

Strand Releasing presents

PARADISE: HOPE

A film by ULRICH SEIDL

Starring Melanie Lenz, Verena Lehbauer and Joseph Lorenz

Official Selection: Berlin Film Festival

Country of Origin: Austria/Germany/France

Format: DCP/1.85/Color

Sound Format: Dolby Digital SRD

Running Time: 92 minutes

Genre: Drama

Not Rated

In German with English Subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

The third installment in Ulrich Seidl's PARADISE trilogy, PARADISE: HOPE tells the story of overweight 13-year-old Melanie and her first love. While her mother travels to Kenya (PARADISE: LOVE) and her aunt (PARADISE: FAITH) does missionary work, Melanie spends her summer vacation at a strict diet camp for overweight teenagers. Between physical education and nutrition counseling, pillow fights and her first cigarette, Melanie falls in love with the camp director, a doctor 40 years her senior. As the doctor struggles with the guilty nature of his desire, Melanie had imagined her paradise differently.

ULRICH SEIDL'S PARADISE: A TRILOGY

AN ESSAY BY CHRISTOPHER HUBER

You can never have unlimited fun, but there is always anticipation and, as they say, that is the best part. A group of people with Down syndrome, their faces bright with excitement, sit in bumper cars at the Prater in Vienna under the beneficent gaze of their caretaker Teresa (Margarethe Tiesel). There is a brief inferno of enthusiasm: despite being warned – “Not so wild!” – the handicapped people crash their cars with gusto, screaming and circling around each other. Yet after a good minute their unlimited fun is over: “That’s it. Time to get out. it’s over.” Thus begins Ulrich Seidl’s PARADISE Trilogy – with the happiest minute of five-and-a-half hours.

Originally Seidl and his co-author, Veronika Franz, conceived of “PARADISE” as a single episodic film about the experiences of a mother, sister and daughter during a summer vacation in the manner of “Hundstage” (2001), Seidl’s great cross-section of Austria. But each story proved strong enough to warrant its own film. “PARADISE: Love” about the mother, Teresa, was shown in competition at Cannes in May 2012, “PARADISE: Faith” about the sister, Anna Maria, won the special prize at the Venice competition in September of the same year; and “PARADISE: Hope” about the daughter, Melanie, premiered in February 2013 at the Berlin Film Festival. The trilogy is more than the sum of its parts; each of the three main characters clings to an idealized vision of what her film’s subtitle ironically promises. Yet, as is always the case with Seidl, this is not a trite irony; instead there is, despite all the comedy, a sense of tragedy in his sympathy for their failures: paradise lost. Social constraints and interdependencies are crucial here, but the value of the trilogy emerges through its opposition to the recently popular cinematic determinism of intersecting episodes and the interdependency of sequels, comes from thematic harmonies in both the large arcs and the small details. Or, more precisely, from a multi-layered dialectic between resonance and dissonance. The result – which, in a certain way, surpasses the epic, seemingly conclusive European panorama that Seidl created in “Import Export” (2007) – is a limitless portrait of institutionalized solitude told through three futile attempts to escape from the framework of unequal power games and uncanny – or perhaps just uncannily funny – institutions. “Love” is set on the beaches of Kenya, in a vacation resort where Teresa mingles with other older female sex tourists. “Faith” is mainly a chamber piece set in the Viennese apartment of the fanatically Catholic Anna Maria, who is carrying on a running battle with her estranged Muslim spouse. “Hope” depicts Melanie’s stay at a weight-loss camp for overweight teenagers in the Wechsel Mountains where she falls for the chief physician.

Resonance and dissonance: the bumper car scene at the beginning of “Love” shows a unique kind of enthusiasm which is not without potential to disturb – frontal shots of contorted faces with Down syndrome. The opening scene appears to stand provocatively by itself, but it also anticipates the move made by Teresa when she abandons the fake exoticism of the palms on a billboard in the Prater for real palms in the vacation paradise of Kenya. There she finds relationships that are like bumper car crashes – a desperate, enervating cycle of attraction, collision, and rapid rejection. Still, these are preceded by promising visions: “This is really different, it’s a different kind of air. You feel different somehow,” Teresa says to her particularly passionate girlfriend (enthusiastic Inge Maux).

