THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series

Goethe !
(Goethe in love)

By Philipp Stölzl

January 27th 2012 ● 6:30 PM ●

Film, Food & Discussion

Donations $15, Members $12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

ALEXANDER FEHLING   MIRIAM STEIN   MORITZ BLEIBTREU

Goethe!

DEMNÄCHST IM KINO

Goethe !

Credits:

Director: Philipp Stölzl
Sreenplay: Philipp Stölzl/Alexander Dydyna
Production: Christoph Müller
Released: 2010
Music: Ingo Frenzel
Camera: Kolja Brandt
Length: 99 Minutes

Cast: Alexander Fehling (Goethe)
         Miriam Stein (Lotte Buff)
         Moritz Bleibtreu (Albert Kestner)
         Volker Bruch (Jerusalem)
         Burghart Klaussner (Lotte's Father)
         Henry Hübchen (Goethe's Father)
         Hans-Michael Rehberg (Court President Kammermeier)

Notes and commentary by Karl Moehlmann

Film und Wahrheit (Movie and Truth)

All the accouterments (locations, scenery, architecture, appliances and costumes) suggest that this movie is an accurate biopic portraying an important episode in Goethe's life. Goethe was born on August 28, 1749 in Frankfurt and started his academic studies at the age of 16 in Leipzig. After a severe illness which forced him to return home to Frankfurt for almost 2 years, he resumed his law studies at the university of Straβburg in the spring of 1770. According to the movie, he fails his law exam in Straβburg and is then sent to the Imperial Court in Wetzlar as a punishment by his father.

In fact he actually completed his studies successfully with a Phd in law on August 6, 1771 and after returning to Frankfurt he was accredited as a lawyer at a Frankfurt court. In May 1772 he became an intern at the Imperial Court in Wetzlar where he made the acquaintance of Charlotte Buff in June 1772.

"Ich habe eine Bekanntschaft gemacht, die mein Herz näher angeht. Ich habe – ich weiß nicht... Dir in der Ordnung zu erzählen, wie's zugegangen ist, dass ich eins der liebenswürdigsten Geschöpfe habe kennenlernen, wird schwer halten. Ich bin vergnügt und glücklich und also kein guter Historienschreiber. Einen Engel! – Pfui! Das sagt jeder von der Seinigen, nicht wahr? Und doch bin ich nicht imstande, Dir zu sagen, wie sie vollkommen ist, warum sie vollkommen ist; genug, sie hat allen meinen Sinn gefangen genommen." (Werther – 16. Juni)

Goethe did fall passionately in love with Charlotte but his relationship most probably remained platonic. Catering to contemporary sensibilities, the movie has them becoming intimate when they are surprised by a rain storm and have to seek shelter in an old ruin. This scene is one of many where the script is inspired to break the tedious bonds of historic authenticity for the likely sake of some combination of commercial calcula-

tion and presumed audience expectation. Goethe's duel with Lotte's fiancé Albert Kestner and his subsequent incarceration are in an altogether different category. They are pure fiction.

The film's treatment of the composition of Goethe's *Werther* manuscript indulges, if possible, in even more creative license. Granted, it is accurate to suggest that this work catapulted him to overnight fame all over Europe and made him the embodiment of the storm and stress movement. His *Liebes- und Leidensgeschichte*, written entirely in letters to an imaginary friend, was a milestone in literary history and set off a wave of lovesick copycat suicides. But the manuscript was not given to a publisher by Lotte after Goethe had written it in prison and sent it to her. The more prosaic reality was that it took Goethe almost 2 years to conceive the structure and content of *Werther* back in Frankfurt, and this was after he had indulged in yet another ill starred love affair.

"Unter solchen Umständen, nach so langen und vielen geheimen Vorbereitungen, schrieb ich den "Werther" in vier Wochen, ohne dass ein Schema des Ganzen oder die Behandlung eines Teils irgend vorher ware zu Papier gebracht gewesen. ... Da ich dieses Werklein ziemlich unbewusst, einem Nachtwandler ähnlich, geschrieben hatte, ... (Dichtung und Wahrheit Dritter Teil)

It was the news of the death of Jerusalem, a friend who had killed himself after his unhappy love of a married woman that jolted Goethe into conceiving the basic plan of *Werther*. He combined his own experience with Lotte with the tragic outcome of Jerusalem's affair. It is this composition that saves Goethe from a *stürmischen Elemente* and sets him free for a new life *"wie nach einer Generalbeichte"*.

Thus what might seem to be a straightforward biopic of young Goethe in his storm and stress period rendered via the tragic love story of *Werther* is more a mixture of real and fictitious events presented as a mirror of the times. The same can be said about the poems and quotes that are sprinkled throughout the movie. For example, "*Dich sah ich und die milde Freude floss aus dem süßen Blick auf mich*" is part of the *Seseneimer Lieder/ Willkommen und Abschied* which Goethe wrote for Friederike Brion when he was in Straβburg. *"Füllest wieder's liebe Tal still mit Nebelglanz."* is from the poem *An den Mond*. It stretches credulity to suggest that Goethe came up with such lines spontaneously.

The "*Lecket mich*" that Goethe writes in the snow after he fails his law exam reminds us of his famous half-curse from *Götz von Berlichingen* (" *Er kann mich ...*".) "*Dass ich erkenne, was die Welt im Innersten zusammenhält*" is of course part of Faust's famous opening monolog in *Faust I* that was only published in 1806. Such quotes occur so frequently that they threaten to tilt the movie into a quiz of Goethe citations for educated *Bildungsbürger*.

Perhaps the exclamation point in the title "Goethe!" is a hint that we shouldn't look for historic authenticity. Possibly that punctuation mark is telling us to relax and go with the subjunctive *so hätte es sein können* mood and allow the movie to cash out as an imaginative recreation of a tempestuous era and a love affair that changed Goethe's life and altered the course of German literature. Adopting such non-purist sentiments gives us a very good chance to be thoroughly entertained and maybe even (at least for a stalwart minority) encouraged to re-read Goethe's works in the original.