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**Goodbye Lenin (2002)**

**February 27, 2004**

**FILM REVIEW: Restoring a Berlin Wall To Comfort Dear Old Mom**

**By ELVIS MITCHELL**

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A softhearted tribute to -- of all things -- Communism, ''Good Bye, Lenin!,'' the German director Wolfgang Becker's social satire, has a knobby tone that somewhat mutes its crowd-pleasing ambitions and keeps it from becoming ''My Big, Fat Life Is Beautiful.''

The film captures the struggle of the devoted Alex (Daniel Brühl) as he fights to keep up his mother's failing health. In 1989, just before the fall of the German Democratic Republic, Christiane (Katrin Sass) sees her son beaten by police during a riot. She falls into a coma, and then the Berlin Wall -- and all it stands for -- collapses. ''Mother slept through the relentless triumph of capitalism,'' Alex notes. Any sudden shock could kill Christiane, a committed woman of the left, so Alex contrives to keep her convinced that things are still the same.

Mr. Becker wryly uses Alex's scramble to refit the apartment with castoff tacky Communist-era decor to tweak the heedless encroachment of capitalism. Alex has to rescue the pasteboard furniture that he and his sister, Ariane (Maria Simon), were happy to heave onto a junk heap. The furniture's utilitarian design seems to inform us that East Berlin might have been where Ikea got its ideas from.

The opening-credit sequence, a flashback to Alex's childhood, details his mother's emotional fragility. His father runs off to frolic with, as Alex puts it, ''his enemy-of-the-state girlfriend.'' Afterward Alex observes that his mother married the fatherland and ''since the relationship was not sexual, she had a lot of energy for us kids.'' Part of Christiane's commitment involves hurling herself into Communism.

And part of Alex's commitment -- keeping his mother in the dark -- involves flinging himself into locating all of the horrible groceries Christiane craves when she regains consciousness eight months after the fall of the East German Communist regime. Neighbors shake their heads sadly after he's caught digging through the garbage looking for empty jars with the original labels. We catch Mr. Becker and his co-screenwriter, Bernd Lichtenberg, rummaging through other stories, like Washington Irving's ''Rip Van Winkle,'' as well as Emir Kusturica's ''Underground'' (1995) and ''Situation Hopeless but Not Serious,'' a 1965 comedy with Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Sundance Kid and Mannix (Alec Guinness, Robert Redford and Mike Connors). In ''Serious,'' an old German doesn't tell the American soldiers hiding in his basement that World War II has ended.

There are a few bright jokes and sharp observations in the sentimental ''Lenin!”. Alex's determination eventually pulls in everyone he knows; instead of paying off East German officials for better supplies, he's now giving money to kids to dress as Young Pioneers -- the left-thinking G.D.R. equivalent of Boy Scouts -- to serenade his mother. Alex's boyhood idol, a cosmonaut who now occupies a reduced station in life, becomes part of the imposture. And his best friend and fellow satellite television installer, who recuts wedding videos to match up with sequences from ''2001: A Space Odyssey,'' recreates old-school newscasts.

The laughs grow out of the elaborate lies they have to construct when Christiane inadvertently glimpses the new world. ''My mother's bedroom resounded with the melody of yesterday,'' Alex says, and he and his pals become the kind of propagandists that disappeared when the Berlin Wall came down. It is not until the film's denouement that the repercussions of the Communist regime's campaign of disinformation aimed at the family adds a harsh, melodramatic tinge to the climax.

Alex's efforts to surround his mother with a Potemkin village\* adds direction to his existence. ''Somehow my scheme took on a life of its own,'' he says. One of the funniest scenes in the movie comes when Alex finds a way to make his mother's dream come true. ''Our Trabant is here!'' he announces, informing her of the arrival of the legendary Eastern European auto so shoddy in manufacture it could have had a wood-burning engine. ''And after only three years waiting,'' Christiane responds, glee adding a tremble to her voice.

But despite their sting, the movie's laughs don't keep ''Lenin!'' breathless enough. Although Mr. Becker can generate tension when necessary, he doesn't flex that muscle enough. Despite his ability -- and affinity -- for recreating the physical details of the early 1990's, ''Good Bye, Lenin!'' is much too long. It starts to feel like a flabby, dramatic version of the first ''Austin Powers'' movie, another exercise in living anachronism as a storytelling device. By the time the picture's final note about German reunification is struck, ''Lenin!'' has raised a wall of indifference for the audience.