

'You Have to Survive Even If It Kills You'

(Old Jewish Proverb)

BY AMOS VOGEL

In Vienna in 1939, my girl and I were prevented from sitting on our beloved bench along the Danube because it sported a newly printed sign: DOGS AND JEWS ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SIT HERE. In October 1993, I was honored by the Vienna Ministry of Culture at a glittering City Hall reception. Life is full of surreal moments.

The occasion in 1993 was the excellent "Departure into Uncertainty" symposium and retrospective organized by Vienna's International Film Festival in honor of pre-1945 Austrian film professionals in exile. Forty-five thousand people attended the festival (now ably

directed by Alexander Horwath and Wolfgang Aigner) at four leading Vienna cinemas. There were about 140 films from 26 countries, by the usual non-Viennese suspects: Campion, Egoyan, Cox, Scorsese, Greenaway, Malick, Loach, Wenders, Cronenberg, Godard, de Oliveira, Wiseman, Varda, et al. All this was admirably positioned by a detailed, 416-page, illustrated catalog-book in German/English, with program notes and credits for all films and also some general essays.

But it's the exiles symposium and retrospective—beautifully structured and executed by two young film journalists, Christian Cargnelli and Michael Omasta

—I want to focus on. Surveys of film history have tended to lump Austrian films and film artists in with German cinema, with the result that their specific contributions are customarily overlooked. This is why both the film retrospective and the symposium were so significant. This mournful, late-in-the-day tribute to Austria's enormous cultural and human losses at the hands of its indigenous amateur painter featured a scintillating and ghostly parade of famous old films and old exiles: flickering shadows on the screen as well as in the lecture hall, as these émigrés, ravaged by age and sorrow, returned smilingly or scowlingly to the city of their dreams and nightmares.



DOKTOR MABUSE, DER SPIELER, by Fritz Lang (b. Vienna, 1890)

The retrospective—excellent prints, first-rate projection at the Austrian Film-museum (under the direction of Peter Konlechner)—encompassed a wide spectrum of films, from *Ecstasy*, *Menschen am Sonntag*, *M*, *Mädchen in Uniform*, *Shanghai Express*, *The Wedding March*, and *Pandora's Box* to *Casa-*

blanca (director, Michael Curtiz/Mihály Kertész; music, Max Steiner; eight Austrian actors, three crew members), *The Naked Dawn* and *Detour* (part of an Edgar G. Ulmer miniretrospective), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *From Here to Eternity*, *Professor Mamlock*, *Mil-dred Pierce*, *The Private Life of Henry*

VIII, Bonjour Tristesse, *Curse of the Cat People*, *Fallen Angel*, *The Seventh Cross*—all directed by ex-Austrians. More than ten Austrians appear as actors in that last film, directed by Fred Zinnemann for MGM in 1944. Ironically, the emigrants—prominent actors in their home country—in *The Seventh Cross* and many other U.S. wartime efforts had to play Nazi roles in order to find jobs.*

An outstanding two-volume, 500-page work, *Departure into Uncertainty*, edited by Omasta and Carnelli, accompanied the event. It includes interviews, portraits, analytical essays and memoirs by émigrés and scholars, and, most importantly, an extraordinary lexical listing of about 600 Austrian emigrants, in all areas of film, with complete bio- and filmographies. The project pays tribute not only to von Stroheim, Curtiz, Zinnemann, Lang, von Sternberg, Preminger, Ulmer, de Toth, and Wilder, but also to the legions of craftspeople who have left their mark on the cinema of Hollywood and many other countries, and are in danger of being forgotten.

The human dimension of a group of professionals in a particular field is not usually in the forefront of our considerations. In these two volumes, it becomes painfully clear as we contemplate the mass expulsion of hundreds of people because of race. Significantly, Fred Zinnemann refused to contribute a piece to this work: "the shadows of the past are still too strong"—his parents died in concentration camps—and he senses a resurgence of anti-Semitic and fascist tendencies in his homeland; "I therefore do not wish to go to Austria to be toasted as one of its famous sons."

