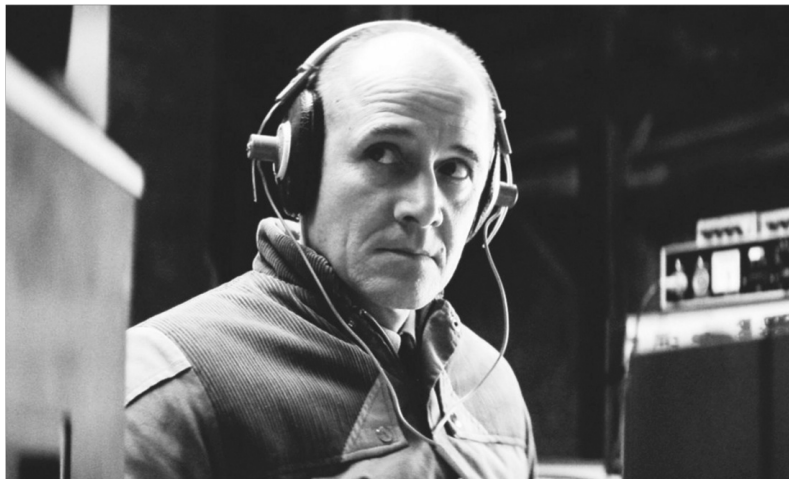


ARTS

Arts Editor: Mark Greaves
Tel: 020 7448 3603
Fax: 020 7256 9728
E-mail: mark@catholicherald.co.uk



Ulrich Mühe plays Gerd Wiesler, a committed Communist and Stasi spy whose compassion is revived by a particularly affecting piano sonata

How a sonata can thaw the heart



The Lives of Others

15 CERT, 137 MIN

Let me tell you a story. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, writer and director of *The Lives of Others*, was listening to a Beethoven piano sonata one day, and suddenly he remembered reading how Lenin had said to his friend Maxim Gorky that the Apparassnata was his favourite piece of music but that he had stopped listening to it in the interests of the revolution. "It makes me want to tell people sweet stupid things and stroke their heads," Lenin had said. "At a time when it is necessary to smash in those heads, smash them in without mercy."

"I find it to be a terrifying quote," says Donnersmarck, "showing the true essence of ideology – the total dominance of principle over feeling."

Donnersmarck then had a vision of a scenario where a Lenin figure, devoted to his ideology, had to listen to the Apparassnata for some secondary reason and was accidentally human-

ised in the process. "I had this vision of a picture, something like a medium close-up, of a man in a depressing room with earphones on his head, expecting to hear through them words that reinvigorate his ideology, but actually hearing a music so beautiful and so powerful that it makes him rethink everything. I sat down and wrote the outline for *The Lives of Others* in three hours."

Had *The Lives of Others* been any less good I would probably have scoffed at such a grand story of artistic inspiration. But, having seen the film, I believe every word of it. When you see as many films as I do, you get used to the fact that most of them seem to start with the premise "let's make a film" or a budget, or a vague concept, rather than a specific something to say. As I pompously decreed in my first ever film review for the *Herald*, three years ago, "in a truly good movie everything – the cinematography, the music, even the references – should serve the artistic purpose." How refreshing and delightful then finally to witness *The Lives of Others*, a film in which every detail is wrought and streamlined to do just that.

It is set in the East Berlin of 1984. State Security Captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) is an almost comically slavish devotee to the Communist Party and its horrific methods of interrogation and surveillance. He goes with his old Stasi classmate and superior in the culture division Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur) to see a new play by handsome playwright Georg

Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), starring of Dreyman's equally handsome girlfriend Christa-Maria (Martina Gedeck). Ordered by gross, all-powerful Minister Hempf (who is having a clandestine affair with the actress), Grubitz tells Wiesler to find some dirt on Dreyman. Having bugged his flat, Wiesler sets up in the attic of his block, and monitors, night and day, Dreyman and Christa-Maria's life. Just as they become more radical and against the regime, Wiesler falls in

East Germany is the perfect setting for the theme of individual humanity versus ideology

love with the largeness of her life and, and these various players fight and swirl towards a stunning high-tide climax.

