

Frieda

UK | 1947 | 98 minutes

Credits

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| Director | Basil Dearden |
| Screenplay | Angus MacPhail, Ronald Millar # |
| Photography | Gordon Dines |
| Music | John Greenwood |

Cast

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| Robert Dawson | David Farrar |
| Judy Dawson | Glynis Johns |
| Frieda | Mai Zetterling |
| Nell Dawson | Flora Robson |

In Brief

‘Would you take Frieda into your home?’ boomed the posters accompanying the launch of this neglected post-war British classic. A product of the first true annus mirabilis of Ealing Studios production (in which they also produced the prototypical Ealing Comedy, *Hue and Cry*, as well as *Nicholas Nickleby* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*), the film pitches Zetterling’s eponymous German immigrant between the airman who loves her (David Farrar, in the same year as his brilliant performance in *Black Narcissus*) and a xenophobic British public, particularly personified by a strident Labour MP (Flora Robson), reluctant to accept the peacetime integration of Germans. Thematically a sort of sequel to the questions raised in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *Frieda* provided Zetterling with her first and unarguably most significant role in her long and mainly unexceptional British filmmaking career.

Frieda remains a strong example of a film from Ealing’s back catalogue that challenges the tried and tested community and ‘projecting Britain’ approaches that have dominated discussions of the studio. Part of the creatively rich 1947-51 period in Ealing’s fortunes, *Frieda* is a curious film that complicates any simple notion of what Ealing was about, and the idea they excelled at safe or restrained filmmaking.

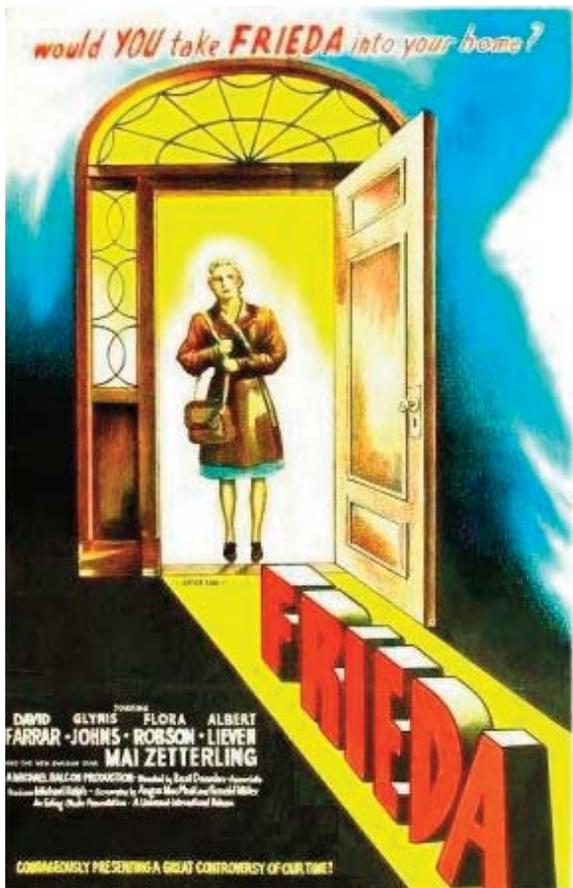
The film follows escaped British POW Robert Dawson (David Farrar) and German girl Frieda (Mai Zetterling), and moves quickly from their marriage in a bombed-out church in Poland to their return to the apparently genteel English setting of Denfield. Although the violence of war underpins the film, the story is more interested in the violent emotions caused by an enemy ‘invading’ a quiet English town, and the shifting acceptance of Frieda herself. While Robert says early on that Denfield is a ‘pleasant, peaceful spot’, he is wrong when he predicts there is ‘nothing to be frightened of’ there. While it occasionally pulls its punches and lurches into melodrama near the end, *Frieda* remains a fascinating look at anti-German feeling, particularly given the film was released within two years of the end of the war in Europe, when such feelings would have been recent and widespread.

