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Interview with film-maker Rolf Lyssy

“Swiss films are minted abroad...”

Swiss Review: Mr. Lyssy, what is a typical Swiss film?

Rolf Lyssy: There is no such thing. You might as well ask: What is Switzerland? Films and language are closely connected. So Swiss-German films reflect the Swiss-German mentality. French-speaking films on the other hand, like those of Tanner, Yersin, Goretta and Reusser, are heavily influenced by France. Normally, French-speaking Swiss do not watch Swiss-German films because they are too different. ‘Die Schweizermacher’ (The Swissmakers) was an exception: the French-speakers liked my film because of Emil, the comic. The reactions were astonishing. More than a million Swiss saw my film, even though it criticised their own mentality – our own mentality.

What are the problems which Swiss film producers have to face?

I make films in a country which is too small for this expensive art form. Every film is like a product made to order. But it needs a wide public to succeed. If it is to cover its production costs of several million Swiss francs, a film must be seen by at least 200,000 people, instead of the 5,000 to 20,000, which is normal here.

So why are Swiss films produced just the same?

Because in 1958 it was decided on the political scene that Switzerland needed films, so that it could be reflected in them. They were promoted in the same way as cheese, wine and other indigenous products.

Swiss film-makers are considered exotic. With what foreign producers would you compare them?

With film-makers in all the smaller countries of Europe – Holland, Belgium, Denmark or Sweden. Incidentally, our government subsidies are amongst the lowest, even though we are

one of the richest countries in the world. Our culture consciousness is apparently thin.

Did ‘Die Schweizermacher’ even out the road for you?

No, unfortunately not. Like everyone in this country I have to fight for financial assistance. Switzerland finds it difficult to deal with success. Resentment and jealousy are very widespread. Someone who gets above the average is suspect, he does not feel solidarity. Since 1975, I have not received the Zurich Film Prize, presumably because people thought that after ‘Die Schweizermacher’ I did not need any more recognition.

Do you know films which have received prizes but were not so-called successes?

The films of Daniel Schmid, for example, always receive a lot of attention at festivals, but unhappily they have problems in getting across to a wider public.

What subsidies do you get for your film projects?

Switzerland promotes its films and their participation in festivals to the tune of Sfr. 7.5 million per year. That is ridic-

ulous when you think that one production can swallow up Sfr. 2 to 5 million. The maximum that can be squeezed out of the federal government, together with cantonal and municipal authorities, is Sfr. 1.5 million. Since the private sector has virtually no interest in films, the rest must come from outside the country. In the case of a costly production, it simply comes down to this: Swiss films are minted abroad . . .

As a film-maker, to what extent are you dependent on television?

Television stations both at home and abroad are important for co-productions. They purchase the transmission rights. In this sense they are important partners, also for cinema films. As a freelance, I am my own contractor. Together with my producers I also organise my own financing. This production work takes up an enormous amount of energy.

Are you ever anywhere near packing it in?

Yes – because it is difficult in this country not to give up. Some of my colleagues are very embittered. I can quite understand people working in the arts who emigrate. My brother, a musician, has moved to Israel, and my son works as a cameraman in New York.

Films are booming, but not Swiss films. How do you find their present situation?

Films are subject to popularity waves, much like those we see in sport. One moment they are right up, and then the next they fall into a pit of anonymity. Our really rich harvest was in the 1940s and 1950s. Then came a big hole. At the end of the 1960s, we had the New Swiss Film. This reached its climax in the middle 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Since then things have been going downhill all the time.

Rolf Lyssy, born in 1936, trained as a photographer and worked as an assistant with a number of film directors, including Alain Tanner, Reni Mertens and Walter Marti. Since 1968, he has written and directed nine films and staged three plays for the theatre. His best known films are ‘Konfrontation’ (Confrontation) 1975 – which earned him the Zurich Film Prize – ‘Die Schweizermacher’ (The Swissmakers) 1978, ‘Teddy Bär’ (Teddy Bear) 1983 and ‘Leo Sonny-boy’ 1989. Rolf Lyssy also aroused broad public attention with his staging of Urs Widmer’s play ‘Jeanmaire – ein Stück Schweiz’ (Jeanmaire – a Piece of Switzerland).

