



***Das Lehrerzimmer (The Teachers' Lounge)* will be a September, 2024 LVCA dvd donation to the Heritage Methodist Church library. The film was Germany's official submission for the Best International Film Oscar® and made it to the final five nominee shortlist in that competition. Below is Kino Ken's review.**

19 of a possible 20 points = *** a major classic**

**Germany 2023 color 98 minutes subtitled live action feature mystery
if ... Productions / Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) / Arte
Producer: Ingo Fleiss a Sony Pictures Classics dvd release**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 2 Direction: Ilker Çatak***
- 2 Editing: Gesa Jäger***
- 2 Cinematography: Judith Kaufmann**
- 2 Lighting**
- 2 Screenplay: Johannes Duncker* and Ilker Çatak***
- Script Supervision: Nicole Birkholz**
- 1 Music: Marvin Miller and Ludwig von Beethoven**
- 2 Production Design: Zazie Knepper***

- Costume Design: Christian Röhrs
Makeup Design: Barbara Kreuzer
- 2 Sound: Torsten Többen-Jung
Sound Design: Kirsten Kunhardt
Sound Effects: Max Bauer* and Wolfi Müller*
- 2 Acting
2 Creativity
- 19 total points

Cast: Leonie Benesch* (Carla Nowak), Anne-Kathrin Gummich* (Dr. Bettina Böhm), Rafael Stachowiak* (Milosz Dudek), Michael Klammer* (Thomas Liebenwerda, teacher), Eva Löbau* (Friederike Kuhn, mother of Oskar), Kathrin Wehlisch (Lore Semnik), Sarah Bauerett (Vanessa König), Canan Samadi (Mariam Irfan), Kerstein Reimann (Mr. Stalman), Henriette Sievers* (teacher with coffee), Benjamin Bishop (Tim Boyle), Tim Porath* (Tom's father), Katinka Auberger (Maren Firouza), Katharina Marie Schubert (Mrs. Hasbricht), Uygur Tamer* (Mrs. Yilmaz), Özgür Karadeniz* (Mr. Yilmaz), Leonard Stettnisch (j)* (Oskar Kuhn), Oskar Zickur (j)* (Lukas), Antonia Luise Krämer (j) (Jenny), Elsa Krieger* (j) (Hatice), Vincent Stachowiak (j)* (Tom), Can Rodenbostel (j) (Ali), Padmé Hamdemir (j) (Jieun), Lisa Marie Trense (j) (Luise), Lotta Wriedt (j) (Vera), Nelson Pres (j) (Nelson), Joesfine Jahn (j) (Josefine), Lewe Wagner (j) (Markus), Mikail Osanmaz (j) (Mikail), Ruben Kupisch (j) (Ruben), Emma Phu (j) (Emma), Klara Lindner-Figura (j) (Klara), Enno Hoppe (j) (Enno), Ruby Kauka (j) (Ruby), Solomon Röthig (j) (Solomon), Zayana Mielke (j) (Schülerin), Phileas Spallek (j) (Phileas), Ela Eroglu (j) (Ela), Johanna Götting (j) (Anna), Jade Nadarajah (j) (Mitra), Goya Rego (j) (Paul), Yaw Boah-Amponsem (j) (Yaw), Jonas Albrecht (j) (Jonas)

Das Lehrerzimmer (The Teachers' Lounge) is an award-winning German drama structured as a mystery. Someone is stealing school supplies and small change from various rooms in a middle school. Neither administration nor students can catch the culprit (or culprits?) in the act of theft. Prior to the movie's opening, this criminal behavior has been ongoing for more than a couple days. How much earlier it began is not revealed in the screenplay.

However, the situation has been present long enough to engender frustration and loosely-supported suspicion in victims, which include both children and adults.