The symposium, held at Vienna's Theatre Museum in the beautifully baroque Palais Lobkowitz, featured the curator of Astoria's American Museum of the Moving Image, Richard Koszarski (on Curtiz, von Stroheim, and Paul Fejos), the British ex-BFI scholar Kevin Gough-Yates (on the emigration to Great Britain), Philip Kemp (on McCarthy vs. Austrian emigrants), Brigitte Bailer of the Austrian Resistance Archive (on repatriation and reparation), the historian Oksana Bulgakova (on the

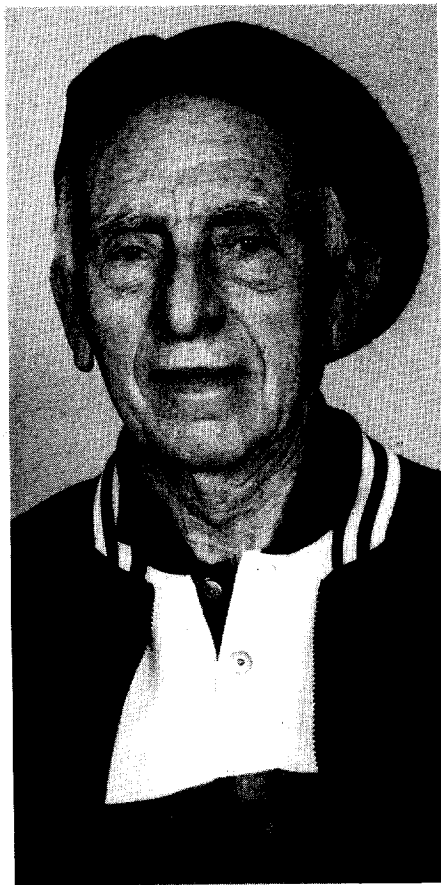
* Other U.S. films with significant contributions by ex-Austrians include *The Hustler* (sets and costumes), *Sunrise* (screenplay, music, sets), *Kiss Me Deadly* (cinematographer Ernest Laszlo), Hitchcock's *Sabotage* (main lead, sets), and *The Hitler Gang* (camera and 16—sixteen—actors).



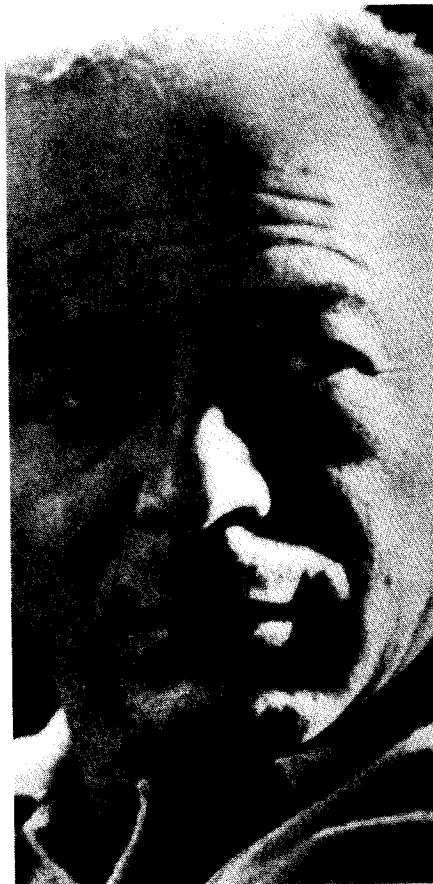
Franz (Francis) Lederer.



Fritz Lang.



John Alton.



Billy Wilder.

influence of émigré filmmakers on Thirties Soviet cinema), and Johann Hüttner (on Max Reinhardt). There were also interviews and an emotional round-table conference of the exiles, attended by a large number of intense young Austrians whose tearful sincerity at times exploded the frame of the event.

