

DVD Select: A breakdown at Orwell's Ministry of Love

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Earlier this August, on the eve of its summer vacation, Congress hastily passed Republican legislation to broaden the ability of intelligence agencies to eavesdrop on enemies of the state. Then Congress put oversight for these enhanced wiretap powers in the hands of the very official it had spent several months lambasting as truth-disabled: Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.

'THE LIVES OF OTHERS' - Sebastian Koch and Martina Gedeck star in 'The Lives of Others,' a drama about life behind the Iron Curtain. CNS Photo courtesy of SonyPictures. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin Feeling better?

You won't after screening the Academy Award-winning (Best Foreign Language Film) German drama "The Lives of Others" (Sony, 4 stars).

The place is East Berlin, the year is 1984 and the homeland security forces, the Stasi, have perfected the surveillance of its citizenry to an unfathomable and unconscionable degree.

Among the best at monitoring the public is a sad, mousey officer, Hauptman Gerd Wiesler (the late Ulrich Muhe who died last month of stomach cancer). Being a strongly principled officer who has given himself over entirely to the state, Wiesler languishes far behind his more ambitious, less talented and scrupulous colleagues.

And so, Wiesler is ordered to head up the surveillance of popular playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and his live-in girlfriend, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). In dreary East Germany, Dreyman and Sieland are as close as you could come to a glamour couple.

Dreyman is a loyal citizen and Sieland is an apolitical artist. Both are beholden to the state for their existence and success, and aware of the tenuous nature of their "right" to be artists.

Why spy on them? It seems a high-ranking bureaucrat has the hots for Sieland and (rightfully) thinks that if he can get dirt of Dreyman then he can push the actress into a compromising position, in his big black state-owned limo.

Wiesler's crack crew swiftly bugs the couple's modest apartment and he takes up residence in the attic with headset on, tapes running and the typewriter tapping out transcripts and reports at a torrid pace.

What Wiesler finds are good people who live their lives as best they can with as much dignity as they can scrape together under the circumstances. They are far from being enemies of the state. But something else happens to Wiesler. Slowly, in that gray and dusty attic, Wiesler begins a conversion into a human being.

Perhaps it is the exposure to the unfettered love of two people for each other. Perhaps it is the exposure to the

arts, especially the wrenchingly beautiful composition "Sonata to an Honest Man" by a state-disgraced friend of Dreyman's, which he hears the writer perform on the piano.

Wiesler becomes cautiously protective of Dreyman and Sieland, even as pressure mounts for him to deliver dirt to the state. Meanwhile, Dreyman is bowing to pressure from colleagues to speak out against the sorry state of the government. He even secures a black market unregistered typewriter on which to type his broadsides. Wiesler looks the other way.

It all ends badly for Wiesler, Dreyman and Sieland - but not for the state or the high-ranking bureaucrats who set this tragedy in motion. Even after the Wall falls, years later, they just change suits and survive, like cockroaches.

"The Lives of Others" is a brilliantly conceived and meticulously researched story that resonates deeply with American audiences. But writer-director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck didn't spend five years researching, writing and creating his movie with American audiences in mind.

He was writing about Germany and good people in bad situations who do what they must to survive. He wrote it for Germans almost as a cathartic for the long, dark nightmare that was Communist occupation.

The Stasi officer Wiesler clearly worries Donnersmarck. "He has the power to interfere in the lives of others if they are not being conducted in a way he feels that they should," the director says in an insightful interview included on the DVD. That is an awful and fluid exercise of authority against innocents.

The success for audiences is in the painful and glacial conversion of Wiesler into a being with a heart and a conscience, which affords society some protection from the state. It is a cinematic miracle to behold and one that enables audience to leave feeling oddly triumphant.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Broken English" (Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2 1/2 stars) Parker Posey does it again - another superb performance. Here, she's Nora Wilder, a slogging New Yorker, in her 30s, cynical about love and besieged by a mother (Gena Rowlands) who harps constantly on her singular situation. Her friends? In love or happily married. But Nora does briefly find the dreamy Frenchman Julien (Melvil Poupaud) who is just passing through. But she's got to find herself before it can all fall into place. (Fans of "Before Sunset" will totally "get" this one.) A respectable first writing and directing effort by Zoe A. Cassavetes (daughter of Rowlands and the late-director John Cassavetes).

