

Out of the shadow of a famous Mann

This weekend sees the premiere of an intriguing film about the fate of Thomas Mann's children, **Kevin Jackson** writes

ALONGSIDE ITS expected array of documentaries, both rough and smooth, on immediate social issues – from BBC-commissioned reportage by the familiar likes of Isabel Hilton and Edward Stourton, to a harsh Italian documentary about life under Taliban rule – the fifth Human Rights Watch Film Festival also boasts an impressive number of features and film essays that take a longer view of civil liberties.

The opening gala, for instance, is devoted to Julian Schnabel's *Before Night Falls*, a biopic of the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, who was persecuted by the Castro regime both for his political views and for his open homosexuality. This is followed by Spike Lee's latest offering, *Bamboozled*, by all accounts a scathing comedy about a TV network that scores a smash hit with an updated and shamelessly reactionary version of "black-face" minstrel shows.

A slightly less glittering, but

nonetheless deserving attraction receives its UK premiere on Sunday: *Escape to Life* (pictured right), a study of Erika and Klaus Mann, the gifted and troubled children of the novelist Thomas Mann. The siblings earn their place in a Human Rights festival as distinguished victims of National Socialism, though their lives were full of many other kinds of trials and achievements.

Produced by Greta Schiller – probably best known for *Paris Was a Woman* – and with a voice-over by a couple of notable British siblings, Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, *Escape to Life* does much to pull Erika and Klaus out from the long shadow thrown by their father, Thomas Mann, the author of *The Magic Mountain*, *Dr Faustus* and all those other slabs of prose. Indeed, it suggests that Herr Mann senior, who for years maintained a cautiously apolitical stance towards the barbarians, ultimately came to be swayed by the arguments of



his more activist daughter.

Being the offspring of one of the century's literary eminences is not necessarily an enviable fate, especially if you plan to work in the same business. But, on the face of it, neither the boy nor the girl seems to have been particularly daunted by their dad's colossal reputation. Thanks to the popular film by István Szabó, Klaus now tends to be remembered

only for his own venture into Faustian territory, the 1936 novel, *Mephisto*: better than not being remembered at all, to be sure, but something of a minor injustice to his writerly talent. The documentary includes new stagings of *Mephisto* and other fictions rather than borrowed movie clips.

Klaus was the more manfully anguished of the two children – drug-addicted,

depressive, and sometimes suicidal, all of which made him quite a challenge to the publicists of the US Army who liked to portray him in service newspapers as a two-fisted, red-blooded "German-born Yank". It's an episode that should be of interest to historians of gays in the US armed forces.

Erika was the survivor. Mainly familiar to British readers, one suspects, as the legal wife of WH Auden, who obligingly led her to the altar as a small contribution to the struggle against fascism, and who remained on cordial terms with her for the rest of his life. But Erika was also a shrewd propagandist, whose political cabarets – carefully put together as allegories, so that there was nothing for the Nazis to put their fingers on – kept anti-Hitler sentiment flickering as the times grew darker. She adjusted to her new home in the United States far better than her brother did, and even said that she loved her new

country with a passion: the title *Escape to Life* is borrowed from her words.

Unlike doomed Klaus (who committed suicide in 1949), Erika lived to a good age and was captured by the television cameras reminiscing wryly and smoking like a champion on chat shows. Thanks to that footage, the film easily transcends its moments of gloom and becomes a tribute that prompts affection as well as conveys it. Above all, it's pleasant to be reminded that the "good Germans" were not necessarily plaster saints, and that sometimes it was their very lack of conventionally saintly qualities that caused them to enlist in the parade of liberty.

'Escape to Life' is at Ritzy Cinema, London, Sunday 1 April at 2pm and Monday 2 April at 7pm, with appearances by Vanessa and Corin Redgrave. For other films, see Listings or contact Human Rights Watch on 020-7713 1995



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