

Go For Zucker! { Now playing, through Feb 6 }



The cliché holds that German comedies are as rare as snow in July, which isn't quite true. Not only does the German film industry make as many comedies as any other country, it produced two of the greatest comic directors in cinema history, Ernst Lubitsch and Billy Wilder. What is rare is a German comedy that works with international viewers who might not recognize the sociopolitical issues underlying the humor.

That is somewhat true of *Go for Zucker!*, which plays in part on the continued post-reunification tensions of residents from the East and West sides of the wall. Nonetheless, this is a movie with plenty of laughs even for viewers who don't know Angela Merkel from Studs Terkel.

Alluding to Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, Jaeckie Zucker (Henry Huebchen) greets us from his hospital bed, where he is in a coma. Despite indications that he is not in the best of circumstances, he explains that he has just been through both the best and worst week of his life.

Self-supporting in East Germany since the age of 14, when his mother and brother Samuel fled to West Germany, Jaeckie was doing well for awhile as a TV sports announcer. Since the wall came down, though, he's been supporting himself by hustling pool. Along the way he has run up enormous debts and alienated his family: his wife kicks him out of the house, he hasn't seen his daughter in two years, and his son the bank manager threatens to have him arrested for non-

payment on his loans.

What might just save Jaeckie's skin is the death of his mother. Regretful at the bitterness caused by her flight to the West, she stipulates in her will that her two sons will inherit her estate only if they make an effort to reconcile.

Simple enough, except for the underlying conditions. Although Jaeckie never took any notice of it, his family was Jewish, and in the years since they left his mother and brother became Orthodox. Because she wants to be buried where she was born, Mom's will requires that the sons work out their differences while sitting *shiva* at Jaeckie's house. Never mind that the Zucker household is as kosher as a bacon cheeseburger; confinement to the house for seven days means that Jaeckie will be unable to participate in the pool tournament whose 100,000 Euro prize is his last chance at evading jail and wholesale ruin. Clearly, it's going to take every lie, canard and subterfuge in his arsenal to get Jaeckie through this week.

Initially conceived as a film for television illustrating personal conflicts in a family that had been separated by the Wall, *Go For Zucker!* was such a hit with test audiences that it was released theatrically, where it was one of last year's biggest hits in Germany (winning that country's film awards for Best Film, Leading Actor, Screenplay and Director, as well as the Ernst Lubitsch Award for Best German Comedy.)

Director Dani Levy (who produced the film through the company he runs with partner Tom Twyker, director of *Run Lola Run*), says that he was attracted to doing a Jewish comedy because of that culture's "blunt, brazen and self-ironic treatment of human weaknesses and quirks." Like German comedies in general, *Go For Zucker!* has an unapologetically broad tone that inevitably gets called "politically incorrect" in the US. Still, every use of a negative stereotype is balanced out by a positive characteristic, and like the French classic *Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob*, it's all performed with a gleeful panache that makes it impossible to dislike.

—m. faust

Isn't This a Time! A Tribute Concert for Harold Leventhal

{ Tuesday, Feb 7 only }



If nothing else, Harold Rosenthal was an important figure in the American folk music scene for booking the folk quartet The Weavers into Carnegie Hall in 1955. A few years earlier, The Weavers were one of the most popular musical groups in the country, with hits like "Wimoweh," Woody Guthrie's "So Long, It's Been Good To Know Ya," and Leadbelly's "Midnight Special" and "Goodnight Irene." But they came under FBI investigation for their outspoken support of international peace, civil rights and workers' rights, and Weaver Pete Seeger was accused of being a Communist by the House Un-American Activities Committee. When Rosenthal booked them for what proved to be a hugely successful show, the group had disbanded, thinking they could never perform again.

For five decades impresario Rosenthal was a key figure in the careers of many who found that music could be a valuable expression of dissent at a time of social repression.

Arlo Guthrie performs a holiday concert every Thanksgiving at Carnegie Hall, and in 2003 he decided to use it to honor his mentor Rosenthal for his fifty years of service to the music industry. Along with appearances by singers Leon Bibb, Theodore Bikel, and Peter, Paul and Mary, he also managed to reunite The Weavers, now well into their 80s.

