

DVD Review: 'Young Goethe in Love' Enchants With Bittersweet Romance

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- [Alexander Fehling](#) [2]
- [DVD Review](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Johann Wolfgang Goethe](#) [5]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [6]
- [Miriam Stein](#) [7]
- [Moritz Bleibtreu](#) [8]
- [Music Box Films](#) [9]
- [Philipp Stölzl](#) [10]
- [Young Goethe in Love](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

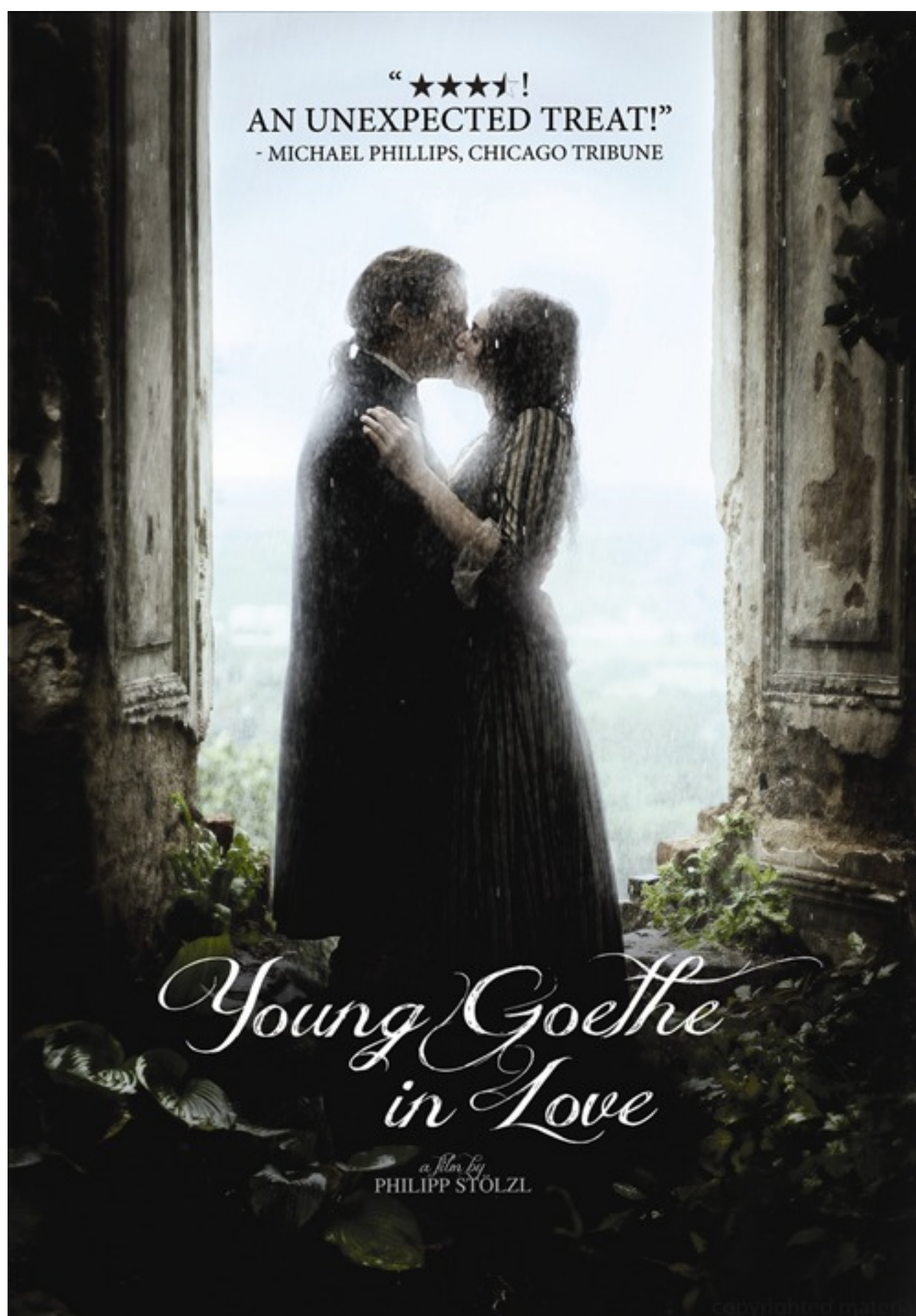
CHICAGO – “Young Goethe in Love” is not the sort of title guaranteed to send American audiences to the theater in droves. For one thing, the title sounds too much like “Shakespeare in Love,” though its original German title, “Goethe!” sounds like a giddy musical along the lines of “Oliver!” Perhaps Goethe’s name should’ve been cut from the title altogether and relegated to a snappy tagline like, “Love Can Cometh and Goethe in an Instant.”

