

'The Dreamed Ones' ('Die Getraumten'): Film Review

11:12 AM PDT 9/5/2016 by Stephen Dalton

A bohemian rhapsody of doomed romance and post-war guilt. [TWITTER](#)

A tormented love affair between two celebrated writers inspired this intimate literary docudrama, which is set to screen at the Toronto International Film Festival.

A literary love affair rising from the ruins of post-war Europe, the troubled relationship between Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann was born in the shadow of the Holocaust, and arguably never quite escaped it. A Romanian-born Jewish poet, Celan lost both his parents in the Nazi genocide. Bachmann, an Austrian poet and dramatist, was the daughter of a devoted Nazi.

Working with actors for the first time, veteran Austrian documentary maker Ruth Beckermann, herself the daughter of Jewish Holocaust survivors, brings this fatal attraction to life in *The Dreamed Ones*. The dialogue is mostly culled from letters and poems the lovers exchanged over more than 20 years, but lightly dramatized by having two actors speaking the texts aloud in a recording studio. A handsome rising star of Viennese stage and screen, Laurence Jupp reads Celan's words while Anna Plaschg, a severe beauty famous in Austria under her art-rocker alias Soap & Skin, does the same for Bachmann.

Screening in Toronto next week after an award-winning tour of European festivals, *The Dreamed Ones* will chiefly interest literary scholars, Holocaust experts and students of modern European history. The talk-heavy format could almost be a radio play, but Beckermann's film also has a handsome visual dimension and a light crackle of sexual chemistry, largely thanks to its attractive young stars and the sensual, rich, lyrical texts they share. Connoisseurs of doomed romance will savor every angst-heavy line, ideally while wearing all-black clothes and chain-smoking high-tar cigarettes.

First meeting in Vienna in 1947, Celan and Bachmann only had a brief physical affair, but they maintained an obsessive friendship and complex literary rivalry for the rest of their lives. After Celan relocated to Paris and married the French aristocrat Gisele de Lestrangé, Bachmann had a long relationship with the Swiss writer Max Frisch, moving to Zurich and Rome. But both stories ended tragically, with Celan drowning himself in the Seine in April 1970. Addicted to barbiturates, Bachmann died just six months later after a fire in her apartment caused by smoking in bed.

Across two decades, Celan and Bachmann composed around 200 letters to each other, some of which they never even posted. This dense literary archive is the raw material for *The Dreamed Ones*: poetic ruminations on love and language, philosophy and politics, post-war guilt and the lingering specter of anti-Semitism. Behind these lofty themes lie darker personal obsessions like unrequited love and jealousy, depression and madness: "to grasp the truth of

the world one must lose one's grip on reality.”

Beckermann initially intended to shoot *The Dreamed Ones* in different locations across Europe, mirroring the journeys of Celan and Bachmann. In the end, the project became a compact chamber drama filmed almost entirely inside the Funkhaus, a landmark radio station and theater in central Vienna. The emotional heart of the film is almost entirely second-hand, teased out through letters and poems. The actors add a light layer of dramatic topsoil, chatting and flirting over shared cigarettes between recording, but their chief function is to channel the voices of the long-dead lovers.

Beckermann and her cinematographer Johannes Hammel shoot the dialogue scenes in mostly long, intimate, sometimes suffocating close-ups. Rupp reacts with the unflustered ease of a seasoned actor but Plaschg radiates a rarer kind of magnetism, her voice drowsy and imploring, her sulky face quivering with emotion. At one point she even bursts into tears over Bachmann's fate, and it looks authentic. The inclusion of her own somber piano pieces into the background scenes add to the sense of words not just being performed, but deeply felt.

Not quite a documentary, not quite an essay film, *The Dreamed Ones* is an unashamedly esoteric viewing experience. It could have been a dry academic exercise, but fortunately the two stars share enough passion and charisma between them to animate the anguished lives behind the words. A little more of their contemporary back stories would have been welcome, but perhaps that would have diverted Beckermann from her painstaking, quietly absorbing experiment in literary archaeology.

Production: Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion

Cast: Anja Plaschg, Laurence Rupp

Director: Ruth Beckermann

Screenplay: Ruth Beckermann, Ina Hartwig

Cinematographer: Johannes Hammel

Editor: Dieter Pichler

Rated PG, 89 minutes