

The Fencer (PG)

Thirteen members enjoyed the excellent "The Fencer" on 11th January. Based upon a true story, the film chronicles Endel Nellis's role just after the Second World War as a sports teacher in a small village in Estonia, as he teaches them Fencing (he was a National class fencer himself and it could be taught using sticks, there being no other sports equipment available). As the film unfolds, his story as a conscript in the German Army (all Estonian males were conscripted towards the end of the war) is explained as the reason why he has had to change his name (from Keller) and move away from Leningrad, because all Estonian conscripts were deemed as enemies of the state by Stalin.

The school's principal, a "party man", doesn't like Endel teaching fencing, but is overruled by a vote of parents. He takes this personally and asks his deputy to research Endel's background. The children, meanwhile, take well to Fencing and want to enter a national competition in Leningrad, which gives Endel a moral dilemma. He elects to go to the tournament with the children (after one of their grandfathers is detained by the secret police in a petty act of retribution by the school principal). At the end of the tournament, Endel is taken away by the Secret Police, whom the Principal has informed of Endel's whereabouts. The Principal shows a rare element of humanity when he cheers the school's team at the final of the tournament.

I won't spoil the ending.

The direction was unusual in a lot of scenes, with the camera directly behind the protagonist, almost making it appear as first person. The cinematography and scenery/lighting was deliberately flat to invoke a sense of joylessness and oppression, which worked well. The incidental music was just that — it never drowned the narrative, and the subtitles were legible. All the acting was top notch, including the children, and there were nice contrasts throughout — for example, the innocence of the children compared with the cynicism of the Principal.

As one of the members said in our discussion — who needs to spend multi millions on special effects laden blockbusters when a low budget, simply told and well acted story, will entertain and move you far more...