

DIE BRÜCKE DVD REVIEW BY KINO KEN OF APRIL, 2024

Die Brücke (The Bridge) is an April, 2024 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.

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

West Germany 1959 103 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
or English-dubbed live action feature drama

Producers: Hermann Schwerin and Jochen Schwerin

Deutsche Film Hansa / Fono Film

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17 points of a possible 20 points = a minor classic

Points:

- 2 Direction: Bernhard Wicki*
- 2 Editing: Carl Otto Bartning
- 2 Cinematography: Gerd von Bonin
Still Photography: Gabriele Du Vinage* and Paul Filipp*
- 2 Lighting
Visual Effects: Karl Baumgartner and Erwin Lange
- 1 Screenplay: Michael Mansfeld, Heinz Pauck, and Bernhard Wicki, based on
the novel by Manfred Gregor
Script Editing: Ruth Girkon
- 0 Music: Martin Majewski
- 2 Production Design: Heinrich Graf Brühl and Peter Scharff
Costume Design: Josef Wanke
Makeup: Jonas Müller* and Alfred Rasche*
- Props: Eugen Ebert (weapons), Theodor Gomolka, Sylvester Schimpke
- 2 Sound: Oskar Sala* and Willi Schwadorf*
- 2 Acting
- 2 Creativity

17 total points

Cast: Folker Bohnet* (Hans Scholten), Fritz Wepper (Albert Mutz), Michael Hinz (Walter Forst), Frank Glaubrecht* (Jurgen Borchert), Karl Michael Balzer (Karl Horber), Volker Lechtenbrink* (Klaus Hager), Günter Hoffmann (Sigi Bernhard), Cordula Trantow* (Franziska), Wolfgang Stumpf (Stern), Günter Pfitzmann* (Heilmann), Heinz Spitzner (Fröhlich), Siegfried Schürenberg (Lieutenant Colonel), Ruth Hausmeister (Mrs. Mutz), Eva Vaitl* (Mrs. Borchert), Edith Schultze-Westrum (Mother Bernhard), Hans Elwenspoek* (Mr. Forst), Trude Breitschopf (Mrs. Forst), Klaus Hellmold* (Mr. Horber), Inge Benz (Sigrun), Til Kiwe (Knight of the Iron Cross), Edeltraut Elsner (Barbara), Vicco von Bülow (warrant officer), Johannes Buzalski (wounded soldier), Heini Göbel (Rations Sergeant), Kurt Habernoll (non-commissioned officer), Herma Hochwarter (Maid at the Forsts), Emil Huneck (civilian), Alexander Hunzinger (lance corporal), Hans Oetti (policeman), others

The West German feature film *Die Brücke* is a 1959 anti-war drama based on a semi-autobiographical book by Manfred Gregor. It was nominated for a Best Foreign-Language film Oscar®, but failed to win that award. Nonetheless, the picture makes as strong as possible a case against war-mongering, showing the tragic wastefulness of military combat on both buildings and people.

Director Bernhard Wicki sets his tale in a small German village. There's a stone bridge just outside it overarching a river, as well as a flimsier wooden one. Since the American army has already established a bridgehead to the north, the significance of both is minimal.

Yet a group of seven sixteen-year-old Hitler Youth, newly drafted into the Führer's forces, determines to make a last ditch stand at the more formidable span in accordance with directives from senior officers. They are told under no circumstances to permit enemy control of the crossing.

Superiors plan to dynamite the structure as soon as sufficient daylight permits. River mist plus the necessity of allowing veterans to retreat over it under cover of night prevent immediate destruction.

Seven schoolboys on guard there are putatively under the command of Sergeant Heilmann, who seeks to protect them by stationing the youths safely behind the front line. Since they have had less than twenty-four hours of

military training since initial call-up, these high-school kids are ill-prepared to take on American warriors.

Their adult defender makes the lethal error of leaving his rifle behind when he returns to the adjacent hamlet in order to obtain coffee for these reserves.

Challenged by a suspicious member of the actual Home Guard, this unfortunate sergeant finds himself being placed in custody, a situation leaving him helpless to oversee boys in their trenches and treehouse beside the main road in and out of town. He sees no alternative other than a surprise attack on his interlocutor, felling him to the street. Making a dash for safety, Heilman is ultimately gunned down and killed by another German patrolman.

That leaves untested youths at roadside to fend for themselves as best they can.

While the boys prepare for a predawn snack, footsteps are heard approaching. An unarmed civilian moves into view. He tries to talk them out of Horatius-style heroics. To no avail. They are too intent on proving themselves real men. At gunpoint, one of them tells this stranger advising them to go home to himself clear off. Realizing further argument is hopeless, the man does so, rushing off into darkness.

The sound of vehicle motors alerts amateur bridgekeepers some kind of military unit's heading their way. Thinking the foe about to arrive, Hans orders his mates to hurriedly set up metal barricade gates. This only serves to infuriate an officer of the Nazi army attempting to oversee panicked exit from advancing unfriendly forces. He unleashes a tongue-lashing on the hapless teens while underlings clear the roadway.

