

The German Mystique

Margarethe von Trotta is not a feminist

By Sarah Coleman

Margarethe von Trotta doesn't want to be known for "always making films about women, women, women." But when her former husband, the renowned German director Volker Schlöndorff, came to her with the idea for her breakthrough 2003 movie *Rosenstrasse*, she couldn't resist—even though it was another movie that pits vibrant, courageous women against social and political forces that are hostile toward them.

For one thing, the story of *Rosenstrasse*—a week-long protest held in 1943 by Aryan women whose Jewish husbands were being imprisoned by the Nazis—had never been told. "Even in Berlin, the story was not known," von Trotta says in a phone interview from Munich, where the filmmaker was preparing for her next film. Hardly anyone knew that intermarried Jews had been spared from deportation until 1943 or that in that year, a group of determined non-Jewish women massed together against the Nazi machine and succeeded in breaking Hitler's will.

The story was undeniably strong, but telling it wouldn't prove easy. At the time when she was trying to raise funds for the movie, Germany was suddenly discovering its funny bone. "All the producers wanted to do comedies, and not very sophisticated ones," von Trotta says. When it came to the Holocaust, there was a feeling in Germany that "we don't want to hear about this time any more," she says. But von Trotta doggedly pursued the project for nine years—her own reluctance to make another female-centered movie melting away as she interviewed about a dozen survivors of the incident.



Margarethe von Trotta at the 2003 Venice Film Festival premiere of *Rosenstrasse* (Jeff Vespa/WireImage.com)

"These people were so fond of the idea, and they knew my other films, so they trusted me," she says, adding, "I always need a very personal motivation to do something."

That kind of careful research, along with an intensely personal connection to her subject matter, characterizes the oeuvre of Margarethe von Trotta. The lone woman in a bunch of talented directors to emerge as part of the New German Cinema movement in the 1970s, von Trotta has built a reputation as a boldly independent and—though she may hate the term—feminist filmmaker. Her best movies tell stories about strong women whose personal lives intersect with larger political forces and whose pluck leads them in unexpected directions. But these aren't one-dimensional, idealized Mother Courage types. Often dark, always complicated, von Trotta's women are anything but predictable.

Take, for example, Christa Klages, the heroine of her 1977 debut solo film *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*. The screenplay, written by von Trotta, was inspired by a news story that swept Germany in the mid-1970s: that of Margit Czenki, a kindergarten teacher who robbed a bank to prevent her school from closing down. "She was treated in the newspapers like a criminal, but on the other hand I saw that she was so sympathetic, and she had such a good heart," says von Trotta, who then decided to visit Czenki in prison. The two corresponded until Czenki was released. Von Trotta later wrote a story, loosely based on Czenki's experience, that examines the effects of crime on the psyche. In *Christa*, she drew a powerful portrait of a woman whose good heart and fighting spirit prove to be a fatal combination.

The film is notable for another reason,



NON LINEAR / LINEAR
OFF LINE / ON LINE
BETA SP, DV EDITING
DV, Hi8, SP, INTERFORMAT
CD-ROM OUTPUT

EXCELLENT RATES
EXPERIENCED EDITORS

SOHO/CHINATOWN LOCATION
MASTER & VISA ACCEPTED

(212)-219-9240

EMAIL:
DFROESE@COMPUSERVE.COM

Your documentary can move audiences to take action for social change. The Independent Producers' Outreach Toolkit shows you how.

WHAT YOU GET

- Interactive Budget
- Resource Binder
- Case Studies
- Sample Proposals
- Interactive Worksheets
- Phone Consultation

AIVF MEMBER DISCOUNT!
www.mediariights.org/toolkit
email: toolkit@mediariights.org

too. True to her vision of female solidarity, the director gave Czenki a cameo in the movie and a job as its script supervisor. The ex-con went on to supervise scripts for von Trotta's next two movies before moving up to assistant director, and then directing two movies of her own—a rehabilitation that pleases her mentor immensely.

The Second Awakening of Christa Klages represented a career turning point for von Trotta as well. For over a decade she'd wanted to direct movies, but in the 1960s and early 70s, Germany's film industry was in decline. Like other Germans with artistic aspirations, von Trotta had gone to Paris after she graduated from high school in the early 1960s. She was supposed to be studying French literature and art history, but instead she was drawn to movie theaters. "My university was the cinema," she says.

And what cinema it was: Francois Truffaut, Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, and Claude Chabrol were all at the height of their careers. The French New Wave was in full force, with movies like Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* jolting audiences out of their comfort zones. Von Trotta gravitated to Bergman the most, attracted by the Swedish director's combination of artistry and psychological insight. The first Bergman film she ever saw was *The Seventh Seal*, and she remembers how its opening scene, with Death and the Chevalier playing chess on the beach, was "for me, absolutely a culture shock. Very mystical."

To satisfy her filmmaking lust von Trotta joined a student film collective, and then started acting. Things moved onto a fast track when she met Volker Schlöndorff, who also studied in Paris in the 1960s. The two married, and von Trotta wrote the scripts for several of Schlöndorff's films and became his assistant director before taking the helm in 1977 for *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*.

What she learned in Paris, she says, was that cinema could aspire to the level of fine art—an important lesson for the daughter of a painter. (Von Trotta's father, Alfred Roloff, was a successful, married artist when he met Elisabeth von Trotta,

an aristocrat's daughter whose family had fled Moscow during the Russian Revolution.) "My mother always told me that she could never obey a man or be dependent on him, so even if my father hadn't been married, she would have stayed single," von Trotta says. Much of this director's empathy for women and her attraction to themes of female courage and friendship can be traced back to her independent-minded mother.