The invited émigrés could be viewed as a delegation of true survivors, the youngest in their 60s, the oldest over 90. Resilient, caustic, optimistic, pessimistic, they offered living proof that a collective entity "the émigré" does not exist. This was also shown in their differing attitudes toward Austria past and present.

There was the worldly extrovert with the not-so-hidden hurt, Theodore Bikel: folksinger, stage and screen actor, Academy Award nominee for *The Defiant Ones*. Expansive, by turns serious and humorous, he provided one of the bizarre emotional high points of the event in his impromptu renditions of Russian, Yiddish, and American folk-songs (and Yiddish jokes) at a lowly, famed tavern so genuine in décor, menu, and atmosphere that at any moment it would not have seemed unlikely—especially for those who lived in Vienna "in those days"—to hear a Nazi song.

There was the award-winning cinematographer John Alton, in Hollywood quickly labeled a troublemaking purist, responsible for the definitive noir camerawork on several famous Anthony Mann films, as well as sharp contributions to films by Don Siegel, Allan Dwan, and others; he won his Oscar for the final ballet sequence of Minnelli's *An American in Paris*. There was producer Eric Pleskow, dapper, eternally young ex-president of United Artists, founder of Orion Pictures, under whose aegis ten Oscar-winning films—including *Dances With Wolves*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Annie Hall*, Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus*, and Austrian Billy (originally Billie) Wilder's *The Apartment*—were produced; he felt uncomfortable in Vienna.

And there was one of the legends of film history—Francis (Franz) Lederer, who, at 94, represents our direct link with Louise Brooks in G.W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box*. Under the direction of Max Reinhardt, he starred in 1928 with Elisabeth Bergner in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Berliner Theatre. A year later he played in E.A. Dupont's *Atlantic* in England. 1939 found him in Hollywood's epochal *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*; the Forties brought problems with HUAC. Active in

social and professional causes, he now lives, as the mayor, in Canoga Park, California, among the sequoia trees. Tall, alert, at the top of his mental powers, Lederer seemingly sports a very pale. makeup and reminisces as required.

Those who have seen the amazing Elisabeth Bergner in *Dreaming Lips*,

Nju, and other films would cherish Lederer's confessing to Kevin Gough-Yates that she had a "great effect" on him and used all kinds of acting "tricks." Notable among these was the habit of pausing, during line deliveries, at places that were entirely unnatural—to great theatrical effect. Lederer imitated her

More than one thousand people—mostly of Jewish origin—became émigrés, among them the following:



directors

MICHAEL CURTIZ / ANDRÉ DE TOTH
/ PAUL FEJOS / KARL GRUNE /
HENRY KOSTER / KURT LAND / FRITZ
LANG / GUSTAV MACHATY / RICHARD
OSWALD / G.W. PABST / OTTO
PREMINGER / HERBERT RAPPAPORT /
MAX REINHARDT / LEONTINE SAGAN /
EDGAR G. ULMER / CHARLES VIDOR /
GÜNTHER VON FRITSCH / JOSEF VON
STERNBERG / ERICH VON STROHEIM /
BILLY WILDER / FRED ZINNEMANN

producers

PAUL CZINNER / WILLIAM FOX
/ ALEXANDER KORDA / JOË MAY /
JOSEPH PASTERNAK / ERIC PLESKOW /
ARNOLD PRESSBURGER / SAM SPIEGEL
/ ADOLPH ZUKOR

composers

RUDOLF FRIML / ERNEST GOLD /
EMMERICH KALMAN / RUDOLF
KATSCHER / ERICH WOLFGANG
KORNGOLD / JOSEPH KOSMA /
RUDOLF RAATHAUS / MIKLOS ROSZA
/ HANS J. SALTER / MAX STEINER
/ ROBERT STOLZ

