



Mephisto

A Film by/ Directed by: István Szabó

©: Magyar Filmgyártó Vállalat

Production Company: Objektiv Filmstúdió

In collaboration with:

Manfred Durniok Film- und Fernsehproduktion

For: Film und Fernsehen, Hessischer Rundfunk, Österreichischer Rundfunk

Production Supervisor: Lajos Óvári

Production Co-ordinator: József Marx

Production Managers: Sándor Mórocz,

Péter Rajczy, József Pleskoni

Assistant Director: Mara Lutter

Screenplay: Péter Dobai, István Szabó

Dramaturge: János Rózsa

Hungarian Dialogue: András Szeredás

Based on the novel by: Klaus Mann

Director of Photography: Lajos Koltai

Assistant Photographer: Gyula Kovács

Lighting Director: József Márton

Stills Photography: Magdá B. Müller

Editor: Zsuzsa Csákány

Art Director: József Romvári

Set Decorator: Éva Martin

Costumes: Agnès Gyarmathy

Wardrobe: Judit Rákosi

Make-up: Edith Basilides

Hair: Rozália Szegedi

Laboratory: Magyar Film laboratórium Vállalat

Music Composed and Arranged by:

Zdenkó Tamásy

Choreography: Maria Ligeti, Bela Szirmai

Sound Recording: György Fék

German Post-synching: Heinz Freitag, Carla Hesse

Consultants: Bertalan Papp, Sándor Zeidler

Collaborators: Margit Szalontai, Klára Ivanyi, János Csáki, István Decsi, Támas Éger, Béla Gajdos,

Csaba Kenéz, Zoltán Kerényi, György Kóska, Gyula

Langer, Judit Lökö, Borbála Sártory, Júlia Sívó,

Antal Szabó, Tibor Szollár, Ildikó Varga, Attila

Varsányi, Róbert Vranik, Judit Zvada

Collaborators - Berlin: Siegfried Hausknacht,

Martin Sonnabend, Werner Schulze,

Paul Schimanski, Thomas Knauf

Collaborator - Hamburg: Georg Restel

Collaborator - Paris: Jean Badal

Translation: Angelika Maté, Péter Maté

Cast:

Klaus Maria Brandauer (*Hendrik Höfgen*)

Ildikó Bánsági (*Nicoletta von Niebuhr*)

Krystyna Janda (*Barbara Bruckner*)

Rolf Hoppe (*General*)

György Cserhalmi (*Hans Miklas*)

Péter Andorai (*Otto Ulrichs*)

Karin Boyd (*Juliette Martens*)

Christine Harbort (*Lotte Lindenthal*)

Tamás Major (*Oskar H. Kroge, director*)

Ildikó Kishonti (*Dora Martin, primadonna*)

Mária Bisztrai (*heroine*)

Sándor Lukács (*Rolf Bonetti, bon vivant*)

Hamburg

Agnés Bántfalvi (*Angelica Siebert, 'Naïve'*)

Judit Hernádi (*Rahel Mohrenwitz, 'Sentimentale'*)

Vilmos Kun (*Knurr, stagehand*)

Ida Versényi (*Mrs. Efeu, prompter*)

István Komlós (*Böck, wardrobe chief*)

The Family

Sári Gencsy (*Bella Höfgen*)

Zdzislaw Mrozewski (*Professor Bruckner*)

Stanislava Strobachová (*general's wife*)

Károly Ujlaky (*Sebastian*)

Berlin

Prof. Martin Hellberg (*professor*)

Restored

Mephisto

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

It is helpful to know the historical background of *Mephisto*, and then perhaps as helpful to forget it. Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto* appeared in 1936 and was a *roman à clef* so transparent that it was more than 40 years before it could be published in Germany, long after the death in 1963 of the original of its central character, Gustav Grundgens. Mann had known Grundgens at least as early as 1925, when Grundgens, then 26, had produced the precocious 17-year-old's first play at the Hamburg Kammerspiele. Both young men acted in the production, with Mann's twenty-year-old sister, Erika, and Paula Wedekind, daughter of the dramatist. Two years later, after the same quartet had performed Mann's second play, Grundgens and Erika married.

In 1933, Thomas Mann and his family emigrated to Switzerland and thence to the United States. Grundgens stayed behind (he and Erika eventually divorced) to go from strength to strength as the favourite of the Nazi establishment, and certainly as one of the most gifted artists, both as director and actor, working in the theatre and cinema of the Third Reich. His character and career were, however, ambivalent. While working in official favour he always sought in his own work to avoid the more strident mannerisms of the official art; and at the same time he is known to have aided Jewish artists to escape persecution. His career continued practically without interruption after the war.

Klaus Mann took the title of *Mephisto* from Grundgens' greatest role, in Goethe's *Faust*. His novel is the story of an artist who for the sake of his career and acclaim readily sells soul and conscience to the service of the Nazis. István Szabó's script for *Mephisto*, written in collaboration with Péter Dobai, claims only to be 'based on' Mann's novel. Szabó clearly wants even less to be bound by the historical facts. 'We have positively tried to avoid all possibilities of concrete identification,' he has said. 'What interested us was not what happened to particular people, but what happened to a multitude of people, the link between a character of this kind and history.' For his purposes he has made his Hendrik Höfgen a much more flamboyant actor than Grundgens, even though they play the same stage roles. Moreover the script recognises that the hindsight of 40 years has taught us much about the period and its dilemmas that Mann, even with his experience, could not have seen.

