

AT THE MOVIES

Two Very Different German Epics

One Sky-High, One Down-to-Earth

BY MIKE CANNING

North Face

Mountain climbing is an occasional but steady subject of movie makers, principally because of the built-in tension of the climb (with its potential for ecstatic triumph or frozen death) combined with the spectacular vistas of the mountains themselves.

Recent documentaries on mountain climbing have been compelling, like the TV shows based on Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air" or the wrenching "Touching the Void" (2003), set in the Peruvian Andes. However, in Hollywood efforts, the human drama overlaying the climbing footage can seem flaccid or dorky, witness examples like "Cliffhanger" (1993) or "Vertical Limit" (2000).

A new, and most vigorous, entry in this mini-genre, "North Face" (Nordwand in German) offers all the usual thrills of the climb (feet slipping on rocks, ropes twirling, pitons – those little metal spikes – popping, etc.), but it adds a more human dimension in a naturalistic depiction of the climbers themselves. Made in Germany, the film tells the true story of an unheralded team of young mountaineers who dared to take on the "Murder Wall," the sheer North Face of the Eiger Mountain in the Swiss Alps (showing at the E Street Cinema).

The time is 1936, and Nazi propagandists, prepping for the Berlin Olympics that summer, are looking for German heroes to scale the unconquered North Face. Two stalwart Bavarian climbers, Toni (Benno Fürmann) and Andi (Florian Lukas), are soldiers but willing to leave their Mountain Brigade to take on the challenge, though for personal reasons rather than for national glory. They are

urged on in their effort by childhood friend, Luise (Johanna Wokalek), who works as a secretary for a Berlin newspaper promoting the scaling effort.

While tourists and press gather in mid-July at a luxury hotel in the shadow of the Eiger, Luise nabs a gig as a rookie photographer on assignment with her boss, the crass Henry Arau (Ulrich Tukur). Toni and Andi, bivouacked with other alpinists, are, along with an Austrian team, the first to take the challenge. Ominously, the weather on the temperamental mountain sours, and both teams combine for a chance to advance. The entire second half of the film vividly contrasts the forbidding situation of the climbers with the shiny serenity of the hotel and its tuxedoed denizens.

The final struggle of the climbers is – take your pick: gut-wrenching, nerve-wracking, nail-biting cinema.

"North Face" gains enormous verisimilitude by being photographed on location at the Eiger site. Adding to that sense of the real are the numerous careful details of the climb: the ropes, the gear, the clothing layers, the steady blizzard conditions, the feel of rock, dirt, ice and numbing cold. These effects make the switching to the hotel scenes the



From left, Andi (Florian Lukas) and second left, Toni (Benno Fürmann) are tested on the "North Face."

At The Movies

Sou'Wester

Wine Guys

Theater

Art and the City

The Literary Hill

Jazz Project

Capitol Hill Wine & Spirits

Your Neighborhood Store

- Great Wine selection with excellent choices in both Domestic and Imported Wines
- Wine ratings of 96 Points
- High End Bourbons and Single Malts... Scotch Whiskies, excellent prices...
- Best selection of imported Beers & Fine Craft Beers, the best on the Hill...
- Fine Cigars
- 15% off on a case of Wine, also mix and match... No limit... (EXCLUDES WINES ALREADY ON SALE)
- For your convenience we also provide Money Ordes and Western Union services
- We deliver in the Southwest and Capitol Hill neighborhood



Capitol Hill Wine & Spirits

323 Pennsylvania Ave, SE • 202.546.7070
www.chillwines.com
(Located between 3rd & 4th Streets)

713 D STREET SE | WASHINGTON DC 20003
202.543.1997 | WWW.HILLSKITCHEN.COM
TUESDAY-SATURDAY 10AM TO 7PM, SUNDAY 10 TO 5PM
CLOSED MONDAY

more effective, as we see languid swells exchanging bon mots and ironies over champagne and steaks.

