KINONIK

A FOREIGN AFFAIR (1948)

Directed by Billy Wilder

WEDNESDAY April 15th 7PM

SATURDAY April 18th 2PM / 7PM



In a basement nightclub called the Lorelei, Marlene Dietrich purrs about the black market. The man at the keyboard is Frederick Hollaender, who wrote her songs in Berlin before the war, and who is now back at a different piano in a different Berlin, playing new songs about the ruins. The club is full of American officers trading cigarettes for champagne and German women performing availability in exchange for them. Upstairs, the city is rubble. The war has been over for two years.

Into this room stumbles an Iowa congresswoman on a fact-finding mission. She has come to assess the moral condition of the occupation... which she has prejudged as lacking and aims to reform. By the end of the picture she will be drunk in this basement, singing about corn.

Wilder shot the exteriors in late 1947, weeks before the Berlin Blockade and airlift. The U.S. military government banned the film in occupied Germany — the same office that, two years earlier, had commissioned his denazification documentary, Death Mills. The problem, apparently, was tone. Considered by some as his most cynical film, it lampooned the imperial gestures of post-war America at the same time it skewered our prudishness.

Wilder had worked smoky rooms like this as a young man in Berlin, before he was Billy Wilder. He knew what a piano in a basement was for, and here he put it to use.