After that small convoy leaves, Hans instructs his troops to replace the road barriers. Only to be reminded more Nazi troops will soon be following those just passed.

Soon these greenhorn sentinels see a motorcycle with sidecar come into view. This conveyance develops engine trouble about midway across their stone posting. Faced with the prospect of being stranded and at the mercy of advancing Allies, an irritated bigwig resolves to abandon his transport and join whatever unit can be flagged down.

The first potential saviors to show up don't even slow down as they pass. To make sure that doesn't happen again, the stranded iron cross veteran takes up a

blocking stance midway between waist-high parapets. He points his gun in the direction from which he came.

Minutes later a medical unit bears down upon him, carrying wounded from the combat zone. Its progress is temporarily halted by the presumed madman facing them weapon in hand. To the amazement of youthful onlookers, a mutinous threat succeeds. The newly augmented company is soon on its panicked way again.

Shortly afterwards, an Allied plane buzzes into view. Immediately, hometown guardians still just raw recruits flatten themselves. When the bomber wings away, they stand back up, temporarily relieved. Older boys taunt Sigi for his display of fear. Their teasing is interrupted by the attacker's return, sending them diving downwards again to escape machine-gun strafing. Except for the youngest, who remains standing, resolved not to show any cowardice, seemingly mesmerized. He's fatally wounded, the first casualty among the makeshift defense force.

They have little time to register his horrible death before the crunching sound of slow-moving tanks is heard. These, they realize, must belong to the Americans.

The sun has risen behind the six remaining Germans. Visibility has improved substantially. That may help the natives some. However, the patriotic stalwarts, armed with one knife, one pistol, a half dozen rifles, two machine-guns, and a couple anti-tank grenades are hardly a match for three Sherman tank crews and accompanying snipers.

What follows is an unnecessary and bloody standoff, with additional fatalities when a German explosives crew is challenged by two survivors of their own army.

In early scenes, the seven pawns in this destructive three-dimensional black comedy of errors are seen at home, school, and at a riverside warehouse where they are in the midst of constructing a boat under the supervision of a school teacher.

Two are in conflict with parents.

Walter lambasts his father for hypocrisy, craven behavior, and preferment of a mistress over a wife. Karl discovers his father fornicating with the family's housekeeper, a young woman for whom he himself has a crush.

Another boy celebrates his call-up to the military by showering with a school physical education instructress.

Klaus, an evacuee from Berlin, is enamored of classmate Franziska. He gifts her briefly with his watch only to ask for its return mere hours later.

Hans, in town solely because his own mother wanted him out of high-frequency bombing areas, is a kind of big brother to Albert, whose mom is acting caretaker of both.

Jurgen, whose dad has been killed in the war, comes from long-standing militant Prussian stock. His forefathers for generations have held officer rank in the army. Though responsible and mature, he's totally committed to national honor and will defend it with his life.

Sigi, only child of a washerwoman, dreams of being a military hero. Smallest of the schoolboys, he's also apparently youngest, least mature, and most accident-prone.

Most of the central core of actors deliver standout performances. Especially credible are Volker Lechtenbrink as devotedly romantic Klaus, Frank Glaubrecht as tradition-upholding Jurgen, Michael Hinz in the role of pampered son Walter Forst, Folker Bohnet playing prudently responsible Hans, and Cordula Trantow, endearingly charming as radiantly lovestruck Franziska. Eva Vaitl makes a strong impression as Mrs. Borchert, Jurgen's stoically nationalist mother. Equally polished is Günter Pfitzmann's performance as cynically avuncular Sergeant Heilman, who undertakes disastrously to keep the septemvir of innocents out of harm's way.

Less persuasive are Gunter Hoffmann's Sigi, occasionally a bit too naïvely awkward onscreen, and Edith Schultze-Westrum's Mother Bernhard. The latter overacts consistently, resembling a supporting player in some hammy Italian opera tragedy more than an underpaid, overworked German manual laborer.

Editing is briskly kinetic, reinforcing admirably a taut crescendo rising from placid daily routine to near-apocalyptic fatalism. Combat scene cutting between window-framed sniper and treehouse lookout is particularly masterful.

Gerd von Bonin handles cinematography adroitly, especially close-ups showing expressive cast faces to fullest advantage.

While the screenplay is only serviceable, it is much less annoying than gratingly overemphatic outbursts of electronic noise that mar a few scenes where the director erroneously decided to insert musical heightening of drama.

Lighting, sound, and makeup are memorably effective. Splashing water, resounding footsteps, and air raid sirens are duplicated here sonically to perfection. The grit, blood, and sheer smeary muddiness of trench warfare is presented in a thoroughly realistic simulation.

Due to graphic wartime violence and a few instances of vulgar language, as well as the demises of most lead characters, *Die Brücke* is only suitable for experienced adult viewers. It's an objectively antiwar masterpiece that should be viewed by every adult opposed to mindless brutality and the overwhelming pointlessness of any and all politically-inspired warfare.