



## *The Fencer*

(Finland/Germany/Estonia 2015)

DIRECTOR : Klaus Haro

RUNNING TIME : 98 mins

RATING : PG

### **Synopsis:**

Endel Nelis (Märt Avandi) leaves Leningrad to escape the secret police in the early 1950s, finding work as a sports teacher in the small Estonian town of Haapsalu. He establishes a sports club for his students and begins teaching them his great passion - fencing, much to the disapproval of the principal (Hendrik Toompere), who starts investigating Endel's background. As fencing becomes a form of self-expression for the children, many of whom have been orphaned as a result of the Russian occupation, Endel becomes their role model and father figure. When the opportunity arises to participate in a national fencing tournament in Leningrad, Endel must make a choice: put his own safety first or risk everything to allow them to compete.

### **Review: Louise Keller**

Inspiration is the life-affirming theme of this charming story in which a fencer in Soviet occupied Estonia inspires the children he teaches to learn a new skill and face new challenges. Shortlisted for Best Foreign Language Film in the Academy Awards and winner of the 2016 Finnish Oscars for Best Film and Cinematography, the story is based on a true story about Endel Nelis, an Estonian fencing master in hiding from Stalin's secret police, who founded a school for swordplay.

Armed with a succinct screenplay by acclaimed novelist Anna Heinämaa, director Klaus Härö manages the subject matter delicately, as he concentrates on the relationships between teacher and student on a politically charged backdrop. While there are no major surprises in the exposition, the film plays with heart and as a result, we too are inspired. It's a sweet film with uplifting elements - and performances that captivate.

Set in the early 1950s during the Soviet occupation of Estonia, we meet Endel (Märt Avandi) as he tries to start a new life in a remote town far away from Leningrad as a sports teacher - away from the prying eyes of Stalin's secret police.

Cont.

---

## **FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC**

10.00 am Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> September 2017

8.15 pm Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> September 2017

---

## Review Cont.

His idea to teach fencing may be deemed to be unsuitable by the school's principal (Hendrik Toompere), who declares it to be 'a relic of feudal times' but it is clear that the young students embrace this new challenge. We get a lovely sense of being there as the youngsters are taught 'the precise sense of distance' and 'the need to know the whereabouts of their opponent'.

We become involved in the relationships and in particular Endel's relationship with Jaan (Joonas Koff), the young boy whose grandfather has a history with fencing, and with little Marta (Liisa Koppel), the angel faced blond child with skin like satin and a blunt manner. The romance that develops between Endel and his colleague Kadri (Ursula Ratasepp) is nicely handled; Ratasepp looks as though she has stepped from a painting from the era. In each of the relationships, the power of silence is well utilized, allowing the emotional impact to filter through.

Tuomo Hutri's cinematography beautifully captures the wintry, desolate landscape while the music score (with large orchestral arrangements) underlines every emotional fork in the road. By the time Endel takes his new fencing team to compete against other schools in Leningrad, there is much more at stake than winning. Source: [www.urbancinefile.com.au](http://www.urbancinefile.com.au) ~ accessed 19/4/2017

~~

## Review : Paul Byrnes

*The Fencer* is a Finnish-Estonian-German coproduction about what bastards the Soviets were when they occupied Estonia. In terms of history, it is hard to disagree. The Soviets arrived in 1940, drove out the Nazis, then annexed the country. Estonian men who had been forced to join the German army were now persecuted, executed or sent to Siberia. The memory is in every frame of *The Fencer*. Estonia only regained its independence in 1991. Many Estonians fear the expanding Russia of Putin.

Just after the war, Nelis (Mart Avandi) arrives at Haapsalu, a small but ancient town on the Estonian coast. He is the new sports teacher. The suspicious principal (Hendrik Toompere) looks over his qualifications: fencing, he remarks, is not a very proletarian sport. Nelis keeps quiet about his champion status. We're not sure why, but he has had trouble with the authorities in Leningrad. The secret police are looking for him. The children are timid, battered by history. With no equipment, Nelis announces that he will be teaching fencing on Saturdays. On the first day, about 40 children turn up – a turning point in the film's emotions. A man who doesn't really like children must now meet their expectations – especially those of young Marta (Liisa Koppel), the film's conscience.

Haro's directing style is restrained, somewhat classical. He concentrates on giving us a few well-drawn characters, rather than spoon-feeding. Most of what these people feel is carried by the imagery. When a friend sends two huge crates of used fencing equipment from Leningrad, the story leaps forward in excitement. We can see champions in the making; discipline makes them ambitious. Why can't we go to the grand tournament in Leningrad, Marta demands? Aren't we good enough?