How deceptive the promises of freedom are has already been seen in the introduction to Kenya: on the bus to the resort the tourists learn the only two local phrases they are expected to use: “Jambo” (“Hello”) and “Hakuna matata” (“No problem”). In “Love” these run like a refrain through the distorted dialogues between the women seeking love and “their” Beach Boys (a frequently exhilarating confusion of languages: “I’ve got many things in my Kopf”) and the song repeatedly sung to greet tourists, “Jambo, bwana.” No problem as long as the money’s rolling in. Sex and money as articles of exchange in the mating games between two groups of exploited people. One, women over fifty who are too old or too fat to be considered attractive at home (or worse, to even be allowed to feel attractive); as “Sugar Mamas” they can buy themselves a second spring from African “Beach Boys” who make money that way – and often through deception. “Love” is characterized by an uncomfortable mix of feminist liberation and unchallenged colonialist residue. Despite Seidl’s inimitable visual signature, the spoken-word and musical dimensions of his work are obvious. The tourists amuse themselves by letting the bartender mangle words from Austrian dialect, such as Speckscwartl¹ and Blunzengröstl²; they cheerfully and unconsciously gush racist platitudes and behave condescendingly. Teresa’s search for “something horny” does not fulfill her utopian longing. Three friends provide a black as her birthday present, but his failure to get an erection ruins the party’s hoped-for climax. One of the women comments that his penis is like a “steak” (and not a “stake” – a nice onomatopoetic coincidence stemming from the Seidl method of improvisation). The final chord in a musical-physical leitmotif: Teresa dances with one Beach Boy while another simply watches as she sways her expansive hips, a third has to dance for the whole “Sugar Mama” troupe, conjuring up memories of the striptease fantasy from the now-distant erotic hit “9½ Weeks” (1986): “You can leave your hat on.”

The images too speak for themselves: the resort lies behind a barrier, the sunbathers on the beach are separated from the locals by a rope. An “exotic” zebra-striped hotel bar with a similarly costumed local band provides a (real-life) satirical spectacle: the musicians’ enchanting rendition of “La Paloma” washing over an apathetic audience. At the end of the credits is a wonderful reprise from the zebra-striped band: the saxophonist/front man has emerged from his decorative position in front of the black-and-white-striped background and spins excitedly until he falls down, out of the image and out of his role – just as the Beach Boys fall out of Teresa’s dream-prince fantasy. The financial pragmatism of the Beach Boys stands in flagrant contrast to Teresa’s desire “to look into each other’s eyes for a long time... I mean looking into the eyes without seeing what’s on the outside... that no one sees how ugly I am.” She can only imagine a one-sided gaze, and this too leads to disappointment. The ingratiating warmth of actress Margarethe Tiesel is one of the reasons why Teresa is touching even in her most deluded moments: “I am not an animal,” she says in a funny fiasco as she patiently tries to teach a Beach Boy how to touch her breasts. Elsewhere she is shown sleeping after a night of love like a nude Rubens beauty, the blue bed curtain wafting around her body in the wind from the fan.

A brief image of calm and fulfillment, in stark contrast to the sleeping places of her daughter (a bunk bed in a dormitory room where people prefer to party) and of her sister: Anna Maria has arranged her life as a penitent’s hermitage – crosses and devotional objects everywhere, holy water fonts at every door, in a drawer the scourge

