

audience. Another is when Pohl reveals to Naima his “*Geheimwaffe*” against anxiety before important appearances like a trial or a debate – dancing. It is hilarious to watch the two rocking and rolling to the captivating music of Bill Withers (*Use Me, Ain't no sunshine, Lean on me, Just the two of us*) outside the debate hall when just a few weeks prior the decorous professor and the youthful law student were embroiled in a tense cultural clash.

Pohl's secret weapon seems to work. Naima's performances get stronger and stronger, and when she takes the “**Contra**” side in the debate about Islam (“*Ist der Islam eine gefährliche Religion?*”) she is able to use the rhetorical tools Pohl taught her and combine them with her own personal experiences for an impressive win. After moving through the debates in Heidelberg, Leipzig, Berlin and Köln, she seems poised to participate in and win the final round in her own alma mater in Frankfurt, but a hint from a fellow student about the secret deal between Pohl and Präsident Lambrecht threatens her composure and the entire project.

This movie is a break out film for Nilam Farooq, whose genuine migrant background, coupled with her considerable skills as an actor, enable her bring to life a sympathetic character, while injecting humor and wit into one of the best “*sozialkritische Komödie*” in many years. Christoph Maria Herbst holds his own as the allegedly racist professor who is nonetheless a skillful mentor. Both characters undergo transitional trajectories fueled by their enforced inter-dependence. Both teacher and student are redeemed by Naima's performance when she testifies about Professor Pohl before the disciplinary committee. She uses several tools out of Schopenhauer's work by first agreeing with the accusations against Pohl but then pivoting to the opposite position with such pathos and clarity that the members of the committee are deeply moved. Aristotle, Cicero and Schopenhauer would have been proud of her.



THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA Friday Film Fest Series



Contra

Directed by Sönke Wortmann

January 20, 2022

● 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.



Contra (2020)

Director: Sönke Wortmann
Screenplay: Doron Wisotzky, Victor Saint Macary, Yvan Attal
Producers: Christoph Müller, Tom Spiess
Production: Constantin Film, Seven Pictures
Music: Martin Todsharow
Camera: Holly Fink
Editing: Martin Wolf
Length: 104 minutes
Cast: **Nilam Farooq**—Naima Hamid
Christoph Maria Herbst—Professor Richard Pohl
Hassan Akkouch—Mo
Ernst Stötzner—President Lambrecht
Meriam Abbas—Lial Hamid
Mohamed Issa—Junis Hamid



Commentary by Karl Moehlmann

LOLA Awards 2022, German Film Prize, nomination for Best Film
Bavarian Film Prize for Nilam Farooq - for a female lead in her role as Naima

The film is based on the French movie "Die brillante Mademoiselle Neila", the original title was "Le Brio" by Yvan Attal (2017).

Rassismus?

It is the first day of a new semester at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt. First semester law student Naima Hamid, who comes from a family of Arab descent, is late for class. When she enters the lecture hall where law Professor Dr. Richard Pohl has started his class, he confronts her by asking for her name. When she answers with her full name he asks for her first name and excuses this insensitive remark with a "kleines Unverständnis". He then adds that Naima is showing a lack of respect for the law school faculty by being late, while in his "Kulturkreis", punctuality still counts for something. While Naima is shocked and can't believe what she is hearing, Pohl doubles down and suggest this shows "die komplexe Vorstellung, verfolgt zu werden. Typisch!" When another student calls this "Rassismus" and many agree with "zustimmenden Raunen", Pohl, being well versed in rhetorical tools, uses a locution known as a "Paralipse", where one pretends **not** to say something while actually saying it:

"Wenn ich gesagt hätte, das ist typisch für Studenten mit Migrationshintergrund, die ihre Spickzettel hinter den Burkas verstecken, die sich 3 Monate

an den Unis rumtreiben und dann ihr Studium schmeißen, weil die Dozenten grässlich und eh alle Rassisten sind, dann, und nur dann könnten Sie mir Rassismus vorwerfen. So sind Ihre Anschuldigungen reine Verleumdung."



Nilam Farooq as
Naima

By framing his statement with the past subjunctive II, he pretends not to make a racist remark, while expressing explicit racial prejudices against students with migrant backgrounds. When the video of this incident goes viral it becomes clear that his rhetorical trick didn't work, and his handling of the situation is seen as an insult to Naima and migrant students in general. Since this is not the first time Pohl has made statements like this, the pressure grows to expel him from the university. But the president of the university, Professor Alexander Lambrecht, an old friend of Richard Pohl, wants to give him one last chance to redeem himself. He comes up with the idea that Pohl should tutor Naima for an upcoming nationwide debate competition and thus, provided she would achieve some success, help Pohl to be treated more favorably in the inevitable hearing of the university's disciplinary commission. Both Professor Pohl and Naima are equally shocked at this proposal and agree only reluctantly to start the necessary training sessions. While the opening scene of this comedy was anything but funny, the dynamics of the tutoring between teacher and student slowly engender a more light hearted atmosphere that is nonetheless very informative (*lehrsam*). Pohl's emphasis on classical rhetoric texts and techniques gives this movie a fascinatingly didactic depth.



Christoph Maria
Herbst as Professor
Richard Pohl

Employing resources ranging from the ancient Greek treatise on the art of persuasion, Aristotle's "Rhetoric" written in the 4th century BCE with the emphasis on "logos, ethos and pathos", to Cicero's "Orator" written in 46 BC in which he outlines the three aims of a proper oratory ("docere, delectare et movere"), to Arthur Schopenhauer's 1831 work "Die Kunst, Recht zu behalten" that includes 38 strategies to win a debate, Professor Pohl prepares Naima for the upcoming debate competition. One of the highlights is Pohl's own rhetorical performance when he wants to show Naima how to delight and emotionally move an audience by reciting Faust's opening monologue from Goethe's "Faust" in public in front of the "Alte Oper" in center city Frankfurt, receiving a standing ovation from the surprised and riveted