



Mann, Erika (1905-1969)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Writer, actress, and intellectual refugee from the Third Reich, Erika Mann was one of the twentieth century's most intriguing nonconformists. She is known for her work in German theater and cinema, anti-fascist cabaret satire, political and literary journalism, and children's books.

Though twice-married, both matches were with cultural celebrities known to be gay, and her affairs with both women and men were well-known in her lifetime. Her most profound intellectual and emotional attachments were with her brother Klaus and, toward the end of her life, her father, Nobel Prize-winning author Thomas Mann.

Erika Julia Hedwig Mann was Thomas Mann's oldest child. Her childhood home in Munich was the center for her father's literary and artistic circle. Intellectually precocious, she started a children's theater in her early teens.

Attracted by Berlin's heady atmosphere of intellectual and social experimentation, she and younger brother Klaus went there in 1922 to pursue their interests in theater. Klaus's play *Anja und Esther* (about a futile lesbian relationship) gained distinction for both of them. Erika's other roles included that of the drama coach (uncredited) in the 1931 lesbian classic movie "Mädchen in Uniform," directed by Leontine Sagan. During this period she also began careers in journalism and children's book publishing.

Her 1926 marriage to actor Gustaf Gründgens (whose later collaboration with the Nazis inspired her brother's 1936 novel *Mephisto*) lasted until 1929. Her relationships with women were infused not only with sexual energy but also with the passion of creative collaboration. Pamela Wedekind was part of the quartet with whom she acted in Berlin. Therese Giehse was co-director of her political cabaret. Betty Knox was a fellow war reporter and "jeep mate" during World War II. From the 1930s on, Mann was also associated with the lesbian journalist and novelist Annemarie Schwarzenbach.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s Mann traveled around the world, often with her brother Klaus, with whom she wrote travel books such as *Rundherum: Ein heiteres Reisebuch* (All the Way Round: A Light-hearted Travel Book, 1929) and *Buch von der Riviera: Was nicht im Baedeker steht* (The Book of the Riviera: Things You Won't Find in Baedeker's, 1931). In photos of the period, she often appears in a man-tailored suit sporting a charismatically boyish grin.

Both Erika and Klaus Mann were outspoken opponents of the National Socialist movement. With Giehse, she founded a satirical cabaret, "Die Pfeffermühletheater" (The Peppermill Theater) in Berlin in 1932. The premiere of the first performances, which she directed, was a great success. However, when the Nazis came to power in 1933, the Pfeffermühle, along with the entire Mann family, went into exile in Switzerland.

"Die Pfeffermühle" continued in Zurich and toured to seven countries. It used fairy tales, parables, and metaphors to exhort opposition to the Nazi threat. This activity prompted the Nazis to revoke Mann's

German citizenship. In need of a passport, she approached novelist Christopher Isherwood with the idea of marrying in order to obtain British citizenship; he demurred, but was able to persuade his friend W.H. Auden to do so instead. Married in 1938, the pair never lived together but maintained a lifelong friendship.

In 1936, Mann moved to New York, where she and Giese continued producing *The Peppermill*. Her work on behalf of European cultural refugees came to the attention of American intellectuals such as Carson McCullers and May Sarton; the latter helped raise money for the group.

Mann wrote several books during this period on the Nazis and the crisis they posed for European civilization, including *School for Barbarians* (1938), *The Lights Go Down* (1940), *Escape to Life* (1939), and *The Other Germany* (1940), the latter two co-authored with Klaus Mann. During the war she returned to Europe as a war correspondent for the BBC and American media, and broke gender barriers by going to the front to interview soldiers, refugees, and high-ranking officers.

After the war, Mann was one of the few women journalists covering the Nuremberg trials who attained access to the defendants. Mann's experience with cabaret irony attuned her senses to the macabre spectacle of unrepentant Nazis treating their trials as a performance. She later commented, "no spookier adventure could be imagined."

Their politics and homosexuality resulted in FBI dossiers on both Klaus and Erika Mann, and stymied her efforts to gain U.S. citizenship during the McCarthy era.

In 1949, Klaus Mann, whose work did not gain recognition until after his death and who became disillusioned with post-war Germany, committed suicide. Only a year apart in age, Klaus and Erika Mann were extraordinarily close and often referred to themselves as twins. His loss was devastating to her. She commemorated him in *Klaus Mann zum Gedächtnis* (In Memory of Klaus Mann, 1949).

Emotionally devastated by her brother's death, and harassed by the McCarthyites, Erika returned to Europe in 1952, settling with her parents in Kilchberg on Lake Zurich. She devoted herself to publishing Klaus's work and to translating her father's lectures. After his death in 1955, she also became responsible for her father's papers, and published a memoir, *The Last Year of Thomas Mann* (1958).

In the final years of her life, Erika Mann remained involved in German cinema and worked on film adaptations of several of her father's novels and stories.

She died in Switzerland in 1969 of a brain tumor.

Many of the songs and graphic designs used in "Die Pfeffermühle" are collected in Keiser-Hayne's study, *Beteiligt euch, es geht um eure Erde: Erika Mann und ihr politisches Kabarett die "Pfeffermühle" 1933-1937* (Participate! It's about Your World: Erika Mann and Her Political Cabaret, "The Peppermill" 1933-1937, 1990). Andrea Weiss's and Wieland Speck's film *Escape to Life* (2000) is part documentary, part dramatization, focusing on the bond between Erika and Klaus Mann.

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