The whole atmosphere of East Germany, with its dull colours and slow cars, feels totally accurate. More than that, it is the perfect setting for Donnersmarck's theme of individual humanity versus flat ideology – the literary coterie that circles Dreyman and his girlfriend is the only evidence of what we would call "real life". All the lesser roles go to the same theme of watching how human instincts mesh into a culture of fear: the actresses, excellently cast as not too glamorous, carries on her secret affair with the

hideous Minister Hempf out of fear; Grubitz, more successful than Wiesler only because more opportunistic, seeks any pretence in his career. Even the occasional funny moment (angry artists putting on coats back to front, nerdy typeface experts giving intelligence to the Stasi) are moments of generosity that speak the lie to the mean, socialist regime.

But what makes this movie great is the tight, surprising, moving character progression of Captain Wiesler. With his grey zip-up jacket and cold, Kevin Spacey eyes, Wiesler starts off as the inhuman face of this distorted ideology. (In my notes, for the first 15 minutes, I referred to him as "Psycho.") But what starts as prurient curiosity as he listens in on a life fully led with its love and passion and loss, soon starts to change him. We follow him home to his tiny lifeless apartment, and he orders a prostitute – his plaintive expression at the end of their brief encounter is when we first start to forgive him. After this there come a series of wonderful moments as the ice starts to thaw. He steals a book of Brecht from their apartment and reads it, he starts letting small insults to the Stasi pass, and then he hears Dreyman play (after the suicide of his black-listed friend Albert Jerska) a piano piece called "Sonata for a Good Man". This is the moment Donnersmarck had envisioned, and it packs quite a punch. You will have to wait for the stunning, highly satisfying plot conclusion to find out who that "good man" turns out to be.

Why our women are the envy of the world

BALLET REVIEW
Dennis Chang

Oegin
ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, LONDON

The unveiling of the new Royal Ballet season drummed home the unmistakable message that an era has ended. Absent from the company roster are Jonathan, Sylvie and Darcey – three names that have dominated opening nights for the past 15 years. Nostalgia aside, we ought not to wallow, for the Royal Ballet is in better shape than ever. In fact, our top women are the envy of the world. I especially look forward to major role debuts by the Argentine pyro-technician Mariamela Nuñez, whose quadruple pirouettes shine through every mundane stock character she has been assigned. In Royal Ballet's current revival of John Cranko's *Oegin* she danced not Tatiana, the heroine struck by love, grief and guilt, but her naive younger sister, Olga.

As with all adaptations of great literature, Cranko's 1965 staging of Alexander Pushkin's 1833 verse novel necessarily condenses the tragedy into three interweaving relationships: Olga and her fiancé Lensky, Tatiana and Oegin, and Tatiana and her eventual husband Prince Gremin. The sisters' bourgeois country existence is disrupted by the arrival of Lensky's friend Oegin, a world-weary traveller unmoved by the impressionable Tatiana's adolescent crush.

Overnight, Tatiana dashes off her impassioned thoughts in a letter, only to be torn into pieces by the remote stranger when they meet at an evening ball. Her begging for his understanding only compounds his annoyance, which prompts him to flirt outrageously with her sister, Lensky, insulted by his friend's crassness and shamed by his fiancé's ostensible fickleness, challenges Oegin to a duel and is killed. Years later, a wearier Oegin returns to find Tatiana married to his friend Gremin. Regal and irreplicable, Princess Tatiana is now the unobtainable object of Oegin's affection, but her pride and propriety endure her simmering passion. She rejects the regretful suitor by tearing up his letter.

Set to a potpourri of orchestrated Tchaikovsky piano miniatures, *Oegin* foreshadows the doomed ending from the start. Even the happiest of dances for the younger lovers in the opening scene are drenched in melancholy – be it a weeping Slavic elegy or a plaintive

Venetian barcarolle. The muted tone looms over the stage like a dust sheet that gets blown away in the second scene by an ecstatic pas de deux for Tatiana and Oegin, who appears in her dream as a reciprocating lover. Held aloft like a prized possession, Tatiana's feet hardly touch the ground in her own fevered imagination. In one memorable moment she runs towards him at full tilt from one side of the stage. Instead of countering her passion, he catches her arm and whips her body into an aerial twirl. Just when she is about to crash land, he sets her down on one knee with nary a flinch – as if Newton's third law temporarily ceases to intervene.

