



**MIEKKAILIJA (THE FENCER)** is a May, 2019 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Here's Kino Ken's review of that Estonian film.

**13 of a possible 20 points**

**\*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\***

**Estonia 2015 color 99 minutes subtitled live action feature drama  
Making Movies Oy / Allfilm / Kick Film Producers: Kaarle Aho, Kim Allen,  
Jörg Brandschuh, Irina Chirashnaya, Ivo Felt, Paul Fenwick, Jan Kuchta,  
Brandon Leidel, Thomas Liaudet, Taylor Lynn, Vladislav Madzhuga,  
Jennifer McDermott, Kai Nordberg, Roland Nyoth, Katrin Schmidt,  
Laura Schwartz, Jarmo Siimento, Ville Varesvuo, and Samuel Peralta**

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance  
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

**Points:**

- 2 Direction: Klaus Härö\***
- 1 Editing: Ueli Christen, Tambet Tassu**
- 1 Cinematography: Tuomo Hutri**  
**Still Photography: Renee Altrov, Annika Haas, Tuomo Manninen**
- 1 Lighting: Taivo Tenso**  
**Special Visual Effects: Andreas Bittner, Jari Hakala, Tuomo Hintikka,  
Jakob Wiessner**



**Krettel Maide, Ingrika Tuulik, Karlote Karm, Svetlana Trynova, Anneli Proosväli, Kaspar Tõnisson, Aleksander Luka, Tauno Runtal, Marvel Leesment, and Rihard-Reno Germ (Fencers), Kaarle Aho and Kai Nordberg (Judges)**

**Mostly set in 1952 Haapsalu, Estonia, Klaus Härö's dour docudrama of provincial life under the heel of Joseph Stalin and MGB police follows a predictable pattern presumably dictated by actual events. Bleak exterior cinematography and underlining desaturated lighting team for a grimness only partly relieved by animated innocence of village schoolchildren.**

**Master fencer Endel Nelis was, at the age of eighteen, drafted by the Nazis into their Eastern Front troops. Except fortunately, like many other natives of the Baltic Republics, he soon escaped into marshland rather than battle Russians. This didn't prevent such unfortunates from later persecution by vengeful Kremlin disposed to conceal its own ongoing crimes by focusing instead on past atrocities and misdemeanors, particularly those committed during wartime stresses. Changing his patronym to confound trackers, Endel trained off eventually from dangerously prominent Leningrad to obscure Haapsalu, where he obtained a post in the community's elementary school as a physical education instructor. Whether he had previous teaching experience is left unremarked by the screenwriter, though the institution's principal does inspect closely a set of documents, implying appropriate credentials were at hand. At any rate, Endel lands a paying job, one little to his liking since he has neither confidence nor natural aptitude for working patiently with children. These deficiencies matter little in an atmosphere where war orphans are thoroughly domesticated, expected to show gratitude for any attention directed their way.**

**At first willing to follow tradition and pursue skiing as a healthy, non-political preoccupation for Pioneers, Endel finds his plan stymied by military requisitioning of essential material. How does a group of kids proceed to set out on a ski trip with nothing to strap below boots?**

**Necessity birthing creativity, he gradually resorts to his area of prime expertise: fencing. Not that equipment for that sport is handy, either. But at least he needn't compete with army brass to obtain what he will need. A second recommendation for fencing is his rich bank of experience in that field to draw upon.**

When nosy Marta discovers her gym teacher practicing successive thrusts at a tumbling mat, she expresses interest in learning how to do that sort of thing herself. That inspires Endel to tack up a notice on the school's bulletin board about a weekend gathering for any pupils curious to learn the fine art of fencing. Expecting a handful of unprepossessing dullards wishing merely for a bit of paternalistic attention, the promoter is amazed to encounter a classroom size group of volunteers waiting in the designated rendezvous. Most are graceless, doubtful of likely improvement, loath to surrender themselves entirely to a gruffly lackluster martinet more concerned with style than personality. His humorless approach to doling out information is accepted resentfully as all a child could reasonably expect from a payroll employee of Soviet bureaucracy.