A sixth-grader from Carla Nowak's class becomes a prime suspect. He happens to be of Turkish descent and is by no means one of the cleverest of his peers. At least for a day, Ali has the dubious fortune to be carrying about a significant amount of cash. For some odd, inexplicable reason, two student representatives are interrogated about his presumed crime. Neither is disposed to inform on a fellow student, even if that person's culpable behavior has been witnessed by one or both of them.

Two teachers pry relentlessly on with a Stasi-style probe, pushing forward Carla's classroom roster and asking the pair of class leaders to put fingers on the thief's name when it's read aloud.

Jenny refuses to play along. But Lukas identifies Ali Yilmaz as the troublemaker, an accusation which appears to have no supporting evidence whatsoever. Lukas may merely be jealous of Ali's having so much available pocket money. Or perhaps he harbors resentment against a boy of Turkish ancestry simply because Ali a. is probably a Muslim, and b. might sometimes speak a foreign language.

Carla's restless and uncomfortable during this proceeding. She herself is a native Pole, guilty from time to time of conversing in a language other than German with a second Polish co-worker, Milosz Dudek. She believes less strident and accusatory measures would accomplish more.

Or does she?

When a pair of colleagues approach her to talk about possible grade retention of Ali, they disclose a pessimism that his classroom performance will improve before the end of the school year. One of them admits he hasn't informed Ali's parents about their son's borderline status because no one answers at home when he tries to make a call (probably during school hours, when Ali's parents would almost certainly be elsewhere). The discussion takes a sharp turn into another topic when Mr. Liebenwerda suggests part of the difficulty is that no one might be around to help the boy with homework in the evening, either. In other words, Ali gets into various forms of trouble because of absentee parenting.

Carla isn't buying that notion. Nor is she sold on the idea that her pupil is a

sticky-fingered sneak. So she decides to set a trap for the pilferer herself.

Going into the teachers' lounge, she hangs her jacket on the back of a chair, making sure to place a wallet inside one pocket. Waiting until no one is nearby, the amateur detective sets a laptop video camera to record an ongoing view of that jacket. Then she leaves the area for a few minutes.

Upon returning, Carla opens the laptop and begins reviewing her videotape of what transpired while she was gone. The presence of an approaching staff member interrupts that screening. Still unsure of the camera's content, she moves detection paraphernalia to a woman's bathroom stall, then starts the playback process over. After a few moments it's apparent someone wearing a light-colored blouse with sizable stars has reached into Carla's jacket pocket, then quickly removed a trespassing hand.

Having taken the precaution of counting euros inside her billfold before starting this test and then again on coming back to the lounge, math teacher Carla's assured a number are missing. Aha! The person wearing a starry blue-and-white blouse must be the cagy nicker. Who might that be?

A glance through the large window dividing office from faculty room reveals Mrs. Kuhn, the school's receptionist / secretary, is sporting a top quite similar to that of someone reaching inside Carla's jacket on the videotape. Without bothering to check that no other women at their school is dressed in a similar top, flushed entrapper walks into Mrs. Kuhn's domain and tells her about what just transpired in the next room. Her listener chooses not to claim additional insight into that event. This forces Carla to drop a strong hint she holds the secretary herself responsible.

Mrs. Kuhn at first attempts to laugh off such an inference, then becomes angrily defensive as she realizes the person confronting her is totally serious. She orders the insinuator out of the office.

What to do next?

Carla reluctantly carries the laptop to Dr. Böhm's office and shows her what it has recorded. Dr. Böhm instantly sides with Carla's suspicion and demands her secretary come at once to watch and to explain, if she can, what was happening on the video. The suspect arrives and protests her innocence, asking if anyone has checked to see if other people in the building are wearing that same kind of blouse. Dr. Böhm peremptorily counters with a claim half of school personnel are men and the other half are all in classrooms with students.

This is blatant oversimplification. The school nurse, any daytime shift janitress, or even a female deliverer of mail, could be moving through hallways or entering the adjacent lounge / office areas even as the school principal is speaking. Mrs. Kuhn's protest is by no means without merit.

