

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Walküre (Valkyrie)

Director: Brian Singer

Writers: Christopher McQuarrie, Nathan Alexander

Cast: Tom Cruise (von Stauffenberg); Kenneth Branagh (von Tresckow); Bill Nighy (Friedrich Olbricht); Tom Wilkinson (Friedrich Fromm); Carice van Houten (Nina von Stauffenberg); Thomas Kretschmann (Otto Ernst Remer); Terence Stamp (Ludwig Beck); Eddie Izzard (Erich Fellgiebel); Christian Berkel (Mertz von Quirnheim); David Bamber (Adolf Hitler)

Music: John Ottman

Cinematography: Newton Thomas Sigel

Running Time: 120 Minutes

Release Date: December, 2008 (US)

Silent Majorities – Allen Krumm

Heroes, if they are allowed, can nourish nations, providing sustenance every bit as crucial as the circulation of a dependable currency. A Washington or Lincoln, a Joan d'Arc or a Virgin Queen, even an Uncle Ho, is indispensable, along with a creedal document or two, when a nation announces its birth, or in those tricky situations where it is necessary to justify the nation's existence. After the Second World War, the *Bundesrepublik* had Ludwig Ehrhard's *Deutsche Mark*, and it had the *Grundgesetz*. For civic instruction and inspiration, the fledgling democracy included among its pantheon of heroes the conspirators of July 20, 1944.

Watching Brian Singer's "Valkyrie", one could be forgiven for assuming that the legacy of the July 20th conspirators is unambiguous and enduring. Their deed on that day surely epitomized a self-sacrificial heroism in the service of truth and justice. One would be wrong. Contemporary reactions, as well as the continuing post war debate should disabuse anyone of such naive notions. All that is unambiguous and enduring is the intensity of the arguments over that tragic day in German history.

The interlocutors range from unapologetic panegyrists who affirm a heroic legacy, to probing critics who have sought to exhume and exhaustively autopsy the agendas of the conspirators, to bitter far right lost cause loyalists who openly brand the conspirators as traitors. Surprisingly, among the ranks of the critics were contemporaries of the conspirators who had also opposed Hitlerism, some of whom were surprisingly harsh in their criticism of the attempt. As one conspirator who escaped was bluntly told by a colleague sympathetic to the cause, the attempt was "*falsch und zu spät.*"

One denomination of critics asserts that the deed alone will not do. Proper intent and sufficient purity must exist in the heart of the doer. In this regard, the problem for the protagonists of the July 20th drama was that they had been complicit for too long in sustaining the Third Reich. They had long before been ensnared by evil, and their

pale, puny goodness scarcely qualified as personal expiation, let alone exoneration for an entire nation. So no national grace is available here, neither *ex opera operantis* (by the work of the worker) nor *ex opera operato* (by the work performed).

Some historians declare that the July 20th conspiracy has unjustifiably been made into the brand image of German resistance to Hitler. It has been granted symbolic preference, they assert, when it was simply one action, and a late one at that, in the history of a resistance movement that was at best a mixed bag of good and bad. The July 20th attempt was merely a minimal episode, they conclude, inflated with maximal symbolism.

One could again be forgiven for making the assumption that the countries of that era which sensed the threat of Nazism would have encouraged and engaged with those in Germany who opposed the dictatorship. Yet the governments of the western powers, both in the Thirties and during the war, had, in the words of historian Hans Rothfels, reacted to the German resistance "with silence and eventually with abuse." A commentary in a leading American newspaper a few weeks after the events of July 20th puts this attitude into perspective: "*Americans as a whole will not feel sorry that the bomb spared Hitler for liquidation of his generals ... Let the generals kill the corporal, or vice-versa, preferably both.*"

Since neither critics nor admirers have achieved full spectrum dominance of the interpretive space surrounding the resistance movement, the naive remnant among us can only ask: what *is* one to assume about these men, and their actions, and their motives? Is it not permissible to indulge in some unabashed hero worship here? Confronted with such disparate interpretations and coldly analytical outlooks, one is compelled to ponder what motivational common denominator would make everyone happy. Saving humanity? Saving the Jews? Saving other nations, or even, God forbid, saving Germany?

And what source of justification would pass muster with the critics: theological, cultural, traditional, pragmatic? Is it *de rigueur* that any justification of the conspirators must satisfy the presuppositions of western liberal democracy and current political correctness? And what should the timing have been: the day Hitler ascended to power? A week later? A year later? When the war broke out? Before the war was obviously lost? Apparently a new legal concept is in play: a *Verjährungsfrist* on good deeds.

The critics deserve a measure of sympathy. Rendering *post facto* moral verdicts has always been difficult and dangerous work, and assessing the legacy of the conspirators is especially complicated, given that the resistance movement which culminated in the July 20th coup was so disparate: the voices advocating resistance were polyphonic, ranging from pure ideology (whether Christian or socialist) to pure pragmatism. And to be sure, results count in the business of *Königsmord*. When it comes to implementation, Georg Elser should probably rank higher than the July 20th group.

Perhaps the conspirators did focus too much on morals and too little on mechanics. But it is easy to argue that the flawed execution of the coup derived in no small part because they *had* focused so much on mechanics, micro as well as macro: debating about whether to kill Hitler alone, or take out the entire top echelon; determining how to maintain civil order in the wake of the coup; strategizing over how to avoid a catastrophic military defeat.

In the actual events of that day, surprisingly well portrayed in the movie, a richly representative cross section of human beings emerges. There is Ernst "*erkennen Sie meine Stimme*" Otto Remer, snapping to like a pavlovian dog when he hears the voice that had inspired some, infuriated others and infected everyone for too many years. Ernst Otto Remer responded to that voice yet again on the evening of July 20, 1944. In any difficult situation, there are, a la George Bush, deciders, and there are doers. Remer assumed both roles, but

unfortunately, his deciding and doing was not in the interests of the conspiracy.

There is the tragic figure of Stauffenberg, the Bo Jackson of the resistance, overflowing with *Tatendrang*, saying 'Do the deed. Just do it'. That Stauffenberg, and the rest of the conspirators, were flawed human beings, enervatingly entangled in the dynamics of their own time and place, pushed to the limits of human endurance, goes without saying. In this light, their courage shines out of the past more brightly, fittingly eulogized in the last three words on the grave of Adam von Trott: "...beherzigt Ihr Beispiel."

While it is hard to say precisely whether the critics or the admirers are in the majority, there is a concomitant, intermingled majority of all those who have ever encountered the story of the July 20th conspirators, whether through books or films or stories passed along. That majority, of necessity a silent one, comprises those who are compelled to recognize that on that day they would likely have been devout *Frommians*, waiting, like the redoubtable general, to come down on the right side.