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2023/24 Film Fest Series!



Einfach mal was Schönes (2022)

May 17, 2024 | 6:30pm

German with English Subtitles

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF
PENNSYLVANIA
Friday Film Fest Series



Die Spionin

Directed by Jens Jonsson

April 19th, 2024

• 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.



Die Spionin

Director: Jens Jonsson
Screenplay: Harald Rosenløw Eeg, Jan Trygve Røyneland

Producer: Havard Gjerstad

Music: Raf Keunen
Camera: Anton Mertens
Editing: Joakim Pietras
Length: 110 Minutes

Ingrid Bolsø Berdal as Sonja Wigert
Johan Widerberg as Baron von Gossler

Damien Chapelle as Andor Gellert
Erik Hivju as Sigvald Hansen
Edvin Endre as Patrik

Alexander Scheer as Josef Terboven
Rolf Lassgård as Thorsten Akrell
Jakob Diehl as Heinrich Fehlis



Commentary by: Al Krumm

"... All the boys think she's a spy..." (Kim Carnes)

Die Spionin tries hard to be a bad film. A good script propels you forward into the story, even taking you by the hand and showing you the way when deemed necessary. The scenes in *Die Spionin* often seem disjointed, as if they were intended as standalone vignettes. One thinks of the comment John Cheever allegedly made about John Updike's prose style: "There is no velocity there"

A movie should succeed, with proper discretion, in suspending our disbelief on a reasonably regular basis. *Die Spionin* lazily relies on scenes that awkwardly strive to mentor us via some archetypal action (I am a spy,

therefore I rifle through files and desk drawers at night) or well-worn trope (I am a pretty lady, therefore I am pretty good at manipulating men).

Unsurprisingly, *Die Spionin* overdoses on the usual hackneyed World War 2 stereotypes: Individuals associated with the Allied cause are by definition noble and innocent and would unhesitatingly give their last pfennig to the United Way if the need arose. All individuals associated with Germany incline toward a clever stupidity ala Colonel Klink, but are ultimately crazy and evil (albeit well-dressed) automatons.



A bit of context is in order here. Like Jimmy Carter in 1976, in 1940 both the British and Germans were lusting in their respective hearts. The object of their self-interested lust was the shapely coast of Norway. Prime real estate indeed! Control the coast of Norway and you control the North Sea and access to the North Atlantic; control the coast of Norway and you control access to the Baltic Sea and access to all kinds of good stuff like Swedish iron ore.

The movers and shakers among the Norwegians and the Swedes, for variegated reasons of their own unpretty self-interest, were very nervous about this lust. Not that either of these two groups would have objected to a fling with either of these large neighbors, (and to be sure, both Sweden and Norway had already engaged in some heavy petting with both pursuers) but the problem was how this whole thing was going to play out. You date one large neighbor, committing to a serious relationship, and then it turns out that the other one has more upside potential. Essentially both the Norwegians and the Swedes suffered from chronic cases of Fear Of Commitment (rendered in the vernacular as "who the hell is going to win this war...")

Both the Germans and the British had been lustily planning and plotting for over a year, and both sides decided to act almost simultaneously. In early April of 1940, the Brits, motivated purely by their principled Commonwealth dedication to protecting the rights of small nations against in-

terference by large nations, mined the Norwegian coast (preparatory to landing troops at Narvik and Trondheim). Even as the Brits were laying their mines, German troop ships were already heading out from German ports on their way to occupy certain cities and stretches of the Norwegian coastline (*Operation Weserübung*).

The Germans were understandably a bit miffed that the Brits had slightly beaten them to the punch, since the movers and shakers of both the Third Reich and the British shared a basic philosophical pre-supposition common to all belligerents in war: Do unto others before they do unto you. Cicero coined a more elegant rendition: "*Inter arma enim silent leges*" (In times of war the law falls silent).

