



## To Be or Not To Be Ernst Lubitsch

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# Context

*To Be or Not To Be* embraces the all too common theme of World War II during a time when America had just entered the war. Although the filmmakers in Hollywood, especially those such as Ernst Lubitsch from Germany, wanted people to support the Europeans during the war, Lubitsch refused to make this into a preachy film.

Instead we see a hilarious group of actors who fight and love together. When Maria Tura, a famous actress, is courted by Stanislav, a pilot for the R.A.F., her husband Joseph becomes extremely angry. As we watch their interactions at the beginning of the film, we can't help but laugh.

As the film continues, the topic becomes more serious as the actors attempt to put an end to the German reign in Poland. At the same time, the film keeps up an amusing play of acting as Joseph pretends to be both "Concentration Camp Ehrhardt" and the traitor, Professor Siletsky. Eventually, the whole group escapes the country, after a final performance by an actor portraying to be Hitler.

Ernst Lubitsch was considered one of the greatest directors of his time. He was invited by Mary Pickford to come to Hollywood from Germany in 1922. Eventually in 1935, Lubitsch lost his German citizenship when the Nazis rejected him. Lubitsch directed a number of successful films such as *Kiss Me Again* (1925), *So This is Paris* (1926), *Monte Carlo* (1930), *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *If I Had a Million* (1932), *The Merry Widow* (1934), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943). After Lubitsch suddenly died of a heart attack on the set in 1947, a distraught Billy Wilder is quoted as saying at his funeral, "No more Lubitsch," to which fellow filmmaker William Wyler replied, "Worse than that. No more Lubitsch pictures." Lubitsch was a much loved director.

Carole Lombard, who plays Maria Tura, was a beloved actress in her time. Lombard's primary start was in a few Fox films such as *Hearts and Spurs* (1925). After an injury

that scarred her face, she lost her contract but continued acting after her recovery. She performed in *Man of the World* (1931) and *No Man of Her Own* (1932) before her career began to take off again with her hilarious performance in *Twentieth Century* (1934). Her first and only Oscar nomination came from her performance in *My Man Godfrey* in 1936. Before *To Be or Not To Be* was released, Carole died in a plane crash on her way back to California.

Jack Benny plays the role of Joseph Tura. Along with this film, *Charley's Aunt* (1941) was one of his best performances. He also appeared in *Broadway Melody of 1936* (1935), *Artists and Models* (1937), *Love Thy Neighbor* (1940), *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (1963), and *A Guide for the Married Man* (1967).

Robert Stack plays the part of Stanislav in *To Be or Not To Be*. Before this film, he had performed in *First Love* (1939) and *Nice Girl?* (1941). He also later appeared in *Fighter Squadron* (1948), *A Date with Judy* (1948), *Bullfighter and the Lady* (1951), *The High and the Mighty* (1954), *Written on the Wind* (1956), and *Airplane!* (1980).

*To Be or Not To Be* was a popular film, but it was only nominated for one Academy Award for Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture for Werner R. Heymann.

# Summary and Analysis

The film begins in Warsaw, Poland, in August 1939. Everything is normal until Hitler appears in Warsaw, and then everyone stops to stare. The people try to figure out how he got here and whether his appetite has grown to desire Poland as well.

A young boy, Wilhelm Gustev, comes to ask for a tank that he was promised for a good report card. The man asks the boy whether he will show it to his father and tell him that Hitler gave it to him so that his father will like him better. Then the boy says that his father doesn't like Hitler at all, upon which Hitler enters and says, "Heil myself."

Suddenly, the director begins to yell at everyone to stop the performance. He doesn't want the play to become funny since he wants it to be a very serious documentary on Hitler and the concentration camps. The man says that he looks like Hitler, but the director disagrees. So, he walks out into the street, and we discover that this is how Hitler came to Warsaw in 1939.

Next we see that the stars of the last show, Joseph and Maria Tura, are now performing in *Hamlet*. Joseph and Maria talk, and Joseph tries to convince her that he truly loves her. When he walks into her room, he becomes insanely jealous when he sees that she has received flowers from an unidentified admirer for the third night in a row.