cinematographers

JOHN ALTON / KARL FREUND
/ RUDOLPH MATÉ / FRANZ PLANER
/ WOLFGANG SUSCHITZKY / WEEGEE

art directors & designers

ANTON GROT / HARRY HORNER
/ VINCENT KORDA / ERNO METZNER /
ALEXANDRE TRAUER / JOSEPH URBAN

writers

BELA BALAZS / VICKI BAUM / LAJOS
BIRO / KARL FARKAS / GEORGE
FROESCHEL / ARNOLD HAUSER /
FREDERICK KOHNER / STEFAN LORANT
/ GEORG LUKACS / FRANZ MOLNAR /
EMERIK PRESSBURGER / WALTER
REISCH / FELIX SALTEN
/ GEORGE TABORI / FRIEDRICH
TOBERG / BERTHOLD VIERTEL /
AMOS VOGEL / FRANZ WERFEL

actors

LEON ASKIN / ELISABETH BERGNER /
TURHAN BEY / THEODORE BIKEL /
VANESSA BROWN / HELMUT DANTINE
/ LILI DARVAS / LYA DE PUTTI /
ERNST DEUTSCH / CARL ESMOND /
RUDOLF FOASTER / KURT GERRON /
ALEXANDER GRANACH / PAUL HENREID
/ OSKAR HOMOLKA / FRITZ KORTNER
/ HEDY LAMARR / FRANCIS LEDERER /
LOTTE LENYA / HERBERT LOM / PETER
LORRE / TILLY LOSCH / BELA LUGOSI
/ PAUL LUKAS / PAUL MUNI /
VIVIANE ROMANCE /
FINI RUDIGER-LITTLEJOHN / S.Z. SAKALL
/ MAXIMILIAN SCHELL / JOSEPH
SCHILDKRAUT / LEE STRASBERG /
HELENE THIMIG / ANTON WALBROOK
/ JOHNNY WEISSMULLER /
HANS WENGRAF

actors/opera singers

MARIA JERITA / JARMILA NOVOTNA /
JOSEPH SCHMIDT / WALTER SLEZAK
/ RICHARD TRAUER

agents

PAUL KOHNER / WALTER KOHNER



Overdecoration in Fritz Lang's *M*; Erich von Stroheim's *THE WEDDING MARCH*, with von Stroheim and Fay Wray.

voice perfectly: "She would say, 'Farewell! God knows [pause] when we shall meet [long pause and change of position] again...'" Though quite delicate, Lederer has retained the lineaments and expressive power of his memorable face.

Among the other participants were Turhan Bey (yes, an Austrian!), character actor in B films such as *The Mummy's Tomb* and *Destination Unknown*; stage and screen actor Leon Askin, the most memorable of the three corrupt commissars in Wilder's *One Two Three*; cinematographer Wolfgang Suschitzky, important member of the British documentary film movement (with Paul Rotha); and Curt Siodmak, the well-known sci-fi author (*Donovan's Brain*) and writer of screenplays for his brother, Robert.

A nagging question—not addressed by the symposium—remains. Granted that Austrian cinema has usually been conflated with German cinema and that the number of exiled Austrian film professionals of note is entirely out of

proportion to the small size of the country. Is it, however, possible to discern a specifically Austrian contribution to Hollywood and world cinema, something comparable to the influence of post-WWI German Expressionism?

Several film historians offer provocative evidence that there is—among them Frieda Grafe, one of Germany's foremost film scholars, and Alexander Horwath, the respected Austrian critic and director of the *Viennale*.

