

The Lives of Others (2006)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 2; L- 4; S/N- 5. Running time: 2 hours 17 min.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Matthew 13:33

Winner of the 2006 Best Foreign Film Academy Award, director/writer Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film takes on the difficult task of showing the positive affect of a good man upon one whom at first we might despise. It is easy to show how "one rotten apple spoils the whole bushel," as witness the large number of films in which one person seduces and corrupts others (there is even a whole genre in which the "rotten apple" is usually female, film noir!). Goodness, however, is much harder to show without descending into sentimentality and cloying sweetness (anyone

remember an old clunker entitled Francis of Assisi—no, the one before Zefirelli's?). Set in the last days of the East German nation (1984, five years before the fall of the Berlin Wall), this film suggests that even a dedicated member of the dreaded Stasi (the East German secret police), a man who lives and thrives in the dark, is not immune to the attraction of light, that a little bit of yeast does indeed have a big effect.

Capt. Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Muehe) seems like the epitome of the soulless servant of the state who would gladly entrap his own mother if he thought she were engaged in activities that threatened socialist society. Totally devoid of a sense of humor, he would have made a good Spanish Grand Inquisitor or chief of staff for Sen. Joe McCarthy. In one chilling sequence interspersed with shots of his grilling of suspects he passes on his interrogation techniques to a group of Stasi recruits, pointing out that one need not resort to brutal physical torture, that sleep deprivation and psychological techniques can manipulate the accused into divulging the truth. One just needs patience and persistence.

Wiesler's classmate Lt.-Col. Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur) is a better politician, so he has become his friend's superior in the service. The two attend the opening of a new play mainly because Grubitz wants to schmooze with his superior, Minister Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme), whom he knows will be in attendance. The drama's author, East Germany's premier playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), is present to introduce the play, and it stars leading actress Christa-Maria

Sieland (Martina Gedeck). Grubitz points to the playwright as a good example of the loyal citizen dedicated to advancing socialism through his art. Wiesler demurs, stating that the man does not seem quite right to him, that he might be hiding something. During the intermission, when Grubitz goes to greet Minister Hempf, he parrots his friend's observation, and the minister agrees. Grubitz, seeing an opportunity for advancement, secures the minister's authorization to place the playwright under full surveillance.

Grubitz assigns his friend to carry out the surveillance, and so Wiesler and another man take 12-hour long turns listening in on all that takes place in the playwright's quarters. They discover that Georg shares his quarters with Christa-Maria, and that the playwright is deeply concerned over the fate of the man who had been his mentor and director of his earlier plays Albert Jerski (Volkmar Kleinert). The latter has been blacklisted because of his "anti-socialist" views, forbidden to work for the next seven years. Georg tries, and fails, to get the ban lifted. However, Wiesler does not pick up any words of incrimination, the playwright always on guard, careful of what he says even at home.

At Georg's birthday party the snoopers do hear journalist Paul Hauser (Hans-Uwe Bauer) urge his friend to take a more public stand for freedom. Georg has been able to walk the thin edge of earning the esteem of the Communist Party by not including anything controversial in his plays, while at the same time, because of his artistry, keeping the good will of members of the artistic community. Jerski is present at the party, but he says almost nothing, sitting off by himself, brooding while reading a book. He has violated Georg's wish that guests not bring him any more books by giving him what appears to be a large thin one wrapped in gift paper. Later it turns out to express the giver's opinion of his friend, it is a musical score entitled "Sonata for a Good Man."

The more Wiesler listens in and records the words and actions

of Georg in his reports, the more he too apparently comes to share this opinion of his subject. The Sonata is haunting and complex, a beautifully apt musical description of Georg. Indeed, as matters become more complicated, with Christa-Maria Sieland pursued by Minister Hempf so that she is torn between her desire to maintain her acting career by acceding to the lecher's wishes and her deep love for Georg, Wiesler intervenes by arranging for the playwright to discover why his beloved goes out alone on certain nights. He is moved when he listens in on Georg's confronting her and forgiving her, telling her that she does have a choice, regardless of consequences. At one point Wiesler even approaches and speaks briefly a word of encouragement to her while she is sitting alone in a café, though not, of course, revealing his identity or eavesdropping role in her life.

The climax of the film is a miracle of the human heart, reminding us again that God, though perhaps officially banished from the "workers' paradise," is nonetheless around, working in strange and wondrous ways. Without giving away the details, I can say that by the film's conclusion we are presented with two good men.

For Reflection/Discussion

You should wait until you see the film before reading further, because it is necessary to include spoilers for meaningful discussion of this superb film.

1) What do you think of Capt. Gerd Wiesler during the first part of the film? Would you think such a man capable of change? Compare him with Georg Dreyman. Wiesler lives alone in a spare apartment, apparently his sole companionship provided by the occasional visit of a prostitute. When he asks her to stay to talk, how does her answer show that she shares with him a mechanical view of relationships? How is this necessary in both of their professions?

2) How is the life of an artist like Georg or Jerski especially complicated in a restrictive society? One might look for historical examples in the lives of such Soviet artists as Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Dmitri Shostakovich (or Eli Kazan and "The Hollywood Ten" in America during the witch hunts of the HUAC/McCarthy era.).

3) What do you think it is that changes Wiesler in his view of Georg? What was his first act of kindness/grace? How did his omitting to record Georg's conversation about testing whether or not his apartment was bugged actually result in realizing that the dramatist was not so loyal after all?

4) How is Wiesler's conversation with Christa-Maria Sieland in the café a moment of grace? How is hers the tragic story?

5) After the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Georg discovers that he was under surveillance after all, what does he do? When he was driving down the street and saw Wiesler delivering mail (or flyers), why do you think he did not stop and talk with him? What do you think of the way in which he did thank the man? How must this have been a comfort to Wiesler in his reduced status in life?