that she uses in the first scene of “Faith” to make her “daily sacrifice” to atone for rampant “sins of sexual incontinence” – does she have any inkling of what her sister is doing? – kneeling before the crucifix and flagellating her back: “Thank you, Jesus, thank you.” By the end of the film she’s whipped the crucifix in desperation: a perfect parentheses for a different kind of disappointed love. In its clarity of form and confrontation “Faith” is the dramatic film equivalent of “Animal Love” (1996) one of Seidl’s documentaries. (In any case, his oeuvre has always undermined such categorizations with its striking combination of “staged” and “found” scenes.) The blend of professional and amateur actors reinforces one’s sense of the Seidl essence. Familiar faces surround the performance of lead actress Maria Hofstätter, which borders on self-sacrifice. Like Teresa, Anna Maria works with sick people, as an x-ray technician. The daily routine at her job is a typical Seidl-ritual of mechanical procedures, set to the rhythm of the medical equipment and her repeated instruction. “Don’t move.” A workaday counterpart to the standardized fun that the vacationers at Teresa’s resort work at having (“Hakuna matata”). The children at the weight-loss camp have all sense of fun driven out of them by compulsory physical exercise, which is also a kind of work. Anna Maria, however, imagines her work/fun differently, using her vacation to proselytize with a statue of Mary and a prayer on her lips – as deaf to misunderstandings as her sister. “Are you Christian?” she asks, marching into the home of a smiling, uncomprehending immigrant family. Their polite “Unfortunately, no!” is met with a group prayer and she leaves her prayer book behind with the words “Here, you can learn a little German along the way.” The two sisters share fervor and ignorance and – typical Seidl neurotics – a compulsion to clean: upon arriving in Kenya, Teresa immediately sprays her bathroom with disinfectant. There is a piquant parallel to this use of a spray can in the scene on a Beach Boy’s bed in which Teresa perfumes herself in expectation – between the legs too, after a brief hesitation. A counterpoint arrives in the exorcizing use of holy water by Anna Maria (the resolute enemy of sex) who scrubs her entire apartment before going off to find converts. Even at home she makes her rounds – the trilogy is a series of hellish circular motions – buckling on her cilice and crawling around on her knees, having set the alarm so that the proper amount of time is spent in penitence.

“Jesus, it is so nice to look into your eyes. You are such a beautiful man, the most beautiful there is,” prays Anna Maria lustfully – reversing her sister’s desire to be gazed at – “I’ve been so happy ever since we’ve been in a relationship.”

While Teresa has ostensibly been left by her husband, Anna Maria has found her partner in Jesus. She sings songs of praise to the lord, whether playing her organ at home with kitschy zeal or together with her prayer group, Legio Herz Jesu – when they aren’t making promises: “We are the shock troops of the Church. We swear to be true to you until death. We swear that Austria will be Catholic once again.” One night Anna Maria’s Muslim spouse, Nabil (A discovery: Nabil Saleh), turns up; his paralysis in an accident was the reason for her return to faith. She preaches to an amusingly unruly couple living “in sin”: “When you leave your first partner and go to live with someone else, that’s adultery!” But the sexual dimension of her desire for Jesus reveals her hypocrisy: in one scene, she takes a crucifix to bed and caresses it while moaning. She sees Nabil’s return as a “test” from her lover. “Only crisis leads to maturity,” Nabil skeptically reads from a wall of aphoristic posters in mangled, broken German. Yet this crisis leads to a feud that

uses love and religion as weapons but, ironically enough, has little to do with the much-quoted culture wars that manifest themselves in a different, mainly economic way in “Love.” Nabil, humiliated in his masculinity, pushes his way into the prayer group, cursing incomprehensibly in Arabic and spitting at his wife, and finally commences a crusade of his own. He uses his cane to methodically knock the crucifixes from the walls and, as if wielding a sword, transports the picture of the pope in the kitchen into the sink. Anna Maria stands wordlessly in front of the piles of shards, gathers them up, and takes away Nabil’s wheelchair. But her life can no longer be patched up: a storm resembling one of Akira Kurosawa’s magical images of weather awaits her after an unsuccessful attempt to convert a dead-drunk Russian woman; at home, her husband crawls to her bedroom door where he cries so loudly that even her rendition of “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden” (Oh Sacred Head, Now Wounded) cannot drown him out. His final sexual assault ends absurdly and pathetically in a crippled wrestling match, Anna Maria screaming when Nabil pulls up her undershirt and tries to touch her genitals (Teresa’s last disappointment is that she cannot convince an African to perform cunnilingus on her). All that is left to both of them is total solitude: Teresa goes down to the beach by herself, where an acrobatic local does cartwheels in the opposite direction; Anna Maria weeps at the feet of Jesus on the cross, a cross that she has hit and spit upon. Under the credits one hears Hofstätter’s moving a cappella interpretation of the hymn “Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig, ist der Menschen Leben!” (How Fleeting, How Vain is Human Life!)

