## lgny Film

FILM REVIEW seth j. bookey

## Loving – and Leaving – Your Country

ESCAPE TO LIFE

Discord by Anthrea Weise

and Wieland Speck

Narrated by Vanessa.

and Collin Redgrave

Eiriglish and German

with Eiriglish subuties

Opens January 11

Chied Cinema, 84 W. 19th St.

212.255.8800

War II is wondering how institutionalized bigotry and scapegoating could happen on a national scale, as it did

with the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s. Clearly. the Nazis had support in Gerboth many. overtly and tacitly from those who didn't speak up. And as a nation, the Germans have collectively borne the brunt of the

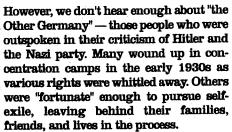
guilt. Witness a book like Hitler's Willing Executioners, which blames the German people for tacit approval of the Holocaust.

she's still amazing even when you can't see her.) The film then starts at their childhood, showing them to be precocious and aware. Upon adulthood, the pair wind up in decadent 1920s Berlin. Erika is a lesbian and Klaus is gay, so fitting into the cabaret-theatre art demimonde is a cinch for the pair. While this was an easy escape from the gathering storm for many artists, over time, Klaus and Erika become more and more outspoken about the evils of fascism in their midst.

Like most Germans, Erika thought "politics is for the politicians"; but that changed over time. Erika later noted in a Swiss television interview, "I overrated the

Germans." For his part, in addition to acting. Klaus wrote Mephisto, but it was published posthumously, like most of his books: the novel is about a stage performer who's fallen in with the Nazis. He also founded several literary journals,

in America and England, that allowed "other Germans" to warn the rest of the world about the Nazis.



Two such people were Erika and Klaus Mann, the two eldest children of renowned writer Thomas Mann. Born within two years of one another, they were often referred to as "the twins" or as a couple. As talented as their father; between them they pursued all the arts. Erika was an actress, writer, lecturer, and theatre director — her play The Pepper Mill, a critique of the Nazis, toured Europe to great success throughout the 1930s. The relationship of this extraordinary pair, and the times they lived through, are explored in Escape to Life, a documentary that blends traditional techniques including interviews and with reenactments, archival footage, and dramatizations of Klaus Mann's writings. Different and vet not disjointed, this unique approach stems from the film having two directors with unique styles: Andrea Weiss (Before Stonewall and Paris Was a Woman) and Wieland Speck (best known for Westler: East of the Wall).

Escape to Life begins with Klaus and Erika "interviewing" each other, using the voice-over narrations of Vanessa and Colin Redgrave upon the Manns' tour of America at the beginning of their exile from Germany. (If you're a Vanessa Redgrave fan, this movie will not disappoint;

Escape to Life charts two powerful dynamics. The first is the personal: the siblings give each other unconditional love and support and deal with being creative in their own right while dealing with their remote, powerful, and famous father. The film's other arc chronicles an outspoken pair of pacifists at a time of growing militarism. Eventually, the strain of dealing with being political outcasts, and then actually cast out of their native country, causes them to split apart. While Erika became more and more preeminent, Klaus finds himself drug addicted, depressed, and suicidal. To get out of Germany, Erika winds up marrying gay British poet W. H. Auden (after Christopher Isherwood turned her down), even though she has a longstanding lesbian relationship. Klaus eventually gets to America and is able to become a citizen and even gets to fight in the American army against his homeland. Part of his work is to write anti-Nazi leaflets. Sadly. Klaus killed himself at an early age, and Erika left America after being hounded out during Mc-Carthy period.

The skillful combination of different narrative styles here works to underscore the subtle and defiant ways the Manns not only defied fascism, but even got their father to go from taciturn to openly vocal about Germany's dark side. Combined with the recent Turner Classic Movies documentary about Marlene Dietrich and her anti-Nazi activities, Escape to Life is a wonderful testament to a patriotic love for one's country, and the need to leave it when what you're defending ceases to exist.

