

## The Fencer [PG] 2015 | Finland/Estonia/Germany | 99 min

UK release date **30<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

Director **Klaus Härö**

Screenplay **Anna Heinämma**

Cinematographer **Tuomo Hutri**

Cast **Märt Avandi** (Endel Nelis); **Ursula Ratasepp** (Kadi);  
**Hendrik Toompere Sr** (Principal); **Joonas Koff** (Jaan); **Liisa Koppel** (Marta); **Lembit Ulfsak** (Jaan's grandfather)

The inspirational-teacher movie gets an effective, sober-minded iteration in “The Fencer,” a fictional account drawn from the life of the legendary Estonian fencing master Endel Nelis, who in the 1950s founded a school for aspiring young swordsmen that still thrives today. Unfolding under a cloud of suspicion and paranoia fostered by the postwar Soviet occupation, this well-acted, smoothly crafted drama tells a story of cross-generational bonding in the face of historical oppression.

The story begins in 1953, a time when the oppressive Russian secret police has forced numerous Estonian resisters into hiding, including Endel (Mart Avandi), who flees his home in Leningrad and heads to the small, remote town of Haapsalu. There, “Comrade Nelis” determines to start a quiet new life and accepts a job as a gym teacher at the local school, where his efforts to give his students a proper physical education are frustrated by a lack of resources, as well as by the toad-faced indifference of the principal (Hendrik Toompere Sr.).

But when Endel, a skilled fencer, locates a few foils in the gym, he decides to start an after-school fencing club for the kids. These include Jaan (Joonas Koff), an earnest, good-looking youth who’s eager to learn, though perhaps not quite as eager as the spirited young Marta (Liisa Koppel), whose combination of inexperience and enthusiasm will inevitably pay off down the road. Endel is a stern, demanding instructor but also a skilled one, and before long the students slowly begin to learn and improve.

One look at the students at practice, silently advancing with makeshift swords in neat formations across the gym floor, is enough to alarm the killjoy principal,

who attempts to get the community to ban fencing as an antiquated relic of a pre-communist era. But when this backfires — the beaten-down local peasants, led by Jaan’s grandfather (Lembit Ulfsak), appreciate the rare joy and passion that fencing has brought to their children’s lives — the principal pursues a far more dangerous tack, digging into the mysterious past that brought Comrade Nelis to this rural outpost to begin with.

The principal’s investigation, and the incriminating discoveries it brings to light, dovetail surprisingly well with the story’s more routine formulations, which include a love interest for Endel in the form of a kindly fellow teacher (Ursula Ratasepp) and the prospect of a national fencing competition in Leningrad, where the rookies from the stix will have to go up against the big-city pros.

The suspense operates on two fronts, smartly juxtaposing Endel’s fugitive status with the climactic competition, the outcome of which is handled in plausible, modestly rousing fashion. Avandi provides a solid narrative anchor as the soft-spoken hero, and his performance falls in line with the respectfully restrained tenor of the entire production, also borne out by the somber grace notes of Gert Wilden Jr.’s score and the gray, muted colors of Tuomo Hutri’s widescreen lensing. Jaagup Roomet’s sets and Tiina Kaukanen’s costumes suitably capture the deprivations of the period.

After: **Justin Chang, Variety, June 2015**

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