In “Love” Seidl’s careful, characteristic tableaux frontal shots of characters looking at the audience – a demand for recognition – are contrasted with shots from behind them that are like an invitation to share their longing gaze – regardless of how unrealistic their ideas are. The claustrophobia of “Faith” corresponds to the narrow worldview that contributes to Anna Maria’s failure. It is only Nabil out on the balcony that we look into the distance – though to the nearby treetops instead of a vast sea. Melanie (Melanie Lenz) is actually sent to a sort of prison, albeit one of the well-intentioned kind. The dilapidated impersonal building at the weight-loss camp corresponds to a personality in the process of being formed. This makes “Hope” the saddest film in the trilogy, although it is also the lightest and most intimate. Seidl veterans Michael Thomas and Vivian Bartsch play a personal trainer and a nutritionist. “We work with discipline here, friends! Discipline is the alpha and omega,” preaches the trainer during group orientation, while the nutritionist invites participants to group therapy, where they sing, “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your fat!” and slap themselves on their fat backsides for encouragement. Violations of the rules are punished with pleasure; only in unsupervised conversations can the girls be themselves: a disgusted Melanie discusses methods of oral sex with her experienced friend Verena (Verena Lehbauer), which recalls her mother’s experiences and conversations with her friends about sex. From those undisciplined bodies via Anna Maria’s self-discipline we arrive at the next generation, which will be disciplined. Melanie also enters the cycle of desire, falling for the melodious yet unsettlingly smooth charm of a doctor (Joseph Lorenz) who is as old as her invisible father. A game of seduction plays out despite the resistance of reason: they circle around each other, switch roles while playing doctor, exchange long gazes in a state of undress – the slumbering desire that the sex tourists in Kenya believe they have won back. Melanie, disappointed by the silent doctor (who, like Teresa and Nabil, smokes by himself), runs

away with Verena to a bar where she falls into the hands of two village boys. “I’m gonna bite her fat bottom,” says one, recalling Seidl icon Herr René (Rupnik) and his monomaniac monologues about women’s soft “seductive flesh” in “Faith.” After the bar owner’s intervention, Melanie is picked up by the doctor, who, in a scene both magical and perverse, lays her down like a sleeping beauty in a foggy clearing in the woods. He sniffs her and lies down beside her as if in a marriage bed, a natural idea that has to remain unthinkable in civilization. Back in the dormitory the doctor says, “You are not allowed to look at me anymore. You will not speak to me anymore.” In reply to her uncomprehending “Why?” he says categorically, “Because that’s the way it is.” Of the three protagonists in “PARADISE”, it is Melanie who is innocently forced into the role of victim. That’s the way life goes and will continue to go, without mercy. Once more the inmates of the weight-loss camp are forced to march in single file between the trainer and the nutritionist, who circle them wordlessly and alertly during the meal. Over the credits comes a reprise of the song, “If you’re happy and you know it and you really want to show it, clap your fat!” Have fun. Within limits.

¹ Pork rind.

² An Austrian dish composed of blood sausage, potatoes, onions, and bacon.

