

## Mephisto (15)

14th October 2002

Hungary 1981

Director: **István Szabó**

Running time: 144 minutes

Leading players: **Klaus Maria Brandauer** (Hendrik Höfgen), **Ildikó Bánsági** (Nicoletta von Niebuhr), **Krystyna Janda** (Barbara Bruckner), **Rolf Hoppe** (General), **György Cserhalmi** (Hans Miklas), **Péter Andorai** (Otto Ulrichs), **Karin Boyd** (Juliette Martens) .

SCRIPT : **Péter Dobai, István Szabó**. PHOTOGRAPHY : **Lajos Koltai**. EDITING : **Zsuzsa Csákány**. MUSIC : **Zdenko Tamássy**.

Remember Klaus Maria Brandauer? There was a brief period in the 80s when he was the hottest actor around, and it was largely due to this film. A role as Bond villain – ever the mark of international acceptability for an actor – and a supporting role in *Out of Africa* followed. But it was with his portrayal of the naïvely ambitious/flawed charlatans of *Mephisto*, *Colonel Redl* and *Hanussen* (1981, 1984 and 1988 respectively, all with Szabó) that he – and his director – earned their place in the cinema chronicles.

There is a thematic link between this film and our other German selection of the season, *Menschen am Sonntag*. For the protagonist of *Mephisto*, actor Hendrik Höfgen, as for the makers of *Menschen*, the rise of the Nazi party presented a choice, a choice whose Faustian nature is acknowledged in the title (after Höfgen's most successful role): does one adhere to one's principles and abandon an established domestic career for a doubtful future abroad, and in a foreign tongue? Or does one ride the whirlwind and for the sake of artistic freedom and commercial success make a sacrifice of one's conscience? Can an artist be above politics?

At the start of the film Höfgen is an idealistic young actor in a Hamburg theatre company in the Twenties, taking dancing lessons from his black girlfriend and committed to the idea of a workers' theatre. He gains advancement through marriage but when his wife flees Germany after the Reichstag fire he declines to join her and determines to make it in Nazi Germany. In short, Höfgen's choice soon affects not only his personal relationships (gradually he must renounce or deny past allegiances) but also his artistic judgement (his performance of Mephistopheles is subjected to Party revision due to its ambiguous political stance). At the film's conclusion the General to whom he owes his stardom (clearly modelled on Göring)

teaches him a lesson in the dangers of over-estimating the power of his own charisma.

It is illuminating to note the background to the novel on which *Mephisto* is based (same title, by Klaus Mann, son of Thomas). The source for Höfgen was one Gustav Gründgens, actor-producer, lover to Mann and later husband to Mann's sister. When the Manns emigrated, he too stayed behind to become the favourite of the Nazi establishment. But the substitution of an ethnically undesirable mistress for homosexuality is not the most significant feature of the adaptation; in real life Gründgens contrived to avoid the more ideological lapses in taste common to official art, and is known to have aided Jewish artists escaping persecution. All well and good, but not very dramatic, at least if political conscience is one's theme.

Szabó takes this ambivalence and subsumes it in the character of Höfgen, making him evince occasional accesses of remorse or vulnerability: we first see him in the throes of a tantrum inspired by professional jealousy, and he later attempts to save a left-wing friend from the Party's vengeance, with pathetic results. Brandauer is superb at conveying this ambivalence: in his portrayal of a man whose overriding ambition is to please, but who is incapable of love, he arouses at once our admiration at his Mephistophelian dexterity and charm, our contempt at his weaselly acts of betrayal and our pity at the occasional transparency of his *jeu de masques*.

**David Clare**