



# Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 6 December 2019

## Balloon

(Ballon)

**Director:** Michael Herbig  
**Screenplay:** Kit Hopkins, Thilo Röscheisen  
**Starring:** Friedrich Mücke, Karoline Schuch, David Kross  
**Year:** 2018



*This review by Peter Bradshaw first appeared in The Guardian in October 2018*

One of the most spectacular escapes from communist East Germany, in which two families sailed over the heavily fortified border in a homemade balloon, has been recreated as a thriller for the cinema.

Ballon, by German director Michael Herbig, tells the true story of the Strelzyks and the Wetzels, who built their balloon in a cellar in Thuringia, a state in the German Democratic Republic, before flying across the border into Bavaria one chilly night in September 1979.

"A cloth sack, put some hot air in it, and up we go," said Günter Wetzel, now 63, describing his original idea in an interview to mark the film's release. He had been inspired by a magazine article about the international annual ballooners' convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "While I'm happy now that we took that decision, if I had the knowledge I have now I wouldn't do it, because it was so dangerous, but I didn't recognise that then," he said.

From 1961 to 1988, 75,000 East Germans were jailed for trying to escape to the west, while more than 800 men, women and children lost their lives at the border and were branded traitors by the GDR regime. Anyone trying to cross was met with barbed wire, landmines and spring-guns rigged to shoot if stumbled on. Anyone, that is, trying to do it on foot.

For Wetzel, a bricklayer, the alternative was to work with his friend and colleague Peter Strelzyk, an electrician, and their wives Petra and Doris, to secretly build a balloon from scratch. They took about 18 months, sewing together 1,000 square metres of cloth and listening closely to weather reports from West German radio to gauge the right time to carry out their plan – which required a strong northerly wind. They would build three balloons and make two failed attempts before, finally, the two families, including four children, aged two to 15, landed safely in Bavaria in the early hours of 16 September. It was the first ever escape of its kind.

"For me the excitement of this project was to try to adapt the true circumstances of this audacious story as closely as possible for a modern-day public," said Herbig, who looked at the 2,000 pages of secret files gathered on the families by East Germany's secret police, the Stasi.

Disney previously bought the rights to the story from both families and turned it into the 1982 film *Night Crossing*. However, both families were unhappy with the final film and welcomed Herbig's desire to, as he put it, "make a German film for an international audience".

The reaction of critics has been mixed, with some hailing it as suspenseful but others saying it is out of touch with current

affairs. The release has coincided with the 28th anniversary of reunification and renewed soul-searching about German identity.

"This is a difficult time for sentimental balloonist films," wrote Moritz von Uslar in the weekly *Die Zeit*.

Election successes by the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany in eastern states, and the recent far-right demonstrations in the eastern city of Chemnitz following the fatal attack on a German-Cuban by migrants, have prompted many to raise questions about what might have gone wrong with German reunification.

"In the year 2018, when many people are bickering over freedom, democracy and fractious GDR biographies, the cold war in which the balloon escape takes place seems very distant," von Uslar wrote. "The land of desire, West Germany, for which thousands of refugees risked their lives between 1961 and 1989 no longer exists."

Writing recently in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Richard Schröder, a former Social Democrat politician from eastern Germany, said: "The East Germans have been humiliated by German unity and this feeling of slight is now turning into anger."

Despite the scepticism of critics, German interest in the film has been huge, with tourists reportedly flocking to the village of Pößneck in Thuringia to find the house where the balloon was built, and visiting the Berlin museum where the passenger gondola – made of sheet metal and washing-line – is displayed.

The balloon itself – a colourful array of stripes because it was created from small amounts of many different pieces of fabrics bought at shops across the east – was painstakingly reconstructed for the film. But the real version has recently been repaired and is due to go on public display in a Bavarian museum next spring.

Günter Wetzel, whose website dedicated to the escape includes detailed instructions on how to make a hot air balloon, said he believed it was wrong to confine the family's story to history. "After years in which I tried to suppress this time, I now get the impression that there is a great deal of interest in the GDR," he said.

"Regardless of how one experienced this time or sees it in retrospect, we shouldn't just let everything fade away, because these 40 years are a very considerable part of our past and Germany's history."