

# The Main Feature



Issue Number 3 – 11<sup>th</sup> October 2007

## The Lives of Others

(Leben der Anderen, Das)

Country: Germany - with English subtitles.  
Cert 15 - 137 minutes

Director, Writer and Co-Producer: Florian Henckel von  
Donnersmarck's

Cinematography: Hagen Bogdanski

Original Music: Stephane Mouchel and Gabriel Yared

cast:

Capt. Gerd Wiesler:

**Ulrich Muehe**

Georg Dreyman:

**Sebastian Koch**

Christa-Maria:

**Martina Gedeck**

Lt. Col. Grubitz:

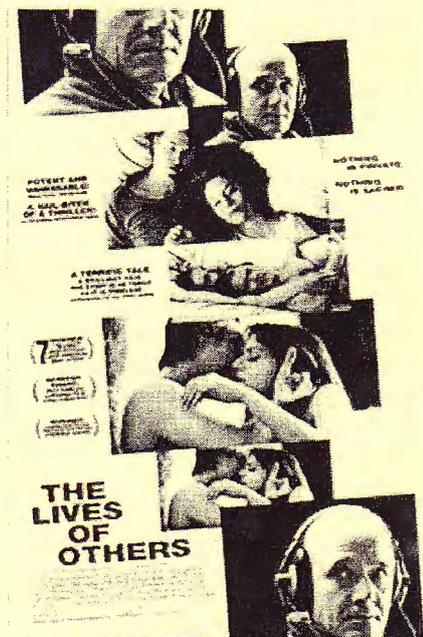
**Ulrich Tukur**

Bruno Hempf:

**Thomas Thieme**

Paul Hauser:

**Hans Uwe Bauer**



Released in the UK in April 2007, we are delighted to be able to present this Oscar winning film so quickly.

Unlike other German films, most notably "Goodbye, Lenin," which we screened in 2005, tonight's film is hardly an exercise in what's called "Ostalgia": nostalgia for the good old days of the East. Instead it is an inside look at how a surveillance society, set up to discover and prey upon human weakness, has the ability to make everyone a potential suspect and destroy everything it touches.

The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and therefore a whole generation has grown up not appreciating the symbolic importance of that structure or indeed barely aware that Germany was split into two countries from 1945 until 3 October 1990 when Germany was officially reunified.

East Germany had been created out of what had been the Soviet occupation zone of Germany after Hitler's defeat; it became a heavily armed dictatorship but never looked as if it could survive without Soviet backing.



The declared goal of the Stasi (the East German Secret Police) was "To know everything". It had 100,000 collaborators and 200,000 informers to ensure it met that target from a population of 16 million.

At the age of 33, this is the first feature film of Florian Maria Georg Christian Graf Henckel von Donnersmarck (his full name). Interestingly his uncle is a Cistercian monk, and Florian sequesters himself in a monk's cell in his Uncle's abbey to write scripts and prepare for film projects, a practice he has no intention of altering. He has a filing cabinet full of projects, admitting that he can personally direct only around 5% of them. So he's planning on assembling a production company around himself to farm them out. Given the impact of his debut, whatever he comes out with, we'll all almost definitely know about it.

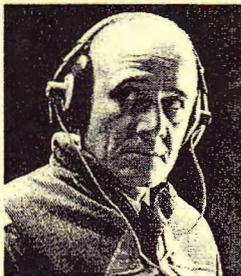
von Donnersmarck has got the historical elements of his film right – which is very admirable when you realise that he was only 16 when the Wall came down (and a West German, too). He spent four years researching the film, and knows as well as anyone that there is no case of a Stasi man trying to save victims. He has said: "I didn't want to tell a true story as much as explore how someone might have behaved. The film is more of a basic expression of belief in humanity than an account of what actually happened."

The thoroughness of the regime was horrifying: it accumulated, in the 40 years of its existence, more written records than in all of German history since the Middle Ages. East Germany was run on fear and betrayal: at least one in 50 people - by CIA estimates, one in seven - were informing on their relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues.