After Joseph leaves, Maria tells her maid that she is certain they're from a handsome aviator. She reassures the woman that she loves her husband, but he becomes upset by such little things. A man later arrives with a note from the handsome aviator, and she decides to see him later. She writes back to the man that he should come to her dressing room during Hamlet's soliloquy that begins with "To Be or Not To Be." As the speech begins to speak, the handsome young aviator gets up and heads to Maria's dressing room.

When he comes in, Maria invites him to sit and talk to her. She thanks him for the flowers, and he tells her that he's seen her in everything she's ever performed in. The man begins to question her based on her interviews, and she has no idea what he's talking about since she often lies during them.

After they talk for a few moments, the aviator asks Maria to see his plane, and she agrees to meet him at the airport the next day. Maria reminds the maid not to tell her husband. Later Joseph comes to her room and shares his disappointment about someone walking out during his performance. She convinces him that the man was probably about to die unless he left.

As they prepare for the next play, Joseph and Maria listen to the radio and hear that Hitler is speaking. Some men from the war office then come in to tell them that they will not be able to open the show that night, because it's not safe. They are angry about the order, but they decide to perform Hamlet again anyway. As Stanislav, the aviator, leaves during the soliloquy again, Joseph becomes infuriated.

In the back, Stanislav tells Maria that they must tell her husband that they love each other. Stanislav also tells her that she will no longer have to work. He plans to tell her husband, but Maria says that she loves her husband. A moment later, her maid runs in and announces that the Germans have entered Poland with no formal declaration of war. Stanislav tells her goodbye, and she asks him to come back. He says that he must in order to see her again.

As everyone runs backstage, the sirens begin, and people rush out of the theater. They hide downstairs as Warsaw is bombed. When the bombing is over, we see that most of the town as we saw it in the beginning is destroyed. Nazi soldiers march through the streets as people look on over the rubble. Curfews, trips to the concentration camp, and death penalties are enacted in the city.

A new spirit comes over the people as they begin to hate Hitler. Around the city, people put up "V"s for victory. The fight for freedom comes out of England as young

Polish men of the R.A.F. try to win freedom for their home country. They gather together and sing about beating Hitler.

Professor Siletsky tells the men that he will be discontinuing his radio speeches in order to go on a secret mission. He reveals that he is going to Warsaw, and the men of the R.A.F. discuss how terribly they want to go back. He agrees to try his best to find out about their families. Stanislaw asks the Professor to find Maria and tell her, "To Be or Not To Be." Stanislaw is shocked that Siletsky doesn't know who Maria is.

Stanislaw goes to some of the leaders of the military and tells them that he suspects Siletsky is lying about his identity. He believes that since Siletsky did not know who Maria Tura was, he must be lying as she is the most famous actress in Warsaw. The leaders tell him that there is no reason to be concerned, but they are disturbed that he told the men where he was going. They are shocked that he took the names since they could easily fall into the hands of the Gestapo. The men discuss how the underground in Warsaw could be destroyed if Siletsky is a traitor. They tell Stanislaw to go to Warsaw so that he can warn the underground.

Stanislaw parachutes from his plane and runs from the Gestapo who see him fall. He finally escapes and hides from them. Inside the bookshop, Maria asks for the book that Stanislaw was told to ask about, *Anna Karenina*, and places something on page 105 just as Stanislaw was instructed. The bookkeeper hurries to the back and finds Siletsky's picture with a note on the back that he must not reach the Gestapo. Soon after, two soldiers go to Joseph and Maria Tura's apartment, and they ring the doorbell as she arrives there. The men take her with them as Stanislaw sleeps inside.

