

4-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Bianca (2005) "Comedian Harmonists," *Moebius*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol3/iss1/7>

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COMEDIAN HARMONISTS

Bianca Rosenthal

Berlin 1927: Unemployment, economic depression, and the mounting persecution of Jews and others prevail. The Jewish acting student Harry Frommermann wants to start a male A-capella group similar to the American Revellers. Robert Biberti, an incomparable bass accepted the invitation, followed by four, up to that point, rather unsuccessful artists: the tenor and women's idol Ari Leschnikoff, the elegant counter tenor Erich Abraham Collin, the introvert Polish baritone Roman Cycowski, and the pianist Erwin Bootz.

The group of six experienced a phenomenal career that included radio and film performances as well as travels to many countries. However, beginning in 1934, the singing style of the ensemble was labelled "Jewish-Marxist" according to Nazi cultural tenets. With three Jewish members in the group, they were forbidden to perform in Germany. At the same time, old conflicts within the group resurfaced, the breakup was unavoidable. Furthermore, the plan to continue as a trio in the United States did not materialize. Yet, during rather painful rehearsals the self-taught Frommermann achieved his dream and developed the unmistakably original singing style of the Comedian Harmonists, with popular, highly rhythmical popsongs, folksongs, chansons, classical music, parody, and nonsense numbers.

The rise and dissolution of this legendary sextet, also an accurate image of the times, lasted eight years and provides the story of the 1997 German film *Comedian Harmonists*. The film, a well staged tragicomedy is also acting performance at its best even in the secondary roles. Ironically the group also slowly becomes the darling of the rich Nazi power wielders. Here the movie mixes fact with fiction, biography with legends, story and history. The chronology of the private life events overshadows the reality of the historical

Nazi regime and its spreading barbarism. As Klaus Richter, the author of the script maintained to have told “not the true but the real story,” the film is about the “real” Comedian Harmonists, but also a fiction of their life and music. The reality is that three members of the group, because of the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazis could not continue to live their dreams, therefore, it all ended in 1934. Whether Harry Frommermann (Ulrich Noethen) had a girlfriend who fell in love with Robert Biberti, another member of the group, we don’t know for sure. Even the music of the film is a mixture of the original tunes and newer film music, arranged by Harald Kloser and Giora Feidman.

Film director Joseph Vilsmaier portrays the group within Germany’s realistic circumstances of the twenties and shows what happened beforehand. For example, many people contact the acting student Harry Frommermann while he is searching for singers. They are all out of work, willing to try anything even if singing is not their strength, in order to gain employment and compensation.

As the group came together in real life, in the film they equally hope for an artistic as well as a financial success. Frommermann is the one who is eager to succeed musically while Ari Leschnikoff is his practical opposite. When the two meet in a bar and talk about the project, Ari inquires about the financial aspect. It is quite possible that because the two were so different they worked so well together, also ensuring their stage success. Again, the plot mimics reality. Finally, after some sharp criticism that also hardened their talents, they obtained the chance to perform on Berlin’s stage during the “golden twenties.”

During that time, Berlin was one of the most important cultural capitals of the world and the Comedian Harmonists earned top ranking as a nightclub. This artistic ambiance surrounding them was accessible only to the rich and to the aristocrats—elegant women in glittering gowns with their long cigarette holders and men, appropriately dressed, eagerly celebrated whatever was new in the musical world. The Comedian Harmonists infused the scene with something new. They gave the audience what it was starved for in wake of wwi: popular tunes, folksongs, chansons, nonsense numbers. They not only sang, but also acted, all in a very original way.

The film shows how people went to a Comedian Harmonists concert, listened to the cheerful songs, and thought not of politics or the Nazis. They were talented singers who made people laugh. The film portrays some aspects of the Nazi beginnings and the ambiance of the time. Soon enough, though, the group like many artists in the Germany of the thirties became threatened. Along with the cosmopolitan Berlin of the “golden twenties,” the Germans experienced the oppressive rule of Hitler’s dictatorship. The Comedian Harmonists, like many other artists, posed a threat for this regime which desired to control everything and professed fascist ideals. Due to their artistic sensibilities and understanding of life, through their art, they promulgated certain truths that the Nazis found disturbing. Therefore, they were persecuted, and not only because several of them were Jewish.

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Unfortunately, this aspect of artistic life under the Nazis is not really dealt with in the film, as much as the brutal persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich. Emblematic songs like “Mein Kleiner Grüner Kaktus,” even though they were simple and nonsensical, must have disturbed the Nazi bigshots. Because of their ironic ambivalence, the songs were open to different interpretations. And because those in the hierarchy who were responsible for official propaganda were educated and understood the subtle nuances, this type of art could no longer be permitted. In the film, it becomes obvious that the ordinary people know that something bad is about to happen. The Comedian Harmonists know that their music and future is threatened by the Nazis. They continue to sing despite everything. The group is not willing to give up its music, because it enables it to create something meaningful.

The film shows that not only did they make beautiful music, but friendships emerged between the male members of the group as well as the group and their fans. Perhaps it was this friendship that the audience in these difficult times enjoyed the most. The Comedian Harmonists have not only friendship in their private lives, but also love. For instance, Robert has a close relationship with his mother, Harry and Erna love each other and Roman and Katja are lovers also. It is these relationships that provide more positive aspects of these depressing times.

When one thinks of this period of German history one is overcome with feelings of sadness, rage, and disappointment over wrong choices made by the Germans. The story of the Comedian Harmonists is shown in a manner that evokes pity and sympathy and remains a legend in our memory because of the great music and demonstration of human ability to deal with adversity. 

Notes

Comedian Harmonists, Germany 1997, 127 min.

Director

Joseph Vilsmaier

Script

Klaus Richter

Camera

Joseph Vilsmaier, Peter von Haller, Jörg Widmer

Music

Harald Kloser, Gloria Feidman

Cast

Ulrich Noethen (Harry Frommermann), Ben Becker (Robert Biberti), Heinrich Schafmeister (Erich Abraham Collin), Kai Wiesinger (Erwin Bootz), Heino Ferch (Roman Cycowski), Max Tidof (Ari Leschnikoff), Meret Becker (Erna Eggstein), Katja Riemann (Mary Cicowski), Dana Vávrová (Ursula Bootz)