It is interesting to learn that groups of ex-Stasi are becoming increasingly belligerent. They write articles and books, and conduct lawsuits against people who speak out against them.

Last year, in March, a group of some 200 ex-Stasi protested with loudhailers outside Hohenschönhausen in Berlin, which was the GDR's main prison for political prisoners. It is now a memorial museum about the regime. They demanded it be shut down, and objected to the words "Communist Dictatorship" proposed for plaques in nearby streets. And they poured scorn on their former victims - some of whom now take tours through the prison – indeed they have been known to attend a tour only to heckle when a guide recounts their experience - "Rubbish! Lies! You're just a common criminal!" At some screenings of *The Lives of Others* protestors have have shouted: "Rubbish

The opening shot of the film is set at Hohenschönhausen prison, but it wasn't filmed there. Dr Hubertus Knabe, the director of the memorial, refused von Donnersmarck permission.



As Wiesler, Ulrich Mühe is note-perfect, capturing the gradual changes to his character with aplomb. According to von Donnersmarck, the part was written with Mühe in mind, which may be a clue as to why there's such synergy between the actor and his screen counterpart. Co-stars Martina Gedeck and Sebastian Koch are also effective, but neither is able to steal the film away from Mühe, whose low-key approach makes him the surprising centerpiece of many scenes, most notably the one in which he eavesdrops as Dreyman plays a piano sonata ("Sonata for a Good Man" composed for the film by Gabriel Yared).

At the end of his "director's statement" on the film, von Donnersmarck writes: "More than anything else, *The Lives of Others* is a human drama about the ability of human beings to do the right thing, no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path." This is an uplifting thought. But what is more likely to save us from going down the wrong path again is recognising how human beings can be trained and forced into faceless systems of oppression, in which conscience is extinguished.

"At last we have a film that shows the East German state was not some kind of comedy show", said Vera Lengsfeld, a former dissident who is now a Christian Democratic politician. After Germany reunited she learnt that her own husband had been spying on her for the Stasi. "I know from my own experience how police surveillance systematically destroys the personality. It is relentless and merciless."

The movie is relevant today, as democratically elected governments post 9/11 ignore habeas corpus, practices secret torture, and asks for the right to wiretap and eavesdrop on its citizens.

As well as winning the best foreign-language film Oscar of 2006 (beating *Pan's Labyrinth* to that award), this film has another 42 wins & 10 nominations from across the world.

"*The Lives of Others*" is a powerful film, constructed of hidden thoughts and secret desires.

*In real life, the actor Muehe discovered that his own ex-wife was a Stasi informant.*

Iain McGlashan

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## Ulrich Mühe

It is a tragic irony that at the moment when one of Germany's most celebrated actors, Ulrich Mühe, had gained international fame for his performance in this year's Oscar-winning *The Lives of Others* he was to die of stomach cancer, aged 54. According to Florian Henckel von Donnesmarck, the director of the film, the original cause of the stomach problems that eventually led to cancer was the anxiety he suffered during the period when Mühe was a conscript in the East German military.

Assigned to patrol the Berlin Wall, he had - like all East German border guards - shoot-to-kill orders for fugitives trying to escape to the west, though, as far as is known, he never killed anyone. Many years later, when Mühe had become a well-known stage, screen and television actor, he was an outspoken critic of the regime and helped to organise a major anti-government demonstration in East Berlin in November 1989, which led to the collapse of the wall.

Therefore, his role as the loyal Stasi officer in *The Lives of Others* was particularly meaningful. In fact, the part was written with Mühe in mind, which partly explains the extraordinary identification of the actor with the part. The way he gradually changes from a soulless, humourless party flunky, leading a cold, isolated existence, into a human being, is a remarkable piece of acting. The film won him seven prizes for best actor, including a European Film Award.