Inside the Nazi headquarters, Maria meets with Professor Siletsky. She is obviously nervous, and he offers her a cigarette. He apologizes for bringing her in that way, and he gives her the message from Stanislaw. His phone suddenly rings, and he makes an appointment for meeting with the Gestapo the next morning. Siletsky warns her that she should be careful to choose the right side. He asks her to be a spy for the Germans and offers to make her life more comfortable. Siletsky tries to explain that the Nazis

are just trying to create a happy world. He says he is not a monster, and he asks her to remain for dinner and the rest of the evening. Siletsky then allows her to leave, and she hurries home.

Joseph arrives home and finds Stanislav asleep in his bed. When he says, "To Be or Not To Be," Stanislav gets out of bed. Maria runs in and tells them that Siletsky is in town but hasn't talked to the Gestapo yet. Joseph wants to know what's going on, and she tells him that she has to have dinner with Siletsky and may possibly kill him. Joseph tells her that he'll take care of things by killing Siletsky himself.

Maria arrives at Siletsky's hotel room in a beautiful dress. They drink together, and she admits that she's scared of him. She asks him to write his name so that she can tell him everything about himself. She tells him that he is a very determined and charming man. Then, he kisses her, and she says, "Heil Hitler." Suddenly someone knocks at the door, and he escorts her into the other room so he can consult with someone. He is told that he must see Colonel Ehrhardt immediately. She watches, disturbed, as he takes out the papers with the names of the men's families and friends on it and leaves.

Maria takes the page where he signed his name and begins to type on it. She types, "My nerves are cracking. My life is of no use to the Fuehrer any more. I am going to end it. Heil Hitler!" Then she slips it under his pillow. After leaving the note, she tries to leave, but since he left no instructions she is trapped.

At the theater, the men arrange a fake Gestapo headquarters. Siletsky arrives and meets with Joseph who is disguised as Colonel Ehrhardt. The first general he meets laughs a lot, but a soldier reassures him that he only became a general due to a relationship with a high-ranking official. They then let Siletsky in to meet with Ehrhardt. Siletsky tells him that in England, he is known as "Concentration Camp Ehrhardt." Siletsky tells him that he will send the duplicates the next morning. Joseph is disturbed by this news, and he realizes that they can't kill him now.

Joseph tries to talk to Siletsky, but he just stumbles across his words. The other men hiding off stage give him a plan, and then he talks to Siletsky about Maria. He reveals that Stanislav sent a message to Maria through Siletsky. When Joseph hears the message, he becomes very angry. Siletsky finally realizes who Joseph is, and he holds him at gunpoint. Siletsky runs and hides in the theater. Finally, they catch him, shoot him, and then he falls to the ground, dead.

At the hotel, a man comes to the room looking for Siletsky. The man decides to wait for Siletsky to return. Later, Joseph returns to the room disguised as Siletsky. The man is a worker for Ehrhardt, and Joseph tells him all about the message from Stanislav. The man tells him that the colonel is expecting him immediately. Joseph and Maria walk into the other room to get the papers out of the trunk. Joseph begs her to tell him about Stanislav. She encourages him that he is a great actor, and he can perform well before Ehrhardt.

Ehrhardt tells Joseph that his good friend, Hitler, is coming into town the next day. He tells him that he is called Concentration Camp Ehrhardt in London. Ehrhardt asks for the information and about his plans for the underground movement. Joseph gives him the name of the leader, and when the soldier enters, he says that the man was killed several days earlier. The other man who was a good possibility was killed too. Joseph tells Ehrhardt to book him two flights back to England so that he can take Mrs. Tura back as a spy as well.

Maria meets with Ehrhardt a few days later, and she is shocked to hear that Siletsky was murdered. They were planning to do a show in the theater when they found his body. Ehrhardt offers to get to know her better and allow her continue being a spy. Suddenly, Ehrhardt's phone rings, and Siletsky is on the line. Maria hurries to try to meet with Joseph, but he has already left. Then she returns home to find Stanislav there; he saw Joseph when he came in and punched him in the jaw, but then Joseph left. She also runs to the theater, but she just misses Joseph again.