But the German's confidence was bolstered by the fact that Winston Churchill had been involved in the planning for Operation Wilfred. Buoyed by this confidence (whatever plans Churchill advocated usually ended in disaster) the German ships ploughed ahead, the troops landed, and drove the Brits out and annexed Norway into their very own *Brits Verboten Aryan Commonwealth*. As Billy Pilgrim would have said, had he been transported to Scandinavia in 1940 prior to being plopped down in Dresden in 1945, so it goes.

So pure mover and shaker hearts were in short supply in the Nordic neck of the woods in the spring of 1940, among the British, among the Germans, and most of all among the Norwegians and the Swedes. And into this crass vortex of competing self-interest stepped our chaste heroine Sonja Wigert. Being a famous (Norwegian born) Swedish screen star, she was eagerly sought by the Germans to become an alluring asset of their propaganda campaign in Norway. Simultaneously, she was arduously courted by the Swedish government to pretend to embrace her role as a German propaganda asset, while serving as a spy for Sweden.

To make things much more complicated, she was then asked by the Germans to become a spy of theirs against Sweden. To make things infinitely more complicated, the Swedes told her to go ahead and pretend to spy for the Germans, while continuing to spy on the Germans. The Swedes would provide her with select and presumably convincing

(albeit useless) information to feed to the Germans.

This is the official story anyway. But epistemological angst insists we perform a modicum of due diligence and descend into the precious grub of history (aka plausibly accurate details that are reasonably verifiable and which make some kind of sense) and that we muck around with such particulars until we think we have something to say.

We need to do this because, among other reasons, lady spies are in vogue now, and when something is in vogue, it is prudent to cast a gimlet eye on that something. Apparently it wasn't D-Day or Stalingrad or firebombing or radar or logistics or the convoy system or Fat Man or Little Boy that made the crucial difference between defeat and victory in World War 2. It was lady spies. Given the current *Zeitgeist*, this makes sense, and it is altogether fitting and proper that this should be the case.

Unfortunately, in the case of Sonya, there is not much precious grub available. There is little print information about her in English, and Internet sources just echo one another, repeating tweaked versions of the same softcore hagiography. Perhaps Sonja Wigert deserves some or much of this praise, but it is difficult to decide what impression of her to embrace. Moreover, it is hard to nail any corroborating timeline down. Supposedly she joined the resistance in 1941 and began her double agent role in 1942 and supposedly by 1943 the Germans had figured out that she wasn't giving them any good information. So one has to ask, why didn't they out her as a double agent, and imprison her or even kill her?



Did she really transmit any vital information that helped the Swedish government avoid being invaded by the Nazis? A cynic or a pragmatist (perhaps there is not a dime's worth of difference between the two) might

suggest that the Germans could have invaded Sweden anytime they wanted to, and that there was no vital information that would have made any difference in the event that they decided to do so.



On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Sonja Wigert did provide important information to the Swedish Government. What induces a smile here is that what was important to the Swedish government was survival. They weren't interested in assuring a German victory, nor were they inter-

ested in assuring an Allied victory. Least of all were they interested in Sonja Wigert's welfare. She was merely a tool to them. Sweden's overweening interest was in sustaining a precarious balancing act until it could be safely ascertained as to who would win the war in the end. In the early forties, who would win in the end was not at all obvious.

In terms of methodology, Delilah set the template for the application of feminine wiles in pursuit of state secrets and by all accounts Sonja Wigert's approach did not deviate from this time honored technique. Her main mission, as elucidated by her spy Boss Akrell, was to become close to the German Reich Commissioner in Norway, one Josef Terboven. ("What do you want me to do?" "I'm sure you can figure that out for yourself...".)

She did so, sometimes, presumably in the interests of greater authenticity, performing her role from a horizontal angle of repose. Yet who fell for whom? Terboven supposedly fell for her, but in the event, did she (perhaps unwittingly) fall for him as well? Who knows? If so, did she then morph from a double agent into an agent sans integer, floundering about in a wilderness of confusion and conflicting emotions?