Enraged both by Dr. Böhm's statement that this has now become a legal matter for police involvement and her follow-up declaration the secretary is now suspended until further investigation takes place, the accused woman departs, taking along her son, Karla's best math student.

Oskar Kuhn can see and hear how distraught his mother is as she drags him unwillingly along the sidewalk leading from school. The boy has observed a failed attempt by his math teacher to dash outside and mollify Mrs. Kuhn. He's also heard enough from raised voices and flustered faces to know an argument preceded Mom's exit from her workplace and that somehow Karla is involved in it.

Every attempt at reconciliation leads nowhere, in spite of Karla's gifting Oskar with a Rubik's Cube. Her prize student becomes increasingly estranged and hostile. He chooses not to believe his parent is a criminal. Understandably so, considering that person is the only adult caretaker he has at home.

Since Karla refuses to publicly apologize for claiming Mom is an underhanded money snatcher, Oskar decides to retaliate by capitalizing on the equally unlawful action of Karla in videotaping individuals without their prior consent. He spreads word of this to peers, who then fabricate their own snare by turning a pre-arranged interview for the school's newspaper into a trial proceedings directed against their instructress. As news of the school secretary's sacking leaks out via Oskar to other middle schoolers, their parents gradually learn about what has occurred. They start rumor-mongering. Then what was supposed to be merely an open meeting to introduce a new staff member becomes instead a battle between Mrs. Kuhn – who of course is within her rights to attend, being parent to one of Karla's students – and Karla. At that gathering, latecomer Kuhn wastes no time informing all present about the new teacher's videotaping activity. Now the accuser is recast as the accused, outsider adults are confused, and it's clearly circle the wagons time for Karla and her associates.

Because of parental gossip and questioning tension inside and outside building grounds increases. The school has become profoundly dysfunctional. Sixth grade students are in open revolt against their teachers.

Meanwhile, Oskar turns to violence and theft in order to intimidate his mother's accuser and destroy what seems core evidence against her. Willfully damaging public school property, this embittered youth invades a previously sacrosanct teachers' lounge. He seizes the bone of contention found there and, after striking the owner in her face with it, races outside with Karla in hot pursuit. Though she finally wears him out, the two of them have already arrived at a bridge. Oskar once more asks for a formal public retraction and apology. Karla again refuses.

Enough is enough. Oskar tosses the laptop into a stream below.

Goodbye, evidence.

Administration and teachers retaliate by suspending him for violent behavior. Oskar's response is to come to class anyway. He takes his customary seat and eventually produces the Rubik's Cube Karla had presented him earlier. Wordlessly, the math whiz shows her he's found the solution to it.

See? I'm just as clever as you.

Yet the drama doesn't end there. So you must watch the final triumphant scene yourself to learn what happens next. Don't expect any pat conclusion. It doesn't exist.

This is no Hollywood film with heroes, villains and a single overriding plot problem. Examine it carefully and you will see a number of thieves in operation, including a teacher taking money out of a piggy bank located in the faculty room (confiscated from one of the pupils, perhaps?), Luise sitting on a cigarette lighter which cannot be her true personal possession and Oskar swiping Karla's computer after first crossing into exclusive adult territory where no juvenile is supposed to set foot.

In addition, two other individuals are labelled as filchers, their reputations ruined and relationships with peers poisoned.

Middle schoolers taking upon themselves to judge guilt and innocence of people through a vigorously one-sided school newspaper article only make the same error of prejudgment as adults around them.

Ambiguity stays intact from start to finish. Who is nicking pencils from stockrooms? Adult or child? Why? All unresolved questions, kept so

intentionally by a labyrinthine screenplay devoid of any center. Johannes Duncker and Ilker Çatak must be commended for absolute refusal to answer questions. Solutions are less important than discussions generated by their continual ambiguity.

