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STRAND RELEASING presents

A film by Markus Schleiner

# MICHAEL

**Starring Michael Fuith & David Rauchenberger**

**Country of Origin:** Austria

**Format:** 35mm/1.85/Color

**Sound Format:** Dolby Digital

**Running Time:** 96 minutes

**Genre:** Drama/Thriller

Not Rated

**In German with English Subtitles**

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**SYNOPSIS:**

Michael (Michael Fuith), a seemingly meek insurance agent, has a secret: he's holding 10-year-old Wolfgang (David Rauchenberger) captive in a locked room in his basement. Chronicling a five month period, director Markus Schleizer reveals a tense portrait of how seemingly mundane lives can hide the darkest secrets. MICHAEL is a masterfully executed study of a monster with rich cinematic detail and unnerving insight.

## CAST

Michael Fuith  
David Rauchenberger  
Christine Kain  
Ursula Strauss  
Xaver Winkler  
Thomas Pfalzmann

Michael  
Wolfgang  
Mother  
Sister  
Nephew 1  
Nephew 2

## CREW

Director  
Writer  
Co-Director and Artistic Consultant  
Producer(s)

Line Producer  
Production Manager  
Cinematography  
Casting

Child Casting  
Sound Design  
Sound Mixer  
Sound Recording  
Production Designer(s)

Costumes  
Wardrobe  
Makeup  
Editor

Markus Schleinzer  
Markus Schleinzer  
Kathrin Resetarits  
Nikolaus Geyrhalter  
Markus Glaser  
Michael Kitzberger  
Wolfgang Widerhofer (Nikolaus Geyrhalter  
Filmproduktion Gmbh)  
Michael Kitzberger  
Louis Oellerer  
Gerald Kerkletz  
Carmen Loley  
Martina Poel  
Lisa Olah  
Markus Schleinzer  
Antje Hochholdinginger  
Catalina Molina  
Kathrin Resetarits  
Meri Dukovska  
Albert Meisl  
Nicole Twardowsky  
Catherine Radam, Daniel Helmer, Alex Trejo  
Veronika Hlawatsch  
Bernhard Maisch  
Klaus Kellermann  
Katrin Huber  
Gerhard Dohr  
Hanya Barakat  
Carina Mayer  
Wiltrud Derschmidt  
Wolfgang Widerhofer

## **INTERVIEW WITH MARKUS SCHLEINZER**

Conducted by Ursula Baatz

Ursula Baatz **How did you get the idea to make a film like this?**

Michael Schleinzer My thoughts kept returning over the past few years to the way that perpetrators and the notion of the perpetrator are dealt with in public. And there is scarcely a crime in this discourse that is so flatly condemned as child abuse.

It is one of society's greatest crimes, such that even sterling citizens who feel strongly about the law would love to return to medieval justice to punish the accused.

I myself am not free of it either when I hear about things like this, which go beyond what I can imagine and picture to myself. And over long stretches I followed the yellow press, which has been left almost entirely to deal with this subject.

That really shocked me and I wanted to take a look at it myself. I have attempted to approach the topic without disguising anything, and fiction film offers exactly this possibility.

To this end I have deliberately avoided looking at cases from here or abroad and chosen a constellation of people I did not know from the media.

There is nothing autobiographical in it, nor were there any instances of pedophilia in my own personal surroundings.

Once I finished writing I asked an internationally renowned forensic psychologist Dr Heidi Kastner to scrutinize the figure and the way he acts from a scientific angle. It would be dangerous and stupid to give full vent to unbridled fantasy with such a topic.

In the work on MICHAEL I was concerned on the one hand with narrative content, with the last five months of a life led under coercion between a 35 year-old man and a 10 year-old boy. On the other hand, and this was paramount to me, with the ways and means by which one can tell such a story.

It's a film about a perpetrator. And I wanted to report from his own world and his way of seeing.

In MICHAEL I have deliberately prevented any judgmental or explicatory morals from appearing. So there is just the man and the child and their interactions.

I wanted to create something you must expose yourself to. Where everyone has to see what it is, and what it does to me. And look at precisely these feelings. I think that helps a society or all of us to get on and progress. A society can only develop to the same extent that it is able to get to grips with its offenders.

