



Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) at his post in *The Lives of Others*

## Secrets and Lies

Telling stories to survive in East Germany

**THE LIVES OF OTHERS** (*Das Leben der Anderen*): Written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Starring Ulrich Mühe, Martina Gedeck, Sebastian Koch, Ulrich Tukur, Thomas Thieme and Hans-Uwe Bauer. Sony Pictures Classics, 2007. R. 137 minutes. ACADEMY AWARD FOR BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM. ★★★★★

The dramatically named Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's debut feature film becomes more affecting with every word one reads about the film. Von Donnersmarck had relatives in East Germany, some of whom were involved in the massive network of informers; the actor who plays Stasi (secret police) captain Gerd Wiesler, Ulrich Mühe, was a theater actor observed by the Stasi. His wife, he discovered years later, was registered as an informer. "When people ask him how he prepared for the role," von Donnersmarck says in the film's production notes, "Ulrich Mühe answers: 'I remembered.'"

To remember feels like an act of bravery and compassion in *The Lives of Others*, a layered, distressing, elegant drama with some of the trappings of a thriller. Set in East Germany in 1984 (a year von Donnersmarck says he chose not for the Orwell reference but because the 33-year-old director remembers it), the story concerns Wiesler, a Stasi officer assigned to observe playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and Dreyman's girlfriend, actress Christa-Marie Sieland (Martina Gedeck). It reaches outward to Wiesler's coworkers and superiors, to Dreyman's writer friends, to plots and suspicions on the part of both the watched artists and the watching police, and where it ends is in a story of change that encompasses wrenching issues of certainty, truth, power and freedom.

Wiesler is a slight but stoic police captain, deeply loyal to the East German government and with a sharp eye for potentially suspicious behavior. When Wiesler's superior, Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur) takes him to a play written by Dreyman and starring

Christa-Marie, something about Dreyman, who watches alone, bothers Wiesler. When Minister Hempf (Thomas Thieme) suggests the same thing and asks that Dreyman be watched, Wiesler gets the job.

After he and his men bug Dreyman's apartment — something they go about with horrifying efficiency — Wiesler sits upstairs in the building's dark, colorless attic, listening, his pale face unconcerned. He is doing his job. He is following the lives of these others, these artists and writers and their possibly dangerous friends. And he is changing, day by day, bit by bit — as is Dreyman. For one man, a death and an emotional revelation lead to a political re-evaluation; for the other, a moment of shattering disillusionment, a piece of music and the taste of loneliness take their toll. What began as a story about two very different men evolves and grows as one becomes what he was suspected of being — and the other becomes what no one would ever think he could be.

The film's title immediately refers to the interest the Stasi took in those they spied on. But it also evokes the lives that Wiesler and Dreyman take on: When Dreyman's phone rings, he picks it up, and in the attic Wiesler shadows him, reaching for the phone that taps into Dreyman's line. Recording Dreyman's life — or some version of it — Wiesler becomes a writer, and a more inventive one as the film continues. Dreyman, for his part, becomes part actor, part activist, piece by piece.

Von Donnersmarck's film is an engrossing, beautifully shot experience, one that somehow turns the dingy grays and browns of 1980s East Germany into a rich yet disquieting palette. It is a story that believes in hope without resorting to sentimentality. In *The Lives of Others*, politics and art merge, change, separate and combine again: Even when it seems the state has taken every fragment of individual freedom, there is still power in the pen. **EW**

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