ULRICH SEIDL METHOD

1. The working method is: Shoot fiction films in a documentary setting. So that unexpected moments of reality can meld with the fiction.
2. There is no script in the traditional sense. The script consists of very precisely described scenes – but no dialogue. During shooting the script is continually modified and rewritten. Seidl: “I see the filmmaking as a process oriented by what has preceded. In that way the material we’ve shot always determines the further development of the story.”
3. The cast consists of actors and non-actors. During casting equal consideration is given to professionals and non-professionals. Ideally the audience should not be able to say with certainty which roles are played by actors and which by non-actors.
4. The actors have no script on set.
5. Scenes and dialogue are improvised with the actors.
6. The film is shot chronologically, making it possible to continually adapt and develop scenes and dramatic threads. The ending is left open.
7. The film is shot in original locations.
8. Music is present only when it is an integral component of a scene.
9. The “open working method” also applies to editing. Rushes are evaluated and discarded at the editing table. The film is rewritten at the editing table. Several extended phases of editing are needed to identify what is and isn’t possible for the film. In this way, to take the example of PARADISE Trilogy, what had been planned as a single film became three separate films, each of which stands on its own, but which can also be viewed together as a trilogy.
10. In addition to the fiction scenes, so-called “Seidl tableaux” are filmed – precisely composed shots of people looking into the camera. The Seidl tableau (which was born in the director’s first short, “One Forty,” 1980) has become a trademark of Austrian film and is now used by other documentary and fiction film directors. On each of his films Ulrich Seidl shoots numerous tableaux, even though they may not make it into the final cut. “At some point I’ll make a tableaux-film with all the unused tableaux-scenes that were shot over the years in all of my films,” he says.

“WHAT YOU CAN’T FIND ON EARTH...”

Ulrich Seidl in conversation with Claus Philipp about his PARADISE Trilogy

INTERVIEW WITH ULRICH SEIDL

With the “PARADISE” films you’ve managed in a single year to present three films in competition at all three major film festivals – Cannes, Venice, Berlin. What does that mean for you?

It means that with the three “PARADISE” films we’ve succeeded in creating debate and controversy about the films and their theme in a broad international context. Of course I’m particularly proud of having achieved something no other filmmaker ever has: presenting three films in succession in a single year at the three most prestigious film festivals in the world.

“PARADSIE” – How did you come up with this title for the trilogy?”

In a Biblical sense, Paradise is the promise of a permanent state of happiness, but in the tourism industry it is a frequently overused term that for many people evokes the desire for sun, sea, freedom, love and sex. And in that way the title applies to all three stories and films, which portray three women trying to realize their unfulfilled dreams and desires.

How does the notion of Paradise apply to young girls at a diet camp?

It’s not the setting of the story that should be taken as Paradise, but rather – as with both the other stories and films – the longing for it. This film describes the dreams and desires of pubescent girls about life, love and their ideas of sexuality. Because she is overweight, Melanie, the film’s protagonist, lacks confidence and thinks that her physical appearance is the reason why she is rejected by the man for whom she experiences her first true love.

Which leads to the question of contemporary ideals of beauty throughout the PARADISE Trilogy. Corporality and, yes, beauty: What do they bring to mind for you?

Corporality always plays a big role in my films. I love filming close to the skin, showing people’s unenhanced bodies. For me it’s precisely in the unbeautified that you find something like beauty. There’s also the issue of the perversity of social pressures. What do women and also men do – that is, to themselves – to make their bodies correspond to socially prescribed norms?

As a director and as a man, what is it about these social ideals of beauty that disturbs you?

I don’t want others to dictate to me what is beautiful.

I'm disturbed by the homogenization of our notion of beauty. I'm disturbed by the social pressures and hypocrisy surrounding it. And I'm especially disturbed that these dictates are set down by people and industries whose only interest is making money.

Originally the PARADISE Trilogy was conceived as a single film. What factors determined the “explosion” of the story (stories)?