**UB Offenders get to be stylized as monsters in the media...**

MS The yellow press likes to work with catchy phrases like "the monster of ..." and so on. But monsters are not people – they are mythical creatures, something from fairy tales. So the offender is denied all humanity.

Obviously the distance we have to assume to perpetrators is incredibly important. And the means we use to create this are arbitrary. Because it is simply a matter of making the distance between us and the people who acted in that way as large as possible.

One doesn't want to have to look at someone like that, let alone be bracketed with them by perhaps being identified with them.

We mostly look for inner and external factors, which allow us to pigeonhole others. But not necessarily so as to understand and fathom them, but rather so as to push them away from us. We always have the same formulaic approach, this compulsive search for "redemption" by means of psychological explanations, which are reinforced by inventing desolate biographies.

I have consciously attempted to override this mechanism in MICHAEL. My main point was: I can only approach criminality of whatever kind if and when I acknowledge it, am on equal terms with it. I have to acknowledge his existence. That is not to say forgive – that I think is reserved for the victims. And judgment is done by the court.

**UB There is also a normal side to this offender's life...**

MS What's it like when you live with someone under such conditions? For both of them? How is it when, after a certain time, the initial protests are over and the first difficulties in the adjustment phase have been negotiated? To our minds that is now a relationship. They have already been together, have got used to each other – what it's like? That's what I wanted to relate.

And a certain kind of sexuality also appears because it is a part of this life together, which of course is totally steered by the perpetrator.

But here again the perpetrator doesn't try to do anything but live according to a clichéd picture of normality. He tries to be like everybody else. He makes a big effort to adhere to the rites of normality because that is what conceals his crime.

I am interested in these self-created idylls, which are presented as "natural" and "normal" – because for me they also pry open the normality and everyday life that I live in. Knowing that in an extreme situation one needs and looks for normality, so that one can make this extreme situation viable and maintain it – that casts a special light on everyday life and the normality that goes with it. What does it mean for my normality – how much of it is simply self-protection and how much just hanging on to certainty?

**UB What I find interesting and also appalling in this film is not only that the perpetrator seeks normality, but that this normality doesn't even find him abnormal. He gets along perfectly at his work in an insurance company, even gets promoted, people value him, he gets invited on a ski trip and so on and so on. The "normal people" react towards him as if he were a totally normal person. That for me is one of the disconcerting and also alarming aspects of the film.**

MS Even if abnormality is the opposite of normality, I don't think it permeates every area of life. The abnormal is just one facet. In MICHAEL the perpetrator's abnormality, his pedophilia has driven him to abduct this child. But that is not something that makes him stand out, so that one would immediately back away from him. And then when, as is typical

of such cases, the neighbors come running up and say “he was always such a nice person...”, they are attempting somehow to balance the dysfunctional side with the functional one. This lack of comprehension – how can someone who once looked after my cats suddenly be abnormal? That seems quite improbable to us, because it endangers our own normality.

**UB The characters in MICHAEL respond on the one hand “normally”, but on the other with a kind of emotional coolness – there are rarely any tears or dramatic scenes etc.**

MS What is terrible is terrible enough. I couldn’t see any sense in exploring this direction any further through my choice of the narrative medium of film.

I decided very early on while writing it that I didn’t want to make a film about this topic where the victim is the main character. That would be a tasteless way of going about it.

First because I don’t know enough about that, and secondly because I often note that films about victims capitalize on them. I didn’t want that.

I couldn’t devote myself to the subject in an emotional, mawkish and sentimental way, or by wallowing in my feelings. I protect the players who act here and I have given the figures of both the perpetrator and the victim their own space.

There are no obscene zoom shots showing tears running down their cheeks. I find that quite disrespectful. That would merely bolster our highly emotionalized form of family entertainment cinema, the way you have to feel moved at the press of a button because you see someone is crying. But I also didn’t want to make the mistake of believing that there is only one vantage point, just one emotional approach – that is never the case.

**UB You spoke a moment ago about your actors – using a child for a film like this seems pretty daring to me.**

MS The most important thing was total honesty. At one of the last castings one of the mothers got up and left because I couldn’t promise her that I would be able to protect her child in the future. I cannot guarantee that the child who played the part will never be teased by his fellow pupils at school. I can’t do that; it would be a lie to say I could. But we attempted to give the child the necessary tools by talking and discussing, speaking and also listening, so that he can also stand up a bit for himself, be his own person in this topic.

