

BLUE SKIES OVER BERLIN
John Steinberg ©2020

TREATMENT

A big, panoramic film in the tradition of *Schindler's List*, *The Reader* and *The Pianist*, but taking us out of wartime Germany and into 1950s London at a time when opportunists are grabbing what they can during the rebuilding of the city. In this unsettled landscape, the naïve heroine struggles to survive whilst harbouring a shameful secret. Aristocrats mingle with East End chancers in the fight to gain control, while artworks stolen by Nazis flow into the UK from South America.

Logline

Disguising her German identity behind an assumed name in the London artworld of the 1950s, a young woman must negotiate two important relationships: firstly, with her older Jewish lover, and secondly with her best friend, a Jewish child of the Kindertransport. Only then can she come to terms with her past in Berlin.

CHARACTERS

Eva Schlessinger/Charlotte Brown Age: teens to 70s

Eva is a tall, striking adolescent, with short wavy black hair and a boyish figure. A gifted artist born into a wealthy Aryan family in Nazi Berlin, she pretends not to see the anti-Jewish atrocities taking place around her. Unloved by her mother, the girl is already emotionally damaged. Now, and throughout her life, she ducks any unbearable reality by escaping into her paintings.

At the end of the war, her beloved father has died in combat. Eva, now an Art History student in Switzerland, seeks to replace him by having relationships with older men. Her first affair is with distinguished psychiatrist Dr Johann Weber. Like her mother, Johann is fundamentally cold and unfeeling. He soon rejects Eva, returning only a few years later when he gets wind of her substantial inheritance.

Eva has come to live in London, using her Swiss passport bearing her new name: Charlotte Brown. Here, whilst working at the National Gallery, she begins a relationship with Jewish businessman **BERNARD MORRIS**. This is genuine love, but Charlotte fails to recognise it. After she accepts his offer to run his art gallery in Mayfair, Charlotte puts her faith in the wrong people and is unable to recognise wickedness in the characters around her. Charlotte's naivety ends up threatening her livelihood and,

His puny frame and chalk-like complexion cover up a devious mind, which was put to good use by the Foreign Office during World War Two. That was when he established contact with a network of high-ranking Nazis seeking refuge in South America.

Shunned by the snobbish British Establishment due to his humble beginnings and lack of a public-school education, James Robson has never achieved the status he feels he deserves.

His marriage to Susana Muller, a beautiful Argentinian woman of German extraction, is a cynical sham. The prestigious position he procures for her in a famous auction house in London enables him to create a route out of South America for priceless artworks plundered during the war by the Muller family. James has absolutely no qualms about receiving a rolling commission for his efforts, which is paid into his private offshore account without the knowledge of his firm.

Blackmailed by Rupert Meredith because of his liking for underage girl prostitutes, James is forced to play the pivotal role in bringing down Bernard Morris and effectively causing his death. However, James Robson will neither forgive nor forget the treatment meted out to himself, and eventually wreaks a devastating revenge on his own enemies.

Lillian Saunders Age: 40s to late-60s

Lillian is a sophisticated, well-groomed woman, and former child of the Kindertransport. At the age of seven she arrived alone in her newly adopted country, carrying a small leather suitcase and speaking only a few words of English. Lillian was eventually adopted and settled into a comfortable life in London, storing the trauma of separation from her parents in Vienna in the attic along with the paperwork inside the little suitcase. Like Charlotte, she has repressed any painful memories.

After the war, Lillian marries well-known publisher Donald Saunders and gives birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. Devoid of any maternal instincts and with no inkling that this could be connected with her own separation from her mother, she palms the little girl off with a series of nannies and focuses solely on work.

After Donald dies, Lillian is left with her unruly twelve-year-old daughter. The child is grieving, since her father was the only one able to love and comfort her. The strain of dealing with the rebellious girl is telling on Lillian. She takes a cruise to give herself a break, and on board she strikes up a friendship with another unattached woman - Charlotte.