Our scripts (co-author: Veronika Franz) are written differently than is usual. While the individual scenes are described precisely, the individual stories are told like short stories and aren't interconnected. This only happens at the editing table, and results above all from my method of working, the basic principle of which is not to execute the existing script, but to take into account what happens while preparing the film and while shooting on any given day. It also has to do with the fact that as far as possible we shoot chronologically and try to remain open to change and new ideas during the process. In all I shot some 80 hours of materials and spent a year and a half in the editing room trying out countless rough cuts that combined the three stories. And at certain moments it worked quite well. Nonetheless, the various versions of this single film, a 5-hour-long-behemoth, remained unsatisfactory. Instead of mutually enriching each other, the stories weakened each other. At some point we realized that the best artistic solution was not one film, but instead three separate ones. Still, it wasn't an easy process.

Love, Faith, Hope – How did you end up with this sequence for the trilogy?

For a long time – while we were in the editing room – I was convinced that “Hope,” the story of the daughter, had to come in second place, after the story of the mother. And so the strongest and most difficult film, “Faith,” would come at the end. But one day we screened the films in a different order, with “Hope” at the end, and it was like a liberation. A deliverance. Suddenly the trilogy worked.

In some ways couldn't we see “PARADISE: Hope” as a variation on Vladimir Nabokov's “Lolita”?

At one point that was in fact the central idea for the story. Nabokov's theme always interested me, and there were plans to stage it as a play. But there's an important difference between Nabokov's novel and our story about the diet camp in terms of a the point of view. For both the script (in the script the girl was even called Lolita) and staging the challenge was to tell the story from the young girl's perspective. She, Melanie, was the story's main character.

Your scripts develop to a large extent through improvisation on set. What did that mean for the scenes between Melanie Lenz and Joseph Lorenz?

It was no easy task, although both acted very “professionally.” From the outset the relationship between the two was very distant, and throughout the entire shoot that didn't change. To be honest I wasn't very happy about it, but I couldn't change it. Obviously keeping up that very conscious distance was the only way those two could protect themselves. They never spoke with each other off set or during breaks. In the end

they had to play a forbidden love story and a forbidden desire between a man and an underage girl.

What was it like, working with the young non-professional cast?

Terrific. The collaboration couldn't have been better. Often after shooting you're left with a sense of dissatisfaction, because you're convinced things could've been done better. But in my work with the kids, this was not the case. If I have anyone to criticize, it's myself, because I was sometimes too careful with the girls and boys. Perhaps I was too careful in some ways because I knew they were children. But don't forget: Shooting was preceded by a long process (almost a year) of casting and selecting the lead actors. As always, it really paid off.

Now that the trilogy is finished, can you give us some idea of your upcoming plans?

For some time I've been working on a film project called "In the Basement," that deals with the theme "Austrian men and their basements."

The starting point was the research I did many years ago while preparing my film "Dog Days." I observed that the basement in single-family homes is often more generously furnished than the actual living quarters, from which we can conclude that many men, husbands, and fathers prefer to spend their time in the basement. At first it's all quite normal: The men do repairs, build things, do exercises, play darts, collect beer coasters or antique models, enjoy a drink with friends at the basement bar, have a smoke, watch TV, play computer games or build a shooting range. But of course we all know that basements, as places of darkness, secrets, fear and hiding, are places of a double life, horror and crime. That's what viewers will be thinking, because the film offers a look at the private and familiar aspects of Austrian basements.

INTERVIEW WITH MELANIE LENZ

You are doing an apprenticeship in retail sales. How is it?

I like the work, but at first the switch from school wasn't easy. I'm in the clothing department and I had to get used to standing on my feet for so long.

Did you have any experience with diet camps before making the film?

I was at diet camp in 2009 and again last summer. The sports activities on set reminded me of being in diet camp. But when you're shooting, you often have to wait around until everything is in place. In a real camp it's different, you do sports non-stop!

What was it like working with Ulrich Seidl? Some actors have said that he can be a very demanding director?

He is professional and knows what he wants. But he realized I was only 13 when we shot the film. When he noticed that I was having a hard time, he always came over and talked to me and tried to cheer me up. As a person he's very nice.

In the film Verena plays your best friend at camp. Did you know each other before?

