

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Wir Wunderkinder

Director: Kurt Hoffmann

Screenplay: Guenter Neumann, Heinz Pauck

Cast: Hansjoerg Felmy (Hans Boeckel), Robert Graf (Bruno Tiches), Johanna von Koczian (Kirsten), Wera Frydtberg (Vera); Elisabeth Flickenschildt (Frau Meisegeier); Juergen Goslar (Schally Meisegeier); Liesl Karlstadt (Frau Roselieb); Ingrid Pan (Doddy); Wolfgang Müller (Hugo, der Pianist); Wolfgang Neuss (Narrator)

Year of Production: 1958

Spieldauer: 108 min

Wir Wunderkinder was released in 1958 at the height of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. It was based on the book of the same name by Hugo Hartung published the previous year. Hartung emphatically approved of Hoffmann's creative adaptation of his novel, noting in an interview how Hoffman and his scriptwriters had preserved the spirit of his novel and translated it so effectively to the screen. For an author to acknowledge such *Werktreue* in a movie is certainly rare. Hartung's endorsement is all the more remarkable given the techniques and creative license Hoffmann employed to achieve that spirit preserving translation from prose to picture.

Hoffmann's work seems oddly eager to be off-putting. The architecture of the movie can easily become alienating; the rhythm is frequently ruptured. You want the story to take you where it will, but the story is a repeated victim of an impudently intrusive *cabarett* chorus. Conversely, the overly earnest story is a drag on the exhilarating presence of that chorus and those insouciant tunes. In terms of sitting back and enjoying either a coherent narrative or an unabashed satire, Hoffmann keeps channeling Yeats: "*Things fall apart, the center cannot hold...*".

The relentless alternation of narrative, music, and commentary leaves you sincerely unsettled and ambivalent about a proper response. Invariably, every time it seems appropriate to submit to some serious reflection or a bit of catharsis, an irresistible invitation to laugh intrudes. Is *Wir Wunderkinder* ultimately serious, utterly satiric or pure irony? Take your pick, says director Kurt Hoffmann. The answer is yes. This is precisely what he envisaged: "*Was mir vorschwebte was die ausgewogene Mischung von Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tieferer Bedeutung.*" He said he wanted Germans, a la English and American films, " ... *einsichtsvoll über sich selbst zu lächeln.*"

Hoffmann gained his enduring reputation with his comedies of the 1950s, one of which (*Fanfare der Liebe*)

served as the model for Billy Wilder's hit *Some Like It Hot*. Hoffmann was known as the director with the light touch, as a reliable source of good middle class entertainment. Yet virtually all of his post war films are undergirded with an incisive and often cutting social critic. *Wir Wunderkinder* was no exception and was not met with universal acclaim. For audiences of that generation, Hoffmann's artistic *Heilmittel* was not necessarily the coping mechanism of choice for dealing with the previous 30 years and many viewers were irritated and more than a few were offended.

When Hoffmann decided that the narrative of *Wir Wunderkinder* would be swathed in the sounds and sensibilities of cabaret, the choice of performers must have been simple. In the late fifties, the hottest cabaret team in Germany comprised Wolfgang Müller and Wolfgang Neuss. Whether Greek, Brechtian or a precursor of Rowan & Martin, in *Wir Wunderkinder* their two man chorus is an irresistible presence and their rendition of the songs of Franz Grothe and Gunter Neumann (*Der tapezierer Tango, Armer Staat, Der Marsch*, etc.) is in the best subversive tradition of *grosse Kleinkunst*.

Each inspired the other, each drove the other crazy. Of Neuss, Müller said "*Es war der sieben jährige krieg. Bei jeder Arbeit alterte ich um zehn Jahre.*" Of Müller, Neuss said: "*in dieser Welt ist mir die Reibfläche Müller lieber.*" Together, they exude an infectious energy, mediated as much through their *Körperwitz* as through their music and lyrics. In *Wir Wunderkinder* that frenetic *Körperwitz* and merciless musical commentary is devoted to jerking an audience back from the story to make them think and think again.

Some of the thoughts provoked are very large scale indeed, such as the nature of militarism in the service of nationalism and nationalism in the service of chauvinism and how history seems to be one damn thing after another and how those damn things keep rearing their ugly historical heads. There are middle sized thoughts about the art of survival whether by keeping in step or falling out of line. And there are the nagging little

thoughts about the skills necessary for navigating in uncharted waters, whether point to point or simply by knowing which way the wind is blowing.

But Hans and Bruno are the ultimate thought provocateurs. Hoffmann termed them both "*... was man einen typischen Deutschen nennt.*" Each could be construed as typical of the generation which came of age in the twenties and experienced the onslaught of the next thirty years of German history. Hans and Bruno were legion during those decades. Each could serve as a microcosm of *Deutschtum*.

Ultimately Hoffmann seems to be discretely inclining toward a both/and perspective rather than an either/or resolution, presenting Hans and Bruno as a composite German Everyman as if he wanted the audience to say: "I am Hans Boekel *and* I am Bruno Tiches." Perhaps this was a confession of sorts as much as an attempt to solicit an audience response. Hoffmann began directing movies in 1939, making both propaganda films (*Quax, der Bruchpilot*) and comedies such as *Hurrah Ich Bin Papa*. Heinz Rühmann, one of the greatest German actors of the twentieth century, starred in both these movies, so surely both director and actor became acquainted with the survival skills and navigational techniques necessary to sustain a career during the Third Reich.

Audiences that sat down in theaters in 1958 to watch *Wir Wunderkinder* were a mere thirteen years removed the war's end. Almost two generations have passed since they first watched the movie and they were closer in time to the twenties and thirties than we are to the making of the movie. Watching the movie now we see their past through the lens of our intervening past and so in ways the movie may tend to reveal as much about the mental climate of the late fifties as it does about the preceding decades. In any event, we can watch *Wir Wunderkinder* but it is unlikely we can see exactly the same movie which they saw. But it is possible we will arrive at Hoffmann's conclusion: "*Die Helden dieser Geschichte haben eines gemeinsam: sie sind keine Helden.*"