Szabó uses Höfgen to explore, much deeper than any previous filmmaker, the quandaries and responsibilities of an artist in a totalitarian state. To be sanctimonious in judging and condemning the German artists who stayed on is far too easy from our distance in time; and Szabó does not make that mistake. Never, anywhere, have the opportunities and rewards come easily for artists working in the cinema and theatre; and it would have been as hard for a German artist of the 30s as for any other voluntarily to give up achieved success. When pressed to leave Germany with his wife, Höfgen echoes the feelings of Erich Engel and of many other equally uncorrupted artists who could not bring themselves to uproot. His language, he explains, is his whole livelihood. What would he do in another place? (Some time ago, in a programme note on Nazi cinema for the American Film Institute, I wrote that among all the film artists who left Germany because their race and political affiliations removed the possibility to work, I knew of none who had left without being forced, only out of moral principle and in protest against the regime. The

Katalin Sólyom (*Miss Bernhardt, theatre secretary*)
György Bánffy ('Faust')
Józef Csőr ('Joachim')
Christian Grasshof (*Cásar von Mack*)
Hédi Temessy (*banker's wife*)
David Robinson (*Davidson, critic*)
Géza Kovács (*Müller-Andrea, critic*)
Teri Tordai (*sculptor*)
Hans Ulrich Laufer (*Radig, editor*)
Margit Hellberg (*young singer*)
Kerstin Hellberg (*young singer*)
Budapest
Irén Bordán (*film actress*)
Oskár Gáti (*film actor*)
The General's Adjutants
Tamás Balikó, Ödön Rubold,
István Palotai, Bertalan Papp
and
Rozsa Balogh, Bazsa Kiss, Mónika Bognár, Géza
Laczkovich, Bela Bolykovszky, György Lencz,
Erzsébet Czegeledi, József Lukácsi, János Dömölky,
Nandor Majoros, Maria Fekete, Rita Máté, Tamás
Fésüs, Lajos Mezey, Katalin Fráter, Vilmos Mosóczy,
O. Gombik, Tamás Philipovics, Katalin Karancz,
Frushsina Pregitzer, István Karsai, Péter Tihanyi,
Gizella Ramschorn, Tamás Tóth, Erzsi Sándor,
Vidor Török, András Sebestyén, Katalin Varga,
Csilla Strébely, Imre Zvoronics, Mihály Szacsány,
János Xantus
István Szabó (*theatre party attendant*)
Hungary-West Germany-Austria 1981©
144 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)

* Uncredited

Restored in 4K by the National Film Institute
Hungary – Film Archive. Courtesy of Second Run.

Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits
including priority booking at BFI Southbank
and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Sight and Sound

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**,
the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine.
Subscribe from just £25*
* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK
only). More info:
sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk/subscribe



BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where
you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema
on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark
British and independent titles, films are available to
watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals
& Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme
updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account
at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

AFI reproachfully told me that they had removed this passage, 'since very many artists left in protest'; but they never named one.)

Szabó's Höfgen is an unscrupulous charmer, user, opportunist. He abandons his mistress for his wife, uses his wife's family connections to get on in the theatre; and when his wife emigrates (to Paris) in 1933 he retrieves the indiscretion of his left-wing theatre past by playing up to the mistress of the Prime Minister and General (a character roughly based, it would appear, on Göring; and brilliantly characterised, with his shifts from bonhomie to crude violence, by the East German actor Rolf Hoppe). Capable only of playing roles, Höfgen self-consciously reproaches his own character as Machiavellian villain; but you feel his conscience is so coddled that he is admiringly accusing himself of no more than some clever social climbing. To every part demanded of him he quite happily adapts his mask. He divorces his wife; accepts the expulsion of his ethnically undesirable Negro mistress; revises his *Mephisto* performance to suit the prevailing ideology; gives earnest lectures on German culture; redefines Hamlet as a Hitlerian hero.

Höfgen's resource as well as his weakness is that he is an actor, with the actor's neurotic hunger to be loved and admired by everyone. Incapable it seems of loving anyone himself, constantly forced by his nature to affect roles, he strives with pathetic diligence to please. The mask nevertheless occasionally falls to reveal despicable vulnerability. So important does Szabó regard these undefended moments that our very first view of Höfgen is at one of them: as a young actor he sits in his dressing-room scouring himself with an hysterical fury of jealousy and frustration while another performer, an operetta soubrette, queens it on the stage.

He is most exposed when friendship uncharacteristically gets the better of him: the flimsiness of his relationships with state power is exposed when he pleads for the safety of his oldest friend, a comrade from left-wing theatre days. His tragic enlightenment comes only when he leaves the reassuring adulation of Germany to go abroad, to encounter the scorn – intolerable to a creature who feeds on admiration – of former acquaintances. (The actor chosen to deliver the literal slap in the face is an English non-professional, type-cast as a *Times* critic, and demonstrating that it's a mistake to put up amateurs against professionals as good as Szabó's.)

In respects quite different from the intelligence and sensitivity of its human portrait and moral inquiry, the film is a model to other filmmakers. It imposes itself by the dynamism of its narrative and its visual spectacle, all achieved on a budget that would not have paid for a single set-piece in *Heaven's Gate*. The secret lies not in some miraculous East European economy (as a West German-Hungarian co-production all but a few establishing shots were filmed in Budapest), but in a confidently planned scenario, the control of an increasingly assured director, pure technical excellence (the director of photography is Szabó's usual collaborator, Lajos Koltai) and above all rational use of resources. Practically everything is shot on location, selected and impressionistically transformed with banners and other properties. The rough edges and approximations (an American Express plaque glimpsed in a 1936 café; obviously post-war sanitary plumbing in a pre-war lavatory) are irrelevant and never impair Szabó's mesmeric evocation of a mood, a time and a place.

David Robinson, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1981