

Upcoming Events

November:

24: Wister and More! Presents: The Wister Quartet, 3:00pm

28-29: Thanksgiving Office Closing

December:

7: Christkindlmarkt, 12:00pm

11: Konversationsabend Christmas Party, 6:00pm

13: Winter Spirits Concert & Tasting, 7:00pm

15: Wister and More! Presents: Ephrata Cloister Chorus, 3:00pm

21-Jan 1: Winter Holiday Office Closing

January:

5: Wister and More! Presents: Xiaopei Xu, 3:00pm

11: Buchclub Meeting, 1:30pm

8: Konversationsabend, 6:00pm

17: Film Fest: Die Unsichtbaren, 6:30pm

February

8: Buchclub Meeting, 1:30pm

12: Konversationsabend, 6:00pm

21: Film Fest: Transit, 6:30pm

29: Bierfest, 2:00pm

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Ballon

Directed by Michael "Bully" Herbig

November 22, 2019

● 6:30 PM ●

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania

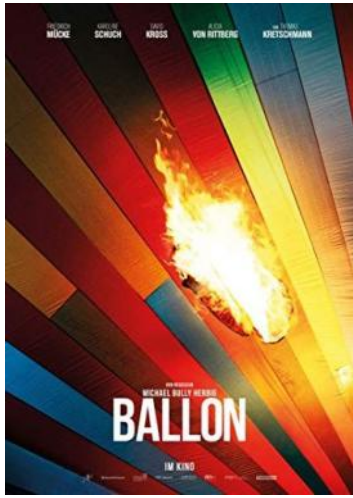
611 Spring Garden St.

Philadelphia, PA 19123

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



Ballon (2018)



Director: Michael Herbig
Producer: Michael Herbig, Stefan Gärtner
Screenplay: Kit Hopkins, Thilo Röscheisen, Michael Herbig
Cinematography: Torsten Breuer
Music: Marvin Miller, Ralf Wengenmayr
Release Date: September 2018
Spieldauer: 125 minutes
Cast: Friedrich Mücke (Peter Strelzyk); Karoline Schuch (Doris Strelzyk); David Kross (Gunter Wetzel); Alicia von Rittberg (Petra Wetzel); Thomas Kretschman (Oberstleutnant Seidel); Ronald Kukulies (Erik Baumann); Jonas Holdenrieder (Frank Strelzyk); Tilman Döbler (Andreas Strelzyk); Emily Kusche (Klara Baumann)

Commentary: A. Krumm

Rising Above The Situation

Philip Larkin may have a point (“*Days are where we live...*”), but situations are what we live in, ensnaring us in dense tangles of conditions and circumstances. Situations are thickly interlaced with ties that bind, whether emotional, economic, social or political and are littered with what Sartre called Hell, that being other people, both lovely and unlovely.

Michael Herbig ensconces us in a very densely tangled and thickly interlaced situation. The time is 1979 and the place is East Germany and the conditions and circumstances comprise the stultifying dynamics of socialism. Over seventeen million people found themselves situated in this infelicitous set of coordinates. Doubtless there were many within that population who would have preferred autonomy to the suffocating heteronomy which prevailed in the workers’ paradise of the GDR.

Ballon is the story of two families who had such a preference for freedom. Herbig’s film is *Ossí Family Robinson* leavened with *The Turn Of The Totalitarian Screw*. The former element, along with its heartwarming theme of family *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*, exudes a charming MacGyverish quality, while the latter component injects a foreboding aura of ideologically fueled menace into the story.

Why the latter aspect in an otherwise uplifting story? Perhaps that question can best be answered by asking another question. Is there anything ultimately good to be said for the GDR, which existed from 1949 to 1990? Some GDR citizens emeritus have answered this in the affirmative. In a poll taken in 2009,

nearly half of the former residents who were polled expressed the sentiment that “The GDR had more good sides than bad sides. There were some problems, but life was good there.”

It would be tempting to accuse these folks of suffering from a severe case of retrojective *Ostalgie*, or evincing symptoms of delayed post traumatic *Lumpen - proletariat-Syndrome*. But *trotz alledem*, these respondents apparently sincerely believed that, notwithstanding its negatives, the GDR was the best type of society in which to live for the majority of its citizens. And perhaps for some of them it actually was, compared to what they experienced subsequently in the capitalistic West.

