



It was almost a night in Vienna ...

Brigitte Timmermann does justice to a filmic masterpiece with her hotchpotch study, *The Third Man's Vienna*, says Simon Callow

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The Third Man's Vienna
by Brigitte Timmermann
416pp, Shippen Rock, €49

All film schools should be closed down, Michael Winner once remarked, and aspiring directors simply made to watch Carol Reed's *The Third Man* over and over again. One of a handful of films which bear any amount of repetition, it is a cornucopia of delights: Orson Welles's incomparable cameo as Harry Lime, Anton Karas's maddeningly unforgettable zither theme for him (as well as his witty musical commentary throughout the rest of the film), Robert Krasker's dazzling black-and-white cinematography, Graham Greene's typically laconic and mordantly witty fable of crime, deceit and betrayal, Vincent Korda's superb designs. Yet no list of ingredients ever guarantees success: the very same elements could have been assembled to disappointing effect. What is it, finally, that makes a masterpiece in this most collaborative of mediums?

Brigitte Timmermann's thesis is that the city of Vienna is the crucial ingredient, the central metaphor: "a world that had physically and morally fallen apart". Certainly Vienna has taken the film to its heart - though it wasn't so keen when it first appeared - and it plays there three times a week, 52 weeks a year. *Third Man* tours are still popular in the city, and Frau Timmermann is one of the guides, diligently pointing out in which sewer this scene was shot, in which café that. Her book is a receptacle of everything she knows about the film and its background. She is, confessedly, something of a train-spotter, albeit a highly intelligent one: she has degrees in history and English literature, and has been impressively thorough in her research, interviewing many of the surviving participants in the making of the film, and extending her investigations in unexpected directions, furnishing us with in-depth backgrounds to quite minor members of the team, en passant giving detailed analyses of the cold war.

In recounting the making of the film, she covers some familiar ground, but her personal passion invariably gives a new twist to a remarkable history. It was Alexander Korda who had the idea for a film in postwar Vienna; he was keen to reunite Carol Reed and Graham Greene after their success with *The Fallen Idol*. Greene had an opening paragraph of a story about someone attending a funeral and then seeing the dead man apparently walking down the Strand: he was very happy to relocate it to Vienna and went there to do the sort of research on which he thrived - hanging around in bars, striking up unlikely friendships, and possibly, Timmermann suggests, working for the secret service. He got the crucial plot element of the sewers from the British head of liaison in Vienna, other details from local journalists. He and Reed laboured long hours over the screenplay, acting out every part until they finally handed it over to a delighted Korda; Korda took it to the independent American producer David O Selznick, who then did everything he could to turn it into a mainstream American movie, bombarding the team with Benzedrine-fuelled input, starting with the title: "Who the hell," he raged, "is going to see a movie called *The Third Man*?" His attempts to persuade them to call it *A Night in Vienna* mercifully failed, but he managed to change the male leads into Americans, which was probably all to the good. Joseph Cotten was in Selznick's stable, but Orson Welles was Carol Reed's idea, to which he stubbornly stuck despite Selznick commissioning a Gallup poll which proved that 90% of the American public thought he was box-office poison. Selznick favoured Robert Mitchum, until Mitchum was arrested for possession of marijuana, whereupon Welles got the part that - much to his irritation, since he neither wrote nor directed the movie - made him an icon.

Filming was complicated by Welles's refusal to let them have his services for more than a week; in the end several doubles were responsible for a large proportion of his 10 minutes on film. The famous scene on the Great Wheel in the Prater was shot in Shepperton: Welles was extremely nervous, needing 32 takes to get it right. His notorious and, apparently impromptu, interpolation of the lines about the cuckoo clock being the sole

achievement of 400 years of peace in Switzerland was an act of defiance, Welles signalling to Reed that he didn't have absolute control. Shooting otherwise proceeded satisfactorily (apart from Trevor Howard going on a binge in his character's uniform and nearly being court-martialled). Throughout Reed remained infinitely patient, calmly insisting that the film should not have a happy ending despite opposition from Selznick, Korda and even Greene; the bleak last scene, improvised on the spur of the moment, is one of the greatest on film.

The Third Man was a huge success on its European release, whereupon Selznick cut 11 minutes from it for the US version, softening its edge, removing irony wherever possible, altering the rhythm, banishing the sense of mystery, making Holly Martins a confident worldly globe-trotter instead of the diffident fall-guy Greene had written. He then claimed the film as his personal triumph. "I hope I die after Selznick," Korda dryly remarked, "because I would hate the thought of him sneaking out to the graveyard at night and scratching my name off my tombstone."

The book absolutely comes into its own with descriptions of the remarkable Austrian and German actors in the film, revealing what life had been like for them under Hitler, attesting to the striking depth of human experience in their performances. The great actor Ernst Deutsch, who plays the Baron in the film, was driven out of Austria in 1938 while playing the part of Colenso Ridgeon in Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma*, went to America where he pursued an active career, then returned to Vienna in 1947, to resume playing Ridgeon. Erich Ponto (Dr Winkel) stayed throughout the war, avoiding any contact with the regime, quietly running the Dresden State Theatre and helping to rebuild it after the terrible bombing of 1945. Paul Hörbiger, the shifty porter, a star of the musical and dramatic theatre, so provoked the Nazis that he was sentenced to death, only to be reprieved when a British broadcaster announced that he had been executed, sending hundreds of people into the street in protest. Siegfried Breuer (Popescu), by contrast, gleefully played a Jewish businessman in a virulently anti-semitic wartime film, which led the Viennese actress Wanda Rotha to seek him out and physically assault him on the set at Shepperton. Snapshots like this - and there are many such - make the book constantly riveting.

Timmermann's method is circumstantial, slightly chaotic, but always illuminating. The book resembles a giant scrapbook, superbly illustrated, though badly proofread and copy-edited to the point of hilarity: no caption ever seems to relate to the picture it is describing, there is a typographical error in every sentence, exclamation marks are scattered around like confetti, Rebecca is described as Hitchcock's directorial debut (it was his 25th film), Shaw apparently wrote Somerset Maugham's *The Constant Wife* and Michael Winner is said to be American (if only).

As the title suggests, Timmermann believes that she has written one book - its last line is "What would The Third Man have been without Vienna?" - but, perhaps by accident, she has written a rather different one, a fascinating account of the ingredients that go into making a masterpiece. Her hero, quite rightly, is Carol Reed, but she reveals in rich detail the confluence of elements over which he presided, and in doing so, has come closer than many more experienced and distinguished writers to doing justice to the infinitely complex process by which a film comes into existence.

- Simon Callow's *Shooting the Actor* is published by Vintage.

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