So the most important thing was to find parents who not only would let their son play a role like this, but who would also be interesting discussion partners; and finding a child who had the right amount of talent and a healthy personality with both feet on the ground. I can’t make a film about abuse and at the same time be guilty of abuse. That of course very much affects the child, because he plays the victim, but also the person who plays the perpetrator, Michael Fuith. It was really important that in the preparatory phase, we took a long hard look at who we are ourselves before beginning to talk about the characters.

**UB How does a ten-year-old digest a story like this?**

MS I have the advantage that I've already worked a lot with children. In particular, *The White Ribbon* by Michael Haneke was a big lesson. I wouldn't have dared take on MICHAEL if I was still wet behind the ears. I have learnt that one must approach children and meet them there where they are, which is to say in their childlike reality. That was really important. So it was not a matter – particularly with such a topic – of dragging the child up into the world of adults.

We talked quite openly with him and he developed certain strategies. I repeatedly gave him the chance to think for himself about what was going on in his character. What was also important was that he helped design his cellar room. He painted all of the pictures that are hanging in there. He developed liberation fantasies, such as that he was digging a tunnel and how he would take revenge. We let him rely on himself and his own strength. He knew the film script and also how it ended; and he had decided for himself how he as the character would come out of it all. And although it was always clear what it was all about, we reached an agreement with the boy and his parents on how to talk about the subject. It was very important not to flood him with information, but to make the situation graspable for him in a tangible way, as it were.

One mustn't underestimate children. Sometimes children are a lot more clued in than we choose to believe, or think them capable of being. Be that as it may, the child has to be protected, just like the figure of the child in this film – from me and the audience – so as to rule out any kind of voyeurism and every form of obscenity.

**UB And how was it for your lead, Michael Fuith?**

MS Actually he should answer that. All I can say from what I saw was that he plunged himself totally into the story, that he did a great deal of research and that time and again it was doubtless difficult for him to open himself up to a person like that and to depict that figure, so that one could follow actions logically even if one can't condone them.

He took this on with great honesty and his work was excellent, but I hope that his next role is something quite different.

## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1971 in Vienna, Schleinzer worked as a casting director from 1994 to 2010. During this time he participated in over 60 feature-film projects, including Jessica Hausner's *Lovely Rita*, *Hotel* and *Lourdes*, Ulrich Seidl's *Dog Days*, Benjamin Heisenberg's *Sleeper* and *The Robber*, Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men*, and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Player*, *Time of the Wolf* and *The White Ribbon*, for which he also cast the children, coached them and worked out their scenes with them.

MICHAEL is his first feature film.

## DIRECTOR'S SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

### Casting Director

2011	My Best Enemy
2010	The Unintentional Kidnapping of Mrs. Elfriede Ott
2010	The Poll Diaries
2010	The Robber
2010	Rammbock: Berlin Undead
2010	Wie man leben soll
2010	In Another Lifetime
2009	Women Without Men
2009	Lourdes
2009	Pepperminta
2009	The White Ribbon
2009	Contact High
2009	The Bone Man
2009	Kill Daddy Good Night
2008	Mr. Kuka's Advice
2008	For A Moment, Freedom
2007	Free Rainer
2007	The Counterfeiters
2006	Swimming
2005	Sleeper
2005	Crash Test Dummies
2004	Welcome Home
2004	Hotel
2003	Time of the Wolf
2002	Icarus
2001	Dog Days
2001	Lovely Rita
2001	The Piano Teacher
2001	Black Widow
2001	White Cherries
2000	Ternitz, Tennessee
2000	Hold-up
1998	Suzie Washington



## MICHAEL FUITH FILMOGRAPHY

2011	Michael
2010	Rammbock: Berlin Undead
2009	Kleine Fische
2008	Free to Leave
2008	Rimini
2008	Das Grosse Glück Sozusagen
2007	Mono
2007	Abwärts
2006	Kotsch
2004	Von Bis (short)
2002	Jagdfieber 124 (short)