Though Marvin Miller's score ratchets up tension to great heights of intensity, his work is superseded by a final dollop of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" music. Just what is that doing in the picture's final moments? Is it referring to brotherhood? Victory? Or ironically just the opposite?

Gesa Jäger's editing is incisive and conjunctive, often moving quickly from face to face, room to room, window to window, connecting suggestively and frequently misinforming. What we don't see is more important than what we do. That's a theme followed loyally throughout Jäger's work. It's probably quite significant windows in this movie never really make anything clearer. They only disclose the obvious. Not what lurks beneath.

The cinematography of Judith Kaufman puts a premium on expanding the sense of space perceived, doing so by roving down corridors and through rows of desks in a way that makes the small interior world of a middle school seem as big as the outside community. Tight shots intensify taut and telling personal interviews. Wider angles appear whenever the director wishes to insinuate larger involvement of outside agencies, including viewers themselves. Each unfolding action requires observers to make a judgement, taking a side either with young or with old.

Sixth-graders obviously here reflect biases of adults in their portion of the world. They're not naïve, blank slates when they reach middle-school age. Already damaged by repetitive exposures to prejudice and injustice, they are capable of inflicting considerable harm on others, both children and adults, by what they say and do without adequate thought beforehand.

Zazie Knepper's production design results in a mostly credible modern German school complete with huge and tempting windows, wide hallways, plenty of light, and cube compartments all over the place. Tables have replaced desks, cell phones are a given, wearing of jackets and coats inside permissible. Metal detectors are strangely absent. An oversight of set dressers? Emphasis is on orderly rectilinear lines, particularly horizontals.

Ilker's direction of thespians is at all moments adroit. Particularly his handling of juvenile cast members who, without exception, had no prior film

experience. Standouts are Leonard Stettinisch as emotionally divided Oskar, Oskar Zickur as a saucebox class representative unable to completely mask racist attitudes, Elsa Krieger as a seemingly docile and diligent scholar who suddenly turns aggressive inquisitor as lead interviewer for the school newspaper, and Vincent Stachowiak as insecure cheater Tom. Among adult actors, Leonie Benesch's increasingly unnerved and backtracking Carla Nowak, Rafael Stachowiak (Vincent's dad?) portraying a loyal second-in-command to chief executive Dr. Böhm, Eva Löbau as alternately smug and vengeful Friederike Kuhn, Kathrin Wehlisch as thoughtfully mediating guidance counselor Lore Semnik, Tim Porath in a hilarious turn as Tom's amiably unconcerned dad, Michael Klammer as teacher Thomas Liebenwerda, bane of perceived lower-class students, and Anne-Kathrin Gummich as stiffly pompous administrator Dr. Bettina Böhm, fighting tooth and nail to maintain control over an ever-increasingly rebellious body of pre-teen challengers.

According to Wikipedia, it was a visit by scripters to an Istanbul school, where two boys in one classroom were creating chaos with sustained thievery, coupled with reporting from Johannes Duncker's teacher sister that prodded Ilker and Johannes to initiate this film project. Duncker's sibling told him a public school secretary in Cologne was helping herself to property belonging to others. She must have been the model for Friederike Kuhn's character.

Das Lehrerzimmer has won a large number of awards, besides the one mentioned at the start of this review. Among the rest was the 2024 Lux European Audience Film Award given to Europe's most popular film. At the German Film Awards, *Das Lehrerzimmer* was recognized for Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Editing, Best Lead Actress and Best Fiction Film.

Das Lehrerzimmer includes some extremely vulgar language as well as psychologically distressing scenes and outbursts of delicately-handled, though shocking, violence. For these reasons it is appropriate only for adults and teens ages sixteen and older.

This is a must-see film for viewers old enough to follow its intricate plot and capable of witnessing several seconds of intense verbal and physical violence. It is most highly recommended by this reviewer for such audiences and will lead to prolonged and probing discussions, if not ultimate enlightenment.