

# The Tin Drum: Good Grass



## Movie Review: The Tin Drum

by Glenn Walton

The cinema has a new hero, and his name is Oskar. He was born in Gdansk, Poland, between the world wars, and is a midget—by choice. Never seen without his little tin drum, he will, when threatened, protest by drumming, and if bodily threatened, let loose an ear-piercing scream that is guaranteed to shatter glass. In Volker Schlöndorff's award-winning film *The Tin Drum*, (based on Günther Grass' epochal novel), Oskar has plenty to protest.

No wonder. The scene is pre-Nazi-Europe, when Oskar is born into a Schnapps-swilling, complacent petite-bourgeois family caught between ascending German nationalism and Polish patriotism. 'The first light I saw was in the form of a 60-watt bulb' he narrates, as we see him, already wary, being yanked out of his mother's body. Only the fact that the umbilical cord was cut, and the promise of a tin drum prevent him from returning to the womb. Oskar's wariness turns to disgust at the brutal society around him. Mama (Angela Winkler) is caught between her husband Matzerath and her cousin/lover Jan who is openly accepted into the domestic arrangement that passes for a family. For the first time Oskar retreats under skirts, these belonging to his grandmother. The tin drum and the

skirts are only the first symbols in an enigmatic film. Oskar grows older, but on his third birthday he orchestrates an accident that prevents his growing up into a world he rejects, and against which his drum and his scream are his only defense.

That world is about to go insane. Oskar witnesses the takeover of Poland, the Reich, and its inevitable collapse. He is at times a lonely, endearing, and heroic witness, and finds allies. The first is a Jewish shopkeeper (played by chansonnier Charles Aznavour) who supplies him with the precious drums that are his defense against moral complicity, but his friend becomes a victim of the Holocaust. Oskar's other friends are the dwarfs in the circus, and he joins them for a time on a propaganda tour for the Nazis, having an affair with the wise Roswitha, a miniature Hayworth. Oskar falls in love with his governess, a problem for a 16-year-old with a three-year-old's body. The governess marries his father after his mother eats herself to death on fish. When stepmother has what is either Oskar's brother or child, he takes the infant on his lap and promises to buy him a tin drum when he is three. Inevitably, the decision to start growing again confronts him, and what more fitting juncture than the beginning of the post-war world,

his hometown in flames, the start of an era in which Germany itself will have to grow up? The film ends on a note of muted hope, as his family boards a refugee train for the West.

Oskar, of course, is the autobiographical invention of novelist Günther Grass, who now works and lives in Berlin, producing books. German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff, faced with the task of transforming Grass's long and multi-structured novel to the screen, has produced a striking, long, and oftentimes brilliant film that like its subject is intellectually irreproachable but emotionally underdeveloped. Schlöndorff has a fine sense of cinematic timing, and his film, in its first hour, as it follows Oskar's exploits, is funny and engaging, if hard-nosed. It creates a dramatic momentum that is fed by Oskar's defiance of a system that will crush his individuality, if allowed. There is scene after memorable scene: Oskar defying the educational system by letting loose his scream on a teacher who will take away his drum; Oskar defying doctors who would take away his drum and write papers on him; and in the film's best scene, Oskar disrupting a Nazi rally by confusing the marching band with cross-rhythms: the pipers and buglers of the brownshirts are tricked into a

## Book Review: The Tin Drum

by Stan Beeler

Hey, how would you like to get some really good Grass? What you do is go down to the local bookstore and say quietly to the guy behind the counter, "Have you got *The Tin Drum*?" It is a sensational not-so-new book by the German (born in Danzig/Gdansk) author Günther Grass.

Yes, that is the one that was recently made into a movie that is too hot to show in Upper Canada. Better and better, first Grass, then pornography, what more could a student ask for? Well I hate to disappoint all of you hardcore literature fanatics, but if you are looking for panting and passion with lots of closeup shots it will fall short of your expectations. On the other hand, if you are interested in a good book concerned with the German people around the time of World War Two you might find what you are looking for.

You will note that I said people rather than military or state; this is by no stretch of the imagination a history textbook. There is no clear cut, objective description of the period to be found in it. In fact, the book spins so quickly from the objective to the subjective point of view that you can hardly tell where you are at times.

It begins with an inmate of a mental institution, Oskar, and that is where it ends around six hundred

## 'Grass attempts to existence into his

pages later. The "present" time is apparently shortly after the Second World War and Oskar sets out in his inimitable fashion to explain how he arrived there. (Or was it here?) Oskar wishes to be precise so he begins the narrative with his maternal grandmother. After all, who can be truly certain of the male line of descent? He describes his grandfather's death at the hands of (or escape from the hands of) the police in great but indefinite detail.

The next great event in Oskar's history is his mother's love affair with the Pole, Jan Bronski, and her subsequent marriage to the German, Alfred Matzerath (that in German pronunciation please). When Oskar finds out that the love affair continues after the marriage he is certain (well at least partially) that Jan is his real father.

*The Tin Drum* is a treasurehouse of symbols for those who care to look for such things. With his inimitable style, Grass attempts to jam the entirety of human experience into his one diminutive figure. Diminutive because at age three Oskar decides that he does not want to grow any more. He steps out of sync with the society of his time by stepping of the top step of the cellar stairway.

At the same tender age, Oskar receives the infamous tin drum. It is both his medium and his message. He uses it to drum up the past and to change the march step of the local Nazi's into a delightful Strauss waltz. It protects him from others and it is the reason that he is persecuted. In many ways it is like imagination. And when Oskar's freedom to drum is threatened, he

dance beat, and the party rally dissolves into a people's waltz. As a symbol of resistance, Oskar is our hero, and we cheer him along.

More difficult is the resolution of his problems. The awakening of sexual desire poses questions that become confusing. Are we or are we not to take Oskar as a symbol, and if we are, how can a three-year-old body succumb to adolescent horniness? The

film's use of a dwarf troupe is also misleading; if these little folk stopped their growth voluntarily, why then do they age? And what about all the fish? Oskar's pregnant mother has to be forced to eat the eels she has seen fished out of the Baltic with a horse's head as bait; the method of persuasion is seduction, which implies that some life cycle is involved. The fish eat the flesh of a horse, are in turn eaten,