Thankfully, a poorly titled and under-marketed cinematic gem can find the audience it deserves with the help of good critical buzz, and here’s hoping that will happen to Philipp Stölzl’s irresistible 2010 period romance upon its DVD realease. The future master of Weimer Classicism was a mere 23-year-old when he first penned 1774’s “The Sorrows of Young Werner,” which heavily influenced the subsequent Romantic literary movement, as well as inspire a wave of suicides committed by similarly lovesick readers.



DVD Rating: **4.5/5.0**

The irony here is that Werner’s sorrow ultimately proved to be Goethe’s salvation, at least according to the spirited screenplay by Stölzl, Alexander Dydyna and Christoph Müller. Deftly played by Alexander Fehling, Goethe emerges here as a stubborn free spirit fed up with the law career thrust upon him by his disapproving father. He gains rejuvenated confidence and overpowering desire in the presence of Lotte (the radiant Miriam Stein), a young woman financially strapped with the demands of raising her younger siblings. Lotte’s father, Vater (Burghart Klaußner of “The White Ribbon,” looking as aghast as ever) orders her to marry a wealthy suitor, Albert (Moritz Bleibtreu), who possesses the ability to provide for his sprawling family. Albert’s snooty demeanor at work softens when he receives romantic advice from his plucky employee...Goethe (standing in for “Cyrano de Bergerac”). As the corners of this classical love triangle start to align, Stölzl extends the delicious irony until the film’s halfway point, where each of the major players finally awakens to their assigned role in the unfolding drama. What makes each moment of this film so immensely satisfying is its utter lack of sentimentality. The script isn’t about heroes and villains, but about the agony of unrequited love in all of its forms, and how passion can outlast the boundaries of a shared attraction, while manifesting itself in artwork destined for immortality.



Young Goethe in Love was released on DVD on April 24, 2012.

Photo credit: Music Box Films

In a film uniformly populated by fine actors, Bleibtreu's performance holds the key to its success. His character could've easily been a cartoonish vexation on the order of "Moulin Rouge"'s Duke, and Bleibtreu certainly doesn't shy away from Albert's moments of abject cruelty. Yet even when he's at his most hateful, Bleibtreu's eyes convey a wealth of regret and vulnerability. If Albert was played by an actor who failed to endear the audience to his own heartache, the final act of the picture would've made little emotional sense. Stein's character arc is particularly complex, and it's captivating to behold her evolution from a devastatingly infatuated girl to a grounded woman who has come to terms with the reality of her future. Like "(500) Days of Summer," "Goethe" poetically and poignantly illustrates how love can continue to enhance one's life even in its aftermath. This is an exuberant picture bursting with feeling, recalling the exquisite eloquence and wrenching bittersweetness of "Bright Star," while supplying a dash of playfulness. American audiences are advised to skip forgettable fodder like "The Vow" and "The Lucky One" in favor of this worthy rental. You may be surprised by how moved you've become by the final fade out.

"Young Goethe in Love" is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio and includes a 26-minute featurette that skims the surface of the shoot, while focusing on the remarkable digital matte paintings utilized to create a vibrant portrait of Germany circa 1772. Several of the painterly backdrops are reminiscent of the effects in Lech Majewski's "The Mill and the Cross," and the featurette reveals that Canaletto's landscape paintings served as a major influence. I'll be keeping an eager lookout for Stölzl's next project due out this year, the action thriller "The Expatriate," featuring the powerhouse trio of Aaron Eckhart, Olga Kurylenko and Liana Liberato.

'Young Goethe in Love' is released by Music Box Films and stars Alexander Fehling, Miriam Stein, Moritz Bleibtreu, Volker Bruch, Burghart Klaußner and Henry Hübchen. It was written by Alexander Dydyna, Christoph Müller and Philipp Stölzl and directed by Philipp Stölzl. It was released on April 24, 2012. It is not rated.



[13]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]
Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
matt@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

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