

Meeting Gorbachev

German director Werner Herzog is a flamboyant polymath filmmaker, having divided his career (since 1962) between offbeat fictional narratives and intriguing documentaries. In “Meeting Gorbachev,” (co-directed with Andre Singer) he turns again to the latter, combining a tour d’horizon of Mikhail Gorbachev’s career with an expansive interview done over three visits to Moscow over a six-month period. For history buffs the film will fascinate, though Herzog’s indomitable presence and his almost Olympian voice could be seen as too brash.

Herzog, as the on-screen interviewer, starts off with a jarring and caustic comment: “I’m a German, and the first German you ever met probably wanted to kill you,” to which Gorbachev can only chuckle “No” to fend off the provocation. And while Herzog regularly inserts himself into the exchange, he also clearly expresses affection for the man and recognizing Gorbachev’s remarkable achievements such as negotiating with the U.S. to reduce nuclear weapons, ceding military control of Eastern Europe, and accepting the reunification of Germany. Those accomplishments are captured in chronological order through ample archive footage and filmed statements from other figures of his time, such as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, George Shultz, James Baker, and Lech Walesa, among others, ringing lines from our recent history.

The story of the demise of the Soviet Union also gets appropriate coverage, recalling how Gorbachev himself was ousted in 1991, his leadership role pulled out from under him while he was on vacation in the Crimea. What is given short shrift, however, is Gorbachev’s role in the Russia of Yeltsin and Putin, and how and why his political fortunes dissipated. We learn very little of his life after 1991, only that he represents the Gorbachev Foundation over the last years. Herzog himself said that “I was anxious not to film a biography of (Gorbachev) but to try to understand the character of such an important figure.” He mainly achieves that.

Mikhail Gorbachev is now 87 and battling illness (diabetes), far from the once vigorous and visionary Secretary of the U.S.S.R who introduced “perestroika” and “glasnost” to the world in his effort to reform his nation. He has mellowed and sometimes looks burdened, as when he talks wistfully about his beloved Raisa, who died in 1999 and who was obviously the key influence in his life. Still, he shows flashes of wit and a full awareness of his past, regretting little. He was a man who tried to genuinely achieve a more peaceful world. When asked by Herzog near the end of the film what he would like inscribed on his gravestone, he replies, “We tried.”

(The film runs 92 minutes and is unrated.)

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