Discovering that they have much in common, the two become inseparable. Lillian is particularly grateful for the close relationship Charlotte forms with Elizabeth during her daughter's chaotic adolescence.

However, it's the encouragement Lillian is given by Charlotte to restart the art lessons she loved so much as a child that proves so important. Her painting unlocks memories and enables Lillian to unburden herself of her own secret, one that has haunted her for the last sixty years.

At the same time as Charlotte, Lillian Saunders is set free from her past, able to open up her feelings and live what is left of her life to the full.

SYNOPSIS

National Gallery, London 1954

Charlotte Brown's maiden exhibition of Dutch masterpieces has just come to an end after a successful two-month run, during which she has unwittingly caught the eye of businessman Bernard Morris. The girl has 'class' - something he himself lacks but needs in order to gain entry to certain exclusive circles. Losing no time, Bernard makes Charlotte a generous offer she cannot refuse as manager of the Morris Gallery in London's prestigious Cork Street.

Before taking up her new position, Charlotte books a two-week break at a sanatorium in the Swiss mountains, hoping to rekindle the intimate relationship with its director Johann Weber, with whom she had her first youthful affair in Switzerland before adopting Swiss nationality, changing her name and moving to London.

On the last day of her holiday, Charlotte is befriended by Margot Goldstein, a permanent resident of the imposing building which houses the Sanatorium. Margot claims she's being mistreated and that Johann has cheated her out of the property the Goldstein family used to own. She also confides the tragic tale of how she had to give up her new-born son when she fled Nazi Germany, and how the child had died before they could be reunited after the war.

Affected deeply by the story, which revives a memory of her Jewish friend Ben, whose family lived on the floor above her family in Berlin before they were all taken away one night, Charlotte returns to London, unaware that Margot committed suicide after their meeting.

Back in Cork Street, she's expected to play hostess to a group of sinister individuals whom Bernard wants to impress. The most corrupt is society banker Rupert Meredith, a giant of a man from whom Bernard has unwisely borrowed large sums he cannot afford to repay. Rupert has been instructed by aristocrat Bertie Chesterfield, heir to the largest private estates in London, to do whatever it takes to restore his family wealth. Large chunks of it have been sold off mainly to property developers like Bernard Morris to settle death duties.

Charlotte is fascinated by Susana Muller, the alluring Argentinian wife of Bernard's trusted solicitor James Robson, but also intimidated because she senses that the German-speaking woman has an insight into her own wartime past and knows that Charlotte is a fraud.

James Robson, like the banker Rupert Meredith, has a limitless desire for money. He has no qualms about utilising the Foreign Office contacts he made during the war with a ring of

prominent Nazis who had found refuge in South America, and lining his own pockets in the process. He arranges for huge sums of money to be laundered through the sale of artworks stolen from victims of the Holocaust. The moneys received end up, unsurprisingly, as reputable deposits at the Meredith Bank.

Susana's plum job at the renowned Brockets auction house was a strategic placement by her husband; he can utilise her expertise in 19th-century European paintings to establish a route out of South America for some of the most sought-after lost masterpieces, which will fetch the highest prices on the international market.

Charlotte is out of her depth in this milieu and begins to regret her decision to leave her secure job at the National Gallery. A brief romantic reunion occurs during an unexpected visit to London by Charlotte's former lover, psychiatrist Dr Johann Weber, but ends badly when Charlotte learns that his prime motive in re-establishing contact with her is to get his hands on her family's substantial inheritance.

It is then Bernard takes her to the South of France where, despite the fact that their relationship is based on a lie since she is not Charlotte Brown from neutral Switzerland but Eva Schlessinger from Hitler's Berlin, they become lovers. The trip comes to an abrupt end when Bernard's mother dies. At the funeral, seeing a group of bearded men in long black coats, Charlotte remembers similar groups that were targeted for physical abuse in Berlin - a distressing sight from which she, like so many others, averted her eyes.

It's only at the funeral that she learns that Bernard himself is a Jew.