Joseph then comes in to meet with Ehrhardt. He is introduced to some people from the Special Investigations squad, and then he is brought into another room to meet with Ehrhardt. Joseph sits down before he realizes that the dead Siletsky is sitting in a chair. He goes to the bathroom and finds a razor. They are leaving him inside until he cracks.

However, Joseph comes to the door and tells the squad that their friend is dead. Ehrhardt tells him that he believes that he is the imposter. Schultz accuses him of tailing Siletsky for several months to grow such a beard. Ehrhardt tries to convince Joseph to pull off Siletsky's beard, but then Ehrhardt does it and finds that the beard is false. They decide that Siletsky should leave immediately with Maria. Another man walks inside, exclaiming that they have found a plot against Hitler. He then pulls Joseph's beard and shows that it's a fake. Ehrhardt quickly discovers that he will be losing his job. The men, however, are actually part of the underground.

Back at the meeting place, everyone talks about what to do to protect the cause. They decide to cause a commotion and confuse the Gestapo so that they'll leave Hitler's box. Both Joseph and Stanislav take their leave of Maria and go to the theater. The Gestapo goes into the theater while the men of the underground dressed as soldiers enter the Gentleman's Lounge. Then, Hitler arrives and the commotion begins.

Suddenly, one of the actors appears, and then the soldiers grab him. The rest of the underground also comes over so that they can save him. He is taken away for questioning, and Joseph says that he doesn't want to hear anymore about this event. He then advises Hitler to leave immediately, and the soldiers follow. Joseph and the other actor playing Hitler step into the car and leave the theater.

It is then that Joseph and the actor hear an explosion, and they realize that the underground is still alive. Joseph realizes that he has lost his mustache, but they realize that he can't get out of the car without it. Ehrhardt and Shultz show up at Maria's apartment, and she tries to throw them off track. Ehrhardt refuses to leave, however, and she tries to avoid his advances. The man playing Hitler hurries upstairs

to meet her, and Ehrhardt is terrified that he has made a mistake when he realizes that she is having an affair with Hitler. Ehrhardt then shoots himself in her apartment.

On the plane, the pilots are asked to meet with Hitler himself while Stanislav takes over the controls. He tells them to jump out of the plane, and they do so immediately. Finally, everyone parachutes from the plane, and they arrive in England. Joseph's greatest desire is to play Hamlet. He is then shown playing his favorite part, and he watches in shock as Stanislav once again gets up at the start of the soliloquy.

# Characters

## Maria Tura *played by* Carole Lombard

### Description

Maria Tura is one of the most beautiful and famous actresses in Poland. She has won the love and admiration of both men and women in the country. Young Stanislaw is completely in love with her, and he tries to convince her to run away with him. Although Maria refuses, she does have a difficult, often strained relationship with her husband, the actor Joseph Tura.

Maria is shocked when her beloved Poland is captured by the Nazis, but she bravely becomes part of an underground movement to free Poland from their hands. Maria has lost touch with Stanislaw, but after he realizes that Siletsky is working for the enemy, he quickly finds and warns Maria. By dating Siletsky to keep an eye on his plans for the rebel movement in Poland, Maria places herself in grave danger.

### Analysis

Maria's attitude seems to be that of a careless woman who delights in taunting men and making her husband furiously jealous. She seems to have few higher motivations in life than to be loved and admired. As we watch the film, we see that Maria grows and matures when she and her country are in danger.

Maria's bravery is to be admired. She is dedicated to her country and willing to do anything to save it from falling permanently into Hitler's hands. She first becomes involved in underground plans to spy on the Germans along with her husband and the other actors.

After Stanislav arrives, Maria risks her life further by becoming involved with Siletsky. She pretends to be interested in helping spy for the Germans so that she can learn more of their plans for her friends. Maria's love for her husband also grows as they work together and risk their lives to save their country.

## **Joseph Tura *played by* Jack Benny**

### Description

Joseph Tura is a popular stage actor in Poland before the war. He and his wife, Maria, are two of the most popular actors in the country, and he is proud of his abilities. Joseph is an extremely arrogant and jealous man who feels that his wife is trying to cheat on him all of the time. The two have a very intense relationship both on and off the stage.