In one sense, then, this is a bookend to Ealing’s war films, a reflection on *Went the Day Well?* (1943), where the undercover German squad was defeated by a village community pulling together. In *Frieda*, the arrival of this German girl (and, eventually, her brother) divides a similar community, which struggles to find a cohesive and coherent reaction to her presence. This is dramatised largely through the response of Dawson’s matriarchal family, from Mrs Dawson (Barbara Everett) and her sister Nell (Flora Robson), to Edith (Gladys Henson) and Judy (Glynis Johns), the widowed wife of Robert’s brother, Alan. This cast of women returns to the (often complex) representation of women in Ealing films. While Mrs Dawson and Edith are domestic, reliable maternal figures who reluctantly accept Frieda, Nell (running for parliament on an anti-German ticket) accuses Frieda of being ‘party to a monstrous crime’ that she ‘cannot evade responsibility for.’ Judy, meanwhile, struggles with Robert’s return as he reminds her of her dead husband: the love triangle of Judy-Robert-Frieda is underplayed throughout, and director Dearden uses lingering looks between Johns, Zetterling and Farrar to convey the emotions rather than overwrought dialogue.

Given the vehemence of Nell and Judy’s reactions to Frieda, they remain (perhaps inevitably) the most interesting characters in the film, and those that the film is most eager to rehabilitate. Nell believes ‘Germanism’ is in the blood, and that Denfield’s eventual embrace of Frieda is ‘our strength and our weakness.’ Initially, the town sides with Nell: Frieda is likened to a mine (quiet until it explodes); Tony notes that it can’t be wicked to hate Germans because ‘it says so in the papers’; his school friends refer to Frieda as a werewolf; and there are complaints that rations are being given ‘to a



Mai Zetterling: Actor, Director, Feminist



German girl.’ By the halfway point, however, Frieda has proven her worth to the community, working on the farm, and included in traditional celebrations such as a Christmas dance.

In one sense, then, the film is a polemic that not all Germans are bad Germans, a sentiment that fits with Ealing’s relatively liberal politics and consensus building. Yet, while telling us that there are good Germans, aspects of the film can be read as anti-German: Robert (our hero) was treated badly as a POW, Alan was killed by German guns, and the only other German character in the film is Frieda’s brother Richard (Albert Lieven), a Nazi sympathiser and fanatic who wants to use Frieda’s ‘conquest’ of the English to revitalise a new war. Although Frieda rejects his view of Germany, Richard (like Nell) is a melodramatic character, visually and aurally striking, and his appearance lingers well after Robert beats him up. The views of Germany we are offered by the film, then, are of small, vulnerable and beautiful Frieda, or the loud, brash and warmongering Richard – Zetterling may be in the film for longer, but as a blank slate for the film’s desire to project a positive image, the louder and more declamatory opinions on Germany could dominate for some viewers.

That is not to dismiss Zetterling’s performance, more to point out that her role is a cipher, pushed around by events and rarely active in the narrative. The psychological toil of the film’s events (not least Robert accepting Nell’s anti-German attitude) does at least offer some justification for her suicide attempt (particularly when compared to other Ealing suicides in *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) or *Cage of Gold* (1950) – a trend that might suggest a limited series of narrative options for these women). Yet even this sequence is as much about Nell as it is Frieda, with a strong performance from Flora Robson where the camera lingers on her face, conflicting emotions playing across it as she decides whether to alert Robert to Frieda’s intentions. Nell and Judy’s

confrontation, where Nell admits to being wrong, remains a little pat and unconvincing, but it allows the film to reinforce its message and, finally, reclaim Nell’s position.

The film contains strong visual touches throughout: an early pan around the Dawson house at Judy and Alan’s wedding is a point-of-view shot from Robert’s perspective (it is his flashback, and all the other characters raise glasses in his direction, acknowledging the POV); within the Dawson house, characters are regularly framed from above, as one character (often Frieda, isolated) looks down the staircase on action below that excludes her; there is also a montage sequence of Robert and Frieda working on the Dawson farm that borrows extensively from Russian techniques; and a strong domestic tableau where the Dawson’s frame Frieda and her brother, suggesting that they are within the family space but still outsiders.

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