No, but we got along really well and we're still in touch. I'm sure it helped that we all stayed in the same hotel. So we got to know each other and really connected. We even shared the same room, just like in the film.

Were your lines completely improvised?

During the first run-through everything was spontaneous. After that Ulrich sometimes gave us feedback about things we should pay attention to for the next take. Most of the time we talked just like we'd talk among ourselves.

How did you get along with Joseph Lorenz, who plays your first real love in the film?

At first I was scared to death of Joseph Lorenz, because he always looked so grim and he was quite strange. But then we talked and hit it off. We laughed a lot on set, and for me it was a lot of fun and I couldn't stay serious. But first I had to get to know him, just like with all the other actors.

Were any scenes particularly difficult for you? How did you deal with them?

For sure one of the hardest scenes was in the disco where I dance with the young guy. We didn't film the scene until the very end, when we really felt like a team. Still I wasn't comfortable about the idea of doing it so I asked my mom to be there, which she did.

Which scene was particularly enjoyable?

There's a scene in the film where my roommates and I sneak into the camp kitchen to steal desserts. We're caught and run away. That was really fun, and one of our best days.

CAST

Melanie Lenz (also her character's name in the film) was discovered during an 18-month-long casting process at a Viennese high school where she had played in many theater productions "and always got the leading role. I get a huge kick from stuff like that." Thirteen years old during shooting, she had previous experience with diet camps (see interview). Not 16, Melli is studying to work in retail sales.

Joseph Lorenz (the doctor) appears for the first time with Ulrich Seidl. Lorenz has made his career on stage, where he has had successful engagements at all the leading German-language theaters. After studying at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, his first roles took him to Germany, including Berlin's prestigious Schillertheater. In 1995 he returned to Austria and performed in Vienna at the Burgtheater and the Theater in der Josefstadt. In recent years he has been a regular at the Reichenau theater festival. He lives in Vienna.

Verena Lehbauer (Melanie's friend Verena) had no previous acting experience. Born in May 1995, she was 16 years old during filming. She is a terrific singer and is currently studying the restaurant business. "Shooting was certainly demanding, but it was totally worth it. Those two months on set were an amazing experience. The collaboration between crew and cast was incredible, and we made lasting friends. It will stay with me all my life."

Johanna Schmid (Melanie's friend Hanni) was born in 1997 and is now finishing high school. She too had no prior experience on-screen. Asked about working with Ulrich Seidl, she says "It was really different from what I imagined. There were no makeup artists or hair stylists. We all did our own makeup and hair. We were only given our outfits, but most of the time we didn't like them. I'm glad we didn't have to memorize dialogue, because that always makes me nervous. Speaking spontaneously is much easier for me."

Michael Thomas (the fitness trainer), here appears on camera for the second time for Ulrich Seidl. He played one of the lead roles in the director's prize-winning "Import Export" (2007) and also appeared in Seidl's stage production "Bad Boys / Hideous Men." Born in 1962 to cabaret artist Fred Weis and actress Tilla Hohenfels, in his younger years he worked as a sailor and bouncer. He began his acting career in theater, followed by appearances on TV. For 20 years he played the legendary cowboy Old-Shatterhand, the longest run in the history of the Winnetou theater festival. An all-round talent, he is an actor, singer, author and silver-medalist national boxing champion.

Vivian Bartsch (the nutritionist) was discovered as an actress for Ulrich Seidl's 1998 film "Models." Raised in Bad Vöslau, she graduated as a medical representative before attending the Franz Schubert Conservatory in Vienna. To pay for her studies she modeled for advertising and corporate videos. Since then she has appeared in numerous films and stage productions, including Seidl's production of "Our Father" at the Volksbühne in Berlin, where she now lives.

BIOGRAPHY

Ulrich Seidl, born 1952, lives in Vienna (Austria).