Over time, the flinty adult mysteriously relocating into their midst becomes emotionally attached to individual trainees as well as fellow pedagogue Kadri, who has little to pick from in a settlement depleted of eligible males by war, deportation, and imprisonment. He throws away one opportunity for arctic retreat, then imposes on former coach Alexei for a supply of foils and uniforms, both badly needed by amateur duelers. When they arrive unexpectedly, albeit in second-hand guise, impoverished new owners are delighted.

A side subplot involving arrest and removal of insecure Jaan's grandfather and a street scene where someone unidentified trails Endel for several blocks lend a backdrop of arbitrary, lurking menace to mundane affairs.

Suspicious principal, aggrieved by upstart new arrival's overshadowing of his own preference for geographically correct sport, gets upended by a popular vote rejecting his suggestion in favor of outmoded "feudal" swordplay. Resolved to displace his more youthfully charismatic challenger, he contacts Leningrad superiors in hopes an investigation into the previous life of his opponent will yield grounds for discharging him. A taciturn teetotaler is quite willing to assist his boss by furtively rifling through archives in Endel's last known place of residence to locate evidence to support the desired sacking. He ultimately finds what is sought and returns with proof of altered identity.

When a newspaper advertisement about a scheduled fencing tournament in Leningrad comes into possession of Haapsala's optimistically eager schoolchildren, the stage is set for a moral dilemma forcing a choice between self-preservation and popular martyrdom. Which do you think Endel will adopt?

Director Härö right off the bat burdened himself with two severe liabilities: a cast composed entirely of foreigners speaking an unfamiliar language – most of them untrained amateur actors making their film debuts – and an unattractive, bleak story setting not designed to entice the eye. Coupled with these drawbacks was a predictable underdog triumph plot utterly lacking in unforeseen developments. Viewers find no offsetting virtues in the film's designated villain and his henchman, nor is any flaw exposed to undermine identification with the film's hero. Regrets are absent all around. These restrictions demanded by the script make for a somewhat dull hour-and-one-half of eyeballing a screen.

Whether a quartet of unmistakably Nordic rustics whose idea of social revolution is enthusiastic adoption of an archaic upper-crust pastime can manage to obtain a bittersweet upset over affluent urban rivals swings into primary focus, relegating heroic self-sacrifice to footnote status. Is that what the director intended?

Insuring against dissatisfied exits by audiences are Gert Wilden Jr.'s prominently romantic orchestral score, one unabashedly apt for the conservative period depicted, saturated with wistfulness, though with considerable variation in both tempo and coloration. Precise, discreet sound recording is maintained from start to finish, at times playing a solo role in pushing the film forward with effect noises in lieu of dialogue. Notable as well are directorial injections of prolonged silent stretches where faces and body signals must tell the tale without speech. Use of real historical locations to stage action is another plus, permitting a high degree of authenticity to strengthen ambience.

Unrated by the MPAA, THE FENCER is quite suitable for family viewing, making for a painless lesson in Stalinist repression. DVD bonuses of the Music Box Films dvd release include the film's theatrical trailer, with a runtime of one and three-quarter minutes; a revealing and refreshingly frank subtitled twenty-two-minute interview with this film's director; and several snippets of audio commentary in clearly enunciated English heard over five selected scenes totaling ten minutes, these supplied by Härö also.

More emotionally uplifting than a screener expects, THE FENCER was Härö's fifth offering to be chosen Finland's official submission in competition for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science's Best Foreign Language Film

designation the year of its release. It additionally was nominated for a Golden Globe Award as Best Motion Picture in a Foreign Language.

THE FENCER is by no means an undesirable inaugural foreign language movie experience for adolescent explorers. Subtitled content is free of graphic violence, profanity, and overt sensuality. Parents, take note. Dramas need not invariably be obnoxious, ranting, suggestive, or abrasive. They can also seep into the bones as this one quietly does.