Masquerade in Vienna (*Maskerade*, 1934)

Robert Dassanowsky

dir. Willi Forst; prod. Karl Julius Fritzsche; screenplay Walter Reisch, Willi Forst; photography Franz Planer; music Willi Schmidt-Gentner. 35mm, black/white, 95 mins. Sascha-Verleih, distrib. Huschak & Company.

DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum

With the emergence of sound, Austrian cinema gained international renown for a stylized romantic-melodrama genre known as »Viennese Film.« It was created by Austrian musical star and film director Willi Forst, who was widely popular in Germany and across Europe, and noted screenwriter Walter Reisch, who would flee the Nazi German annexation of Austria to become an Oscar-winning Hollywood writer at MGM and Twentieth Century-Fox. The genre's narrative center in the original early and mid-1930s versions deals with the question of sacrificing love for art, which is presented philosophically, but is clearly an emotional and sentimental experience rather than a rational choice. By the late 1930s, as other directors took on the genre, the films continued to deal with the figure of the artist and such an existentialist choice but were also more broadly about sentimental narratives of Viennese life and its mores. What the genre also continued was stylized art direction, favoring elements of the Habsburg baroque, but also romanticized images of the suburban and even working class world and bohemian life, influenced by French director René Clair's poetic realism. A rich musical score borrowing from classical themes framed these melodramas in a uniquely sophisticated manner that made them significantly detached from the structures of Viennese operetta. As this »topos Vienna« moved beyond Forst and Reisch, its elements became established in Hollywood and further mutated there with Austro-Hungarian and German expatriate talent (Dassanowsky).

The plot of *Maskerade* (1934) is based on games of decadence like anything that might have been written by the Viennese author and playwright Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931).

It recalls his plays *Anatol (1893)*, *Liebelei* (*Flirtation*, 1895), and *Reigen* (1897), with their impressionistic interplay of sexuality and the unyielding demands of class and elitism. As he would do in most of his films about Vienna, Willi Forst places a passive man between two distinct types of women: the naïve and self-sacrificing *süßes Mädel* (the »sweet girl« of the suburbs or provinces) and the *femme fatale* (Jung; Linhart). For Austrian clerico-authoritarianism of the 1930s, as for German National Socialism, the image of the pure and devoted girl served as an important female role model in theater and film melodrama, and the debut of Paula Wessely as Leopoldine Dur (»Poldi«) in *Maskerade* establishes her image as the anti-glamour star until the postwar era (Seeßlen). Wessely's »naturalness« in appearance and acting provides Austrian and German film of the era with an adaptable ideal. She is able to win the hearts of handsome male leads in her films and to provide sympathetic identification for a female audience (Brecht and Steiner).

Willi Forst strove to season sentimentality with irony throughout his Vienna oeuvre, yet he grants Wessely's Poldi a tenderness that glows with *both* erotic and motherly possibilities. She represents the first in a long line of female leads to come who represent the filmmaker's desire to evoke the theatricality of a lost Vienna, while realistically skewing traditional gender roles and relationships. In *Maskerade*, which is set in the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Forst opens with its now famous sweeping shot of the ball, moving with the dancers in what appears to be an unedited continuous shot that pulls the audience into the movement and headiness of the moment. We are introduced to the fashionable society artist and philanderer Paul Heideneck (Adolf Wohlbrück) and his former mistress, Anita (Olga Tschechowa), who has won a chinchilla muff at the ball's tombola. He later sketches Gerda (Hilde von Stolz), the wife of the famous surgeon Dr. Carl Harrandt (Peter Petersen), as she poses wearing only a mask and Anita's fur glove. When the drawing is published in the newspaper as a tribute to the ball, a scandal is ready to break. The surgeon's brother, Paul Harrandt (Walter Janssen), demands to know if the unclothed model was indeed Anita, his fiancée. Heideneck is unable to tell him the truth about Anita or his sister-in-law, Gerda, and simply invents a model by the name of »Leopoldine Dur.« Unfortunately, Leopoldine, better known as »Poldi,« actually exists. She is a »sweet girl,« and a reserved and clear-headed companion to the elderly Princess Metternich. When Poldi subsequently appears at a gathering, Heideneck has to make good on the pretense that he knows her. He pays her such flattering attention that Poldi eventually becomes infatuated with him.