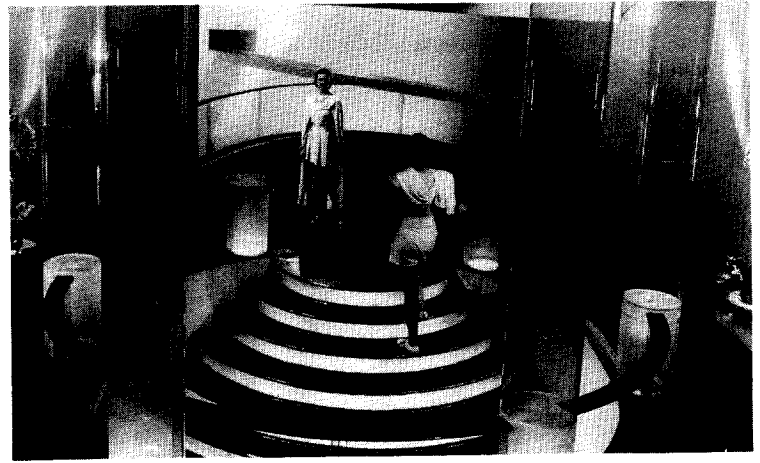
1. To begin with, the sheer size and, particularly, the extraordinary quality of the specifically Austrian contingent among the emigrants (represented by the list of film professionals accompanying this article) speaks for itself.

2. When we discuss German cinema's influence on world film, it needs to be understood that its leading positions were frequently occupied by Austrians.

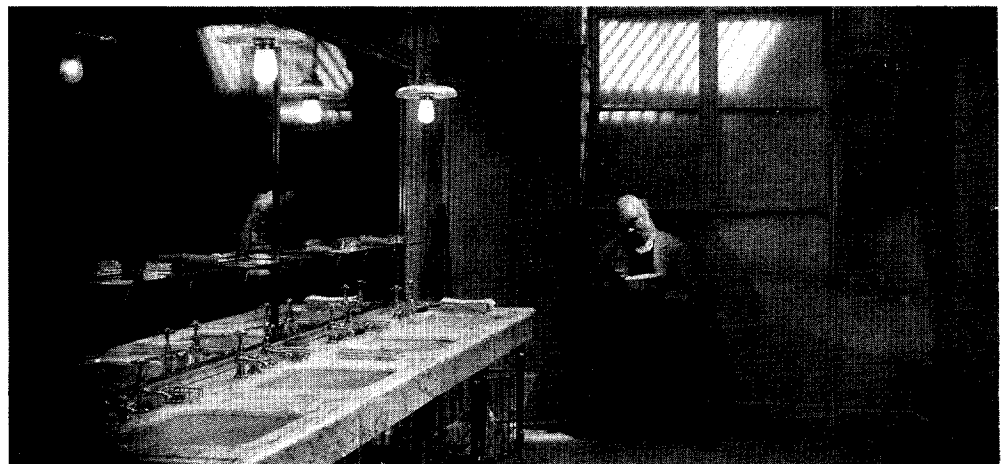
Frieda Grafe, who, as a German, cannot be accused of Austrian chauvinism, correctly observes that since the truncated Austrian Republic (successor to the Austro-Hungarian empire) had neither a large enough market for its pro-

ductions nor enough *nouveaux riches* to supply production money, its film industry was international from the start. It supplied a surprisingly large number of talents to other countries and simultaneously exported also its Viennese élan, its frivolity, love of pleasure, love of art—in short, its richly ornate dreams that tended toward clichés. The direct road, because of the common language, led to Berlin. But, says Grafe in her "Viennese Contributions to a True History of Cinema" in *Departure into Uncertainty*, "Wherever one looks in German film, there is Vienna, or, better, the Viennese connection. If one had to subtract from 'our great German cinema' its Austrian elements, the proud edifice would collapse.

"Without the writer Carl Mayer"—probably the most important figure in the post-WWI German film movement—"Willy Haas, and Berthold Viertel, we would have half a Murnau or even less, not to speak of Karl Freund's liberated [*ungefesselte*] camera. Without Fritz Lang's *mise-en-scène*, we would have to make do with Thea von Harbou's script inventions for *Mabuse*, *Die Nibelungen*,



Alexander Granach in Lang's *HANGMEN ALSO DIE*, with Dennis O'Keefe; *THINGS TO COME*, produced by Alexander Korda, designed by Vincent Korda.



