

Bonhoeffer

Washington's cinemas currently sport documentary movies that are, in many ways, far more compelling than their fictional equivalents. For elegance and wonder, there is the soaring bird epic *Winged Migration*; for psychological insight and familial trauma, there is *Capturing the Friedmans*; and for human interest and nail-biting tension, there is *Spellbound*, tracing a National Spelling Bee. To add to this array, now include *Bonhoeffer*, the real-life story of a religious and political hero who defied Nazi Germany.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brilliant and committed German pastor and theologian (b. 1906) who, despite pacifist leanings, became involved in the plots to assassinate Adolf Hitler. That involvement led to his arrest and eventual execution just three weeks before the end of World War II. The documentary tells his life story, from his comfortable days in a Berlin suburb (from a large but not notably religious family), through academic success and a telling American sojourn, to respectable work as a minister and teacher. By the time Bonhoeffer was 27, however, the Nazis had taken power, and his religious fervor--and openness--smacked up against the reality of a vicious regime.

Anti-Semitic policies coupled with general totalitarian rule eventually drove Bonhoeffer, always anxious to truly live his faith, to move from principled pacifism to an equally principled commitment to challenge Nazi savagery at its core. The film highlights this transformation by examining Bonhoeffer's writing, especially a phrase from the mid-1930's in which he says that the church may have to do more than "bandage the victims under the wheel, it may have to jam a spoke in the wheel itself"--suggesting that religious belief may have to stand up to the criminal actions of the state.

Documentarian Martin Doblmeier tells the Bonhoeffer story chronologically and completely, and he does it in a stately, restrained way, mixing the usual historic footage and personal interviews, many of the latter with relatives and friends of the pastor. Memorable (among many) are his best friend Eberhard Bethge (since deceased), who offers a most personal view, Otto Dudzus, a former Bonhoeffer student who recalls his mentor's mind and personality, and Ruth Alice von Bismarck, the sister of Bonhoeffer's fiancée, who movingly describes a final meeting between her sister and the German minister.

Bonhoeffer himself is evoked in an ample succession of stills and through readings from his works (finely voiced by Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer). Intriguing use is made of the man's personal history, such as his being captivated by Negro spirituals in Harlem and his Socratic examination of faith at a small seminary in the tiny German town of Finkelwalde. Real tension and momentum result when the film traces his courting of danger--especially with his brother-in-law Hans Von Dohnanyi--by both aiding Jews and passing conspiracy information in and outside Germany's borders. His rough arrest comes as inevitable, yet still shocking...

Besides the ongoing, intrinsic drama of Bonhoeffer's committed life, Doblmeier (who also narrated the film and whose production company Journey Films, is based in Alexandria) offers other useful elements: for one, a trenchant "essay" on the early relationship between the Nazis and the German church (and how the former subverted the latter) as well as a serious discussion of the demands of faith, a subject

surpassingly rare in *any* kind of American motion picture. Such subject matter might be seen as rather ponderous, but--no--it offers here a richness of context which makes Bonhoeffer's personal story the more fascinating.

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