



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Mädchen in Uniform

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

While *Mädchen in Uniform* and its sympathetic depiction of lesbian love now enjoy an unassailable place in the history of queer cinema, the film's critical legacy in Germany, its home country, used to be quite muddled. Some critics struggled to draw out the link between the film's homoeroticism and its anti-authoritarian conclusion. In 1947, the film theorist Siegfried Kracauer lamented that the film's political stance was too weak. In 1982, the academic Claudia Lenssen, in a conversation about early female German filmmakers, said that critics in Germany were indifferent to *Mädchen* and regarded its lesbianism as subdued by censorship. Nevertheless, thanks to the work of scholars such as Richard Dyer and B. Ruby Rich, the conversation surrounding *Mädchen in Uniform* no longer halts at merely defining the film as either a lesbian or an anti-fascist work. In fact, the radical potency of the film lies in its queer and anti-authoritarian duality; it is the lesbian attraction at the centre of *Mädchen* that propels the film to its politically revolutionary end.

Even though *Mädchen* was very much a product of Weimar Germany, with its political instability as well as its thriving gay nightlife, the film's personnel set it apart from its contemporaries. As well as a cast consisting entirely of women, *Mädchen* had a woman director, Leontine Sagan, and was written by a female novelist, Christa Winsloe, who adapted the script from her all-female hit play *Yesterday and Today*.

The film follows the sensitive Manuela von Meinhardis (Hertha Thiele), a motherless girl who finds herself at a forbidding Prussian boarding school for girls. Prone to tearful outbursts and melancholy, she finds comfort in the camaraderie of her classmates. She also discovers an emotional release in the beautiful and sympathetic Fräulein von Bernburg (Dorothea Wieck), her Bible teacher. Soon, Manuela's infatuation develops into a feverish, all-consuming crush.

After a school production of Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*, in which Manuela plays the title role in men's clothes, she drunkenly professes her love for Fräulein von Bernburg, to the shock of the school's tyrannical headmistress (Emilie Unda). As punishment, Manuela is banished to the sick room and forbidden from talking to her beloved teacher. In a moment of despair, she tries to throw herself off the school's steep staircase. Moved by her plight, the other students and Fräulein von Bernburg rally around Manuela and rescue her, in a show of defiance against the cruel headmistress. Given that the film was released so soon before Weimar was overthrown by Nazism, this victory over authoritarianism is especially poignant.

The female gaze abounds as the film sets up a dichotomy between rigid patriarchal structures and spontaneous acts of female bonding. The men might be absent, but the patriarchy is perpetually present. It looms over the film's opening, which crosscuts between shots of austere military sculptures and the schoolgirls obediently marching in a straight line. It manifests itself in the girls' mandatory striped uniforms, which resemble prison garb. It is made blunt in the headmistress's declarations that the girls are 'children of soldiers'

whose purpose is to become 'mothers of soldiers'. Finally, the most striking visual display of the omnipotent patriarchy at work is the precipitous staircase where Manuela contemplates suicide. *Mädchen*'s masterful use of low-key lighting and sharp contrast captures the insidious, panoptic nature of the patriarchal constraints that lurk in the deceiving shadows.

Amid the unforgiving architecture of the school, the girls' bond destabilises their constricting surroundings. On that very severe staircase, the students run up and down in wild, youthful abandon. They gossip and exchange love letters. The fluid camera movements that follow the students' daily activities suggest a sense of subversion fostered by their rapport and their burgeoning sexuality. When the schoolgirls are out of their uniforms, even the mundane rituals of teeth-brushing or hair-washing sparkle with a lively, uncontained spontaneity.

Central to this female camaraderie is the lesbian attraction between Manuela and Fräulein von Bernburg, which is anything but subdued. Their kiss, for instance, is framed lovingly in a close-up with soft music. Even more suggestive than this physical embrace is the film's sensual use of dissolves, which have a swooning intensity that contrasts sharply with the austere sets. When Manuela and Fräulein von Bernburg look at each other, close-ups of their faces are superimposed, their visages slowly melting and merging into an erotic stupor. Such stylistic choices are far from subtle. They gesture to romantic desires that refuse to be contained.