Peter Lorre in Lang's *M*; Emil Jannings in *THE LAST LAUGH*, written by Carl Mayer, shot by Karl Freund.

and *Metropolis*. The turn to the Neue Sachlichkeit [New Objectivity] was led by Pabst, Richard Oswald, Lang's *Spione* and *M*. The Viennese Operetta was the crutch of the young German sound film, for which Billie Wilder and Walter Reisch wrote the screenplays. And as the first Nouvelle Vague raised its head with *Menschen am Sonntag* [*People on Sunday*], it was three Viennese—Ulmer, Wilder, and Zinnemann—who worked together [with Robert Siodmak].”

Horwath therefore proposes that what is usually called the influence of German Expressionism on Hollywood should rather be called “the influence of Central-European culture/aesthetics/styles/mythologies on Hollywood”—that is, the culture of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

And if we talk of the expressionist aesthetics of the true films noirs, Austro-Hungarians were—especially in the establishment of their noir-expressionist atmosphere—in the forefront: the famed cinematographers Alton, Freund, Ernest Laszlo, Rudolph Maté.

In addition, a significant portion of the

non-Austrian emigrants chose the “Old Vienna” type of musical or romantic comedy as their main fictional inspiration; Ernst Lubitsch (a Berliner) and Max Ophüls (from the Saar) are their most prominent representatives. Horwath concludes that either the cultural heritage or the preferred cultural myths of the German-speaking émigrés indeed were Austrian/Austro-Hungarian in origin.

3. From about 1930 to 1937, Hitler's rise and victory led to a reemigration to an Austria erroneously perceived as a haven, though its Austro-fascist government (in power since the 1934 civil war) should have provided the necessary warning. People like Curt Siodmak, Peter Lorre, Paul Fejos, Gustav Machaty, S.Z. Sakall (later Karl of *Casablanca*), and others returned to Vienna during this period.

This period also marked the flowering of the “Wiener Film” (“the Viennese film”), frankly escapist in nature, hence not problematic for the Nazis—the most important period of Austrian pre-WWII feature filmmaking. Willi Forst and three subsequent émigrés, actor Anton Walbrook, writer Walter Reisch, and cine-

matographer Franz Planer, created the famed Austrian film *Maskerade* and other Forst operettas and comedy-dramas; these pointed toward Ophüls in their mise-en-scène (Planer—Frank Planer in Hollywood—subsequently photographed many of Ophüls's films). Machaty directed *Ecstasy*, which brought Hedy Lamarr to Hollywood's attention, and Paul Fejos directed *Sonnenstrahl* (*Sun Ray*). Fejos had already been to Hollywood in late silent days; both he and Machaty would make their way there subsequently.

The “honeymoon” for the returned émigrés ended in 1936 with Austro-fascism's adoption of the anti-Semitic regulations of the German film industry—two years before the Anschluss!

4. The influence of fin-de-siècle Viennese culture on the cinema, as yet not fully explored, is a fertile area for further research. That the “Austrian spirit” came from the multicultural mix of the former Austro-Hungarian empire seems indisputable. (Good examples are Curtiz, Alexander Korda and his brothers, and Paul Czinner.) Grafe talks about the well-known connections between



Von Sternberg's *SHANGHAI EXPRESS*, with Anna May Wong, Marlene Dietrich; Otto Preminger (r) in Billy Wilder's *STALAG 17*.



Max Reinhardt's *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*: Anita Louise.

the writer Artur Schnitzler (*Reigen/La Ronde*), von Stroheim, von Sternberg, and Reinhardt. Von Sternberg, who met Schnitzler in Vienna in 1921, said, "He was the first person to give me artistic courage. Vienna for me was Schnitzler, Schiele, Klimt, and Kokoschka."