Nelis' daughter helped with the film. Can we assume then that much of the story is true? I doubt that. It's an effective vehicle for exploring the troubled relationship between two countries, and that may be the point, at the expense of accuracy. Nelis did become a celebrated fencing teacher in Estonia, producing a number of champions. He died in 1993. The film is a fine tribute and the children turn it into a crowd-pleaser – whatever the truth.

Source: [www.smh.com.au](http://www.smh.com.au) Edited extracts Paul Byrnes 23/11/16 – accessed 29/9/17

## Some Thoughts On: *The Second Mother*

### The Pool is Half Full!

Well, OK, it was about quarter full, but this is an optimistic review. And so too was this very fine film, ultimately. So how we can look at it?

Potentially, the film could have been a slow boiling melodrama of marital infidelity between the good Doctor and his nanny/housekeeper/doormat's daughter. A stolen kiss and an impulsive offer to wind back the years and escape a sterile marriage falls on barren ground. But this narrative strand does offer up something far more important in the thematic arc of the film - the need to seize the moment while we can. His failure ends in ennui.

Then we have film as social commentary and the divide between master and servant. I think we collectively flinched each time Val served her employers or their party guests and was met with, at best, polite distance and at worst dismissive disdain. The symbolic climax of this aspect of the film is Barbara's draining of the pool after Jessica's breaking of the 'rules of the pool'. We know who the 'rat' is. It is fitting that in an act of defiance and renewal that Val wades in too, signalling her transformation – a baptism of sorts. So, that's one up for the downtrodden!

But Muylaert's story telling rises above cliché. She is not afraid to keep the characters and elements of a scene hidden. The camera remains still as the characters walk through doorways, are heard from other rooms and filmed from behind. Their pasts are only half known – even Val's - while their present lives are carried along by a combination of life's baggage and the unexpected 'now'. Whether it be a car accident, a test result or the arrival of a daughter, *The Second Mother* did a sterling job of representing, well, life.

And the question of whether we are forever to repeat the mistakes and missteps of the past is answered with aplomb with a series of 'returns'. The question of the film's original title (*What Time Will She Return?*) is answered. Now. Val will be with her daughter Jessica and she will be with her baby son. And even Barbara has come to realise that she must be more a mother to Fabinho. Muylaert portrays us stumbling along, making choices, little and large, that come back to bite us. But we can still get in the pool of life, even if it's only a quarter full and make a splash! **Paul Williams**

~~

### COMING UP:

November	<i>The Last Hammer Blow</i> (France)	Sunday 19 <sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 21 <sup>st</sup>
December	<i>Kumiko the Treasure Hunter</i> (USA)	Sunday 10 <sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 12 <sup>th</sup>
February '18	<i>Jimmy's Hall</i> (UK)	Sunday 11 <sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 13 <sup>th</sup>

~~

## Message from the President

Our AGM was held just prior to our last Sunday screening on the 17th September. The current committee all nominated for membership once more and were duly elected. In addition the committee was expanded to our preferred maximum of 10 by accepting two new nominees, bringing fresh ideas and energy to the table.

Your new committee is as follows: President, Ross Armfield. Vice-President, Sandra Gillespie. Secretary, Virginia Romney. Treasurer, James Saville. Membership Secretary, David Cowie. Newsletter Editor/Film Research, Liz Stevenson. Website Manager, Neill Ustick. Guest Enquiries, Caro Kennewell. Committee, Roslyn Garwen. Committee, Chris Bell.

A special welcome to Chris and Roslyn. I look forward to another year of working with such friendly and devoted 'filmophiles' in our aim of presenting great cinema to you, our membership. Many thanks to Rob Spence for acting as our Returning Officer, once again, at our AGM, and to The Empire staff for facilitating it.

The committee has just selected four films for March, April, May and June 2018 that will complete our current season. Once Gerard at The Empire has locked them in with the distributors and allocated their screening dates to us, we will provide you with that information so you can plan the rest of your life until July around those FISH screening dates.

Our last film, *The Second Mother*, was generally very well received and scored another positive and insightful review from Paul Williams. *The Fencer* looks like being a beauty too and I look forward to sharing it with you in a week and a bits time.

Yours in film,

**Ross Armfield.**



### FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

**President:** Ross Armfield 4883 4144 / 0427595453

**Guest Enquiries:** Caro Kennewell 4869 5946  
[caroгеoff@oracletelecom.net.au](mailto:caroгеoff@oracletelecom.net.au)

**Website:** [www.fish.org.au](http://www.fish.org.au)

**Email:** [fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com](mailto:fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com)

**Mail:** P.O. Box 1330 Bowral NSW 2576

**Membership:** Forms available at Empire Cinema & on Website.

**Enquiries:** David Cowie - Membership Secretary  
[fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com](mailto:fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com)

**We are grateful to our sponsors :** **EMPIRE CINEMA**  
**ACE INTERNET SERVICES** **HIGHLAND CREATIVE**