The film ends with the defeated headmistress retreating down the staircase and into the darkness; in the real world, its makers did not witness such revolutionary triumphs. Leontine Sagan, who was Jewish, moved to England where she directed her second feature, the now lost *Men of Tomorrow* (1932). She would later become the first female producer at the Drury Lane theatre in London, directing multiple Ivor Novello musicals; she emigrated to South Africa, dying there in the 1970s at the age of 85. Winsloe met a more tragic end. A staunch anti-Nazi, in 1944 Winsloe was living in self-imposed exile in France. A few days after D-Day, encountering a group of Frenchmen in the forest, she was accused of being a German spy and shot dead. So the film's idealism is bittersweet. Its call for revolutionary empathy is, however, timeless. Beyond the constraints of historical circumstances, the radical, antiauthoritarian queerness of *Mädchen in Uniform* has lost none of its electrifying potency.

Phuong Le, *Sight & Sound*, May 2021

MÄDCHEN IN UNIFORM (MAIDENS IN UNIFORM)

Director: Leontine Sagan

Production Company: Deutsche Film-Gemeinschaft

Producer: Frank Wysbar

Artistic Supervisor: Carl Froelich

Screenplay: Christa Winsloe, F.D. Andam

Based on the play by: Christa Winsloe

Directors of Photography: Reimar Kuntze, Fritz Weihmayr

Art Directors: Fritz Maurischat, Friedrich Wincker-Tanenberg

Music: Hansom Milde-Meissner

Sound: Karl Brodmerker

Cast

Dorothea Wieck (*Fräulein von Bernburg*)

Hertha Thiele (*Manuela von Meinhardis*)

Ellen Schwanneke (*Ilse von Westhagen*)

Emilie Unda (*headmistress*)

Hedwig Schlichter (*Fräulein von Kesten*)

Gertrud de Lalsky (*Manuela's aunt*)

Marte Hein (*Duchess*)

Lene Berdolt (*Fräulein von Gärschner*)

Lisi Scheerbach (*'Mlle' Oeuillet*)

Margory Bodker (*Miss Evans*)

Erika Mann (*Fräulein von Atems*)

Else Ehser (*Elise, wardrobe mistress*)

Ilse Winter (*Marga*)

Charlotte Witthauer (*Erika*)

Erika-Margot Biebrach

Margarethe Reschke

Annemarie von Rochhausen

Ilse Vigdor

Barbara Pirk

Dora Thalmer

Dolly Mathieu de Padilla

Lore Schützendorf

Marieluise Claudius

Germany 1931

87 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar

Tue 1 Feb 18:20; Fri 25 Feb 20:45

Young Soul Rebels

Wed 2 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Thu 17 Feb 20:45

All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)

Wed 2 Feb 20:45; Wed 16 Feb 21:00

Beautiful Thing

Thu 3 Feb 20:45; Mon 14 Feb 20:30

The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)

Fri 4 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50

Rent

Sat 5 Feb 12:30; Sun 20 Feb 18:10

Maurice

Sun 6 Feb 15:20; Mon 14 Feb 18:00

The Watermelon Woman

Mon 7 Feb 20:45; Sat 26 Feb 20:30

Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Tue 8 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Yi Wang, Queer East); Sun 13 Feb 15:20

My Own Private Idaho

Tue 8 Feb 20:45; Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)

Brokeback Mountain

Wed 9 Feb 17:45 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Mon 21 Feb 20:25

Go Fish

Wed 9 Feb 20:40; Sat 26 Feb 18:20

Rope

Thu 10 Feb 18:30; Tue 22 Feb 14:30

Victim

Thu 10 Feb 20:40; Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00

Desert Hearts

Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart)

My Beautiful Laundrette

Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45

A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica)

Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50

Mädchen in Uniform

Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00

Moonlight

Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45

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