The ballet reaches a second climax at the very end. The prodigal Oegin now pleads for Tatiana's love by encircling his arms around her body without once touching her. He prostrates at her feet on her every step as she attempts to escape before old passion erupts. Her resolve wavers, and her frozen upper torso correspondingly bends, first hesitantly sideways, and then lurching backwards as she falls into his embrace. He lifts her into the air with effort, as if attempting to set her free from the marital and social confines to which she is now subject. He catches her under the arms as she crashes down with the weight of their history, no doubt painfully from the force of the impact. She does regain her senses, though, she shows him the door and it ends in tears.

Heart-on-sleeve theatre and breathtaking acrobatics have always endeared Cranko's choreography to audiences and dancers alike. Alina Cojocaru and Johan Koborg gave blistering performances. Reckless high jinks aside, they invested every step and gesture with maximum pathos, and electrified the house. On separate nights, Thiago Soares and Roberta Marquez did not reach the same fortissimo height of passion and despair, but they brought a mature gravitas to the final scene that was more true to Pushkin's intentions. Mariamela Nuñez's Olga exuded a lovable innocence that made us all too ready to forgive, the havoc she wreaked by flirting with the wrong man.

Right, Alina Cojocaru



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Disappointing dame

THEATRE REVIEW

The Lady from Dubuque
HAYMARKET THEATRE ROYAL

Edward Albee's 27-year-old play opens with the question: "Who am I?" It is asked by a man whose wife is dying from cancer. Catherine McCormack screams with pain and is very convincing, but the character's wife behaviour to her guests is totally unbelievable. The husband is an unpleasant bunch, including a dumb, a redneck, a bore and a neurotic. They are all ciphers.

The opening scene – a pale re-run of the guest-bullying in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – is acted here for artificial comedy, with the actors often speaking directly to the audience. "Who are you?" the husband keeps asking the lady from Dubuque. She claims to be his wife's mother, when it is pretty obvious that she is really an Angel of Death who has come to succour a dying woman. She is accompanied by a witty, elegant, middle-aged black man (Peter Francis James) who is adept at lobbing ironic lines and smiles across the footlights.

His performance is the high spot of Anthony Page's production. The husband (Robert Sella), who gets angry and is finally knocked out and tied up, is called Sam. Is he meant to be a symbol for America? Audi-

ences who come just for Dame Maggie Smith are likely to be disappointed, since the lady from Dubuque isn't that hot a role.

The Jewish Wife

YOUNG VIC
Bertolt Brecht was high on the Nazi Party's blacklist and went into forced exile in 1938. This moving one-act play was one in a series of plays and sketches which he wrote under the collective title of *Fear and Misery* in Nazi Germany.

A rich German-Jewish wife (beautifully underplayed by Anastasia Hille) is packing an extensive wardrobe in her art deco bedroom. She phones people telling them that she is going to Amsterdam for a couple of weeks. She is, in fact, leaving for good. Her husband, a gentle who is in danger of losing his job because he is married to a Jew, is only too relieved to see her go.

A Respectable Wedding

YOUNG VIC
Brecht's satire on the bourgeoisie, written in 1919 when he was 21, is as vicious as the caricatures of Otto Dix and George Grosz. It owes much to the vaudeville tradition and the silent film comedies of the era. The wedding party is observed coping with a whole series of embarrassments and disasters, including inappropriate

toasts, vulgar quarrels and constantly collapsing furniture.

Rory Bremner's version, updated and anglicised, cuts down the bitter satire and concentrates on the physical and verbal jokes. Joe Hill-Gibbins's production, cleverly set in a crowded room and well acted by an excellent ensemble, is hilarious and deserves a longer shelf life than its present run.

French Without Tears

TOURING

Terence Rattigan's career went into sharp decline with the arrival of John Osborne and the angry young men at the Royal Court in the late 1950s, when he and Noel Coward suddenly found themselves out of fashion. French windows and cigarette holders were out; kitchen sinks and ironing boards were in.

This comedy, which brought him instant fame in 1936 at the age of 23, is set in a crammer in a small seaside town in France where a number of young men, destined for the diplomatic service, are distracted by young women while trying to learn French. Ben Mansfield is straight out of drama school but catches the period style and manages all the French dialogue with convincing ease. He is very amusing while curled up in agony on the floor, frightened he is going to fall in love.

Robert Tanitch

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