

Christian Blech as police chief Dobrik and Richard Münch as the teacher. But in the leading roles he secured the services of two international stars, the Swedish Grande Dame Ingrid Bergman as Claire and Anthony Quinn as Serge Miller (alias Alfred Ill). Bergman in the role of Claire necessitated some fundamental departures from the script of the play. In the play, Claire is sixty three when she returns to Gullen after forty five years. Bergman was forty-eight when she took the part and was supposed to play a thirty-seven year old, which she does brilliantly. But the title of the movie had to be changed from „Der Besuch der alten Dame“ to „Der Besuch“ to accommodate these age differences.

Some of the other changes that the screenplay writer Ben Barzman incorporated included: being in the middle of the Cold War the place was moved from affluent Switzerland to a country in the Balkans with kyrillic scripts on the walls. Also the „Kopfgeld“, the money that Claire offers the impoverished city and its citizens was reduced from one billion to two million. Some gratuitous cruelties were cut and instead of a black panther, Bergman travels with a leopard that fashionably fits her wardrobe.

But the most dramatic changes in the movie script as opposed to the play take place at the end. The death sentence against Serge Miller is not carried out. Claire only wants to shame her former lover but not completely destroy him. In a scene of consuming passion, Bergman overcomes her longstanding hatred and falls into the arms of Anthony Quinn when they meet before the final scene. Quinn regrets what he has done to her and Klara lets him live, thinking that he and the people of Gullen will be punished more severely if they have to live together in the future. Miller will have to live with the knowledge that he deserved the punishment he has narrowly avoided, and the citizens will have to live with the fact that they were at some point willing to kill him for money. Hence both Miller and the citizens will be bonded permanently by their mutual guilt and shame.

Bernhard Wicki was a passionate pacifist and it is highly significant that many of the people in Gullen wear quasi fascist uniforms. It seems as if he wants to portray the people as conformist „Mittläufer“ who are willing to follow a leader or a „Führerin“ if only enough promises are made. The fact that they are willing to commit murder with an offer of only one million divided among all the families significantly lowers Dürrenmatt’s original threshold of human greed.

Wicki thus provokes disturbing questions about the threshold and strength of man’s morality and his ability to withstand material temptation in the face of crippling poverty. His treatment suggests that human weakness rather than evil intent is more often the source of sin and suffering. Wicki’s rendition transcends any particular historic era or economic system, yet remains faithful to Dürrenmatt’s classic play as a timeless parable of guilt and atonement, justice and revenge and ultimately, the enduring frailty of the human condition.

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Besuch

By Bernhard Wicki

January 19, 2018

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



Der Besuch (1964)

Director: Bernhard Wicki
Screenplay: Ben Barzman
Camera: Armando Nannuzzi
Music: Hans-Martin Majewski
Editor: Samuel E. Beetley, Françoise Diot
Producer: Darryl F. Zanuck, Julien Derode
Production: Twentieth Century Fox
Length: 96 Minutes
Cast: Ingrid Bergman (Karla Zachanassian)
Anthony Quinn (Serge Miller)
Paolo Stoppa (Doctor)
Hans-Christian Blech (Head of Police)
Ernst Schröder (Mayor)
Richard Münch (Teacher)
Leonard Steckel (Priest)
Valentina Cortese (Mathilde Miller)
Irina Demick (Anya)
Commentary: Karl Moehlmann



Friedrich Dürrenmatt "Der Besuch der alten Dame"

A tragic comedy in 3 acts – first performed at Schauspielhaus Zürich January 1956

The small city of Gullen ("somewhere in Central Europe") awaits the visit of elderly Claire Zachanassian, who had lived in Gullen forty-five years before as a young girl named Klara Wäscher. The people are expecting her to rescue them from financial ruin, a threat that has been looming over the city for some time (and which in fact, as we find out later, was imposed on the city by Claire herself after she had become rich and powerful).

Claire had married the old Armenian oil baron Zachanassian who left her a fortune upon his death. The merchant Alfred Ill (who was Claire's lover when they were young) is supposed to solicit a charitable endowment from her that will benefit the city. But when Klara was seventeen and pregnant with Ill's child, he denied being the father. Being sued by Klara, he bribed two friends to falsely testify that they had sexual contacts with her, thus ruining her reputation and compelling her to leaving the city, after which she eventually fell into prostitution to survive.

Hence Claire is returning, intent on both justice and revenge. She offers the city "eine Milliarde, 500 Millionen der Stadt und 500 Millionen verteilt auf jede Familie" if the people of Gullen fulfill one condition: Ill must be killed for his crime by his fellow citizens. The people are at first indignant and reject her

offer "im Namen der Menschlichkeit." But slowly and surely they succumb to the temptation of the money and decide to execute Ill.

Ill, knowing that time has not erased his guilt, accepts his sacrifice. The check is being issued as a choir praises the value of prosperity and wealth, thus subverting the second chorus in Sophocles' Antigone from "Ungeheuer ist viel und nichts ungeheurer als der Mensch" to „Ungeheuer ist viel...doch nichts ungeheurer als die Armut."

The resonance of this tragicomedy emanates from the contrapuntal movement of two stories. One is the comedic and grotesque story of the moral corruptibility of an entire city and the other is the development of an ethical consciousness in a single person. The stories are set on a collision course, the first in a descending, the other in an ascending trajectory. As Dürrenmatt couches it: „reichsten Frau der Welt, die durch ihr Vermögen in der Lage ist, wie eine Heldin der griechischen Tragödie zu handeln, absolut, grausam, wie Medea etwa". In Euripides' Medea, the scorned wife of Jason kills not only her husband's new wife, but also their own two sons, in a fit of rage fueled by both love and hate.

Flickenschildt/Hörbiger vs Bergman – ARD vs. 20th Century Fox

The first movie adaptation was done by Ludwig Cremer and shown on the German television network ARD on February 19, 1959. It cast Elisabeth Flickenschildt as Claire Zachanassian in a convincing performance. The movie remained true to the original play yet exhibited characteristics reminiscent of the stage. (The same can be said about the 2008 remake, an Austrian-German TV co-production by Nikolaus Leytner that cast Christiane Hörbiger as Claire and Michael Mendl as Ill). Twentieth Century Fox saw the enormous potential of this story for the cinema. As director they hired Bernhard Wicki who had made a name for himself with the masterful antiwar movie „Die Brücke" in 1959. Wicki had started to work in Hollywood as a co-director of the 1962 movie "The Longest Day" and he was also a close friend of Dürrenmatt. This made him even more attractive to the studio. They saw Wicki as someone who could implement the many changes and conditions that 20th Century Fox demanded while still garnering Dürrenmatt's approval for such extensive artistic license.



The filming was done from September to December of 1963 in Ponte Galeria near Rome. It was shot in black and white to evoke a more realistic aura than was evident in Dürrenmatt's play. In supporting roles, Wicki cast some German actors like Ernst Schröder as mayor, Hans-