Things are beginning to fall apart. Bernard has over-extended himself with the bank and the pressure is mounting. Bernard had planned to ask Charlotte to marry him and had purchased a diamond for that purpose but, because of his precarious financial position, has had second thoughts. Summoned to a meeting and told that the banks have withdrawn their support, Bernard suffers a fatal heart attack, but not before realising he's been well and truly stitched up by his 'friends'. Rupert Meredith had acquired enough dirt on Bernard's lawyer James Robson relating to his penchant for under-age girls to ruin Robson's career - unless he obeyed Rupert by securing Bernard's downfall.

A month later, there is a new owner of the Morris Gallery. Susana Muller is using the premises as a front for her family's money-laundering activities. With unlimited funds, the gallery is transformed, exhibiting priceless works of art obtained from mysterious foreign sources.

Whilst attending an auction of 19th-century paintings, Charlotte is confronted by a visibly agitated young man, who turns out to be David Goldstein, the son of the unfortunate woman she encountered at the sanatorium. Margot's baby boy, it transpires, hadn't died after all. David produces photographs of paintings, alleging that the ones on show were stolen from his family during the war. Whilst sympathetic to his predicament, Charlotte finds his claim somewhat far-fetched and puts it out of her mind.

When evidence comes to light implicating the Muller family's

involvement in the sale of plundered works of art, Charlotte finds herself in the midst of a criminal conspiracy. She turns to James Robson for help, but he tells her there is nothing he can do. However, from him she learns that the banks had purposely gone all out to ruin Bernard and were largely responsible for his death.

Lonely and short of money, Charlotte is tempted to draw on her substantial inheritance, but her conscience tells her the money is tainted. Instead, she makes ends meet by pawning Bernard's diamond. Too late, she realises what a good man he was.

Charlotte makes a new life teaching art in London's Hampstead; as ever, painting is the escape from traumas past and present. On a cruise, she meets Lillian Saunders, a wealthy Jewish widow who becomes her closest friend. Lillian's problematic adolescent daughter, Elizabeth, becomes for a while the child that Charlotte never had.

Elizabeth herself puts the difficult relationship with her mother down to some papers she found in an old leather suitcase dating from the time when, as a small child in Austria, Lillian was sent away from home. There's some mystery attached to the papers but the subject is taboo and Lillian won't talk about it. Charlotte wonders if, like herself, her best friend is covering up a past she hasn't been able to confront.

Charlotte is teaching an evening course in painting, attended by Lillian. The subject is: 'My earliest memory'. As Lillian's sombre painting emerges, Charlotte sees a Vienna railway station of sixty years ago; this was where Lillian waved goodbye to her parents and joined the Kindertransport en route for safety in England. Looking at the painting, Charlotte becomes convinced that the blond German guard depicted in it was her bully of a brother Hans, who had been stationed in Vienna.

Charlotte's sense of guilt is acute. It's time for the truth to be told. She decides to confess all in a letter to Lillian, and then flee to live in Switzerland for the rest of her life - for how could her friend ever forgive her? At the last minute, she decides to stay and face the music. The truth is acknowledged and the women's friendship acquires an even greater depth.

Charlotte reads a newspaper article about a court action against banker Rupert Meredith, whose offices were found to be lined with stolen works of art. This was the same odious individual responsible for Bernard's death! Her thoughts turn to David Goldstein and her unfulfilled promise to help him.

For the first time in half a century she travels to Germany and manages to track David down; he is now working tirelessly on the restitution of property to victims of the Holocaust. At last Charlotte has found the proper use for her inheritance: she donates the whole amount of the vast untouched Schlessinger family fortune to David's organization, allowing her to make amends before it's too late.

Two years later, Charlotte receives a large package from David Goldstein. It contains a priceless painting by Monet - one of his idyllic water-lilies series - sent in gratitude for helping him to recover much of his family's collection. This, Charlotte/Eva realises, is her reward for no longer being prepared

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to close her eyes.

Treatment Ends

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