What actually is a good film?

The question of quality is a very touchy one. A film is made by people. There is an author and a director – sometimes one person – and there are actors. A film-maker must know exactly what he is doing, and he must also have something to say.

In Switzerland, there is nothing like Cinecittà, Hollywood or Babelsberg. Have Swiss films any chance at all from the professional point of view?

Speaking frankly, there are too many film-makers in Switzerland, making too many pointless films – documentaries excluded. There are too many people fighting for a cake which is much too small. In the last twenty years inexperienced people have been given opportunities to make feature films too soon. Most of them have fallen on their faces badly before both the critics and the public. This problem cannot be solved by means of film schools alone, for these produce unemployed film-makers too, and many of their graduates simply enter television.

How would you define a successful film-maker?

Film-making needs passion. A film-maker is giving his life to his film. It is a matter of love, but to this we have to add the ominous word, talent. And another: patience. I sit at my writing desk more often than I stand behind a

camera. You also have to be prepared to take risks. In this very expensive profession, you must be able to take more responsibility on your shoulders than in almost any other field.

The film which has impressed you the most, Mr. Lyssy?

There isn't one. I refuse to establish a list of that kind. But a cinema father figure who has influenced me greatly is Billy Wilder, who incidentally was actually born in the same year as my father. Wilder showed that a film – whether a comedy, a thriller or a melodrama – could entertain and put over a message at the same time.

What message would you like to put over?

I think as an anti-fascist. I try to tell stories keeping this basic attitude in mind. I have hit my target if people feel a little bit changed when they come out of the cinema.

What are you working on at present?

My next film is called 'Swiss Paradise'. It takes place in the United States in a fictitious place called New Schwyz, and it tells the story of how we Swiss, who seal ourselves off from each other, wish, can and should open ourselves up to others . . . ■



"Alpine Fire"
by Fredi M. Murer,
a successful
Swiss film.
(Photos: zvg)

The 50th Locarno Festival

Films in the piazza

Where can you find evening after evening 7,000 people under the stars being enchanted by moving pictures shown on a giant screen 26 metres wide

Fred Zaugg*

by 14 metres high? And where is a festival of the seventh art made available to the population in the main square, the Piazza Grande, right in the middle of town? In Locarno, naturally.

The Locarno International Festival, to be held for the fiftieth time on August 6–16, is the second oldest after Venice. It has the reputation of being the most original as well as the most informal, although with about 150,000 partici-

pants it is only the sixth biggest in the world.

The Locarno Film Festival started in the gardens of the Nobelhotel Albergo Grande. In 1971, it moved to the Piazza. From the very outset, Locarno wrote movie history. Among the prize winners at the first festival in 1946 were René Clair's American film, 'And Then There Were None' and Sergej M. Eisenstein's 'Ivan Grozny' (Ivan the Terrible). Since that time, many film-makers from all over the world have started their careers in Locarno, for the festival has always paid particular attention to films by young directors and films from little-known and new film countries.

According to tradition, during the jubilee festival the future-oriented international competition amongst 16 to 18 of the most important films will still be the

biggest part. But it goes without saying that with justified pride Locarno will this year be looking back on its past. A section entitled '50+1 Years of American Films' is planned, in which well-known contemporary film directors will select important films from the USA which were not sufficiently appreciated when they came out. Publication of a book, a hiking event with stopovers throughout Switzerland, and a Locarno Federal Festival, which will amount to a Festival Birthday Festival, will also take place.

The festival family will be the same, or so it is hoped, growing bigger yet getting younger and younger all the time. For 51 years Locarno has given films a future (in 1951 there was no festival, so this is the 50th). The jubilee edition will surely demonstrate the festival's ability of moving with the times. ■

* Fred Zaugg is the film critic of the Berne daily, 'Der Bund'.