

István Szabó: Hungary, 1981-1988

MEPHISTO

COLONEL REDL

HANUSSEN

István Szabó; Hungary 1981-88; Second Run; Region-free Blu-ray; 3 discs; Hungarian with English subtitles; Certificate 15; 415 minutes; 1.66:1. Extras: Szabó shorts *Variations on a Theme* (1961), *You* (1963), *Concert* (1963), *City Map* (1977); interview with Szabó; tribute to production designer József Romvári by his granddaughter, filmmaker Sophy Romvári; video essay; trailers; booklet.

REVIEWED BY SOPHIA SATCHELL-BAEZA

It's not hard to see why the myth of Faust has been endlessly adapted. Every era has its glut of people willing to sell their soul to the devil for worldly gain – satanic bribery certainly makes for a rich metaphor in times of moral famine. Hungarian director István Szabó's *Mephisto* (1981) brings the 500-year-old folk legend together with the horrors of 20th-century fascism. Szabó is one in a long line of artists who have seen the fall of Doctor Faustus as a lesson for troubled times; his magisterial adaptation of the 1936 Klaus Mann novel follows an ambitious actor willing to consort with the Nazis to achieve his dreams of stardom. The Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer's bravura performance as Hendrik Höfgen (pictured below) sees him contorting himself – both physically, in grimacing on-stage performances, and of course ethically – to achieve his ambitions at whatever the cost, his heady ascent to fame mirrored in the horrifying rise of the National Socialist party.

Spoken of as Szabó's masterpiece, *Mephisto* is part of an informal 'Mitteleuropa trilogy,' made during the 1980s, a rich period for the director. All three features star Brandauer as men driven to desperate acts by blind careerism and the buffeting winds of history. The follow-up to *Mephisto*, the extraordinary *Colonel Redl* (1985), tells the true story of an officer in the Austro-Hungarian military whose hunger for power sees him climb to the top of the secret police, only to crash back down again when his homosexuality is exposed. *Hanussen* (1988) dramatises another real-life story, this one about a Nazi clairvoyant: after being wounded in war, a soldier sets himself up as a hypnotist and astrologer in the theatres of Berlin, predicting the rise and fall of the Nazi party as his own future is held in the balance. The final, dream-like image of *Mephisto*, showing a man caught in the crossfire of a blinding spotlight, seems to capture the ambiguous outcomes of these three troubled protagonists. What their futures will spell may be easier to guess from the vantage point of today.

Though not always in the subtlest gestures, Szabó's historical triptych plunges into the darkest chapters in Mitteleuropa's history with Isherwoodian elegance and biting critique. I was left swooning at the sets, from gothic theatre stages to brown-walled bars, brought to life by production designer József Romvári – in a delightful disc extra, filmmaker Sophy Romvári pays tribute to Romvári, her grandfather. If the weight of history hangs understandably heavy over the three features, Szabó's newly restored shorts come as something of light relief. *You* (1963) is particularly lovely: suffused with the youthful energy of the New Wave, it follows a young woman – Cecilia Esztergályos, Szabó's gamine then-girlfriend – as she floats through the streets of Budapest, not entirely oblivious to the ogling of passers-by. That Szabó is a major director will surprise no one. But these films bring his talent for telling personal stories against vast historical backdrops into spotlight-sharp relief.

DISCS: These excellent new 4K restorations were supervised and approved by cinematographer Lajos Koltai, who worked on all three feature films. Individual booklets by leading writers and film historians give necessary context to the epic narratives, and were a delight to read.

