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In Mann's shadow

'Escape to Life' reveals two extraordinary artists

BY DAVID NOH

The Rheingold bar in East Berlin, a masterpiece of Bauhaus design, features a huge mural of an androgynous man and woman dressed in the clothes of the 1920s. Those figures are Klaus and Erika Mann, the children of writer Thomas Mann and the subjects of the new, enthralling documentary, "Escape to Life: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story."

Both gay, both artists, and both extremely political, Erika and Klaus exemplified the creative freedom rife in the Weimar Germany of the '20s. However, when the Nazis took power, the pair were persecuted and hounded out of the country. They sought refuge in America, but it was far from a happy ending: Klaus enlisted in the U.S. Army to combat his former father-land, but he was addicted to drugs and died a suicide at 43, while Erika found herself blacklisted as a Communist and was deported to Europe, where she settled in Zurich.

Their relationship with their eminent father was ambivalent. Thomas Mann basked in his lofty literary reputation in Germany until he, too, was forced to flee to America, but his earlier refusal to protect his children from the Nazis led to their estrangement. Furthermore, the incestuous attraction he had harbored for Klaus since his son's adolescence made their relationship exceedingly complex and difficult.



The gay children of Thomas Mann, Klaus (left) and Erika (right) fled Nazi Germany when their political theater offended the wrong people.

"and Corn got back to us right away, saying they were dying to do it. They are very much like Erika and Klaus: siblings, artists, and very political."

The film is full of revelations about the pair. For instance, Erika Mann acted in "Mädchen in Uniform," and she was lovers with actress Theresa Giese, who was Bertholt Brecht's original Mother Courage. To obtain her British citizenship, Erika married the gay poet W.H. Auden, although the two never lived together.

Klaus, in contrast, never had a really satisfactory romantic partner. Weiss did manage to meet the love of Klaus's life, Herald Tribune drama critic Thomas Quinn Curtis, but was unable to include his comments in the film.

"I met him in Paris before we started filming, and, as it turned out, just before he died," says Weiss. "He was slightly senile and we had the most incoherent conversation, but I was desperate to have him in the film. We set up a film shoot to come back to Paris, but it was too late."

ARTS FILM

"He was kind of a cult figure," she first learned about Klaus Mann.

says, in part because of his dramatic, self-inflicted death, and because of several notable plays he had written. "Then I met Wieland, who was crazy about him and was interested in doing some short films based on his fiction. We started to think about working together."

The resulting film is a hybrid — a straight documentary laced with vivid enactments of scenes from Klaus' novels, which have the rich flavor of Christopher Isherwood's "Berlin Stories," but with a more authentic, gritty, Berlin-insider's view.

A casting coup occurred when Vanessa and Corn Redgrave agreed to narrate. "We sent a letter to them," Weiss recalls.

Information

ESCAPE TO LIFE: THE ERIKA AND KLAUS MANN STORY

Now playing
Quad Cinema
34 W. 13th St.
212-255-8800