

# THE READER

**A Weinstein Company presentation**

**A Mirage Enterprises, Neunte Babelsberg Film GmbH Production**

**Produced by Anthony Minghella & Sydney Pollack. Screenplay by David Hare**

**A film review by Franco P. Visser**

In June this year an armed elderly man, who is thought to have had links to white supremacist organisations, walked into the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. and opened fire, killing one security guard that was on duty that day. He too was shot and killed in the return fire, leaving a lot of questions unanswered. In the days following this incident it was uncovered that this individual claimed that the World War II extermination of 6 million Jewish people by the then German Nazi Party was fabricated and that, still today, Jewish people pose a threat to society at large. Very often we are reminded by acts such as the incident in June of the atrocities of the 1930's and 1940's. The Hollywood entertainment industry regularly produces films with the Jewish Holocaust either as its main theme, or as a theme woven somewhere into a story plot. The discriminatory nature of mankind (which perpetually manifests itself) serves to warn us that events such as Holocaust should not be forgotten.

The film *The Reader*, based on the book "Der Vorleser" by Bernhard Schlink, is the latest in the line of stunningly produced films that takes the viewer on an emotional journey through some of the events that took place in the 1930's and 40's. Set in both 1995 and the 1950's post-war Germany, this film tells the story of a young 15 year-old boy's first contact with love, both on an emotional and physical level. It also tells of the consequences of young love entered into without forethought and logic. Michael Berg (played by Ralph Fiennes), a single parent and very successful attorney, has had a string of love affairs, most of which were fleeting and short-lived. The adult Michael is confronted by events that take him back to his childhood years in Berlin. As a teenager he was assisted one rainy day by an unknown adult woman, Hanna Schmitz (played by Kate Winslet) after becoming ill on the tram that he took going home. Michael got off the tram and started vomiting, and ended up seeking shelter from the rain in the entrance to an apartment building, the apartment building where Hanna lived and where she found and helped him.

Michael immediately becomes drawn to Hanna after their first encounter, and after an extended period of recovery at home he returns to her apartment building. A love affair ensued between Michael and Hanna, an affair that was both steamy and



unstable at the same time. A twist is added to the story in that Hanna starts asking Michael to read for her either before or after they have intercourse. So it is that Michael starts reading classics like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain), *Doctor Zhivago* (Boris Pasternak), *Emilia Galotti* (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing), *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (D. H. Lawrence) and Homer's *The Odyssey* to Hanna. In total, 17 classic stories are mentioned in the film. Doomed from the beginning, their affair ended, probably in part due to Hanna's past 'ghosts' still haunting her. They part ways and the story now focus on Michael who pursues a law degree as a young student. It is while studying law that Michael and Hanna's paths again cross, in a manner that is both surprising and very emotional.

Michael's law Professor, Professor Rohl (played by Bruno Ganz),

engages his students in very interesting and intellectually challenging debates regarding legal concepts and arguments. He is however not aware of the significant 'legal challenge' that is unfolding in front of his own eyes as Michael struggles to cope and come to terms with the unfolding drama. What does one do when your past is an ever-recurring feature of your life as you get older? This is one of the biggest questions that Michael needs to face as the story unfolds further. In addition, the film forces one to ponder whether love knows any boundaries, or limitations. Can we box love, and the experiences that love and 'being in love' brings to one in such a manner that we can control its outcomes and effects? But more importantly one wonders: What is real love?

It is from one of the classics that Michael reads 'I'm not frightened, I'm not frightened of anything, the more I suffer, the more I love. Danger would only increase my love, would sharpen it, would give it spice. I'd be the only angel you need. You will leave life even more beautiful than you entered it. Heaven will take you back and look at you and say: Only one thing can make a soul complete, and that thing is love...' This is so very true for a young, searching and insecure Michael, but even for every one of us. *The Reader* is a film beautifully executed and brilliantly written. It takes you to 'places', both intellectually and emotionally. This film ought to be on your must-see-films list. Live your life fully with no regret, and love fully!