

# Treasured Artist Inga Kohn

Frankly Speaking with Inga Kohn

by Mary Ann Ebner

## Frankly Speaking

Dressed in black and white, like the Chaplin films she loves, Dr. Ingeborg Kohn enters her classroom and commands attention. Kohn, a resident of Cornwall-on-Hudson, is a film connoisseur, writer, translator and Professor of French Literature. Her charges? Cadets at the U.S. Military Academy.

Vocabulary word #1: *cinéma*. Behind the word rests a lifelong passion.

Her students are well acquainted with the big screen, as is Kohn. Using discussion of film as a teaching tool enables this strict disciplinarian to encourage students to quickly engage in conversation in Intermediate French. Growing up in Switzerland, Kohn saw films at every opportunity and grew to love vintage black and white.

"I enjoyed the French wave, and Italian and German movies," she said. "Later, the European industry was changing and I saw many movies in theatres saturated with American films." In class, one of her students, an engineering major, greeted Kohn confidently. "*Bonjour, Professeur Kohn.*" He continued with a mini-presentation about his interests, including his collection of DVDs. *Cinéma* had broken the ice. French conversation filled the classroom.

While periodically showing excerpts of Chaplin films to build conversation around *cinéma*, Kohn has written a book on the legendary film artist, *Charlie Chaplin, Brightest Star of Silent Films*. Her favorite Chaplin film, *The Great Dictator*, was released in 1940. "The whole atmosphere of pre-World War II is expressed in a way that I think no other filmmaker has been able to do," Kohn said. "It's so funny and so ominous at the same

time."

Kohn attended high school in Switzerland and studied at the Sorbonne in France before moving to California. "I had an uncle who taught French at UC Berkeley," she said. "I finished my undergraduate degree there and received a scholarship to study for my Ph.D. at the University of



Arizona." Soon after, she was nominated for a Fulbright Scholarship and returned to Paris in 1988-89.

"I went back to the movies," she said. Kohn kept up with film until accepting a position as Head of the Department of Humanities at Arizona. Though she loved the position, it left little time for movies. She immersed herself in academics and a student took interest in her dedication.

"Unbeknownst to me, a former cadet stationed at Fort Huachuca and studying at Arizona nominated me for a position at West Point," Kohn said. "In 1992-93, I became a visiting professor." Dr. Kohn continued to publish, lecture and translate works for Julien Gracq, France's leading writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

"When I started translating for Julien Gracq," Kohn said, "I discovered his interest in great silent movies. I was amazed. Then, in 2002, I was at a conference in Paris on 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature on writers who wrote for movies.

We were talking about what a great innovator Charlie Chaplin was, how he could visualize any daily situation. It was then that I was asked by an editor, Emilia Aru, to write the Charlie Chaplin biography."

"It took me about eight months," Kohn said, "to write the biography. The more I looked into it, the more interested I became. His (Chaplin's) abject poverty shocked me. He had a talent, and the movies were his way out." Kohn briefly met the man who immortalized the character he created, the Little Tramp, with his signature costume of baggy pants, big shoes, cane and derby hat. "One day, my sister was at a movie festival in the town of Vevey in Switzerland, and Charlie Chaplin invited her to a cocktail party," Kohn said. "I attended

with her. It was in 1976, the year before his death. When I shook his hand he greeted me in perfect French. He was very gracious."

Kohn is currently working on translations of captions for a collection of photographs of famous artists, including Chaplin, for the photographer Horst Tappe. In her third tour at West Point, Kohn and her husband, Jonathan Kohn, balance careers and two households. They have raised two children, and a filmmaker has also joined the family. "I am so lucky my daughter married Menno Meyjes," Kohn said. "Primarily a screenwriter, he's Dutch and he loves Charlie Chaplin. The first movie he has written and directed, *Manolete*, starring Adrien Brody and Penélope Cruz, will be presented at the Venice Film Festival this summer."

Though her son-in-law's new film is to be shown in New York, Dr. Kohn simply cannot wait. She plans to travel to Venice, to embrace the art of *cinéma*.