For Grafe, the obsession with décor is a central element of the Austrian heritage. Vienna is "the city of decoration par excellence," said the writer Herman Broch, "befitting a feeble-minded nation of vassals that has been trained to enjoy pleasure and curiosity." Reinhardt charged the theater by incorporating pop-culture mechanisms, circus, and filmlike action into the plays and monumental events he staged. Joseph Urban, Austrian architect and designer (inspired by Jugendstil, Wiener Werkstätte, Otto Wagner, and Joseph Hoffmann), worked for Reinhardt as art director and set designer and, from 1920 on, for Hearst's *Cosmopolitan Film* in New York. His use of art direction transformed décor into an active part of scenic impression. In the Twenties he became the mastermind behind Ziegfeld's "Follies," art director of the *Metropolitan Opera*, and of Fox in Hollywood on films by Borzage and Walsh.

Reinhardt's supra-ornamental mise-en-scène, says Grafe, corresponded to the pleasure-craze of the Twenties. The taste for "production values," the delight

in grand display and extravagant décor, thus seems to be one of Vienna's gifts to Hollywood. It was left to von Stroheim to heighten decorative festivity into orgies and excess: "Jewish baroque," Orson Welles named it, with much insight.

To these décor-loving directors must be added Edgar G. Ulmer and Fritz Lang—both of whom derived their fascination for architecture and grand design from their studies of art and design in Vienna (see Ulmer's sense of Art Deco in *The Black Cat*, and Lang's in *Metropolis*). It is equally apparent in von Sternberg's enticingly overstuffed, overly orchestrated images and grand designs, as well as in the arabesques in Ophüls's films. Significantly, none of these directors is a marginal figure; all left their imprints on cinema.

5. The Austrian spirit can also be strongly felt in Hollywood's lush music tracks. In her essay in Volume I, Regina Schlagnitweit concentrates on Austrian-born Max Steiner, Hollywood's most famous composer, who revolutionized the studio system's approach to film scoring.

This most prolific composer—186 scores from 1929 to 1965!—came from a famous showbiz family in Vienna. His grandfather and father owned the stages that showcased the famous operettas and musicals by Strauss et al. His father

owned the largest amusement park in Vienna and the famed Ronacher variety theater (in which appeared John Philip Sousa and W.C. Fields); he also built Vienna's famous Prater Wheel (from which Harry Lime would view his fellow humans as so many moving dots). Thus, spectacle and excess were inextricably part of Steiner's life. From the very beginning, in his music, his large orchestras and rich sound effects, one finds the "decorative" lushness, the easy, utilitarian romanticism that so effortlessly and relentlessly slides into kitsch.

But the Austrian influence goes far beyond him, for all the other important Hollywood film composers of the Thirties and Forties (Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Miklos Rosza, Hans J. Salter, Dimitri Tiomkin, etc.) were impregnated with the romantic music idiom of 19th century Europe. In Old Hollywood soundtracks, the "Viennese School" is always present, never more so than with Steiner.

6. An example of the German-Austrian connection and the interrelation of film, opera, and spectacle is the German filmmaker Werner Herzog. The director of *Aguirre* and *Kaspar Hauser* has moved to Vienna, was last year co-director of the Vienna Film Festival, and is now credited as its collaborator. His startling new feature-length TV documentary *Bells from the Deep*, an unorthodox study of faith and superstition in the new Russia, was premiered at this year's festival. After having created several opera productions, Herzog, at the time of this year's Viennale, was directing the nostalgic variety revue that served to reopen Vienna's famed and splendidly restored Ronacher Theatre—the very one originally owned by Max Steiner's father. In keeping with Austria's tradition of legerdemain and chimera, the star of the show, "The King of the Pickpockets," successfully robbed me during rehearsals—not merely of my wallet and keys, but also of my eyeglasses—without my noticing it. The loss, however, was not real. The Austrian spirit lives on. ☼

Amos Vogel, first director of the New York Film Festival, is author of Film as a Subversive Art and recipient of a 1994 Anthology Film Archives tribute for his pioneering work on behalf of experimental and independent cinema. He expresses his debt and gratitude to Alexander Horwath, Frieda Grafe, Kevin Gough-Yates, Christian Cargnelli, Michael Omasta, and Regina Schlagnitweit for their contributions to this article.