

67th Berlin International Film Festival--Part 2

A film about the legendary guitarist: *Django*

By Bernd Reinhardt
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This is the second of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 9-18, 2017. The first part was posted March 2.

Finally, a feature film about the legendary jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt!

The timelessness of his music makes one too easily forget that it emerged in a very real and troubled world—characterised by an enthusiasm for everything American in the 1920s and 1930s, by socialist aspirations, by the threats of French fascists, by mass strikes—a time when Paris was regarded as a Mecca for American jazz musicians, the period of the German occupation of France, the Resistance and the flood of refugees from the war across Europe.

Django, the debut film of Étienne Comar—who deals relatively loosely with Reinhardt’s biography—focuses on the year 1943, when the Nazis tried unsuccessfully to convince Django to undertake a tour of fascist Germany.

Reinhardt (Reda Kateb, whose father was an Algerian actor) is initially uncertain. He is drawn to the prospect of sold-out concert halls. He is also of the opinion that the war between rival groups of “Gadjos” (non-Gypsies) is none of his business. In the end, artistic considerations lie behind his rejection of the offer. The Nazis, who could not entirely block the spread of jazz in Germany, demand a “clean” jazz from Django, preferably without syncopation, without blues, played only in optimistic major tones and with very brief improvisations; in short, a completely neutered music. This is unacceptable to the artist.

A blonde admirer, Louise de Klerk (Cécile de France), advises him to flee, but the vain musician enjoys his reputation in Paris as the “King of Swing” (following the departure of a number of outstanding

American musicians) and continues to rely on the protection of a jazz-loving Nazi officer. Only when the pressure increases and Manouche [Romani people in France] are sent to “work deployments” in Germany—as the deportations are officially called—does Django flee with his family to the French-Swiss border.

For the many Manouche and Sinti [Romani people of Central Europe] in *Django*, who speak exclusively in their language, Romanes, the film must have been an affair of the heart. Comar (who also co-wrote the screenplay, based on a 2013 novel by Alexis Salatko) dispenses with such banalities as presenting Roma as spontaneous anarchists who instinctively reject bourgeois society, or as representatives of a nature-based, alternative way of life. Roma families playing idyllically in a forest are suddenly confronted with Nazi machine guns. In the next scene we see Django Reinhardt, the acclaimed guitarist, in a magnificent concert hall. This is the tightrope that someone in his position walks.

The illiterate Django laps up the glamorous world of the rich and famous, and imitates Hollywood film star Clark Gable. On the Swiss border, however, the King of Swing becomes a defenseless refugee whose mother (Bimbam Merstein) fights for her son to play for a few francs in a pub in order to feed the family. When Django plays the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise,” the bar-keeper’s face lights up.

Occasionally Django is contemptuous of Gadjos, but the film refrains from condemning his audiences and refrains from clichés about “other” forms of culture. Rather it reveals the lack of perspective of an oppressed minority, which has internalized its suffering as fugitives and outsiders over many generations. On several occasions *Django* makes clear that the French police and military hounded Roma with the same

ruthlessness as the Nazis. But we also witness Roma joining the Resistance.

Django lives in the middle of Paris. He is not indifferent to the opinion of Gadjos who also play in his band. What Django shared with “non-gypsies” of his generation was, above all, an enthusiasm for America and its music. The arrival of jazz in Europe was a major cultural event and something of a symbol of freedom. Already as a 13-year-old banjo player, Reinhardt listened enthusiastically to bands from the US. Unfortunately, the film makes barely any reference to this formative period that contributed to Reinhardt’s original musical path.

The film’s Django exudes a strong attachment to traditional gypsy music (the film features prominently at the start his well-known “gypsy” song “Black Eyes” —albeit in swing style). In fact, the real Django Reinhardt drew inspiration from many sources. He was interested in the music of Bartok and Debussy (the latter inspired many Hollywood composers), he went to the ballet and began to paint. Unlike many European contemporaries, he was able to swing as well as the best American jazz players and (according to legend) could personally replace a whole rhythm section. This is why so many of the US greats lined up to jam with him.

Reinhardt’s music is finely played in the film by the outstanding Stochelo Rosenberg Trio. Kateb plays the guitarist with the “poker face,” who, with bells attached to his ankles, could entice an entire concert hall of the “master race” into dancing to his tune. Even the hardline Nazis, who raise their glasses and quote the German poet Friedrich Rückert for a “free, a German Europe”, succumb to the power of his music and lose control for a short time.

Reinhardt undoubtedly undergoes a development in the film. At the outset he is very naive. On seeing Hitler in 1943 for the first time in a cinema, Django chortles at the “clown” on the screen. At the end of the film, however, Reinhardt’s “Requiem” is performed; a piece he composed for and devoted to all the Roma victims of the Second World War. His tonal language has changed and become more universal.

The score of the “Requiem” has been lost and only fragments remain. Nevertheless, the score based on the fragments composed by the Australian musician and composer Warren Ellis is deeply touching, in particular

during the choral section (sung in Romanes). The notion that Django Reinhardt might have opened up different musical paths is fascinating and, one hopes, may encourage young Manouche and Sinti musicians to go further than the limits imposed by playing exclusively gypsy swing.

Django is to be welcomed for dealing with a neglected chapter of history—the persecution of Roma under the Nazis. At the same time, Comar shows the contradictory nature of his main character who pragmatically tries to survive “between the fronts.” His ignorance of social and political developments and not least his egoism render Reinhardt blind to the impending catastrophe. He is free only in music. In the film, he is able to make it to Switzerland with his family. In reality, Reinhardt’s situation was more desperate. Swiss officials refused him entry due to his status as a “gypsy.”

To be continued

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