Joseph changes after the war begins. He and Maria become involved in the movement to save Poland from Hitler, and Joseph finally seems to grow up. Joseph becomes a leader of the movement, and he tries to protect his wife as she puts her life in danger for the cause.

Joseph is very proud of his acting skills, and he decides to use them to play the role of Professor Siletsky in order to save Maria. Joseph easily convinces the Germans that he is indeed Siletsky and eventually his skills help save Maria and the other members of the movement from certain death.

### Analysis

Joseph acts like a foolish, arrogant boy when we first see him. He and Maria have many passionate, but silly, arguments as they perform, and we are sometimes unsure of their love for one another. Joseph becomes insanely angry and jealous after Stanislav walks out in the middle of his famous soliloquy. Instead of behaving like a

gentleman, Joseph becomes a raving lunatic for a short time.

Joseph quickly matures once the war begins. He can no longer act foolish when his country, his life, and his loved ones' lives are in danger every moment. Joseph bravely becomes part of a movement to free Poland. He is angry when he sees that Stanislav has returned, but he is willing to work with him to save Maria and Poland.

Joseph reaffirms his love for Maria when he plays the role of Siletsky before the Germans. He realizes that the only way to free Maria is to become the person who is holding her hostage. Joseph plays his role well, and he even continues playing roles until Maria and all the other actors are safe as well.

## **Lt. Stanislav Sobinski *played by* Robert Stack**

### Description

Lieutenant Stanislav Sobinski is a young Polish man who becomes a member of the British R.A.F. after his country is invaded by Hitler. Stanislav is madly in love with the beautiful actress, Maria Tura. Before leaving the country, he attends many of her performances, leaving each night during Joseph's soliloquy.

Although Stanislav believes that he and Maria could be together, she realizes that he is young and naïve. Maria's love for her husband keeps her from running away with Stanislav, but she continues a serious flirtation with him throughout the film. While in Britain, Stanislav discovers that Professor Siletsky is actually a German spy, and he hurries to Poland to warn Maria and the other members of the movement to free Poland.

Stanislav works with the actors and other members of the movement to outwit Professor Siletsky. Stanislav's courage helps these people to trick Siletsky, save members of the movement, and escape the country.

## Analysis

Stanislav is a brave young man who loves his country. He risks his life to fight with the R.A.F. so that he can see his country free from Hitler's grasp at some point in the future. He fights overseas, and he is the only person among his fellow soldiers to realize that Professor Siletsky is a fraud.

Stanislav bravely parachutes into his home country so that he can warn Maria and the others of the danger. He courageously finds their apartment and hides there until he can speak with Joseph and Maria. Stanislav's courage saves many lives including those of the people he loves the most.

## **Prof. Alexander Siletsky *played* by Stanley Ridges**

### Description

Professor Alexander Siletsky is working with the British R.A.F. when we first meet him. He claims to be from Poland and is spending time with the flyers from Poland who are now living in Britain. Siletsky kindly offers to contact their families and friends to check on them while he is in Poland on a secret mission.

Siletsky takes the names, but when Stanislav mentions Joseph and Maria Tura, Siletsky does not recognize their names. Stanislav knows that everyone from Poland knows Maria Tura, so he suspects Siletsky of being a German spy. Stanislav reports his findings to his superiors and offers to parachute into Poland to warn members of the freedom movement.

Siletsky does turn out to be a German spy who is trying to help squash the freedom movement in Poland. After meeting Maria, he takes a fancy to her and tries to convince her to date him. In the name of the movement, she agrees and begins to spy on him. Joseph and the others finally murder Siletsky so that Joseph can impersonate

him and save Maria.

### Analysis

Siletsky is a normal, intelligent man who has decided to fight on the wrong side of the war. He seems no different from any other professor, but he naively denies having ever heard of Maria Tura and blows his cover. Siletsky's plans are then compromised.

