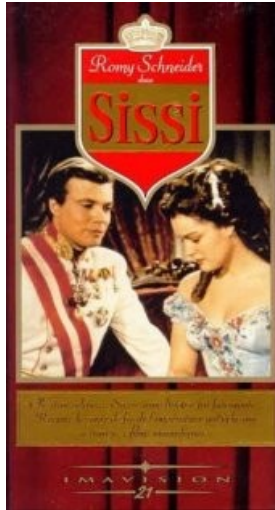
Screenplay: Ernst Marischka

Cinematography: Bruno Mondl

Music: Anton Profes

Length: 102 minutes

Cast: Sissi (Romy Schneider), Karl Heinz Böhm (Franz Josef), Magda Schneider (Duchess Ludovica), Uta Franz (Princess Helene), Gustav Knuth (Duke Max), Vilma Degischer (Archduchess Sophie) Josef Meinrad (Gendarmierie-Major Bockl), Erich Nikowitz (Archduke Franz Karl)



Notes and commentary by A. Krumm

Sissi's Moment ...

Maybe every decade gets the movie it needs. This might explain Victor Fleming's civil war in *Gone With The Wind*, if what Americans in the thirties needed to remember was a noble Lost Cause and those wonderful ante bellum days when southern belles like Vivien Leigh were flitting about. Maybe such reasoning explains the arrival of *Its A Wonderful Life* in 1946 and *High Noon* in 1952.

And of course, as noted by David Thomson, Hitchcock appropriately inaugurated the sixties with the moment of *Psycho*, a prescient peek at the coming zeitgeist of the sixties. Just possibly, for every national season there is a reason for a movie which serves up beautifully crafted memories of what should have been or provokes titillating hopes and fears of what might be. Ernst Marischka must have been tuned in to some variety of this psychological dynamic. For the collective psyche of the German speaking world, he scheduled the moment of *Sissi* for 1955.

In the wake of the relatively rough patch of the forty years preceding their miracle decade, Germany and Austria most certainly needed some uplifting fare. For many it was probably better to be devoid of memories than to dwell on those years. The message of *Sissi* was right on time. Cynics are fond of saying "If you want a message, call western union..." but there is always a message, and if the artist under contract doesn't make the message clear you can always read between the lines. Marischka didn't require anyone to read between the lines. His message is in large font and bold print.

Some have been prone to bring charges of unfettered kitsch mongering against Marischka, but if so it was dignified, comforting, therapeutic kitsch and the dosage was unlimited. Even that turned out to be scarcely sufficient for the public's insatiable *Sissi* appetite. The first installment of the trilogy was a huge hit in Austria and Germany, then all over Europe, and eventually even in America in an adapted form.

Sissi is bright and beautiful and if it is not paradise regained it certainly represented a solid edenic beachhead for the original audiences. It points back to a time in mythic

memory when things were going better for *Deutschtum*, back to a time when they were still exporting Bavarians to Austria instead of Austrians to Bavaria. Let those good mid nineteenth century times roll...

Marischka had all the right ingredients with which to confection his lovely tale. Have a seventeen year old Romy Schneider riding around on horses in a red dress, or gamboling through the woods in elfin outfits; have good old boy Prince Max hunting and drinking and bowling with his posse; have a beaming, boy next door Crown Prince Franz Joseph meet an enchanting incognito Cinderella Sissi on the road to Ischl; have all of this, and then you can make a little romance, make a little comedy, and get down tonight. You want to crawl into that screen and hang out with Max and maybe Sissi will let you sign her dance card.

A relentlessly simple and charming dialectic is employed: Wien versus Possenhofen, court against country, ceremony and artificiality in opposition to simplicity and honesty. Begin this cozily predictable narrative with some gorgeous panoramic shots of mountain lakes and meadows while emphasizing Sissi's down to earth family roots, throw in some gentle satire of German *Beamtentum* in the midst of the blossoming love story (while never neglecting frequent cuts to Sissi, whatever might be transpiring in the plot) and you have your beautiful and surprisingly believable illusion. Who on earth would opt for a rubble film or some heavy handed *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* when such a generous serving of sweetly seasoned pop history was on the menu.

Sissi made Romy Schneider a star. Her ascent had begun a couple of years before when Kurt Ullrich asked Magda Schneider "Hör mal, Magda, hast du nicht eine Tochter...?" Magda did indeed, and that daughter proceeded to take the family vocation to dizzying heights. It didn't take Romy Schneider long to start hating the role that made her famous, but she never entirely escaped from it. The magnitude of her sudden celebrity and her box-office potential certainly wasn't lost on Marischka. His name and status as director comes first in the credits in the first installment of the trilogy. The credits for the latter two installments leave no doubt about who the rainmaker was.

And the 'real' Sissi? Historians tell us she was more or less elevated to be the Lady Di of her time. She would have concurred with Diana that being a princess is no easy thing, especially when your own royal family doesn't like you. According to a recent biographer, Elisabeth Eugenie Amalie, Empress of Austria, struggled mightily and did succeed in preserving a measure of her individuality in the midst of the rigid court culture of the Habsburg empire, but only at the cost of her personal happiness.

Regrettably, in terms of iconography, she did not die in her prime. She was assassinated by an Italian anarchist shortly before her 61st birthday. She was also the mother of mad Rudolph, who committed suicide a decade before his mother died. Perhaps she had told her son what was in store for him. But the 'real' Sissi doesn't really matter. We have the Sissi that mattered, the stunningly telegenic Romy Schneider chugging down the Danube, waving to the adoring citizenry as she heads to her nuptial ceremony that ends in an understated segue into Handel's Messiah. Marischka is unrelenting. And he was right. That was the only Sissi that mattered in 1955. It was her moment.