



FILM: **PHOENIX**

FDG RATING: 3.3 ☺☺☺○○
Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Christian Petzold: *Director*
Ronald Zehrfeld: *Actor: Johnny*
Nina Hoss: *Actress: Nelly*

DATE: Sept. 20, 2015

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **PHOENIX**

Phoenix is a powerful, emotionally charged German film that exposes one of the shameful, postwar scams: survivors trying to prove entitlement to another family's wealth through lies and impersonation. The war has just ended and after undergoing reconstructive surgery for a bullet blast to the face, Nellie, a survivor of the concentration camps, returns to Berlin in 1945 in search of her husband Johnny, a night club piano player. She had been the vocalist for Johnny in their prewar life. Nellie doesn't know that he denounced her to the Gestapo to save himself, then filed for divorce during the war, and has assumed she is dead. When Nellie approaches Johnny, he doesn't recognize her but sees enough similarity to hatch his scheme to have her impersonate his dead wife so he can claim her estate, which is being held by Allied authorities. The plan is to, collect the cash, split it and go their separate ways. Nellie told Johnny, who insists on being called Johannes, that her name is Eva and she passively plays along as he teaches her how to walk, talk, gesture, dress, and apply makeup like his dead wife. Nellie seems to be trying to understand why Johnny would be doing this despicable maneuver. She still loves him but begins to question her feelings. The powerful conclusion provides poetic justice.

Unfortunately, only a few of us saw this art house film since it only showed for a short time in a couple cinemas. One resident critic thought the story line was contrived, and the staging unrealistic. Others found the film very absorbing with superb acting. Although the pace was slower with less action than Petzold's previous 2012 acclaimed film, *Barbara*, (set in East Germany in the 1980s), *Phoenix* holds our suspense making us confront the realities of extreme brutal betrayal driven by the savageness of war as well as equally extreme hope and despair.

A lone rating of 2 undermined two ratings of 4 resulting in an acceptable 3.3 on a scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

A note about the English title "Phoenix": The word, Phoenix, has broader significance than just the name of the Berlin nightclub where Johnny is performing. In mythology, the phoenix represents death and rebirth as the bird that dies in a fire of its own making only to rise again from the ashes. The title of the film then can also refer to Germany rising again after the war as well as Nellie rising from the (assumed) dead. The film is based on the 1961 novel "Le Retour des Cendres" (Return from the Ashes) by Hubert Monteilhet.

A note about the director: Christian Petzold is a fixture of the Berlin School of historically informed, realist filmmakers, interested in probing the dark aspects of German history.



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See you at the movies!

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