Yet certain facts on the ground, along with some stubborn statistics, would argue the contrary. Eight hundred and sixty six miles of barbed wire, alarms, anti-vehicle ditches, watchtowers, automatic booby traps, and minefields return a resoundingly negative verdict. The border fortifications were created to keep people inside, not to keep invaders out. As for numbers, 75,000 people decided trying to escape was worth the risk. Estimates vary, but 327 deaths have been documented, and experts believe that up to 1,500 men, women and children may have died in the attempt.

A State that finds it necessary to lock its citizens inside is not a state conducive to human flourishing. Common, comforting interactions and everyday occurrences can be filled with foreboding in such a state. Such things can even inspire terror: the ring of a doorbell, the glance of a neighbor, a casual conversation that is misconstrued. In such a state, everyone is compelled to lie, because they do not want “a boot stamping on a human face”, in particular their own face.

Such boots can be bureaucratic or institutional or economic or psychological and sometimes even literal. In such a state people must live with those lies, lies which engender an omnipresent fear suffused with hopelessness and despair. The best that citizens can hope for is to find some space of inner freedom, however humble, and overlay that inner space with an outward patina of submissive apathy, in the hope that the State will not take much notice of them. Outwardly, they must aspire to inconsequentiality and group think.

However, ideological totalitarianism never succeeds in totally extinguishing human aspirations. It cannot eradicate a longing for freedom and autonomy. And some people, although never a majority, are motivated by these longings to act. They are willing to take great risks in order to escape their situation. Such was the case with Peter and Doris Strelzyk and with their friends Gunter and Petra Wetzel.

The overweening desire to escape the situation in the GDR could give birth to amazing inventiveness. One could run or tunnel or swim or one could sail or engage in “boat jumping”, among other methods of choice. Or one could simply decide to rise above the situation. This is what Peter Strelzyk and Gunter

Wetzel decided to do. They decided to take their families up, up and away in their beautiful balloon.



Having so decided, they subsequently learned that when you seek to rise above a situation, you have to cut the ties that bind. If you are launching a balloon, there is a simple technique for ties made of fiber or hemp or nylon. You do it quickly and simultaneously. It is best to handle economic, political and social ties with the same approach. Ties made up of heart-strings are much stronger than any other ties, but with these, severance is not necessarily the only option.

Ballon is an exceptional film, mostly because it is based on a remarkable true story. It is also exceptionally accurate as films go. There is no need for any dramatic embellishments or tinkering. Michael Herbig's rendering has an exhilarating velocity, with the plotline comprising a riveting sequence of events that enable us to viscerally re-experience the journey of the Strelzyks and the Wetzels.

Herbig deftly deploys composite characters. Oberstleutnant Seidel (wonderfully played by Thomas Kretschmann) is the personification of a "boot stamping on a human face." Yet there is nuance in this character, as he has his doubts as well. Ronald Kukulies as Erik Baumann oozes the sleazy affability typical of an opportunistic survivalist moonlighting as a low level Stasi asset. He is "Mr. Facing Both Ways", but when push comes to shove, he will do what the State wants.

There are vignettes that vividly incarnate the dueling imperatives which habitually embroil the minds and hearts of the denizens of a totalitarian State. The kindergarten teacher who refuses to betray the family of the little boy she teaches evinces the courage necessary to choose human solidarity over the faux objectivity of a reigning ideology. Gunter Wetzel's father embodies the decency of a man who knows he has long since arrived at his own angle of repose in the GDR, yet signals to his son that he must break any remaining fetters of fear or guilt that might still bind Gunter to a life in the GDR.

Be grateful for the cinematic magic of time compression. The course of events that led to the successful flight in September of 1979 actually began in March of 1978. Subsequently two balloons were built, neither of which worked, due to various tech-



nical deficiencies. Gunter Wetzel and his family then dropped out, and Peter Strelzyk and his family made a balloon escape attempt on their own, as well as an attempt to escape via the US embassy in Berlin. Finally, in July of 1979, Wetzel and Strelzyk joined forces again to make one more attempt to escape by balloon.



It is amazing that two rank amateurs were able to succeed even on their third try together. Yet they learned from their mistakes. They learned about the best fabrics to use in constructing the balloon. Such fabrics must combine optimal strength with minimal porousness (umbrella fabric, tent nylon and taffeta became the materials of choice). They learned how to rig up a motorcycle engine to pump in the hot air required to inflate the balloon. They learned how to create a burner from a section of stovepipe, a piece of hose, a valve and a gas cylinder. And they learned how to create their own version of a gondola using angle steel left over from the 1940s coupled with wash line rope.

