

## Choice Cuts

Book: "What To Do In Case Of Fire?"  
(Was Tun, Wenn's Brennt?)  
Director: Gregor Schnitzler  
By Randy McDonald

Think of "What To Do In Case Of Fire?" as an early-21st century German post-anarchist version of "Ocean's Eleven". Hold that thought.

West Berlin in the 1980s was a city-state that existed in a peculiar limbo. The Cold War remained visible in West Berlin, long after Europeans on both sides of the Iron Curtain had become accustomed to not seeing their relatives in Hannover or vacationing in Provence.

West Berlin existed as an artificial island, sealed off from the eastern half of the city and its East German hinterland, for all intents and purposes a colony of West Germany. Normal life – at least, a life as normal as in Frankfurt or Munich – was impossible: The economy depended hugely on West German subsidies (the federal government had to pay businesses to set up shop there) and West Berliners didn't have voting representatives in the Bundestag or any legal status independent of the four-power occupation.

On the plus side, West Berlin accumulated large immigrant communities – not least of which is what is now one of the largest communities of Turks anywhere in the world – and because West Berliners were free from the draft, youth from across the Federal Republic flocked to the erstwhile German capital.

In Weimar times, Berlin was famous for its uninhibited lifestyle and its political radicalism; after the revolutionary energies that were instituted in '68, West Berlin's youth took up this tradition again. Neither capitalist consumerism nor communist rectitude appealed to the city's youth: Why would it, since they felt equally repelled by the two ideologies which had managed to partition between themselves?

Anarchism was their ideology of choice; punk was their soundtrack. The housing issue was key to this youth movement, since the abandonment of much of the city after the devastation wrought by the Second World War's final battle in Berlin left rows upon rows of old apartment buildings simply sitting, dilapidated. When their legal owners tried to tear these buildings down, West Berlin's anarchists began squatting in these buildings, as a sign of their renunciation of the principle of private property and their desire to build, in these buildings, an alternative society. Naturally, whenever the police was sent in to kick the squatters out, the anarchists fought back.

"What To Do In Case Of Fire?" begins with a giddy, quick-cut, and fast-paced depiction of one of these fights, in 1987 as six friends – Tim (Til Schweiger), the blonde, Teutonic leader, Hotte (Martin Feifel), Maik (Sebastian Blomberg), Terror (Matthias Matschke), Nele (Nadja Uhl) and Flo (Doris Schretzmayer) – fight the police, and then film themselves (as Group 36) making a bomb and throwing it into an

abandoned mansion in the Grünewald neighbourhood.

This opening scene may be the best part of the movie; not that this reflects at all badly on the rest of the movie, mind, since it's here that we see the energetic confrontationalism, the camaraderie, the downright cheekiness – all of the characteristics that made the six friends such a cohesive unit, an Arthurian ideal of a circle of friends united by a shared passion.

Things fall apart, of course. The day after the street fighting and the bomb-making were filmed, Hotte loses his legs to a police water cannon, and the group dissolves. As Berlin is reunified and the hothouse conditions that nurtured West Berlin punk fade, the other characters move on: Maik is now a high-power provocative ad executive, Terror has become a bland prosecutor, Nele is a happy single mother of two and Flo wears white fur, travels the world, and is about to marry. Tim still lives with Hotte in the same run-down apartment building on Kreuzberg's Machnow Street, trying to keep up the faith by themselves, but nothing – whether spray-painting police vans, protesting as yet another shiny corporate headquarters is opened, or helping like-minded anarchists loot a glitzy department store – is as it was. Group 36 has died.

And then, in 2002, long after everyone forgot about that bomb, and that Grünewald mansion, and moved on with their lives, the bomb goes off. The subsequent police raids on known anarchists hits Machnow Street, where for 15 years Tim and Hotte kept that film. Group 36 is reunited, as the six members find that now as never before their existence is threatened by the system. They know that before long the authorities will identify when the bomb was made and, when they see the film, that they will know who made it; they know that they have to do something. And, almost despite themselves, they decide that the only way to save themselves is to break into the fortress that is Berlin police headquarters and get the film back.

