



A Gay Pioneer in a Perverse Situation

Pioneering emancipator Magnus Hirschfeld's conflicted personality is portrayed in Rosa von Praunheim's 1999 biopic "The Einstein of Sex"

By KEVIN MOSS

It seems appropriate that the biopic about Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), pioneer of the German homosexual emancipation movement, was made by Rosa von Praunheim, a pioneer of German gay liberation cinema.

Director Rosa von Praunheim was born Holger Mischwitzky in Riga, Latvia, moved to the Praunheim district of Frankfurt and took the name Rosa to remind people of the pink triangle homosexuals wore in concentration camps. Von Praunheim shot the first gay liberation film of the second wave movement: *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Situation in Which He Lives* (1971). He has gone on to make numerous films about homosexuality, older women, AIDS, and transvestism, notably *I Am My Own Woman*, about the East German transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf.

Hirschfeld founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, the first homosexual

The Einstein of Sex

Directed by Rosa von Praunheim, 1999
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emancipation organization in the world, in 1897. He edited the first scientific journal of homosexuality, the *Journal of Sexual Intermediaries*, and established the Institute of Sexual Science in 1919. He even made a cameo appearance in the first positive film about homosexuality, *Different from the Others* (1919).

The Einstein of Sex follows Hirschfeld's life from his childhood, when he is fascinated by animals copulating on the beach, through his university days, when he objects to the accepted pathologization of homosexuals. The suicide of a homosexual army officer he had turned away and news of the Oscar Wilde trials (the second of which resulted in a prison term for the author for being a practicing homosexual) prompt him to write an apology for homosexuality, *Sappho and Socrates*, but this move also alienates his aunt and uncle, who had supported him financially.

Hirschfeld finds a sometimes ally in Adolf Brand, editor of the journal *Der Eigene* (*The Special*), who leads a circle of men and boys who practice nudism and have a cult of male beauty based on Classical models. Hirschfeld finds help and support along the way in his relationships with three significant figures: a young baron who eventually flees to Italy to escape blackmail; Dorchen, a transgender woman who botches her self-performed sex change and becomes Hirschfeld's maid; and Karl Giese, a young disciple who defends Hirschfeld when he is physically attacked. Karl becomes Hirschfeld's first real lover, and he is crushed that he cannot accompany Hirschfeld on his tour to America and the Far East. Instead he remains behind to defend the Institute in an increasingly hostile Germany.

Hirschfeld never returns to Germany, dying abroad after his beloved Institute is sacked by Nazis.

Unlike most of von Praunheim's radical films, this one is a straightforward narrative and historically accurate. (A con-

cise scholarly account of Hirschfeld's life can be found in James Steakley's classic *Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* [Arno Press, 1975]. A more literary description of Hirschfeld's milieu appears in Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and his Kind*. The visit to Berlin that led to Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories* and then *Cabaret* was really prompted by a search for boys. Isherwood even stayed at Hirschfeld's Institute, which must have become a kind of an international intellectual and cultural center for homosexuals).

Von Praunheim shows not only the landmarks in Hirschfeld's professional life, but also the many conflicts he encountered along the way. Private/public: while urging many homosexuals to live their lives openly, Hirschfeld himself was celibate through much of his life so as not to jeopardize his public efforts towards legalization and acceptance of homosexuality. Masculine/feminine: Hirschfeld's theory of homosexuals as a third sex intermediary between man and woman was rejected by Brand and others, who called it "swishy" and "too effeminate."

And finally, Nazi/Jew: Hirschfeld's Jewish background was a potential liability for the movement as German anti-Semitism blossomed. On one hand the movement could be rejected simply because its leader was Jewish; on the other hand attacks on Hirschfeld's Institute by the Nazis could be written off as anti-Semitic rather than anti-homosexual by potential allies. Even outing as a political tactic is raised in the film, as it was in Hirschfeld's actual life: his participation in the Eulenberg scandal (in which a number of aristocrats were "outed") was a political blunder it took years to recover from.

In spite of this serious historical material, von Praunheim's film is not without its queer kitsch value and its sense of humor. The acting, as one might expect from a low-budget film with many personnel debuts, is sometimes less than compelling. The seriousness of occasional documentary footage is leavened by perhaps more scenes than needed of Brand's

band of young nudists frolicking in nature with beach balls or posing in museums among Classical nude statues. Of course this all is historically accurate.

The two camp poles of humor are Hirschfeld's conservative aunt, who covers her eyes when she visits her nephew's office so as not to see his collection of phallic objects, and Dorchen, the ballsy transgender maid, who in one scene demonstrates the use of one of these objects – a pedal-operated moving dildo.

The objects themselves are amusing, especially the giant phallus made from an elephant's tusk and the 18th Century Asian masturbation box Hirschfeld himself is caught using in one scene. But it is Dorchen who in a penultimate scene steals the show: when the Nazi youth ransack the Institute and beat her erstwhile rival Karl, she returns and lets her hair down to give them a classic tongue-lashing that cows even the Nazis into retreat. Hell hath no fury like a transgender maid in the Institute of Sexual Science!

The final scene of the film is the ultimate irony, but again historically accurate: Hirschfeld learned of the destruction of his lifelong dream, the Institute for Sexual Science, from a newsreel he saw in a Paris movie theater. Many readers may not realize that the pictures of Nazi book-burnings shown the world over featured Hirschfeld's library, which was the Nazis' first target. Hirschfeld died shortly thereafter, unable to establish a new Institute in France. His lover Karl committed suicide in 1938. Dorchen's fate is unknown.

Von Praunheim's loving homage to the pioneer of sex research and homosexual emancipation is definitely worth watching, both entertaining and informative. Magnus Hirschfeld should be remembered, and Rosa von Praunheim's film makes him memorable. ▼

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Haynes

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and balance; his job, in part, was to make shocking what – for most people today – is no longer so. For the few dramatic outbursts that occur to resonate, everything else had to be muted. The dialogue – restricted almost entirely to stock movie

lingo – is all about what isn't said. The actors were forced to do a lot with very little, and they all succeed beautifully. Indeed, *Far From Heaven's* performances are as stunning as its cinematography.

Perhaps because of the film's emotional subtlety, at the screening I attended a row of young women behind me were decidedly less impressed than I was. "It was depressing, boring, and noth-

ing happens," they huffed as the closing credits rolled. I guess we all have our own definition of "nothing," though it is true Haynes's films hardly have blockbuster pacing, and – unlike even Sirk – he doesn't promise requisite happy Hollywood endings.

If you missed *Far From Heaven* in the theaters, rent *All That Heaven Allows* and see if it whets your gay sensi-

bility. If it does, *Far From Heaven* is an ideal follow-up meal. If it doesn't, at least *Lord of the Rings* has our own Sir Ian to recommend it. ▼

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