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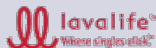
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SCREENING ROOM

Another kind of Berlin wall

'Berlin Is in Germany,' which focuses on German reunification, screens at the Goethe-Institut.

By Kevin Crust, Times Staff Writer

The ongoing effects of the reunification of Germany are underlined with gentleness and heart in director Hannes Stöhr's wry **"Berlin Is in Germany,"** the second film in the Goethe-Institut's Blockbuster series.

As in the recent "Good Bye, Lenin!," the filmmakers use a Rip Van Winkle device — here, an East German man released from prison after 11 years — to showcase the drastic changes experienced by those on the former Soviet bloc side of the Berlin Wall.

Jörg Schüttauf stars as Martin Schulz, an engine fitter sent to jail for manslaughter in July 1989. When he is released, Martin is surprised to see a bustling Berlin on the rise, full of scaffolding and building sites. Even the automated ticketing system in the subway puzzles him.

Martin's main goal, apart from easing himself back into society, is to reconcile with his wife and 11-year-old son, who doesn't know him. Manuela (Julia Jäger) now lives with another man, Wolfgang (Robert Lohr), who is none too keen to let Martin back into their lives.

Many of Martin's pals from before and men he met while in jail are also having difficulty making their way in the new Germany, and Martin soon finds himself entangled in events that threaten his survival.

Stöhr makes a fine character study of the laconic Martin as he struggles to adjust to his new life. The film is full of astutely observed subtle humor and social criticism.

Cinema Italian Style

Another European film that takes a dry look at contemporary social issues is **"Caterina va in città,"** Paolo Virzi's coming-of-age story, part of the American Cinematheque's "Cinema Italian Style: New Films From Italy."

Caterina, warmly played by Alice Teghil, is a teenager who moves with her neurotic teacher father (Sergio Castellitto) and long-suffering mother from the provinces to Rome.

There, Caterina becomes the centerpiece in a tug of war between two clashing factions at her school — the avant-garde revolutionaries who parrot their parents' anti-globalization rants and the rich, preppy kids of the politically conservative.

Virzi clearly places Caterina's family, with her ambitious father (he's written a novel), in the middle of the two social classes but is ultimately more interested in mining light humor from the contrasting proclivities than making a political statement of his own.

Nonetheless, the film is endearing, especially for young Teghil, who brings a pleasantly understated quality to her role as a teen in turmoil.

Dances With Films

A highlight of the seventh Dances With Films festival is **"Sinkhole,"** a rural drama by writer-director Paul Schattel set in a bleak corner of the South. Schattel avoids the usual gothic clichés in depicting a man's downward slide into a previously undetected world of corruption.

Things are already bad for Jason Griffin (Bryan Marshall) when the film opens. He lost his job as a high school teacher when a female student accused him of having an inappropriate relationship with her — a charge he denies — and he is living in a hovel.

Now he's left driving a bulldozer at a landfill, hanging out with his pothead pal, Poppy (J.R. Hooper), and putting up with derisive comments from the people in the small town. Plus, his ex-wife (Kelly O'Neal) is threatening to move to Ohio with their young daughter

Then things get worse. The body of a young woman turns up at the landfill, and soon Jason is being visited by a mysterious, vaguely threatening man in black making offers that may turn out to be too good to turn down.

Schattel and director of photography Steve Agnew, shooting in 35mm, have created a good-looking, low-budget film with a rusted-out palette that accurately captures the protagonist's state and matches the story's country-noir tone.



New world
 (Courtesy of Goethe-Institut L.A.)

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