Anita details the entire affair without naming names to the Princess in the presence of Poldi and Gerda. Poldi, who knew nothing of her supposed »notoriety,« realizes she has been used and breaks up with Heideneck; but he is now in love with her and ignores the gossip. At yet another ball, Anita shoots him in a jealous rage. Poldi rushes to find Dr. Harrandt at the opera, and insists he help the seriously wounded Heideneck who has been carried out of the ballroom to a greenhouse. Dr. Harrandt, who now also knows the truth of the matter, refuses to save the decadent Heideneck at first, but is ultimately moved by Poldi's insistence that he must perform his duty as a physician. Given the success of the emergency operation in the greenhouse, Dr. Harrandt rescues his masculine pride and forgives both Anita and his wife, Gerda. Heideneck awakens to Poldi and is humbled by her actions. Poldi now sees the honest and talented man she wanted to love and forgives his scandalous ways by tenderly kissing his injured hand. The film ends, however, without the resolute conclusion given to the stilted 1935 MGM remake, *Escapade*, which indicates marriage between the two characters (Horak). In

Forst's original version, the final shot of the film is taken from outside the greenhouse windows in the snow. It lends the couple a gentle transcendent quality and suggests a resurrection tableau (snow = water = baptism) in which Heideneck is saved by Poldi's love, as the greenhouse suggests the hopefulness of a spring »blossoming.«

Both Anita and Gerda are theatrical *femmes fatales*, while Poldi demands true emotion and an honest relationship. Forst and Reisch flip gender roles in this adaptation of the bourgeois tragedy. The usual victim in such a melodrama is the *süßes Mädel*. Here, although Poldi is wronged, her possible tragic outcome is hindered by her intelligence and combination of pity and compassion that makes her understand Heideneck's unhappiness and even self-destructive qualities. Nevertheless, to ensure that Forst's beloved imperial era is not injured by too strident an accusation of irresponsibility and adultery in Old Vienna, the wise cigar-smoking Princess Metternich concludes that female sexual desire certainly exists, but that it was (and should be) better served in the context of wedlock: »In my day, when a woman had a headache, she got married and did not take aspirin.«

Viennese Film's intensity in its use of metaphor and allegory, along with its stylized orchestration of settings, music, and story as well as its juxtaposition of eroticism and sentimentality, made it a welcome genre for Hollywood remakes and adaptations. The genre satisfied the censorship demands of the Hays Law and the Motion Picture Production Code, which took effect in 1930, while offering sensuality, strong emotional manipulation, and female protagonists overcoming traditional gender roles, thus making it popular with women. The genre was somewhat similar to Hollywood's own moralistic melodramatic social narratives, while the venerable imperial settings proved to be a draw for American audiences faced with the era's supposed threat of social disintegration. Popular remakes of Viennese Film also underscored the transcultural adaptability of the genre and style. These include the British remake of Forst's Schubert biopic, co-directed by Anthony Asquith and Forst as *Unfinished Symphony* (1934); *Maskerade* as *Escapade* (1935), directed by Robert Z. Leonard; Geza von Bolvary's *Frühjahrsparade* (1934) as *Spring Parade* (1940), directed by exiled Austrian director Henry Koster (Hermann Kosterlitz); and the production that unconvincingly moved Vienna into the MGM backlot, the Johann Strauss Jr. biopic, *The Great Waltz* (1938), directed by Julien Duvivier and scripted in part by Walter Reisch.

Desiring to lead European film, Mussolini, who defended Austrian sovereignty against Hitler until 1936, viewed the success of the Viennese Film with some envy, and hoped to emulate and reinvent the Austrian melodrama style for Italian cinema. Several co-productions shot in Vienna and Rome with Austrian-Italian blended narratives followed, including the highly praised *Tagebuch der Geliebten* (*The Affairs of Maupassant*, 1935), which RKO Hollywood intended to remake as a vehicle for Katharine Hepburn. The Hungarians aimed Viennese Film at their own variations of the Austro-Hungarian mythos, and the artificial German imitations moved the romantic melodrama to working class venues and used the form to propagandize and co-opt Austrian culture and history. Despite the opulent remounting of Viennese Film that only Hollywood studios could afford, its successes were not always guaranteed. *The New York Times* critic Fred Nugent observed that »it is unfortunate we should have seen [Hollywood's] *Escapade* before we had an opportunity to admire *Masquerade in Vienna* the Viennese Film that Metro [MGM] copied in 1935 when it sought an introductory vehicle for Luise Rainer. *Escapade*, we now realize was a rather bad imitation.«

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