Siletsky is not particularly cruel, but he believes intensely in the Nazi goals. He wants to murder those in Poland who are standing against the Nazis, but he finds Maria to be attractive. Since he cannot give up a chance with a beautiful woman, Siletsky ends up being tricked and murdered by Joseph and the others.

## **Greenberg *played by* Felix Bressart**

### Description

Greenberg is one of the other actors who works with Joseph and Maria. Greenberg also plays his parts well as they try to fool the Germans.

### Analysis

The roles that Greenberg and the other actors play help Joseph and Maria to play their roles more effectively. Working as a team, everyone can survive.

## **Rawitch *played by* Lionel Atwill**

### Description

Rawitch also performs in shows with Joseph and Maria Tura. Although he is a talented actor, he receives his biggest break as he plays roles to help outwit the Nazis.

## Analysis

Rawitch and the others are integral parts in the scheme to outwit Siletsky and the other Nazis.

## **Col. Ehrhardt *played by* Sig Ruman**

### Description

Colonel Ehrhardt is the leader of the Nazi occupation in Poland. He is an arrogant man who loves the praise that Joseph, disguised as Siletsky, offers him. Joseph shares with Ehrhardt that he is known as "Concentration Camp Ehrhardt" in Britain. Joseph had learned this information from Siletsky who spoke to Joseph while he was disguised as Ehrhardt.

### Analysis

Colonel Ehrhardt is behind most of the evil plans in Poland. He, like Siletsky, strongly believes in the Nazi mission. In fact, Ehrhardt has been an integral part in forming the deadly concentration camps. Ehrhardt shows no remorse, and Joseph and the others are happy to trick him.

## **Anna *played by* Maude Eburne**

### Description

Anna is Maria's maid while she is performing on the stage. Anna tries to keep Maria in line when Maria flirts too freely with Stanislav and other men.

### Analysis

Anna seems to serve as Maria's conscience early in the film. Maria has a tendency to become too flirtatious with men, and Anna's influence helps to keep these impulses under control.

# Themes

## Stand Up For What You Believe

One of the most difficult things in life is standing up for what you believe especially against seemingly impossible odds. In *To Be or Not To Be*, each of the characters risks his or her life in order to stand up against Hitler and the Nazis. At first they simply make fun of Hitler in their performances, but eventually they are forced to face the recognition that Hitler has invaded Poland and their lives will never be the same. As they struggle with that concept, they work together to save Poland from the Nazis.

Stanislav is the first character we see who must face the choice between protecting his beloved country or listening to those who try to convince him to do otherwise. After he talks to Siletsky, Stanislav realizes that if he does not know Maria Tura, then Siletsky is certainly not from Poland. Stanislav hurries to report the possible spy to his superiors, but they at first ignore his warnings. After they realize the reality of the problem, Stanislav bravely offers to parachute into his country so that he can warn those in Warsaw. Stanislav's bravery saves many lives.

Joseph, Maria, and the other actors are also involved with plans to protect Poland. They are secretly spying on the Nazis in Poland and passing information through a variety of means, including a nearby bookstore. Throughout the film, they continue to stand up for what they believe by continuing their acting careers in real life; Maria pretends to be interested in Siletsky while Joseph impersonates both Colonel Ehrhardt and Siletsky.

## Trust is Relative

Trust is one of the most important parts of any human relationship. Without trust, there is no basis for a relationship. In this film, we see that trust can be relative. When

dealing with spies and evil people, one must be careful about who they trust. The characters in this film are constantly trying to discern who is trustworthy.

In the beginning, we see that Joseph and Maria have difficulty trusting one another in their own relationship. Joseph is arrogant and demanding while Maria is constantly being overly flirtatious with other men. Although they eventually work through their problems, Stanislav always remains an issue.

Stanislav, on the other hand, actually protects Professor Siletsky in the beginning. He tells him of Maria and his love and asks Siletsky to give her his love. When Stanislav realizes that Siletsky's entire story is simply a performance and effort to hurt the freedom movement in Poland, Stanislav learns to be more careful with whom he trusts.