Born in the small town of Grimma in Saxony, the son of a furrier, Mühe trained as a builder before being drafted into the Volksarmee and detailed to watch the Berlin Wall. In 1975, aged 23, he began his theatre studies at the Hans Otto Theatre Academy in Leipzig and began to get small roles in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now, once again Chemnitz) before being discovered by Heiner Müller, a leading director and playwright in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (obituary, January 1 1996), and invited to join the ensemble of the Berliner Volksbühne. Mühe's roles there included Goethe's *Egmont*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, *Hamlet* in both the Shakespeare play and in Müller's modern masterpiece *Hamletmaschine* (1979).

His film and television career began in 1983, but it was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that he began to get the parts he deserved. Mühe was first seen widely outside Germany as the gullible publisher Dr Wieland in the Oscar-nominated *Schtonk!* (1992), a farce on the Hitler diary hoax. The Austrian director Michael Haneke gave Mühe three choice roles. In *Benny's Video* (1992), he was the distant father partly blamed for his son becoming a "desensitised" killer, and in *Funny Games* (1997), he is the victim of young thugs, presumably for being an opera-loving bourgeois. Mühe carries conviction in both these specious studies of the cause and effects of violence, as he does as K in Haneke's adaptation of Kafka's *The Castle* (1997).

In 1998, Mühe became a household name in Germany as the pathologist Doctor Robert Kolmaar in 73 episodes of the television crime series, *The Last Witness*. By this time he was married to Susanne Lothar, with whom he co-starred in about half a dozen films, including the three by Haneke. His second wife, whom he had married in 1984, was Jenny Grollman, with whom he acted in the early days. Years later, in a book describing the background to *The Lives of Others*, Mühe claimed that Grollman had informed on him to the East German secret service, which held hundreds of pages on him. She obtained an injunction against the publisher, swearing under oath that she was not an agent of the state.

In recent years, Mühe made a niche for himself as nasty Nazis - as Joseph Goebbels in *Goebbels and Geduldig* (2001), and Dr Mengele in Costa-Gavras's *Amen* (2002). He was scheduled to play Klaus Barbie in an upcoming feature. His last film was the truly dreadful comedy *Mein Führer: The Truly Truest Truth about Adolf Hitler* (2007), though Mühe was amusing as an actor hired to give Hitler lessons.

In November 2006 he appeared at the Barbican in Thomas Ostermeier's Berlin Schaubühne rendering of *Blasted*, by Sarah Kane, described by this newspaper's Michael Billington as a superb production.

Mühe is survived by Susanne Lothar and their two children, a daughter by Jenny Grollman and by two children from an earlier marriage.

· Ulrich Mühe, actor, born June 20 1953; died July 22 2007

Ronald Bergan Saturday July 28, 2007 [The Guardian](#)

## Reactions to ....

### Pans Labyrinth 27<sup>th</sup> September 2007

Score 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
Votes ~ ~ 2 0 1 4 4 11 5 5 2

Total Votes - 34 Average Score - 6.88 Position in Season - 2<sup>nd</sup>

Last Season Average - 6.714

Film	Score	Position
Notes on a Scandal	7.73	1 <sup>st</sup>
Pans Labyrinth	6.88	2 <sup>nd</sup>

## Your views

Brutal over the top form - not my taste

Another thoroughly unpleasant and ridiculous film form Toro

Clever but too farcical and unpleasant so it did not work

A strange mixture of fairy tale and scenes of great cruelty and violence

I like to go home happy not depressed

quite thought provoking

"Things are not good here" took on a whole new meaning in this odd yet well made and thought provoking film both interesting and intriguing excellent timing with the full moon!

A very Spanish happy ending Innocence murdered by political monstrosity - compulsory viewing for the Burmese military

Very intriguing Children's fairy tales are truly grim.

But what an exciting, interesting film A Spanish answer to Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia"!

## Next Time

25<sup>th</sup> October 2007(One World Week) Double Bill - The Day-I Became a Woman & Offside

From a young girl who is told on her 9<sup>th</sup> birthday that she may no longer play with her male friend as she is now a woman, through adult hood to old age. What true freedom do women have in Iran?

 2001/Iran/78 mins

A group of Iranian girls are discovered trying to get into a big football game disguised as boys.

 2006/Iran/93 mins

**Repropoint**

sponsors photocopying of the main feature