Ultimately the movie would have us believe that Sonja's loyalty compass never deviated from Swedish true north. Tracing the emotion laden, recursively choreographed movements of multiple hearts (three, if one includes her Hungarian lover, four if one factors in whatever her true north might have been) is beyond the reach of any known technique, whether psycho-

logical or historiographical or otherwise. Even Chat GPT4 would not be able to handle this algorithm.

Initially her decision to become a spy is portrayed as essentially pragmatic – she wanted to get her father out of prison. And perhaps that pragmatic trigger was facilitated by a naïve patriotic impulse ("don't you want Sweden to remain free..."), which morphed quickly into an intoxicating fling cum adventure cum I have only one life to give for my career, etc. But with flings, whether amorous or careerist or in terms of patriotic spy craft, there is always the morning after. Sonja's morning after, which lasted the rest of her life, was apparently not a very happy one.



Norwegians and Swedes naturally assumed that she really had sympathized with the Nazis, or at the very least, as a vulgar opportunist, had become a willing fellow traveler in order to further her career. Is it possible there is any truth to this? Probably not, but it is hard to be certain. Really nasty compatriots called her a Nazi slut. After the war her career did not thrive as it had before the war, and according to some, she experienced considerable financial difficulties. When she attempted to reconnect with her Hungarian lover, he spurned her. Eventually, she moved to Spain and, by some accounts, spent the rest of her life there as a lonely recluse.

Sonya Wigert played the spy game, but in the end, it seems she was the one who got played. Perhaps the Swedish government gained something, perhaps the Germans did, perhaps neither achieved anything, but one thing seems certain: Sonya Wigert lost. In this regard, there is another longstanding tradition that merits mention. Philosophers and artists who get involved in politics and affairs of state usually regret it in the end.

Starting with Plato's ill advised (and in hindsight rather naïve) excursion

to Syracuse, there is a long line of such well-meaning activism. If you serve the state, any state, in its dirty work, you find out that you are expendable. You are an asset that sooner or later exceeds its use by date. Or perhaps prior to that date, you become collateral damage. Individuals like Sonya Wigert have always been consumable and expendable. A posthumous docudrama and or biopic (reeking of the usual over simplifications and propagandistic tropes) which seeks to portray her as a heroine does nothing to redeem her life.

In 2005, the Swedish government released information which is said to have exonerated her. That didn't do Sonya Wigert much good, since she had died 25 years before. It seems more a case of a gauche attempt by the Swedish government to cast itself in a post facto positive light, as in "... See, we were against the Nazis, we even spied on them...in the event, we wrecked Sonja Wigert's life, but rest assured that she was glad she had at least one life to wreck for her country..." The movie has Akrell giving her an engraved cigarette lighter: "For Service to King and Country...". One can hardly imagine a more equitable compensation.

The foregoing perspective admittedly stems from a severe hermeneutic of suspicion when evaluating the relationship of the state (any state) to the individual. Despite this, and despite the manifest flaws of this film, something still urges us to suspend our judgement at least for a while. Perhaps we can learn to like it, perhaps this film can even be re-deemed.

The voice-over narration works well, and due to the off-kilter effect of the sequencing, the film would have benefited from even more of this narration. The camera is all in when it comes to light, eagerly capturing torchlight and sunlight and lantern light and even the light emanating from jazz bars and Nazi soirees. Scandinavian interiors (whether fake or real) exude a mystical coziness that transcends mere *Gemütlichkeit*.

Rolf Lassgard is superb as the world weary yet single minded spy boss Akrell and the camera is utterly enamored of Ingrid Bolsø Berdal. A movie benefits greatly from a visual center of gravity and she is a veritable cinematic black hole – our eyes cannot escape the gravitational

pull of her photogenic presence, not to mention those wonderfully over the top 1940s outfits she wears, whether at premieres or just out for a stroll to rendezvous with a fellow spy.