## **The Average Person Can Make a Difference**

In a war like World War II, average people were the ones making the biggest differences in the war effort. Many men were drafted or signed up for the Army so that they could protect their country. At the same time, women went to work to keep the factories running and the economy up. Many women also signed up to be nurses in the war so that they could go overseas and care for the men.

The most frustrating part of the war was that people heard so little from their loved ones. Although some letters and communications were able to come through, many were lost or destroyed before they made it back to the States. Those at home were encouraged by this film in knowing that their average loved one was overseas making a difference. They also realized that they were not in the effort alone; people all over the world were risking their lives to defeat the Nazis.

When viewers see this film, they realize that every person can make a difference not only in war but also in other people's lives. It only takes the actions of one person to

start an entire movement and possibly change the world. Viewers are encouraged to take up their roles in the world to make it a better, safer, happier place.

# Style and Cinematography

During the 1940s, World War II was one of the most important subjects of film in the United States. Even before the United States became involved, everyone was concerned about the events in Europe. At the same time, many in Hollywood and the rest of the nation felt that America should help their friends overseas rather than sit back and wait to be attacked. The United States had only recently entered the war when this film was released.

*To Be or Not To Be* takes a rather humorous look at the events in Poland during World War II. The film also shows a simplistic solution for solving the problems as civilians fought against the Nazis. Many in America and around the world were exhausted as they constantly received bad news from overseas. This film helps spur people to action while telling its tale with a lighthearted air.

The humor in the film comes from several sources. First, the actors in the plays carry on a riotous series of stunts and intense relationships as the film first begins. They even poke fun at Hitler in some of their performances. One of the actors runs into the street during a rehearsal, and the people in the streets stare as they believe Hitler is already in Poland. Also, the relationship between Maria, Joseph, and Stanislav is humorous as Stanislav walks out during Joseph's best speech and Joseph becomes insanely jealous.

Throughout the rest of the film, things become more serious as Siletsky goes to Poland to round up the families of the men who have joined the R.A.F. However, once Stanislav arrives to warn the actors, the humor begins again. We watch as Joseph continues his grand performances, first as Colonel Ehrhardt and then as Siletsky. When another actor then plays the role of Hitler in real life, the laughs and silly stunts create a funny scene where many people are saved from death.

# Motifs

## Plays

As we watch *To Be or Not To Be*, we watch the story through the plays that the actors and actresses perform in. At the beginning of the film, we see Joseph and Maria starring in a performance of Hamlet. We learn of Stanislav's affections backstage and watch as he walks out during Joseph's soliloquy. As we watch, Joseph becomes increasingly angry as well as jealous concerning his wife's flirtation with Stanislav.

The next play we observe shows the characters making fun of Hitler. They are poking fun at his ways, his looks, and his general philosophy of life. As we watch, the performer playing Hitler runs out into the street which causes concern among the public since he so closely resembles Hitler.

Finally, each character performs in a real life play in order to save their lives and their beloved country, Poland. Maria plays the role of the beautiful temptress who works to seduce Siletsky, discover his secrets, and murder him. Joseph plays both the role of Colonel Ehrhardt and later the role of Siletsky. The other actors play a number of roles including Hitler when they all trick the soldiers and escape the country.

## Concealed Identity

Concealed identities form a background for this film. As the film begins, we can never be sure of anyone's true identity or motivations. Although Maria seems like a good wife, she also plays the part of flirtatious actress. Stanislav also plays the role of smitten pilot, but he actually plays the role in truth.

The most important concealed identity is Professor Siletsky. He has fooled the entire British military by pretending to be a caring professor originally from Poland. He even

convinces them that he is going on a top secret mission for them when in reality, he is working for the Nazis and trying to squash the freedom movement in Poland.

Finally, we see that all the different actors and Stanislaw take on different identities to try to protect each other and Poland. Although many people believe them, they are actually only doing what their career has prepared them for—acting in the story of their real lives.