Filmmaker Jim Brown, who documented The Weavers in the acclaimed 1980 film *Wasn't That a Time!*, came in to film the show, and the movie that resulted works both as a nostalgic visit for longtime fans of this music and an introduction to newcomers. Inbued with a strong sense of family, the performances are both comforting and rousing. Highlights include Bikel's rendition of a Russian gypsy tune, Weaver Fred Hellerman's moving solo on "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," and the group's "Sinner Man," dedicated to George Bush.

Even the musicians' age works to the film's advantage, showing that you don't have to slow down if you don't want to. (Mary Travers and Weaver Ronnie Gilbert are shown in a backstage sequence having a mock swordfight with their canes.) Arlo Guthrie, the young-un of the show in his mid-50s, recalls the then-84-year-old Seeger worrying that his voice might not be up to the demands of a show, to which he responded not to worry, the hearing of most of the audience isn't what it used to be, either.

—m. faust

Caché { Feb 8-14 }



When national film critics published their 2005 Best-Of lists last month, many of them featured the French film *Caché* ("Hidden"). It's a pleasure to now see it appear in Buffalo. *Caché* is like a big and rich piece of cinematic cake for you to sink your teeth into, with one important difference. It has many layers and many flavors, but none of them are sweet. On the surface it's an extraordinary suspense thriller, but that is only the tip of its iceberg. It is ambitious, being both about intimate matters like family and about large subjects like history or the state of the world today.

The movie begins strikingly with a stationary camera calmly watching a house on a quiet Paris street. Normal cinematic practice would begin with an establishing shot and then cut to a closer, more detailed shot, for example inside a house. But three minutes pass, and we begin to realize that something weird is afoot: this is no normal, functional establishing shot—it looks more like a voyeur's point of view. Then suddenly, the image "rewinds" and we realize that we are watching some sort of surveillance video.

The video is being watched by a respectable upper middle-class couple: Georges (Daniel Auteuil), a TV literary show host, and Anne (Juliette Binoche), a book editor. Someone, for some unfathomable reason, is sending them tapes which indicate that the family is being watched. Slowly, other things begin arriving at the door, like crude and childish (but creepy) drawings. The psychological pressure mounts in the household, and the family begins to crack.

Michael Haneke, the Austrian director and writer of *Caché*, has made a thriller that is also a critique of thriller formulas. There are no fast or hand-held camera movements here; instead, the camera observes quietly, motionlessly, almost icily. There is no music soundtrack to cue us into feeling scared or uneasy. There are no odd camera angles to enhance suspense. And there is none of the "exciting" editing to whip us into a pulse-pounding frenzy. Haneke eschews these blatantly manipulative effects. Instead, he makes movies in which it's less important to entertain than to engage the viewer in some kind of examination of real-world complexity, rather than fleeing it for the refuge of escapism.

In *Caché*, the videotapes quickly result in the dredging up of repressed memories from Georges' childhood, when he lied about a young Algerian boy his family was about to adopt, thus having him sent away. The submerged undertones of ethnic tension now break to the surface, and the family is forced to deal with them. But though this is a story of one family, it resonates uncannily with the world at large. It seems to come perilously close to predicting the recent French riots and even packs a potent post-9/11 punch without ever mentioning it.

Haneke might be a moralist but he does not present the world in black-and-white terms. He doesn't paint characters as heroes or villains, and we never quite know who is telling the truth and who isn't. In his films, women and especially children are a bit more vulnerable and thus more deserving of his sympathy. The educated middle class family in the movie is fashionably intellectual but morally myopic, afraid of self-examination. But ultimately, the characters all possess psychological complexity. Also, Haneke doesn't allow us easy identification with any one sympathetic character (which he thinks of as another hallmark of emotional manipulation) at the expense of others. We see them all, identify somewhat with each one, but we don't find out all we'd like to about them. As in real life, some questions remain unanswered.

I've seen *Caché* twice and I'm amazed at how carefully constructed it is. The details are important, and the movie requires our participation in the making of its meaning. A warning: the movie does contain one brief scene of violence that is over in an instant, but is nevertheless unsettling. And a friendly heads-up: Not a single shot in this film is wasted, so please don't start rising when the credits appear; stay with it till the end, and you may find a revelation or two tucked away in that last parting shot.

—girish shambu