The von Trotta family was poor in fortune but rich in cultural appreciation. As a young girl, von Trotta tried to follow in her father's footsteps by painting, but she says, "I knew quickly that I had no talent." What she had a talent for was stirring up trouble. "My mother was called to my school many times, and the teachers told her I was too impertinent." Her mother promised to reprimand von Trotta, and then, once home, told her to carry on doing what she was doing. Von Trotta chuckles. "She said, 'Go on. Don't be too shy. Assert yourself.'"

A self-portrait of von Trotta in her feisty teenage years can be seen in *Marianne and Julianne*, her 1981 movie about two sisters who grapple with politics in very different ways. The two heroines are the daughters of a clergyman who grow up in the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s, longing to break out of their narrow world. The girls have opposite trajectories: Julianne, a fearless and brazen teenager, becomes a rather cautious reporter and pro-life activist, while the more timid Marianne grows into an uncompromising revolutionary who embraces violence by joining one of Germany's infamous terrorist groups of the 1970s.

At one point in the movie, when Julianne visits Marianne in prison, her face is superimposed upon her sister's in the glass that separates them from each other—an image that, von Trotta says, speaks to the complexity of human nature. "In many of my movies, it's as though these two women or three women could always be one." She credits Hitchcock as being the finest exploiter of this idea, though Bergman's *Persona* is clearly also an influence. "It's like a splitting-up of the self—you have



Lena, Ruth, Schles, and Goldi in *Rosenstrasse* (courtesy of IDP Film)

always a dark side and a light side.”

Her current project, now in production in Germany, is a more literal version of that idea. It’s about a woman with multiple personalities and will star Katja Riemann, who won a Best Actress award at the Venice Film Festival for her role in *Rosenstrasse*. The screenplay is by Peter Märthesheimer, who co-wrote several of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s most acclaimed movies and who died a year ago—“So now it becomes a sort of homage [to him],” von Trotta says.

Psychological complexity also comes to the fore in one of her other signature movies, the 1986 biopic *Rosa Luxemburg*. Luxemburg, known as “Red Rosa,” had become almost mythical as a revolutionary Socialist of the early 1900s, and the question was how to turn a feminist political icon into a living, breathing human being. Von Trotta started by accessing the 2,500 letters of Luxemburg’s that remained, then reading them five times without making notes. “I thought that after those five times, what I remembered about her would be the things that interested me, the points at which we came together.” It turned out that what interested her was the intersection of Rosa’s private and public lives. “She was a woman who wanted it all. She wanted to have children, to be a revolutionary, to be independent but also to be loved,” von

Trotta says, noting that this was “the same thing that women wanted at the time when I made this film.”

Another of her intensely political films, *The Promise* (1995), examines the effect of Germany’s partition and reunification on two lovers separated by the Berlin Wall (the female character is, naturally, the more gutsy and stronger of the two). When the film was released at the Berlin Film Festival, von Trotta took some heat from people who felt she didn’t have the right to make it, having lived in Italy for the previous six years. Actually, she says, being a relative outsider enabled her to take on such charged subject matter. “I thought that after the Wall came down, it would be a theme that many German filmmakers would jump on—but in fact, people who were inside Germany were so paralyzed by this new development that they feared to touch it. I came from the outside, so I had no fear.”

Call her fearless, call her independent—but don’t call her a feminist or political filmmaker. “It’s a ghetto—too restrictive,” she says of the terms. She prefers to think of her filmmaking as a combination of exhaling and inhaling. “When I’m exhaling I’m looking outside, at politics and history. When I’m inhaling, I’m doing personal themes,” she says. For the organism to stay alive, both are essential. ☆

INTRODUCING THE
GLIDECAM
SMOOTH SHOOTER™
from Glidecam Industries, Inc.

INTRODUCTORY
PRICE
\$1499.00

www.Glidecam.com
1-800-600-2011
1-800-949-2089
1-508-830-1414
or Fax us at
1-508-830-1415

SONY HDR-FX1
Camcorder and
GLIDECAM 2000 PRO
not included.

The World's most sophisticated and affordable Body Mounted Camera Stabilization System designed for Cameras weighing up to 6 pounds when used with the Glidecam 2000 Pro, or for Cameras weighing from 4 to 10 pounds when used with the Glidecam 4000Pro.
Glidecam is Registered at the Patent and TM office.
Copyright 2005 Glidecam Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

DV AND HD TO FILM TRANSFER AT 2K AND 4K
ONLINE AND COLOR CORRECT CREATIVE SERVICES

PRICES STARTING AT \$199 PER MINUTE FOR 35MM

HEAVY LIGHT DIGITAL

NY'S EMERGING DIGITAL INTERMEDIATE SOURCE

HLD CONGRATULATES OUR CLIENTS AT 'OPEN WATER' AND 'SUPER SIZE ME'

TRANSFER YOUR HD ON
HEAVY LIGHT DIGITAL'S
XTREME DEFINITION 4K

HEAVY LIGHT DIGITAL
115 W 27TH ST NY, NY 10001
212.645.8216 FAX 212.367.8861 WWW.HEAVYLIGHTDIGITAL.COM