## **World War II**

World War II is the backdrop for this story. This can be considered the worst war that the modern world has seen. Millions of men, women, and even children died during this war, not only including the massacred Jews but also those fighting to save the Jews and the countries overtaken by the Axis countries.

When the film was created, the war had been going on for a few years, but America was just getting involved after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Before this time, America had been desperately trying to stay out of the war since so many lives had recently been lost during World War I.

The director and actors poke fun at Hitler and create a lighthearted feeling in the viewers who were terribly concerned about those they loved who were fighting overseas. Additionally, viewers felt less alone because they realized that people all over the world were suffering even more severely than they. The story of the bravery of these actors and Stanislaw is told through the all too real setting of World War II.

# Symbols

## "To Be or Not To Be"

Joseph is starring in *Hamlet* when the film begins. He is especially proud of his "To Be or Not To Be" soliloquy. Maria recognizes his pride and writes to Stanislav to walk out in the middle of that speech to meet her backstage. She also knows that the length of the speech will keep Joseph from investigating too quickly.

The "To Be or Not To Be" speech and the events occurring during it are symbolic of the strained relationship between Maria and Joseph. Maria chooses this moment because she realizes that it will drive him crazy. Although she loves her husband, she also wants him to remain extremely jealous.

The phrase "To Be or Not To Be" can also symbolize the uncertainty of life. Each character must be willing to sacrifice his or her life for the sake of Poland. They all make their sacrifices in different ways, but not one person knows how everything will turn out. Rather than giving up, Maria, Joseph, and the others become stronger, more persistent, and more creative in the face of possible defeat and despair.

## Disguises

In *To Be or Not To Be*, every character wears a disguise at some point. The disguises are symbolic of the lengths they will go to in order to save Poland. As they try to save Poland, each person must pretend to be someone else so that they can spy on and outwit the Nazis. The first person we see in disguise, however, is Professor Siletsky who is actually working for the Nazis and pretending to be on a top secret mission to help Poland.

Later scenes show that Maria must disguise herself in order to outwit Siletsky. The

only way to find out his secrets and kill him is for her to be with him at all times. Siletsky quickly falls for this beautiful woman, and he is willing to let her do whatever she wishes. Maria's disguise may be the most dangerous since she becomes trapped in his suite until someone can save her.

Joseph shows his love for Maria by playing many roles to save her. First, he must pretend to be Colonel Ehrhardt so that they can trick Siletsky into giving them the list that he created. After he discovers that Siletsky has another list, they murder Siletsky, and Joseph must take on the disguise of Siletsky as well. Although Joseph is not completely successful, he uses his disguise to cover who he is and to save his wife and Poland.

## **The List**

When Siletsky is in Britain, he becomes friends with the Polish men of the R.A.F. Siletsky claims to be a displaced professor from Poland who is being sent back in order to work on a top secret British mission. After convincing the young men of his story, he offers to try to contact their friends and family while he is there. Then, he makes a list that is symbolic of all the death lists made by Nazis during World War II.

Siletsky's list puts everyone on it in grave danger. He knows that these families are likely for the freedom of Poland since they are related to these brave young freedom fighters. Only Stanislav realizes Siletsky's true purpose after Siletsky professes to never have heard of the great Maria Tura, a name every good Polish person knows.

Many similar lists were made during World War II. The Nazi death lists are infamous. Millions of people from Jews to those who simply stood in the way of the Nazis were put on these lists to be sent to concentration camps and murdered.

# Essay Questions

How does Hitler come to Poland in August of 1939?

What is the signal for the young aviator to come see Maria?

How do Maria and Joseph feel about one another?

Why does Stanislav have to leave?

What happens to Poland after Hitler arrives?

Why is Siletsky going to Poland, and why does he get the names of people there?

How is Maria working for Poland?

What does Siletsky ask her to do?

How does Joseph try to protect her?

Describe the last elaborate act of the theatre group.