

# Phoenix (2014)

*German with English subtitles*

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 38 min.

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

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;*

*you will strengthen their heart,*

*you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and  
the oppressed,*

*so that those from earth may strike terror no more.*

*Psalm 10:17-18*

Director Christian Petzold's devastating film *Phoenix* is like a Post Holocaust film noir. As we will see, the title takes on a double meaning as the stark story of two survivors unfolds. The film begins in 1945 just after the end of WW 2, with two women traveling at night from the Auschwitz death camp to Berlin. Lene Winter (Nina Kunzendorf), a survivor working as a clerk in the Hall of Jewish Records, is bringing back to the city her just liberated friend Nelly Lenz (Nina Hoss). She explains to a curious G.I. guard at a bridge checkpoint that her injured companion, is a concentration camp survivor. He still demands that Nelly unfold the blood-stained bandages around her head so he can see her face. Taken aback by the damage that he sees inflicted by a Nazi bullet, he quickly passes them on.

Safe in a lake-side apartment where a middle-aged German woman cares for them and the apartment, Lene, with some degree of

hesitation, informs Nelly that her German husband Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld) has survived the war—but that he might be the one who betrayed her. He was arrested and tortured the day before she was found, and then he was released afterward, so he might have given away her hiding place—a compartment in a boat docked at their lake home. Nelly enters a clinic where the plastic surgeon says he can give her a new face. Being a German, he refers to the faces of two movie stars popular during the Hitler regime. Nelly insists on being restored to her former features. This will be “difficult,” he informs her due to the intense damage inflicted by the bullet. What results from his labor is a face still marred by huge black patches around her eyes, but apparently very different from her original countenance.

Lene has her heart set on escaping the horrible memories of the camps by the two of them going to Israel. Lene believes that as survivors they have a legacy of supporting a place safe for Jews where such things can never happen again. She has some funds on which they are now living, and Nelly will have even more when she can claim her family inheritance. However, Nelly determines to search for Johnny, the best clue given her being to go to the clubs in the American sector of the occupied city. She had been a singer and he a pianist before the war. The city is still filled with rubble, the house where she and Johnny had lived being a brick-strewn vacant lot between its undestroyed neighboring buildings. It is at the club with the emblazoned name of PHOENIX that Nelly catches her first sight of Johnny. Instead of playing music as in the past, he is now a unkempt looking bus boy, clearing away dishes while a pair of naughty frauleins on the small stage entertain the guests. He does not recognize Nelly the first time.

But then, seeing some resemblance to his dead wife, he proposes to Nelly that she assume the role of Nelly so that together they can put in a claim for the inheritance. He

offers to split it, she receiving \$20 K, with him coaching her. Nelly holds back revealing her identity, instead accompanying him to the dingy basement apartment where he lives. Alternating between lodgings, she spends her waking hours supposedly practicing Nelly's handwriting and physical moves. During part of this time the dissatisfied Lene is out of town on business. Johnny talks a lot about his wife, but does not go into the details of the arrests. He tries to have Nelly stay indoors all the time because he fears that former friends might spot her—though how they would recognize her when he didn't, he does not explain. His plan is to take her east, out of the city and then to have her re-enter Berlin by train, where at the station he and a gathering of surviving friends would greet her and go to a welcome home party.

Like all film noirs, there are surprises as the characters become entwined in their plans. One development explains why Johnny needs a live Nelly to claim the family fortune, rather than just show up as the surviving husband. And another, even more shocking surprise, brings out into the open the cloud of despair that clung to so many Holocaust survivors. As Lene says, she can see their past, but not the future.

The filmmakers provide an ambiguous climax that leaves it to the audience to draw its own conclusion as to Nelly and Johnny's future. It involves her calculated singing the haunting song for the guests, Kurt Weil and Ogden Nash's "Speak Low." With Johnny seated at the piano, Nelly starts out with sort of a raspy whisper, bursting forth into the full melody by the time she has reached "When you speak love/Our moment is swift/like ships adrift,/We're swept apart/Too soon/Speak low/Darling speak low." It is the perfectly chosen song for what has happened to her and Johnny during the war. With his face showing dawning recognition, he stops playing midway through the performance, staring at her. What she does when she finishes the song will leave you troubled, maybe, but also perhaps hopeful. (I strongly recommend that *after* you see

the film, you Google the title to see the lyrics and listen to them. Tony Bennett's version is at <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/tonybennett/speaklow.html>. The second, mythological meaning of phoenix comes to mind as we think of the ashes of Berlin and of the lives lost in the ovens. Lene hopes for a rebirth of them both in Palestine where more and more Jews are settling every day. Contrarily, Nelly sees a possible rebirth of her marriage to Johnny, but then...Whatever rebirth she is able to enter into, it will be a different sort of phoenix for her, one as different as her present face is from the one of her past.

*This review with a set of discussion questions is in the September issue of VP.*