

The Bonhoeffer project

by [Bea Rothenbuecher](#) in the [June 7, 2000](#) issue

*Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* (2000), directed by Eric Till

A number of attempts have been made over the years to produce a feature-film dramatization of the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It's a formidable task to bring to the screen the story of a brilliant theologian who was also a connoisseur of fine wines, a talented pianist, an outstanding athlete, and a man of deep piety, who joined the conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler and died for his beliefs. With support from the Aid Association for Lutherans, Christian Stehr has produced *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace*, which airs June 14 on PBS.

The director, Eric Till, who co-wrote the script with Gareth Jones, opted to emphasize Bonhoeffer's period of incarceration and the love story of Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, his fiancée. In an interview included in the film's promotional material, Till is quoted as saying, "I wanted to sort of deliberately depart from the historical accuracy of locations. . . . You can get bogged down by the truth of it all. At the same time, one is most anxious not to in any way distort the essence of the real story itself."

Till's film raises the question: how much artistic license is acceptable? In the opinion of J. Patrick Kelley, a member of the boards of the International Bonhoeffer Society and the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Translation Project, the film is "only loosely related to the reality of Bonhoeffer's life. After 90 minutes the viewer is persuaded something dramatic happened to Bonhoeffer but has hardly a clue as to what made him tick."

Ulrich Turok's portrayal of Bonhoeffer is sympathetic but one-dimensional. Had the film projected a stronger sense of the enormity of the inexplicable Hitlerian evil--particularly the genocidal policies--Turok's role and the entire film could have gained in dramatic dimension.

Johanna Klante is appealing as the distraught Maria, struggling to free her imprisoned fiance, but when Bonhoeffer tells her he is writing about ethics, she replies emphatically, "Ethics? Ugh!" The real-life Maria was mature for her age, and

well able to hold her own in conversation with Bonhoeffer.