

Balloon (12A) Germany 2018

31 January 2022

DIRECTOR: **Michael Herbig**

(German with English subtitles) Running time: 125 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Friedrich Mücke** (Peter Strelzyk), **Karolin Schuch** (Doris Strelzyk), **David Kross** (Günter Wetzel), **Alicia von Rittberg** (Petra Wetzel), **Thomas Kretschmann** (Oberstleutnant Seidel), **Jonas Holdenrieder** (Frank Strelzyk), **Tilman Döbler** (Andreas 'Fitscher' Strelzyk), **Christian Näthe** (Hauptmann Heym), **Till Patz** (Peterchen Wetzel), **Ben Teichmann** (Andreas Wetzel).

SCRIPT: **Kit Hopkins, Thilo Röscheisen, Michael Herbig**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Torsten Breuer**. EDITING: **Alexander Dittner**. MUSIC: **Marvin Millar, Ralf Wengenmayr**.

German films of the last twenty years or so - or at least those that have come our way - have been almost exclusively preoccupied with the national past. The most obvious of such titles is perhaps *Downfall* (2004), but one might quickly add *The Lives of Others* (2006), *The Counterfeiters* (2007) and *Barbara* (2012). It is understandable that to have had one's national psyche overshadowed by both Nazism and the Iron Curtain might call for a 'coming to terms' among the country's filmmakers.

At the same time, the period of the German Democratic Republic has undergone a subtle shift in hearts and minds since reunification. The latter has brought independence of action, freedom of movement and expression, but also an appreciable 'levelling up' price tag, augmented by the mass migration of which Germany has borne more than its fair brunt. A certain nostalgia for those comfortable days where everyone had a job, a home and a car, and took their holiday in Germany, is in some quarters replacing the dystopian vibe of *The Lives of Others* in which the GDR was a place where love could not show its face.

Balloon is an interesting film in this respect. At first glance we seem to have a classic 'escape scenario': healthily sceptical family, joined in loyal bonds of friendship with like-minded neighbours, risks everything to build and deploy a hot-air balloon under the noses of Party officials so that they can live free in the West. At the same time this 'based on fact' story of personal triumph is almost material for a 'Grande vadrouille'-style comedy; as if conscious of such, it scrupulously avoids any charges of frivolity, with the possible exception of the scene in which Frau Strelzyk gazes wide-eyed at the Berlin police officer to distract him from what is going on across the street!

There is much that is nostalgic here, or at least potentially comedic: the fine grained cinematography and warm, if muted colours, the blue family Wartburg, so striking it's amazing they are not spotted sooner, the dunderheaded neighbour you almost feel sorry for in his failure to notice the tell-tale signs, the endless trips out to buy material, with the shopkeeper/informant

displaying proud German efficiency in her ability to recall the details of her denunciation, the beautifully recreated cigarette packets... And spare a thought for the fledgling communist state losing so much skilled labour in addition to political composure!

Which brings us to Thomas Kretschmann, national treasure himself, and everyone's favourite Good German since he invited Adrien Brody to play Chopin in *The Pianist*. He is cast as the jaundiced, slightly bemused Oberstleutnant, exchanging provocative Q&A with the border guards, and all too wryly aware of the political cost of ballooning success - high stakes indeed! - and the futility of trying to stop them. As he puts it, 'Why do they want so much to leave?'

Why indeed, we might ask, looking at everything (and everyone) they are leaving behind and the question mark over their future. (The GFR had insertion programmes in place for escapees, which meant that quite apart from their propaganda value, they were well looked after, but this is an aspect of the story about which it would have been interesting to know more.) Instead, the makers opt for suspenseful near misses and generic ellipses of storytelling, rather than documentary detail, to fill up the time. As John Ford said, 'faced with the choice between the truth and the legend, print the legend', and one wonders how many Germans allowed themselves a wistful backwards glance as they enjoyed this secure exercise in popular filmmaking.

David Clare