Ulrich Seidl is the Austrian director of numerous award-winning documentaries such as "Jesus, You Know," "Animal Love" and "Good News." Seidl's first fiction feature "Dog Days" won the Grand Jury Special Prize at the 2001 Venice Film Festival. Werner Herzog named Ulrich Seidl one of his 10 favorite filmmakers and said: "Never before in cinema have I been able to look straight into hell." In 2003 Seidl founded Ulrich Seidl Filmproduktion in Vienna, where he produced "Import Export". He followed it with his PARADISE Trilogy (2012): Three films about three women made in four years. He is now completing a documentary feature that explores people and their relationships to basements. "In the Basement" will premiere in 2013.

Filmography

2012 PARADISE: Love | 2007 Import Export | 2006 Brothers, Let Us Be Merry (short) | 2004 Our Father, Volksbühne Berlin (filmed stage play) | 2003 Jesus, You Know | 2001 State of the Nation (feature) | 2001 Dog Days | 1998 Models | 1998 Fun Without Limits (TV) | 1997 The Bosom Friend (TV) | 1996 Pictures at an Exhibition (TV) | 1995 Animal Love | 1994 The Last Men (TV) | 1992 Losses to Be Expected | 1990 Good News | 1982 The Prom (short) | 1980 One Forty (short)

Prizes

2012 PARADISE: Love – Palic Tower – Best Director - Serbia | 2011 Maverick Award – Motovun - Croatia | 2010 Bremen Film Prize - Germany | 2008 Amnesty International Award - Festival Internacional de Cinema Independente - Lisbon | 2007 Import Export - Golden Apricot - Armenia / Import Export – Palic Tower - Serbia / Import Export – Main Prize – Bangkok | 2005 Film Prize of Lower Austria | 2004 Best Director - Riga - Latvia | 2003 Jesus, You Know – Best Documentary – Karlovy Vary / Jesus, You Know – Film Prize - Viennale – Vienna / Jesus, You Know – Prize of the Association québécoise des critiques – Montréal / Jesus, You Know – Erich-Neuberg Prize (ORF - Austrian TV) - Vienna | 2002 Honorary Prize of the Office of the Chancellor | 2001 Dog Days – Silver Lion - Venice / Dog Days – Best Film, Best Director –Bratislava / Dog Days – Best Film – Gijon / Dog Days - FIPRESCI-Prize for Discovery of the Year / Dog Days – Most Successful Austrian Feature Film for the Year 2001/2002 / Models – Best Feature Film - Television Prize | 2000 Models – Audience Award - Sarajevo | 1996 Animal Love – Best Documentary - Potsdam / Pictures at an Exhibition – Best Documentary – Austrian Prize for Adult Education | 1992 Losses to Be Expected – Runner-up Prize – Yamagata / Losses to Be Expected – Jury Prize - Amsterdam / Losses to Be Expected – Austrian Film Days Prize / Losses to Be Expected – Best Documentary Film – Golden Frame | 1991 Good News - Prix des bibliothèques - Paris / Good News – Vienna Film Prize

CAST

Melanie Lenz

Joseph Lorenz

Michael Thomas

Vivian Bartsch

Verena Lehbauer

Johanna Schmid

Melanie Lenz

The doctor

The fitness trainer

The nutritionist

Verena

Hanni

CREW

Director

Script

Camera

Sound

Production Design

Costume Design

Casting

Editor

Artistic Assistant

Line Producer

Production Manager

Production

Co-production

With the support of

Ulrich Seidl

Ulrich Seidl & Veronika Franz

Wolfgang Thaler & Ed Lachman

Ekkehart Baumung

Renate Martin & Andreas Donhauser

Tanja Hausner

Eva Roth

Christof Schertenleib

Veronika Franz

Konstantin Seitz

Max Linder

Ulrich Seidl Film

Tat Film & Parisienne de Production

Österreichisches Filminstitut

Filmfonds Wien

Land Niederösterreich

Eurimages

Centre national du cinema et de l'image animée

ORF (Film/Fernseh-Abkommen)

WDR/ARTE

Degeto

ARTE France Cinéma

Ulrich Seidl Film Produktion GmbH

In collaboration with

Producer

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