"What To Do In Case Of Fire?" is definitely set in Berlin more than a decade after the jubilation of November 1989 when everything seemed possible. Since reunification, Berlin has gone through an interesting phase. It has become the capital of a united Germany without any major war or threat of war; it has become a major corporate centre, attracting both the well-to-do and the enterprising poor from across a united Europe and beyond. (Tim and Hotte's landlord, Bülent, is a prosperous Turkish businessman, and their first reaction after the film is taken is to flee to Poland.)

At the same time, reunification has failed to erase the past half-century of division and poverty: Machnow Street remains a run-down neighbourhood, neglected and covered by anarchic graffiti almost as relevant to modern post-communist Europe as the cave paintings on the walls of Lascaux. There is wealth, there is glamour, there is high technology, and yet underneath it all there is a strong yearning for something more, some direction: A some sort of cause, a sense of community,

something to give people's lives direction. Group 36, back in 1987, was united by a shared commitment to a utopian anarchism, a belief that society could be changed radically; Group 36 in 2002 is united only by a desire to save themselves from past mistakes and a yearning for a youthful intimacy that everyone has lost, to the inroads of the modern world and the decline of their old world.

The film does have its problems: It can be a bit too sentimental (are there really that many mutable gruff old police inspectors?), the ending struck me as a bit saccharine, and, as with "Ocean's Eleven", the idea that people could try to pick up their lives together years after they went their separate ways strikes me as almost absurdly hopeful. For all its faults, though, "What To Do In Case Of Fire?" is definitely one of the best films I've seen in a long while. You should see it too.

Film: **Chicago**  
By Brodie MacRAE

Chicago, based on the 1975 Broadway musical, opened in theatres at the end of last year (and arrived in Charlottetown three weeks ago). Historically, the musical version dwelt in the shadow of A Chorus Line, which opened around the same time, until the Broadway revival of Chicago in 1997. It then won 6 Tonys, including Best Direction of a musical, Best Revival of a musical and Best Choreography. Now Chicago the film has won three Golden Globes and leads the way in Oscar nominations, 13 in total, including Best Picture and Best Actress (Renee Zellweger).

The plot involves murder, sex, jazz, prison, – everything a good musical needs. Roxie Hart (Renee Zellweger) murders her lover a month after famous jazz singer Velma Kelly (Catherine Zeta-Jones) is jailed for murdering her husband and

sister. They end up in the same cell block and hire hot-shot lawyer Billy Flynn (Richard Gere) to represent them. He is a master of sensationalism and uses the press to garner public sympathy, which aids tremendously in their eventual release (and don't accuse me of spoiling it, of course you knew they would be set free).

It isn't the plot that makes you shell out ten dollars, it's the music (and, to a lesser degree, the dancing -- of course, were this the live Broadway show, the dancing would be right up there with the music, but this is Hollywood with modern Hollywood actors and frankly, no one is going to accuse Richard Gere of being the next Gene Kelly, no sir-- but I digress.). The music is upbeat, catchy, and for the most part, very well sung (again, Richard Gere will never be Gene Kelly). Several of the numbers qualify as showstoppers, including "All that Jazz", "Cell Block Tango" and "When You're Good to Mama," (Queen Latifah's performance of this number is alone worth the price of admission).

At first glance, it looks like there is a lot of fantastic, complex dancing. Upon reflection, however, you realise that there was a lot of simple dancing edited together in complex ways. The editors did a lot more dancing than the actors. All of the camera work was smooth and even a bit exciting, easily disguising some of the actors' dancing inexperience. This doesn't apply to everyone; the strongest dancer in the cast was Catherine Zeta-Jones (who, I should add, has musical theatre experience).

The roles were well-cast and the acting was superb. Zeta-Jones fit her role like a glove, Zellweger was tragically naive as Roxie and Gere's portrayal of Flynn was dynamic and made up quite well for his mediocre singing. I couldn't have imagined someone playing Big Mama better than Queen Latifah, she was great in every way.

I went into this movie knowing

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