

German Films

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ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

The German Producers Alliance

A TENDANCY FOR EXTREME CONDITIONS

Florian Gallenberger

CREATING SOMETHING MAGIC

Maria von Heland

CINEMATIC DIVERSITY

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NEW FACETS OF A NICE LAD

Kostja Ullmann

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DIRECTOR'S PORTRAIT



Maria von Heland (photo © Dietmar Gust)

Maria von Heland was born in Stockholm in 1965. She first studied Journalism, earning a degree from Rider College in Lawrenceville, New Jersey in 1987. In the same year, she went to New York to take acting lessons. From 1990 to 1995, she studied at the California Institute of the Arts and at the School of Film and Video in Los Angeles, concluding her studies with a Master of Fine Arts degree. In 1992, during her studies in California, she also attended the "Konrad Wolf" University of Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg. She immediately attracted attention with her first short films, **Die Staerkere** (1994), **Chainsmoker** (1997) and **Real Men Eat Meat** (1998), for which she received such international awards as the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Short Film Award (1997), the Multicurta Award in São Paulo (1998), the International Canal+ Award (1998), and the Grand Prix du Court Métrage in Valenciennes (1999). In 1999, she directed the television feature **Recycled** for the public broadcaster WDR. One year later, she was nominated for the Shooting Star New Directors Award in Baden-Baden. Active as both a screenwriter and director, her other films include: **Big Girls Don't Cry** (2002), **Orka!Orka!** (TV, 2005), **Those Who Whisper** (2006), **Search** (2006), **Suddenly Gina** (TV, 2007), and the screenplay to Kai Wessel's *Hilde* (2009). She has just adapted François Lelord's *Hector's Journey* for the screen. Her current projects include the German black comedy **Frank Schmidt is Born!** and the international **Mr. Lu's Blues**, a passionate love story set in 1930s Shanghai.

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CREATING SOMETHING MAGIC

A portrait of Maria von Heland

In an age when nationalism keeps threatening to raise its head again, **Maria von Heland** has just the kind of cosmopolitan background the European film industry needs. Born in Stockholm in 1965 into a family with a Swedish and Austrian/Jewish background, she has studied Photography in Sweden, Acting in France, Journalism in New Jersey and Film at Potsdam-Babelsberg; has an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts (where she studied under the great British director Alexander Mackendrick); has lived in Berlin since the early 1990s; and has made films in Germany, Sweden and Mongolia. She speaks Swedish, German, French and English, the last very fast and with a disarmingly British accent.

Von Heland first attracted attention with an 11-minute short called **Chainsmoker**, which starred Amanda Ooms as a young woman whose desperate night-time search for a packet of cigarettes triggers a series of ever more bizarre events, culminating with a superb comic pay-off. That was followed by another short, **Real Men Eat Meat**, set in Ulan Bator and about a Swedish boy and a Mongolian girl who are forced by their parents to spend the afternoon together. It is a film of great delicacy in which sulky reluctance turns into friendship and almost blossoms into love.

Von Heland's first feature, **Big Girls Don't Cry**, revealed her to be an extremely sensitive director of actors (and actresses). The story of

the relationship between two school friends which becomes strained when one of them decides to take revenge on her father's infidelity, the film premiered at the San Sebastian Film Festival.

Von Heland's skill with actresses was also to the fore in her second feature, the Swedish drama **Search**, starring Ooms as a young woman navigating the dangerous waters of internet dating, which had its international premiere in Montreal in 2006. Since then, von Heland has written and directed a Swedish two-part miniseries entitled **Those Who Whisper**, an unflinching look at the effects of pedophilia in an apparently peaceful Swedish suburb ("Those who live in silence condone. Those who whisper, lie. Those who scream are not heard"). More recently, she has directed an adaptation of Richard Curtis' *The Girl in the Café* under the title **Suddenly Gina** for German television, starring Julia Jentsch and Jan Josef Liefers, and she wrote the screenplay for the big-budget biopic *Hilde*, starring Heike Makatsch as the troubled postwar German star, which premiered at this year's Berlinale.

