



FILM REVIEWS

Mahler on the Couch -- Film Review

By Kirk Honeycutt, June 23, 2010 04:57 ET



"Mahler on the Couch"

Bottom Line: A heavily romanticized but very witty and erotic film about famous names from Viennese society a century ago.

Percy Adlon, who once made a movie about Marcel Proust that focused on his maid, is up to old tricks in this delightful, witty, artistically vigorous and occasionally loony fantasia about Vienna's cultural elite 100 years ago.

"Mahler on the Couch," which Adlon wrote and directed with his son Felix, manages to pose a serious, intimate study in obsessive jealousy while, like a gaga celebrity hunter, bumping into just about everybody who's anybody in Viennese society circa 1910.

The German film is having its world premiere at the Los Angeles Film Festival.

The Mahler in the title is, of course, the great Austrian composer and opera director Gustav Mahler, and the couch belongs to none other than Sigmund Freud. The maestro seeks out the father of psychoanalysis because he is absolutely freaking out over the marital betrayal of his wife,

Alma. She has fallen for Walter Gropius, the architect who eventually will be a founder of the Bauhaus School and therefore will usher in modern architecture.

Of course, once you introduce the (in)famous Alma Maria Mahler-Werfel, you drag into your story such alleged lovers as Gustav Klimt, Max Burckhard and Alexander von Zemlinsky. And let's not forget that Carl Moll, co-founder of the Vienna Secession, was Alma's step-dad. The movie ends before she meets Oskar Kokoschka or Franz Werfel, but you get the point: This is a who's who of early 20th century Vienna.

For all this crowded cocktail party of famous names, the film focuses on the nine-year marriage of Gustav (Johannes Silberschneider) and Alma (Barbara Romaner), a union that seemingly was doomed from Day 1. Gustav, nearly 20 years her senior, stifles Alma's desire to write music while insisting she act as his muse, assistant, music copyist and foremost critic. This headstrong woman never was going to play that role for long.

Gustav tracks down Freud (Karl Markovics) in Holland, though he spends less time on the doctor's portable couch than wandering strangely deserted streets and canals with the cigar-smoking Freud while ranting about the distressing adultery of his beloved wife.

In flashbacks and documentary-like interviews on camera with Alma's mother (Eva Mattes) and other pivotal personalities, the film explores the source of Gustav's great joy and sorrow while suggesting that Alma is in every note of music he wrote during the marriage.

This is especially true of the last piece he ever composed, the first movement of his unfinished Tenth symphony -- one sees Gustav's desperate scribbles and pleas to Alma on the sheet music -- a composition filled with a outbursts of joy, rage and torment. Also included in the film's music, recorded by Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, are the Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth, dedicated to Alma, and the "Ruhevoll" from the Fourth symphony.

The film's great gift, though, is Romaner. Unbelievably, this is the first film for the Bavarian stage actress. She fully inhabits the role of this complex personality whose passion for love and art collides with her role of wife and mother. Her love affair with Gropius is like a drug whose physical sensations she can't do without, yet her adoration of her husband's genius forces her (temporary) withdrawal.

Almost as brilliant is Silberschneider as Gustav. He gets the prickly nature of a true genius, his insensitivity to those closest to him, as well as his unstrung despair when his carefully ordered world comes crashing down. Artists like Gustav aren't so much bohemian as well-regulated businessman who barely can function when that order is disturbed.

The film never shies from silliness, though, a prime example being the "Sound of Music" moment when Gustav bursts from his country study to summon his wife by declaring, "The Sixth (symphony) is finished!" You can feel the camera's strong desire to swirl around the embracing couple as it did around Julie Andrews on another Austrian hilltop.

Markovics' Freud is the odd man out here as he exists mostly to pose questions rather than as the subject of biographic scrutiny. Nevertheless, the scenes between the two giants of Viennese society contain much wit and humor, almost a play within a play.

Benedict Neuenfels' cinematography is lush and romantic, and Jochen Kunstler's editing neatly entwines past and present.

Venue: Los Angeles Film Festival

Production: A pelemele Film & Stage/Cultfilm production with ARD Degeto BR and ORF

Cast: Johannes Silberschneider, Barbara Romaner, Karl Markovics, Friedrich Mucke, Eva Mattes, Lena Stolze, Nina Berten

Director-screenwriters: Percy Adlon, Felix Adlon

Producers: Eleonore Adlon, Burkhard Ernst, Konstantin Seitz

Director of photography: Benedict Neuenfels

Production designer: Bernt Amadeus Capra, Veronika Merlin

Music: Gustav Mahler

Costume designer: Caterina Czepek

Editor: Jochen Kunstler

No rating, 101 minutes