

Germany (Bayerischer Rundfunk, Creado Film, Wiedemann & Berg, arte) 137m Color

Language: German

Director: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Producer: Quirin Berg, Max Wiedemann

Screenplay: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Photography: Hagen Bogdanski

Music: Stéphane Moucha, Gabriel Yared

Cast: Hans-Uwe Bauer, Matthias Brenner, Martina Gedeck, Charly Hübner, Volkmar Kleinert, Sebastian Koch, Ulrich Mühe, Ulrich Tukur, Thomas Thieme

Oscar: Germany (best foreign language film)

DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN (2006) THE LIVES OF OTHERS

By turns both horrifying and darkly humorous, *The Lives of Others*—debut director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's story of the East German government's obsession with tracking the populace's every move—acts as an acid corrective to Wolfgang Becker's cheerily ironic 2003 film, *Goodbye Lenin!*

It's 1984 and "glasnost is nowhere in sight" as crack Stasi hardliner Captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) decides to keep apparently squeaky-clean playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) under surveillance. When a bug planted in his Berlin apartment reveals the writer genuinely believes in the socialist state, Weisler finds himself growing fascinated by the urbane Dreyman's domestic life with his beautiful actress lover Christa-Maria (Martina Gedeck). Things become further complicated when his superior—culture minister Hempf (Thomas Thieme)—fancies Christa-Maria for himself and instructs Wiesler to clear the way for his advances by framing Dreyman. Pushed out of the comfort zone of government-sanctioned spying, the expressionless Wiesler is shunted in directions he is profoundly unfamiliar with.

The callousness of Cold War East Germany is chillingly conveyed, but when events threaten to become overwhelmingly dark, von Donnersmarck reigns back with a dose of black humor. A Kafkaesque spin on Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), this is one of the most important German films of the last ten years. **TE**

Ireland (Bórd Scannán na hÉireann, Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE), Samson Films, Summit Entertainment) 85m Color

Language: English / Czech

Directors: John Carney

Producer: Martina Niland

Screenplay: John Carney

Photography: Tim Fleming

Music: Glen Hansard, Markéta Irglová

Cast: Glen Hansard, Markéta Irglová, Alistair Foley, Geoff Minogue.

Oscar nominations: Glen Hansard, Markéta Irglová (best original song)

ONCE (2006)

Written and directed by John Carney, former bass guitarist for the local band The Frames, *Once* is not strictly a musical, though its melodies — ten ballads of love, loss and longing, written and performed by Frames lead singer Glen Hansard and his collaborator, Markéta Irglová, who also play the leads — carry the movie's love-life better than reams of well-written screenplay could. Tracked by an enchantingly wobbly handheld camera, the Guy and the Girl — he's a moony romantic coasting on unfulfilled dreams, she's resourceful and free-spirited in the way of the chronically displaced — come to their brief encounter trailing incomplete love lives of their own. So there's the pull of opposites, and the attraction of the ethnic Other, but nobody has anybody at hello, or for that matter at goodbye.

Like the memories we have of formative interludes in which a love affair never fully jelled but expanded our vision of what we might do with our lives *Once* feels handmade in the best sense, an impressionistic feast for the senses cobbled together from a warm palette of reds and yellows. All that binds these two novices is a thwarted need to be heard. She's a pianist without a piano; he's a musician without an audience. Neither has a dime to their names, but they find ways to make music together on borrowed premises. In a recording studio rented for one lousy weekend, we see the sexy magic of a temporary community making music together, and it's there that Guy and Girl ready themselves to exchange the gifts that will tip the balance of their futures. Isn't it romantic? **ET**

THE QUEEN (2006)

The heart of Stephen Frears's *The Queen* is the complexity of public performance, about which the film holds varying degrees of antipathy and admiration, never settling on how we should feel about royalty or our elected leaders. The central figure is Queen Elizabeth II (Helen Mirren) upon Lady Diana's death in August 1997, when royalty, and its stiff formality, went at loggerheads with the Internet age. Content to accept Di's death without changing habits and without understanding her popularity, *The Queen* presents Elizabeth walking a tightrope between necessary tradition and what innovation she might affect as queen, along with all the silly pomp and meaningful tradition implied in the job, hers for life.

Written by Peter Morgan, *The Queen* is equally about the ascent of Tony Blair (Michael Sheen), who is as pleasant and attractive as Elizabeth is intimidating and distant. His rise to prominence, partly indebted to the Lady Di crisis, is an example of the political process being connected with passing fads and the undeniable passion of the masses. Not only has Elizabeth been through ten prime ministers, as she's careful to remind him, she'll never have to please an electorate; yet she's trapped in her role as figurehead, which she'll never shirk from or knowingly fail, ergo the crisis of the royal.

A crafty fable about old versus new, Frears lets performance lead our reflections, sympathizing with both Elizabeth and Tony since both are undeniably influenced by the waxing and waning interests of their sovereign people. James Cromwell, as Prince Philip, Alex Jennings as Prince Charles, and Helen McCrory, as Cherie Blair, are also excellent in subtly critiquing class distinctions in the modern age. **GC-Q**

G.B. / France / Italy (BIM Distribuzione, Canal+, France 3 Cinéma, Granada Film Productions, Pathé Pictures International, Pathé Renn Productions, Scott Rudin Productions) 97m Color

Language: English

Director: Stephen Frears

Producer: Andy Harries, Christine Langan

Screenplay: Peter Morgan

Photography: Affonso Beato

Music: Alexandre Desplat

Cast: James Cromwell, Alex Jennings, Helen McCrory, Helen Mirren, Michael Sheen, Sylvia Syms

Oscar: Helen Mirren (best actress)

Oscar nomination: Consolata Boyle (best costume design), Stephen Frears (best director), Alexandre Desplat (best music), Andy Harries, Christine Langan, Tracey Seaward (best picture), Peter Morgan (best screenplay)