"I don't really do nationalities," says Maria von Heland. "I don't see myself as strongly one thing or another. It's a problem, actually, because we seem to want that in Europe – that nationalistic feel to films." Swedish-born, Berlin-based and fluent in a couple of other languages as well, von Heland has been dividing her time of late between staging the European Film Awards ceremony in Copenhagen; completing the screenplay for *Hilde*, the story of Germany's best-known movie star of the 1950s; and working on a number of future projects. That and looking after three small, hyper-energetic children and a dog called Cash in one of those Prenzlauer Berg apartments that make you realize why everyone wants to live in Berlin.

The fact that von Heland is not German-born and was only a year old at the end of the period dealt with in *Hilde* doesn't phase her at all. "I had never even heard of Hildegard Knef, literally," she chuckles. "But not having a history and not having hated her on television for 25 years was probably really good: it meant that I didn't have those strong emotions about her."

"It's an intensely German story which starts during the war and eventually goes into the Economic Miracle," she adds. "The film is the portrait of an artist, of somebody who finds their creative voice. But it's also a portrait of Germany, a country that I have visited and looked at and had a relationship with for so long. Hilde becomes a very German figure: that's what's fascinating about her. She became the personification of postwar Germany, the epitome of the Trümmerfrau – the people who went out and literally built up the houses again from the rubble. But in her personal life she always did the wrong thing. Whenever she got to a place where something functioned, it exploded in her face."

In von Heland's career, it has been pretty much the opposite: each time she seems to have settled into something, it is she who has made the choice to move away. Journalism, for example, which she found "too personal". Similarly, her time in California ended with exactly what a degree from the Disney-funded Cal Arts is supposed to bring: the opening of a career-door. In von Heland's case, she was offered a top job at a computer games company. All she had to do was say how much she loved computer games. "But how could I say that? I hate them!"

This prompted the return to Germany and the first short film, **Chainsmoker**. "It's very Berliny," she says. "It took place exactly

where I was living at the time and the elements in it were things I knew about."

The same process of reaction led to the Richard Curtis adaptation, which came out of a desire to escape the dark world of **Those Who Whisper**. "I know Curtis' story is about people dying of starvation in Africa and hunger and AIDS, but it's actually a romantic comedy," she says. "It was such a relief to be allowed to do something other than this incredible darkness. It had become a kind of spiral in which the films kept getting darker. Having spent 2x90 minutes in the world of pedophiles, it was time to quit, to get out of the basement and see some light."

Since *Hilde* (directed by Kai Wessel) was completed, von Heland admits she has been getting lots of offers to write historically-based scripts. "I don't mind at all, actually," she says. "I like writing history because I like learning. And I'd rather write about that than about women who perpetually have problems getting laid, which some of my films have been about. But I think the main thing for me is, the next film I write, I also want to direct. "I never made a conscious decision to take a break from directing films," she explains. "But, watching *Hilde* being made without being able to contribute with what I do best – which is bringing out the psychological truth in human relationships – was a painful process. I know that no two filmmakers would make the same film from a script, and my vision goes far beyond the writing process. I don't mind writing the odd screenplay for a colleague every now and then, but I have learned that I am a filmmaker, not a writer. So from now and on, I am focusing on my film-making work."

The first project is a black comedy that takes place on her doorstep. "I am writing it together with Britta Krause who wrote **Chainsmoker** with me. It is a small film that can be done without years of financing. That is what I need now: to get out from behind my computer screen and direct a film that I believe in."

Also in the offing is **Mr. Lu's Blues**, the true story of Swedish-Russian jazz legend Oleg Lundstrem, who founded one of the most acclaimed big bands in Shanghai during the 1930s. "It is not going to be a biopic," insists von Heland, "but a passionate love story that takes place between the opium dens and dance halls and against a backdrop of political turmoil, war and espionage."

"What I do with a passion," she concludes, "is write stories about people. I try to avoid making judgments, but I am passionate about understanding the world I live in, its people and their weaknesses. To me, filmmaking is like having a colorful dream; then, one day, after years of hard work, you can invite people into the cinema and say: 'Look what I just dreamed!' It's a beautiful experience and, once you've had it, it is very hard to do anything else with your life. It is not about becoming famous, or being the best. It is about creating something magic."

Maria von Heland spoke with Nick Roddick