

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF
PENNSYLVANIA
Friday Film Fest Series



Der Vorname

Directed by Sönke Wortmann

March 20, 2020

• 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.



Der Vorname (2018)

Director: Sönke Wortmann
Producer: Tom Speiss
Screenplay: Claudius Pläging
Alexander Dydyne
Cinematography: Jo Heim
Music: Helmut Zerlett
Release Date: October 2018
Spieldauer: 91 Minutes
Cast: **Christoph Maria Herbst** as Stephan
Florian David Fitz as Thomas
Caroline Peters as Elisabeth
Justus von Dohnanyi as Rene
Janina Uhse as Anna
Iris Berben as Dorothea
Commentary: A. Krumm



How About Adolf

Sam Cooke's endearing lyric "...don' know much about history...", besides epitomizing an enduring American mindset, actually speaks to a great blessing. Ignorance can be bliss. Just ask the Germans. They, unlike Sam and his fellow Americans, know a lot about history, because between 1871 and 1990, they accrued a prodigious amount of it. Not garden variety history, which your average country churns out all the time, but the interesting kind, the type that concentrates the attention of entire epochs and continents.

Actually a number of other countries have generated what might be termed "interesting" history as well during that same period, for instance the Russians or the Chinese, or even the British and Americans. But no one seems all that fascinated by Russian or Chinese history (other than the Russians and the Chinese and a few obscurantist eggheads) and as for the Brits, well, it is self evident that their history is on the right side of history, as in 'you'll thank me for it later', etc. Ask India for details. As for the Americans, well, God is on their side, so there is no need to fuss about details in that regard. But it is different with the Germans and their history. Their history is not just interesting, it is, as Artie Johnson would say: "...very inter-

esting."

It is a good bet that most Germans would prefer to be like Sam and the Americans and not know much history, but they do know a lot because a) as noted, they produced it; b) the Woke Media Industrial Complex spews out an endless array of documentary extravaganzas and sundry other melodramatic schlock to ensure that no one ever lets them forget any of it; c) the British harbor a predictably peculiar obsession with the Third Reich, and d) not surprisingly, Jewish folks, who have an understandable predilection for commenting upon German history. Germans have by and large been resigned to accepting their role in all of this, although occasionally they do betray some irritation.

Producing a lot of "very interesting" history is akin to overeating. You have to digest it. The Germans even have a word for digesting history: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Actually the translation is closer to managing history, but you get the point. And since 1945, as Jerry Lee Lewis might couch it, there has been a whole lotta *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* goin' on. That would be above all due to the *Lebenslauf* of an individual about whom Joachim Fest famously remarked: 'He taught us some things we will never forget'. The key lesson would be that it is probably better not to produce so much 'very interesting' history. If you don't produce it then you don't have to know about it and you don't have to digest it. Do the Danes or the Scots have any words for managing or digesting history?

Fest also posed the provocative question: 'Can we call him great?' In *Der Vorname*, it boils down to something a bit more prosaic: "Can we call him Adolf?" Agent provocateur and resident *Großmaul* Thomas, having descended upon a soiree at the home of his sister Elisabeth and his brother-in-law Stephan, announces that he and his significant other Anna are going to name their impending child Adolf. Thomas offers a spirited argument as to why it is not only not wrong, but a positively good thing to do. His Adolf will serve as a positive example, perhaps even become a German Gandhi.

His family circle, consisting of Elisabeth, Stephan and adopted sibling Rene, rather than displaying the equanimity of Juliet ("*What's in a name...?*") reacts along the lines of Raymond J. Johnson, Jr. : "*You can call me Alexander, or you can call me Axel, or you can call me*

Alois, or you can call me Amadeus, or you can call me Arvid, or you can call me Asterix, but ya doesn't hasta call me Adolf." Stephan leads the charge. As a Right Thinking Herr Doktor Professor, this is only fitting and proper. He is Woke as only a virtue signaling, self righteous, historically aware German academic can be Woke. To him such a first name can only mean one thing: *Endlösung!*



And Thomas' response? *"You make your Adolf an icon of Evil. A Myth... He's a pop star who people like you keep alive."* To Thomas, it is pseudo-intellectual lefties like his beloved brother-in-law who are turned on by Hitler, not the usual suspects like card carrying *Rechtsradikaler* or everyday xenophobes. And Thomas' peroration? *"By naming my son Adolf, I'm taking the first step to destroying the myth of Hitler."*

Stephan is not pleased by this discourse. Nor by Thomas' countless other examples of names that must be banned because of the deeds of those so named. Hence Stephan's brilliantly logical next move is to declare the discussion at an end. Rene, ever the peacemaker, deduces from a subtle clue that Thomas has been joking and Thomas reveals, under duress, that naming the baby Adolf has indeed been a joke all along.

But when Anna finally arrives, she, not having been clued into Thomas' joke, inadvertently reanimates the outrage. The psychological energy unleashed by the thought of having a young Adolf in the family, coupled with the outrage of having fallen for the joke in the first place, is now unstoppable and a congeries of suppressed hostilities and long hidden skeletons come bubbling up or tumbling out, as the

case may be, of their respective psychic depths or familial closets. It is an emotionally radioactive chain reaction that envelops everyone in the room.

Rendered in the vernacular, they proceed to strip the bark off of one another, methodically and relentlessly, in the manner in which only family members are capable of. The bark stripping inflicted on Rene, however, boomerangs unexpectedly, eradicating any last vestige of amour propre in the room. Stephan's subsequent musing about this ultimate volte sums it all up: *"It is always hard to accept a new step-father."*

Comedy being U-shaped, it is ineluctable that things will bottom out and the overabundance of inbred invective and seething animosity efficiently propel this required descent. During the swoop to the bottom of the U of this charming little *Kammerspiel*, we along with the respective dramatis personae, are privileged to learn that digesting history is inherently painful and problematic, regardless of whether it is personal history or history of the "very interesting", earth shaking variety.

Of course, bottoming out is necessary in comedy in order to catalyze a shift from ignorance to knowledge. Achieving that shift enables the ascent back up to the top of the 'right' side of our U, where normalcy is reasserted. So has the often hilarious eponymic strife in *Der Vorname* bestowed such knowledge upon our ensemble of interlocutors? Elisabeth assures us that such is the case. But it is not knowledge stemming from Stephan's obligatory orthodoxy or Thomas' therapeutic demythologizing. Their debate about a name, a proxy for *'coming to terms with the past'*, has generated a lot of heat, but precious little light, and certainly no harmonious epiphanies.

According to Elisabeth, the knowledge gained from this *Nennungss-treit* boils down to *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. She has a point; firmly grasping this truth is indeed a shift from ignorance to knowledge. Of course, Elisabeth is a bit biased, so maybe we should ask what Sam Cooke would say about all this. Sam would probably counsel us to let sleeping historical dogs lie. Because, Sam might say, if you wake them up, they will all start barking at once and amidst the cacophony you might begin to suspect that "...*history*

is just one damn thing after another..."

Good dialog driven films are rare. Why roll the dice on verbalizing when you can easily visualize a story? Pictures are pretty, and moving pictures are pretty good at moving us. But a good dialog driven film does have one overriding virtue. It compels us to become conversation partners. *Der Vorname* is very good and very funny at times. Sönke Wortmann provokes the mirth by spoofing a taboo via a contrapuntally calibrated verbal massacre. This verbal massacre is a polyphonic one, sparing no one and nothing. Amidst the laughter, *Der Vorname* insistently draws us into the dialog, even if we *'...don' know much about history...'*.