"The Ex" (Genius, 1 1/2 stars) In theaters and out in May of this year, this romantic comedy will find life on DVD. The newly responsible Tom Reilly (Zach Braff) moves his wife Sofia (Amanda Peet) and their newborn back to her Ohio hometown so that he can work for her father's (Charles Grodin) ad agency and support his family. The guy he works for, though, (Jason Bateman) was Sofia's high school sweetheart and he's a deceptive creep. A bit painful for a comedy and for Braff another misfire (remember "The Last Kiss"?). Under the theatrical witness protection program, it also goes by the title "Fast Track."

"Redline" (Genius, 1 star) Real, expensive and exotic cars were used and sometimes crashed in the making of this road race film. And still it earns the rare distinction of a 0 percent on the Tomatometer at rottentomatoes.com. In other words, of the 23 reviews on the site, all pan the movie (some quite hilariously).

"Perfect Stranger" (Sony, 1 star) Halle Berry goes undercover to find the killer of her friend. Her quarry is a businessman (Bruce Willis). Berry's character goes to work as a temp in his company and goes online as a temptress who lures Willis into a keyboard game of cat and mouse. Reportedly there were three endings, with a different guilty person in each - none of which I bet is the director or writers.

IT CAME FROM TV

The caustic Dr. Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) holds court in season three of the edgy medical drama "House M.D." (Universal). Extras include an inside look at the making of Episode 23, "The Jerk"; a blooper reel; tour of the production office; alternate take from "Cane and Able (The Angry Valley Girl Version)"; and a tour of the props department.

Cartoon Network's live-action feature "Re-Animated: The Movie" (Warner) in which little Jimmy Roberts (Dominic Janes) ends up with the thawed brain of celebrated cartoonist Milt Appleday during transplant surgery. Oh, yes, it gets weirder ...

"Dane Cook: The Lost Pilots" (Sony) Lost? Ditched is more like it. Cook, of the modest hit "Employee of the Month," is like a lot of aspiring comics/actors in that he has to try lots of stuff until something sticks. This 47-minute disc holds pilots to two shows that didn't stick. In one, a mirror-turned-toward-mirror sitcom, Cook plays a comedian just cast in a sitcom. In the other he's a slacker who pursues unusual adventures with his reluctant pals.

Also: Season one of the Latin American knock-off comedy "Ugly Betty"; fourth season of the Navy legal thriller "JAG"; the first season of Showtime's quirky drama "Dexter"; the 10th season of Comedy Central's potty-mouthed cartoon "South Park"; and the first season of Brad Garrett's domestic sitcom "'Til Death."

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Dark Backward: Special Edition" (Sony, 1991) This Adam Rifkin oddity has been variously described as a mesmerizing "train wreck," an instrument of torture, an extraordinarily original black comedy and the filthiest movie ever made. The last comment refers to the layer of grime that seems to coat everything and everybody, especially Gus (Bill Paxton's bravest portrayal ever). Cast includes Judd Nelson (so you know it is weird), Lara Flynn Boyle, Wayne Newton, James Caan and Rob Lowe. Nelson is Marty, a garbage man who aspires to be a stand-up comic. He stinks. Uh-huh. His pal Gus accompanies and exploits Marty, especially after Marty grows a third arm, which he works into the act. Why is it being resurrected now? Because the versatile Rifkin wrote the script for the new "Underdog" movie.

"Serenity Collector's Edition" (Universal, 2005) Josh Whedon's sci-fi space-in-time-of-war project is well-packaged and filled with a fresh hour of extras, including 15 minutes of deleted scenes. Tour the rebel ship Serenity, a Whedon introduction, commentary, more. The ideal movie for those who feel George Lucas has lost his way. Born from Whedon's ill-fated, but much-admired TV series "Firefly."

"Reel Talent: First Films of Legendary Directors" (Fox) The first films of successful directors - I'm not so sure about the "legendary" aspect of some - with all proceeds benefiting the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Directors include George Lucas (with three films), Robert Zemeckis (two), Kevin Reynolds, Jon Turteltaub, Shawn Levy, Stephen Sommers, James Foley, Richard L. Bare and Richard Kelly. Budding young film makers can decide if genius lurks in these early efforts or if that is a trait acquired along the way to the top.

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