

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



NaPoLa

Director: Dennis Gansel

Writers: Dennis Gansel, Maggie Peren

Cast: Max Riemelt (Friedrich Weimer), Tom Schilling (Albrecht Stein), Jonas Jägermyer (Christoph Schneider)

Music: Angelo Badalamenti, Normand Corbeil

Cinematography: Torsten Breuer

Running Time: 117 minutes

Release Date: December 2004

NaPoLa – Allen Krumm

Dennis Gansel's ambitious project is to pull off a *Mitverführung*, seducing us along with his young protagonist in this excursion into the prep school world of National

Socialism. His approach is adapted accordingly and is surprisingly sparing, with little effort made to ignite interpretive fuses or enhance emotional octane. He succeeds at telling much of the story without dialogue. The pace and sequencing of the story with the alternation between light and dark aspects seems to aim at hindering us from calibrating our own equilibrium of involvement and distance. We are to be Friederich Weimer's companions on his journey.

Strictly speaking this is a genre film of the boarding school variety. Like all boarding schools, this one is oriented and animated by a mission statement and is staffed by admirably dedicated pedagogues. Friederich is a working class boy who escapes the narrow nest of his family, defying his father to seize what might be his only main chance. Noticed by a boxing instructor for his pugilistic prowess, he enters one of the Nazis elite prep schools (*Nationalpolitische Lehranstalt: NaPoLa*) where the headmaster declares "*Männer machen Geschichte, aber wir machen die Männer.*"

The school is, in Siegfried Krakauer's apt locution, a "*closed cosmos*" and within this ideological *Sonderraum*, Friederich becomes another lump of adolescent clay intended for molding by the school's perfervid potters. His Aryan metrics having checked out, Friederich eagerly integrates himself into the rhythms of the school and plunges into a well rounded curriculum which ranges from the hard sciences (biological hygiene) to physical education (grenade throwing) to symbolic logic (racial and patriarchal).

Friederich's generational conflict with his working class father pales in comparison with that of his new friend and fellow student Albrecht Stein. It is bad enough if your father is the preacher or the principal, but in a case of *My Father the Gauleiter*, how do you help your friends relax when you invite them over? Extreme coping mechanisms would seem to be inevitable. Albrecht is the pivotal character in this tale, the *über* foil against whom everyone else may be measured, raising consciousness, probing psyches and pricking consciences.

NaPoLa is an intentional institution and the intent is to produce quality *Übermenschen*. Friederich and his fellow future *Gauleiters* are pushed to the limit in gymnastics, competitive contact sports, and all the tasks and rigors of a veritable boot camp. The endemic psychological brutality becomes evident to Friederich early on, but when he evinces scruples in this regard, at every turn he encounters a pervasive Darwinian rationale which serves as both an answer and an admonition.

This rigorous regimentation of mind and body is put to the test when Friederich and his fellow lower classmen are given the chance by *Gauleiter* Stein to hunt down a group of escaped Russian POWs. The *Gauleiter* does his best to inject his charges with a healthy dose of *Jagdfieber* in a pre-hunt pep talk but the boys in the event, trucked far beyond the pale of innocence, discover exactly what men always discover whenever they are cajoled or compelled into participating in war. Their cosmos collapses. Gansel achieves the most powerful sequences of the movie when the boys of NaPoLa, the unwitting predators, are nakedly confronted by their dying prey, who turn out to be boys much like themselves.

The deadly hunt pushes Albrecht past the boundary which he has been striving so desperately not to transgress. Yet in crossing over, Albrecht finds his voice, and gives his response to Napola's *Weltanschauung* in penultimate words and an ultimate deed. Gauleiter Stein's counter response is a four word eulogy: "*Schwach, einfach zu schwach.*" Friederich cannot save Albrecht, but Albrecht posthumously liberates Friederich with his ringing *No!*

Gansel has a decided fondness for scenic soliloquizing and non-verbal philosophizing via slow motion shots (*Zeitlupenaufnahme*) where the character (and vicariously the audience), being granted a sovereign dispensation from the distracting flux of time and the vexing exigencies of circumstance, achieves clarity and conviction. This is an efficient technique for resolving plot questions and character conundrums and Gansel is adept at employing it to simultaneously induce insight and focus one's outlook.

Siegfried Gladen's lingering leap of faith onto the grenade is a striking example. Amidst the maddeningly slow stretching of time in this scene, one absorbs the enormous psychological pressure that moved this boy to act so as to transform himself from a shameful *Bettnässel* on the verge of becoming an outcast to a feted hero and eternal insider of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. We encounter this approach yet again in Friederich's final bout when he says no to all the *schwärmerisch* nonsense swirling around him and deliberately loses the fight.

Having thusly gotten himself expelled, Friederich departs into the grey winter landscape in the same manner in which he arrived, as a hitchhiker and an outsider. The only possession which he has gained while at the school is his integrity. When Friederich literally turns his back on NaPoLa, after one last look comprising equal parts of loathing and longing, the theme has been executed and closure achieved, at least in theory.

Gansel has made an honest effort to achieve some kind of historical empathy and provide a glimpse and possibly even a fleeting feeling of what such a time as Germany in the 1930s and such a place as NaPoLa might have been like for such a young man as Friederich. Although not always successful, he tries to avoid oversimplification and political correctness, and he does not seem tightly tethered to any ideology or interpretive school of thought.

The past is always with us, but to distill the essence of a particular time and place can be maddeningly difficult, since we can never attain the immediate awareness and living insight of *Zeitzeugen*. Yet the attempt to obtain that distillation is a crucial first step for anyone seeking understanding. Gansel has taken such a step, albeit a baby step. Interestingly, his grandfather was actually a student at a NaPoLa school. Perhaps because he spoke with and listened to people like his grandfather, he is able to tell the story of Friederich as it were from the inside out, having intuited from those he listened to that "*the past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.*"