

# Frantz (2016)

(German/French with English subtitles)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 53 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 1;  
Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;  
my eye wastes away from grief,  
my soul and body also.  
For my life is spent with sorrow,  
and my years with sighing;  
my strength fails because of my misery, [b]  
and my bones waste away.*

*Psalm 31:9-10*

Most of the main characters are in distress in French director François Ozon's post World War 1 tale set in the small town of Quedlinburg, Germany. Twenty-some Anna (Paula Beer) is the depressed fiancée of Frantz Hoffmeister (Anton von Lucke), but they will never marry because he was killed in the trenches near the end of the war. She is currently living with his grieving parents, Dr. Hans Hoffmeister (Ernst Stötzner) and his wife, Magda (Marie Gruber). They regard her as a daughter, perhaps more so because Frantz had been their only child. Thus, when the middle-aged patient he is currently examining, known only as Kreutz (Johann von Buelow), reveals his desire to marry Anna, it is from the doctor that he seeks permission to court her. When Kreutz tells her that he can make her forget Frantz, she promptly turns him down, saying that she does not want to forget him.

During her daily pilgrimage to the cemetery where the family

has created a symbolic grave (Frantz's body having been tossed into a mass grave at the front), Anna spies a young man placing roses on it. When she asks around, she is told that he is Adrien Rivoir (Pierre Niney), a Frenchman staying at the local hotel. Later that day he comes to the Hoffmeisters' to speak with the doctor, but the embittered old man orders him out of the house when his visitor tells him that he is French. Hans would not allow for any explanation. "Every French man is my son's murderer," he exclaims, his visitor agreeing that all soldiers are murderers. However, when Pierre returns and speaks with Anna and Magda, they are won over by his claim to have been a good friend of Frantz, the latter such a Francophile that he had become fluent in French, even as he had learned German. Hans, who has been listening in on their conversation, soon joins them.

Over the course of the next few days Pierre brings comfort to the household by recounting their visits to the Louvre where they were drawn to a Manet portrait of a young man with his head thrown back. The two men were also bound together by their love of and performance of music, with Pierre, a violinist in an orchestra in Paris, helping Frantz to improve his violin technique.

A most emotional sequence is the one in which Hans opens his son's violin case and asks Pierre to play, saying the instrument is a gift to him. Pierre gently declines, but later, with all three Germans together, he does play a lovely melody for them. It looks like he and Anna are destined for each other when she joins in on the piano, their playing perhaps a symbol of the two once warring nations overcoming their old hostility and living together in harmony.

Countering this good feeling is a gnawing suspicion that the relationship between Pierre and Frantz might have been more than brotherly love, this fueled by the somewhat effeminate look of actor Pierre Niney. However, this conjecture is short lived. Pierre discloses something to Anna that is so shocking

that she withdraws from him. She does not tell Hans and Magda Pierre's secret, and soon after this he leaves town.

From Paris Pierre writes to her, but she hesitates to respond, torn so by her emotions. Before his abrupt departure, he had been scheduled to dine with the family. She lies to the couple about him, and this too is so disturbing to her that she confesses to her priest, revealing the terrible secret Pierre had confided to her. The cleric kindly observes that sometimes a lie can be better than telling the truth if the latter would bring only pain, and that there can be forgiveness for this.

By the time Anna replies to Pierre, her letter is returned, marked address unknown. In a turmoil, she does something irrational and deadly, but eventually emerges from her despair with the determination to go to Paris to search for Pierre. Her "parents" strongly support this, they also being very fond of their former enemy.

Besides the issue of telling lies to protect loved ones from pain, the film deals with the dark feelings of anger and resentment that war leaves in its aftermath. While in the village, some of the villagers express their hatred for the visiting Frenchman. Kreutz appears to be the head of a group that meet at the pub to grouse over their defeat in the War and to look toward a day when their country will be strong enough to thrust aside the humiliations forced upon it—we can easily imagine that in a few years they will be wearing Nazi armbands. When Pierre takes Anna to a local dance, Kreutz, upset because Anna had refused his invitation to take her, stirs up the crowd against the Frenchman.

Much later in the film, Hans enters the pub where Kreutz and his gang have been criticizing the doctor for his hospitality toward Pierre. One by one the men turn down Hans offer to buy them a round of drinks. When they attack the French for killing their sons (almost all of them had lost a boy), Hans launches a diatribe that ends with, "Who killed your boys? Who

sent them to the front?" he asks accusingly. "We did: their fathers. We are responsible." In Paris Anna also experiences the narrow, hostile patriotism of the French when at a café, the crowd joins in singing "La Marseillaise." Ozon probably intends for us to recall the stirring scene in *Casablanca* when the patrons at Rick's nightclub sang the anthem as a means of protesting the presence of the Nazi officers. What a difference the context makes, as in this film it is used to show the exclusion of Anna due to the lingering hatred between the two nations.

In the last act of the film the focus is almost entirely upon Anna's emerging from the protection of and dependency upon the Hoffmeisters during her journey to Paris to find Pierre. She visits the Louvre, seeking out the Manet painting that Pierre had said was so impressive. She is surprised to discover that it is "The Suicide," a subject as dark as the state of Pierre's and her soul. Tracking down Pierre to an estate some distance from Paris, ruled over by Pierre's aristocratic mother (Cyrielle Clair), leads to another unsettling discovery. And yet Anna's message to the kind Hoffmeisters at the end seem to bear out Friedrich Nietzsche's famous quote, "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger." Still, we wonder about her future and the wisdom of lying in order to protect loved ones from the pain of truth.

This is a fascinating film about complex people dealing with emotions that still resonate almost a hundred years later—the hostility between nations and their people. The film is shot mostly in crisp black and white, slowly morphing into color a few times: when we see Frantz and Pierre in France visiting the Louvre and playing their violins; and Anna and Pierre emerging from a dark tunnel in a huge rock overlooking the village and relishing the beautiful view of village and surrounding area; and, especially the film's closing shot of Anna. Not knowing of the 1932 Ernst Lubitsch dramatic film *Broken Lullaby* upon which Ozon has based his film, I was

surprised by Pierre's revelation that led to his sudden departure from Germany. The film is time specific, but the themes of guilt and grace are not. Even if you are averse to subtitled films, you should see this one.

*This review with a set of questions will be in the May 2017 issue of VP.*