They learned enough to construct a balloon that was functional enough to achieve a twenty-eight minute flight that allowed the two families (eight people in all) to soar 6,600 feet above all the barbed wire, alarms, anti-vehicle ditches, watchtowers, automatic booby traps, and minefields. That was all they needed, twenty-eight minutes aloft that took them over the fifteen miles from a clearing in the forest near their home village of Pöbneck in Thuringia to land on a farm near Naila in Bavaria; twenty-eight minutes and fifteen miles separating two radically disparate situations.

Even before they met up with policemen, they knew they were in the West, due to telltale indications (the size of fields, signs along the road, machinery in the barn that was not used in the East). But still the two men could not resist a rhetorical question: "*Sind wir hier im Westen?*". As Gunter Wetzel recounts it:

“Die Polizisten haben ganz erstaunt geantwortet “Natürlich, wo denn sonst?”. Es konnte ja keiner damit rechnen dass mitten in der Nacht DDR-Bürger 10 km von der Grenze entfernt auftauchen....”

Bürgermeister Strobel was thrilled that his small and obscure village was now making worldwide headlines. This unexpected event, literally dropping from heaven, would obviously be a good stimulus for tourist traffic, both foreign and domestic. He ensured that the two families were afforded free housing and expense accounts during their transition to a new life in Naila. Even Franz Josef Strauss got into the act, inviting both families to his official residence in Munich.

A media storm ensued for months, and the Strelzyks and Wetzels quickly learned how in a capitalistic society, everything is for sale, even the recounting of your own story. Newspapers, TV stations and film companies besieged them with offers (even after *Stern* allegedly purchased exclusive print rights for 50,000 marks). Although the GDR maintained an official silence for a time, the escape obviously fascinated and engrossed the citizens of the GDR. Perhaps the most pointed proof of this was the erection of a pole on the exact spot where the balloon had ascended. The wooden signpost attached to the peak of the pole read: *“Naila – 28 Minuten Flugzeit.”*

We might justifiably assume that a “Happily Ever After” trajectory governed the subsequent lives of the protagonists. Yet leaving the situation in the GDR meant entering another situation with a new set of ties that bind in the West, not the least of which were the press and capitalism. If our heroes expected that in the West the fourth estate and the pursuit of profit were always harnessed to society in such a manner as to promote truth and human flourishing, respectively, they soon learned that all too often, the golden rule was in play: He that hath the gold makes the rules.

Peter Strelzyk eventually opened an electronics business and began to learn about capitalism. He likely learned more than he wanted to know after his business collapsed. Perhaps he failed on his own merits, perhaps he fell victim to the vicissitudes of the free market or perhaps the old friend whom the Stasi sent west to work for him instigated and accelerated his misfortune.

In any case, the Strelzyks finally ended up returning to their old home in East Germany after reunification. Yet in the biography which the Strelzyks subsequently published in 1999, they emphatically reaffirmed that, given the same circumstances and knowing what they subsequently experienced in the West, they would do it all again: *“Die Antwort heißt uneingeschränkt Ja.”* Peter Strelzyk passed away in 2017.

Gunter Wetzels went to work as an auto mechanic and still resides in Bavaria. He has often been asked if he would do it again. Obviously, like Strelzyk having lived in both systems, he now knows a good deal about the complex situational dynamics of life, and knows that in theory he could answer yes or no,

given divergent lines of reasoning. But his final answer? *“Ich kann nur eins ganz klar sagen, Ich bin froh, dass wir damit die Entscheidung getroffen haben und auf diese Weise in den Westen gekommen sind.”*

Unfortunately, the relationship of the two families could be characterized as a casualty of the press feeding frenzy that ensued in the wake of their spectacular escape from the GDR. They became estranged, with Wetzels eventually coming to feel that Strelzyk had always claimed too much credit for the planning and execution of the escape. Strelzyk blamed their estrangement on the “boulevard press”, while Wetzels blamed Strelzyk, inferring that he had been willingly seduced by the blandishments of the press.

Unsurprisingly, time and circumstance happened to these families as much in their situation in the West as was the case with their situation in the East. And Peter Strelzyk and Gunter Wetzels proved themselves to be utterly normal, fallible human beings with their subsequent struggles and squabbles. But in that brief stretch of time from July through September 16th of 1979, both men and their wives demonstrated how much they valued the rewards of freedom, notwithstanding the attendant risks. In order to achieve that freedom, they also demonstrated ample amounts of ‘the right stuff’, the active ingredients being extraordinary ingenuity, resolve and courage. Against all odds, they rose above the situation.

