

Goodbye, Lenin!

It's October 1989 and Alex (Daniel Brühl), his sister Ariane (Maria Simon) and his mother (Katrin Sass) are muddling through in their tight East Berlin apartment. The siblings are bored with their drab existence, and Alex yearns to rebel against their socialist fate, while their mother--a natural enthusiast--is an über-achiever and classic do-gooder who accepts fully all that is the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the only world she has ever known.

The absent father has long since fled to the West. When Alex participates in a street rally demanding reform, it causes his fragile mother (never named in the movie) to collapse into a coma. Though still comatose, mom is returned to the family's apartment for care. November 1989 comes and the Berlin Wall falls, opening the once-divided city. Told earlier by doctors that his mother cannot handle any excitement or it could mean her life, Alex and her friends are at wit's end when, surprisingly, mother awakes after several months into a new Germany she cannot imagine, presenting the potential for just the kind of shock to her system that could mean a relapse or worse.

Thus, the set-up for this comedy/drama *Goodbye, Lenin!*: how can dutiful Alex, his sister, and their comrades organize the life of the bed-bound mother to make it *appear* that the Wall never really toppled?

On paper, this is a quite unbelievable premise, but once it's accepted, and the filmgoer goes along with what follows (much as Alex himself does), it provides a countless number of lively incongruities as Berlin folkways morph from boring cant to Burger King. *Goodbye, Lenin* is no laff-riot; its humor comes at you sideways and on the offbeat. The more one has a sense of the once profound differences that existed between the Two Germanies, however, the sharper is its bite.

The culture clashes are big and small. When the mother one day sees a massive Coke sign unfurled against a building outside her bedroom window, Alex and his work buddy Denis (Florian Lukas), a video nut, concoct a fake TV newscast which duly announces that the Coca Cola formula was originally invented in East Germany in the 1950's so that it can now be sold in the East. A running ruse has Alex constantly switching old jar labels of a famous local pickle--the *Spreewald* gherkin, a favorite of his mother's--on to the imported fare he has bought at the new Western-style supermarket. The *real* pickle that Alex is in is how can he possibly keep up the dissimulating game as his mother looks to widen her world again?

This dance of deception is nicely led by Alex, leading gently, and his mother, pensive but accepting. Young Brühl's character may be living a lie, but he is doing it with the best of motives and with real care and thoughtfulness. The actor proves funny without trying to be funny, while appearing ever sympathetic however misguided. He just doesn't know any other way to turn. Sass has the tough task of playing most of the film as the complete naif without appearing pathetic or ridiculous. She pulls that off then also convinces as the utterly startled beholder of the New Berlin when she finally, one day, wanders out of her bedroom to discover a Brave New World that hath such cars and consumer products in it.

Audiences who might be scared off by what they think might be more "heavy" German film fare should give this very droll and delicate confection a taste.

An Interview with the Filmmakers

Wolfgang Becker is an engaging, burly German film director delighted with the fact that he has a film with commercial potential in the U.S. Over 15 years, he has made numerous television shows and, now, three features, most with his company X-Filme in Berlin, but none of them has been seen widely in this country. His latest movie, *Goodbye, Lenin!* was a massive hit in his own country and has charmed audiences in France, Brazil, Australia and elsewhere (in Hong Kong, they want to do a remake!), a success that has propelled him, and his lead actor, young Daniel Brühl, to do an American promotional tour.

Goodbye, Lenin! is a wry, basically non-ideological look at the new Germany through the optic of an East Berlin family trying to adjust to reunification. It is played for gentle humor and sly insights rather than for political points.

Asked where the original idea came from, Becker credited his screenwriter, Bernd Lichtenberg, with the concept. Lichtenberg, Becker said, "had produced an outline on the idea as far back as 1992, and X-Filme had originally thought it would make a decent television drama." Yet, after a year-and-one-half toiling on the script, it was decided it would work best as a theatrical release.

Premiered at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival, *Goodbye, Lenin!* was a spectacular audience favorite. Daniel Brühl, after attending the premiere, witnessed that positive international reaction and thereby, "we learned that it could be successful" well beyond German borders. Becker remarked further that "almost all of the Berlin critics condemned the movie because of its likely commercial appeal. But the critical reaction elsewhere (i.e., outside the capital) has been very positive."

Becker himself has no East German background, though he has long been resident in West Berlin. Asked where he was when the Wall fell, he replied that he was in Berlin that night. "When I heard about it," he said, "I took three days off and just hung around the wall where the whole thing happened. I would have loved to have filmed it then," he added, "It would have saved me a lot of money (on this film)!"

Young Brühl was only 11 when the Wall came down, living in his home town of Cologne. Becker noted, however, that his lead actress Katrin Sass personally lived through the transformation of East Germany. Born in that country, she became a successful stage and screen actress there, but had only once--in her twenties--been to the West (to briefly attend an earlier Berlin Film Festival).

Asked if Sass personally contributed to the screenplay in any way, Becker said that, "while she did no rewrites, she would make useful language suggestions--'we say it this way rather than that way'--which we incorporated into her character." One moment in the film had real resonance for her, according to Becker. It's a crucial scene where she faints when she sees her son in a street demonstration. "While living in East Berlin," he said, "Katrin had once had a traumatic experience during a real demonstration, so that when 600 extras showed up for the movie's demonstration scene, she really relived that disturbing event."

For Daniel, performing seems to be in the blood. With his father and an uncle in radio and television, the actor appeared on radio as a child and began acting in films when he was 15 (he is now 23). It has been so much a part of his life that he "didn't want to go to acting school." With *Goodbye, Lenin!* his stock is rising nicely. He said he

has just completed shooting on his latest motion picture, his first in English. He will co-star in *Ladies in Lavender*, a British film featuring acting icons Maggie Smith and Judi Dench. And, as it turns out, he's the love interest for Dame Judi!

(March 2004)