The acting for a film of such physical demands may not require superlative performances, but it evidences sound ones. The leads, studly Fürmann and bouncy Lukas, are just fine in their contrasting roles as, respectively, the careful technician and the bubbly free spirit. Wokalek, as bashful but loyal Luise, has more to do as the buddy of Andi and the closet lover of Toni. A very nice turn comes from Tukur as the cynical journalist; he is fast gaining credentials as a great character actor, having also appeared in the magnificent "The Lives of Others" (2007) and the upcoming "The White Ribbon."

Though it takes place during the heyday of the Nazi's consolidation of power, "North Face" does not overemphasize the loaded political element. In fact, it is soft-pedaled (perhaps too much for some). An example is the ease with which Toni and Andi, who are uniformed members of the Army's Mountain Brigades, simply give up their military roles to take up the Eiger climb. The film, directed by Philipp Stolzl, could have played up facile, ominous portents of the Nazi future to come, but it keeps these at bay, and I think that approach – rather than being naïve about 1930s political life – is the right tone.

Maybe in these days of record DC snowfall, it is hard to even consider a film that can chill your bones, but if you want a gripping, heart-pounding adventure based on real human traits rather than special effects, take a tour of the "North Face." (Running time is 121 minutes. The film is not rated but contains nothing objectionable).

The White Ribbon

Another German film has opened in the States to mainly critical praise. "The White Ribbon," by the inimitable Michael Haneke, has been an international success and has been nominated for an Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film.

It is a strange, unnerving work, beautifully photographed (in crisp black and white) and sturdily acted but containing overlays of doom and providing no easy answers. It is a careful chronicle of a German village in 1913, some of whose inhabitants have fallen victim to strange accidents and vicious crimes for which no one claims responsibility. Some of these actions are directed at village children, but the townspeople come to realize that the nefarious doings are, in fact, being perpetrated by them.

Varying reaction from town authorities come from both the local aristocrat, the baron (Ulrich Tukur again), who employs many of the townspeople, and the town's pastor, a stern character, who suspects the devil is tempting his own children. It is the latter who places white ribbon armbands on his kids to remind them to maintain their purity. One commonsensical, humane voice is heard from the town's teacher, an easy-going nerd who tries to understand what is really happening while he also gently romances a young governess. The film brings out hints of both "The Crucible" (in plot) as well as the monumental 1984 German mini-series "Heimat" (in its village setting).

Like a number of Haneke films (e.g., "Caché" from 2005), "The White Ribbon" is equivocal and open-ended, leaving the viewer to speculate on whether the film means to be a harbinger of the upcoming war or not. Whatever its final meaning, it is intriguing to watch this microcosm of a village develop through a fine ensemble of actors.

Environmental Film Festival

The 18th annual Environmental Film Festival (EFF) will run March 16–28 and present 155 documentary, feature, animated, experimental and children's films providing fresh perspectives on environmental issues facing the planet. The vital connections between food and the environment are the major theme of the festival, which features 66 Washington and US world premieres. The EFF is presented in collaboration with over 100 local, national and global organizations and is one of the largest cooperative cultural events in the nation's capital. Films are screened at 56 venues throughout the city, including museums, embassies, libraries, universities and local theaters. Many screenings are free.

Some films will be shown at venues on Capitol Hill. They include "Greensburg," which tells of a town in Kansas inspired to rebuild "green" after a devastating tornado. It will be shown March 16 at the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, at 25 Massachusetts Ave. NW. Two other films, both featuring the breathtaking Peruvian Andes, will be shown the evening of March 23, at the Atlas Performing Arts Center at 1333 H St. NE. "Hananpacha" is a stunning visual portrait of the region around Lake Titicaca, while "Altiplano" intertwines the destinies of two strong local women.

A complete festival schedule is available at www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org. To receive a festival catalog, e-mail info@envirofilmfest.org or call 202-342-2564. ★