

Nachtgestalten [Nightshapes]: a new film by Andreas Dresen...

## ... A wind from the East

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Ten years after German reunification a handful of films are emerging that attempt to deal with the realities of life in contemporary Germany. Barely a day goes by without a sanitised report of the glowing future opening up for Berlin as the city adjusts once more to its role as capital of a reunited Germany. The German parliamentary deputies have packed their cases in Bonn and are in the process of moving to luxurious new homes in Berlin—their bags and pockets crammed with generous subsidies for removal expenses, kindergartens, free plane and train travel, etc., etc.

Andreas Dresen's new film *Nachtgestalten* [Nightshapes] deals with a side of Germany and its capital which, with one or two honourable exceptions (e.g., the recent films *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* [Life is a building site] and *Fette Welt*), has been studiously avoided by most contemporary filmmakers. *Nachtgestalten* is a refreshing and overdue alternative to recent mainstream German film, which has, in the main, been dominated by anodyne “relationship” dramas and comedies oozing self satisfaction with society in general.

*Nachtgestalten* comprises three short stories united only by place—Berlin—and time—a day and evening in the present as the Pope pays a visit to the city. The latter's intervention (divine?) brings with it traffic chaos, booked out hotels and large parties of nuns plunging in and out of buses and trains.

Hanna and Victor are both homeless and alcohol-dependent. Hanna is begging in the street as she is distracted by a plane overhead. She looks up—is it the pope flying overhead? As she looks down again she sees that someone has left a DM100 in her hat—a miracle! She finds her friend Victor. At last the two of them have enough money to spend a night in a proper bed in a hotel and enjoy a bath. The task is, however, more difficult than they think. Their first attempt at a hotel is a flop—one night with breakfast—DM160! Further efforts prove just as

difficult as the two of them, dressed in their tattered clothes and carrying an assortment of plastic bags, encounter continuous harassment from bureaucracy, morally superior hotel clerks and finally the police.

Jochen, a 30-year-old, somewhat naive agricultural worker, with a bit of money in his pocket seeking company and the sights and sounds of the big city, is also in Berlin on the same night. He encounters Patty, an obviously underage and drug addicted prostitute. She offers him her services for DM50—half an hour in a bleak, unadorned neon lit hotel room. He prefers to pay DM500, to take Patty out for a good meal and a tour of Berlin. Through Patty, Jochen becomes acquainted with a completely alien world of clubs, drugs dealing and miserable, slum-like living conditions. For her part Patty, hopelessly trapped in a treadmill of drugs and prostitution, comes to acknowledge the warmth and humanity of Jochen.

Perhaps the most successful pairing of the film and certainly the most amusing is that of stressed, middle-ranking businessman Peschke and Feliz, a seven- or eight-year-old refugee from Angola. Feliz arrives alone at Berlin Tegel airport and is due to be met by a friend of the family. The friend crashes his car and arrives late (Papal intervention). Peschke misplaces his wallet and falsely accuses the small boy of stealing it. Realising his mistake, he has a fit of bad conscience and decides to help the stranded Feliz reunite with his family—and so the pair begin their own Odyssey through the grim, rain-swept streets of Berlin.

In one telling scene Peschke and the tiny Angolan boy take the lift in an East Berlin tower block of flats. Two huge skinhead types enter the lift and in the close confines of the lift, glare and then blow cigarette smoke into the face of the tiny boy who “threatens” their German way of life. Peschke can do nothing and as it turns out he, himself is no saint, sharing many of the sublimated racial prejudices prevalent in the German middle class.

As a human being Peschke has everything that the homeless couple lack. He has work, a BMW car and a home (there are no indications in the film of a wife or family—figures for single households are on the rise in Germany). In its own way, however, Peschke's life is also one long tribulation. He is continually badgered on his (mobile) phone by his chief—Dr. Schneider, who repeatedly warns his deputy of the impending arrival of “an important delegation of Japanese businessmen.” Crushed between the multiplying problems involved in finding Feliz's parents and increasing pressure from Dr. Schneider, Peschke mutters desperately: “I am and always was just a nothing. [Ich bin und bleibe eine Null].”

As he declared at the film's premiere in Berlin, Dresen is not interested in merely painting everything black and depicting his characters as just helpless cogs in a machine. In different ways his characters, although fighting near impossible odds, make their own efforts to free themselves from the morass of their day to day existence.

Andreas Dresen, 37, began his training in film at the East German DEFA studios in Babelsburg just a few years before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The traditional DEFA school included a strong element of documentary film—work much in evidence in *Nachtgestalten*. Dresen says that following the collapse of the Wall he saw and studied as much Western film as possible. A particular influence is the British director Ken Loach. His previous films include documentary pieces as well as the features *Stilles Land* (1992) —dealing with the repercussions of German unification for members of a provincial theatre group in East Germany—and *Mein unbekannter Ehemann* (1994), about the arranged marriage of an African refugee and a German woman.

In preparing his latest film Dresen worked closely with organisations for the homeless to get the right feel for life on the streets. In addition, on the completion of filming, Dresen painstakingly retreated the entire negative of *Nachtgestalten*, removing gloss and toning down colour to give the film a raw, unvarnished quality. The result is characters portrayed with respect and without condescension or sentimentality and a Berlin which is not to be found in the travel brochures.

Many of the reviews in the German press have made much of the fact that characters portrayed in *Nachtgestalten* exist at the fringes of German society. A closer examination, however, indicates that taken as a whole, the tribulations and experiences undergone by the figures featured in *Nachtgestalten* are not so very far removed from the reality for many living in Germany

today. The number of unaccompanied foreign child refugees arriving in Berlin is small and, in light of restrictive government policy, on the decline. According to statistics, however, the number of child prostitutes working in Berlin today is steadily increasing.

No official figure exists for the number of homeless in Germany. The money needed to set up an institution to assemble such a statistic has been refused by the current finance minister Eichel (SPD) for financial reasons. The Berlin Senate reckons that between 2,000 and 4,000 are currently living on the streets in Berlin and the figure is on the rise. The current figure for homelessness in the entire former East Germany is estimated to be 78,000. There are still millions, like Jochen, working on the land in Germany and, without doubt, there are at least several million sharing Peschke's fate in today's Germany. Bearing in mind such numbers, Dresen's film becomes less an exotic exploration of some interesting fringe characters and more of an examination of powerful tendencies in German (and not just German) society.

It is too early to judge whether Dresen's film portends a real change in the German cinematic landscape. Nevertheless, avoiding polemic and sensationalism, Dresen's new film demonstrates the possibility of making entertaining film while at the same time probing beneath the surface of the “German miracle.”

PS: As part of the refurbishment of Berlin, the Vatican is planning to build its own embassy in the city for 15 officials at a cost of DM15 million.



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