



REVANCHE

Autumn
Season
2010

Starring Johannes Krisch, Irina Potapenko, Ursula Strauss and Andreas Lust. Directed by Gotz Spielmann. 121 minutes. In German with English subtitles

Review by Mick LaSalle, San Francisco Chronicle:

Revanche is an extraordinary film, mythic in feeling, about an ex-con who falls in love with a prostitute and how their lives intertwine fatefully with that of a policeman and his wife.

From its first moments, there's no turning away from this movie. Austrian filmmaker Gotz Spielmann, who also wrote the screenplay, directs *Revanche* (the word means revenge) with tremendous self-assurance - a self-assurance that comes from his knowing exactly what he's doing. He knows his characters and understands his story so deeply that every shot not only seems right, but also conveys mood and essential meaning.

This film's special quality is difficult to describe because it's not one commonly found in movies: Watching *Revanche* is like witnessing a seemingly chaotic universe through the eyes of someone who perceives some ultimate logical order. The perception is that of a distant but sympathetic witness, who is incapable of being agitated because he has already unraveled the mystery at the center of things.

Who is this all-knowing, unseen entity whose perspective we're invited to share? You can call it God or Spielmann, it doesn't matter. But partaking of that viewpoint means feeling, at various times during *Revanche*, compassion without worry, sadness without despair, and heartbreak without distress. It means watching two people have sex in the shower, for example, without thinking, "Wow, this scene is hot" but rather "Wow, he's really in love with her."

Always, we're privy to a deeper and more vital understanding, which Spielmann communicates with psychological precision, mainly through the intuitive choice of angles. For example, the shower scene is filmed from about 12 feet outside the translucent shower door, so there's no vicarious sense of getting all wet and jolly with the lovers. No, it's their shower - but it's our understanding of it.

We understand even more when we see them lounging around afterward, half dressed in his crummy apartment. We see his pride and longing, and the limits of her aspiration. We also see her dislocation at being a foreigner who doesn't speak German, and her woundedness and isolation. She's a Ukrainian prostitute who works in a brothel, and he's the functionary who works there, too - cleaning up after the couplings and throwing out guys who get out of line.

It's an inherently painful situation, because neither of them have power. She has no power to escape this life, and he has no power to rescue her, and that impotence is embarrassing. What could be more embarrassing to a man than to be unable to protect his woman from degradation and abuse - especially when he's a good 15 years older than she and should, at 40 years old, have some kind of foothold in the world? Too withdrawn to express his frustration in words, he devises a plan to free them forever, and his one attempt at decisive action sets the story in motion.

Though his screenplay is sparse in dialogue, Spielmann directs his actors to rich performances. As played by Irina Potapenko, the prostitute at first seems dazed, then emerges as more intelligently connected to reality than her lover. As the brothel tough guy, Johannes Krisch is all sternness and hard talk - yet the surface hardness is just weak rebellion against his essential humanity. Later, the policeman and his wife are introduced. Ursula Strauss, as the wife, gives a brilliant portrait of a woman whose practiced glibness is a smoke screen for dark and towering impulses and emotions.

Throughout, Spielmann remains in tight control of his story, creating moments of suspense, shifting dynamics on a dime and presenting us with reversals of expectation that seem, in retrospect, inevitable. For Spielmann, *Revanche* is a substantial international breakthrough.