Most importantly, there are moments where the film does address the moral ambiguity (and even immoral acid) implicit in the spy world. Akrell provides some of the best commentary in his intermittent voiceovers: "Stockholm was crawling with spies ... no one trusted anyone..."; A row-boat bringing ashore the corpse of one of Akrell's recently deceased lady spies elicits a deeply emotional and tender response from him: "Shit". As in, another one bites the dust, so we'll need a replacement asset.

Sonya ("Bill") becomes that replacement. Subsequently, in one of their regular meetings, Akrell encourages her to trust no one, illustrating his advice thusly: "Look, this is one of our spies ... we found her under a bridge, drowned. Her brother ratted her out." When Sonya is told to feed the Germans the lie that Sweden is mobilizing, she exclaims: "False information ... won't that put me in danger ...". Akrell comforts her with the soothing reply: "Its an order, Mrs. Wigert."

Sonya reassures a Nazi propagandist by cooing "*Ich bin auf ihre Seite ... sie müssen meine Wort glauben...*", eliciting a chorus of "Heil Hitler". She thus demonstrates her bona fides as an entry level spy, having mastered the art of lying with utter conviction. The corrosive *Nachwirkung* of continual lying only becomes apparent later, when she needs to caress, however

fleetingly, the touchstone of truth.

This invidious *Nachwirkung* is viscerally brought home via Sonya's relationship to her afore mentioned Hungarian lover, the diplomat Andor Gellert. Akrell actually induces Sonya to spy on Gellert as well, suspecting that the hungarian might be working for the Germans, and in fact, might even be Maria. Sonya follows orders and herself mistakenly comes to the conclusion that Gellert (whom she truly loves) is Maria. The psychological *Schwerpunkt* of the entire film is when she meets Gellert in their favorite jazz bar, and hands him a packet of costal surveillance photos similar in nature to the ones she perused among Gellert's possessions.

There is (at least for this reviewer) an ambiguity, a vexing lack of clarity to this scene. Gellert is horrified that she has handed him these photos, and angrily asks "who are you working for ... who are *you*.' Sonja tries to reassure him that although she knows he is Maria, it is okay. So what is the meaning of this interchange. Is Sonja trying to get him to admit to being Maria, so the Swedes can swoop in and arrest him? Or is she signaling her love for him and loyalty to him, love and loyalty that transcend all the deceitful dynamics in which they themselves are willing participants? It is not even clear if she knows that Akrell is nearby, listening to their entire conversation.

In the event, Gellert bolts from the bar, with Akrell in hot pursuit, but he disappears. Later, when Sonja is forced by the real Maria to help track Gellert down at his remote cottage, we are back to convention and contrivance, with Gellert saving Sonja's life by not torching the place when he could have, and then Sonya saving Gellert's life by not revealing his hiding place beneath the floor boards of a small shed. Now, in moral terms, the script writer clumsily informs us, they are even steven.

But back to the pivotal scene in the bar - Was Sonya functioning as a spy here, or as a recovering human being trying to grasp that indispensable summum bonum of human existence: inviolable love and loyalty? Was the ambiguity of this scene intentional, meant to illustrate the splintered state of her mind and her heart? If so, it was a brilliant

move, and we can declare that *Die Spionin*, at least momentarily, has achieved the status of a very good film. Or did the director and script writer just lose their focus at crucial moment in the story? Discerning minds among the audience are requested to weigh in.

Schwerpunkt and summum bonum aside, the best line in the film is when Sonja is typing a report to Akrell and says "*I have become someone else.*" Such a disconcerting existential epiphany must surely occur to every genuine spy sooner or later. Being fluent in German, Sonja should have listened to Nietzsche:

"Staat heißt das kälteste aller kalten Ungeheuer. Kalt lügt es auch; und diese Lüge kriecht aus seinem Munde: «Ich, der Staat, bin das Volk.»"

Come to think of it, Sonya should have just emulated Greta Garbo and lit out for Hollywood before that cold monster could get a grip on her.

