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Lights, camera, action!

Swiss-German film is finally enjoying a breath of fresh air following the box-office success of the military comedy "Achtung, fertig, Charlie!".

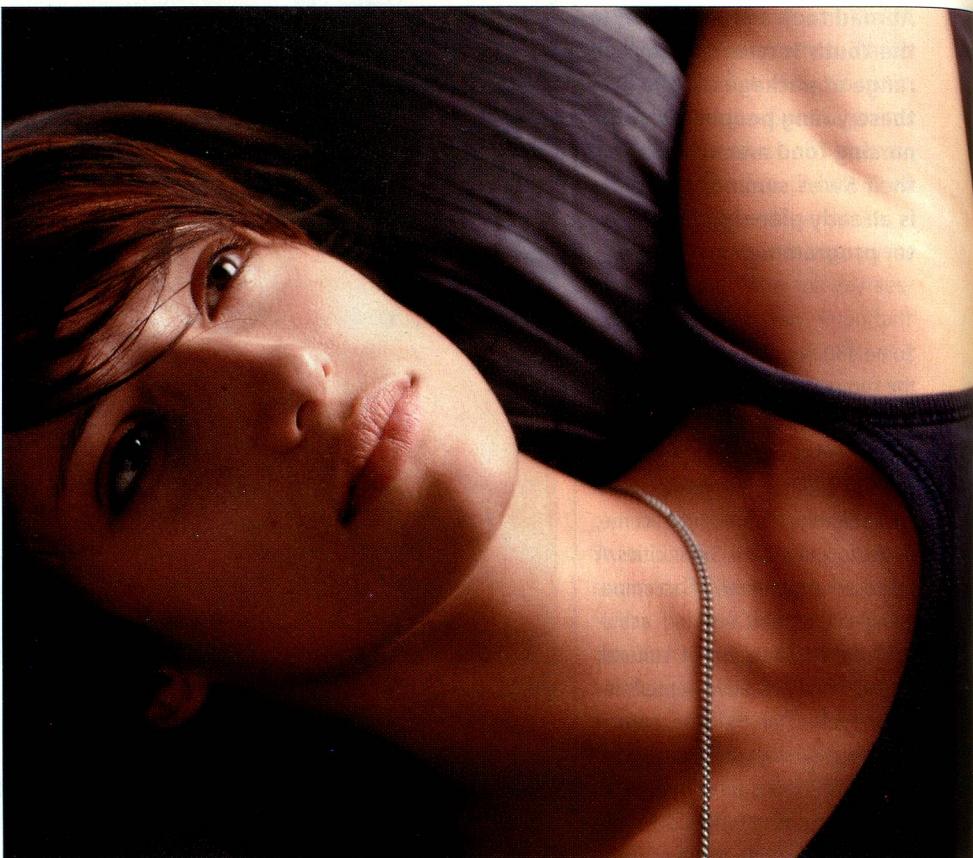
BY MICHAEL LANG*

"THE MIRACLE OF BERNE", the box-office hit about the German squad's victory at the 1954 Football World Cup final, is not, unfortunately, a Swiss production. But last year, after years in the doldrums, the Swiss film industry experienced another kind of miracle when Zurich director Mike Eschmann produced a sensation with his comedy about military recruits, "Achtung, fertig, Charlie!". The film attracted audience numbers of 530 000 and was outranked on the annual list of hit films only by the two blockbuster productions, "Finding Nemo" and "The Matrix Reloaded". So, is the Swiss film industry approaching Hollywood dimensions?

Of course not: but the Swiss adore the cinema. In 2003, Swiss cinemas clocked up 16.5 million admissions. The main beneficiaries of this trend are films from the USA, France and the UK. Home-grown productions came fifth on the list, nevertheless representing a market share of some six percent. Thanks to "Achtung, fertig, Charlie!", this is considerably more than in previous years. While sceptics are worried about the trend levelling off after this success, the fact is that Eschmann's military comedy may well provide the impetus for open, creative film-makers. And Swiss film promotion organs, generally regarded as conservative, were rewarded for their courage in supporting obviously commercial projects as and when they occur.

Naturally a box-office success is not the be-all and end-all. Films should reflect more

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Melanie Winiger in "Achtung, fertig, Charlie!"

than the lightness of being. Yet it is interesting to note that Swiss film can also hold its own when it comes to pure entertainment. What began in 1978 with Rolf Lyssy's "Die Schweizermacher" ("The Swissmakers"), was revived again in recent years through "Katzendiebe" (1996), "Komiker" (2000) – both by Markus Imboden – and Sabine Boss's "Ernstfall in Havanna" (2002), has now been firmly cemented by "Achtung, fertig, Charlie!": The Swiss like to laugh at themselves, even over taboo topics like the military.

Such a statement would have been unthinkable in the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of the new Swiss film industry, when there was a clear bias against the voracious US film industry and TV entertainment. Led by politically active Swiss-French writer-directors like Alain Tanner, Michel Soutter or Claude Goretta, the movement also inspired the production of acclaimed works in German-speaking Switzerland thanks to

film-makers like Fredi M. Murer, Markus Imhoof, Rolf Lyssy, Kurt Gloor and Daniel Schmid. But in the 1980s many exponents of the critical 1968 generation felt misunderstood, and mistrusted the formal posturing and radicalism of a rebellious new generation already heavily influenced by the video culture. Moreover, they regarded the laborious process through state film promotion committees as inhibiting.

Yet without public funds there would be no modern Swiss film industry, given the fragile nature of production structures and the limited commercial opportunities afforded by three different linguistic regions. So it came about that established film-makers like Markus Fischer, Urs Egger and Markus Imboden shifted their focus abroad. Bernese Oberlander Imboden is a highly successful TV director in Germany but still occasionally makes Swiss films such as "Katzendiebe" or "Komiker". Xavier Koller, has lived and worked in California since he

won an Oscar for his "Reise der Hoffnung" ("Journey of Hope") in 1991, since when he has only made one film in Europe: the hugely successful adaptation of Tucholsky's "Gripsholm" (2000).

With the exception of works such as Gertrud Pinkus's "Anna Göldin – die letzte Hexe" (1991) and Daniel Schmid's political farce "Beresina" (1999), the Swiss film industry has been struggling at the box office for decades. Many heavily-subsidised fiction films never get further than showings at national events such as the Solothurn film festival or at minor film festivals abroad. Their reputation has not been the best. By contrast, Swiss documentary films have always been acclaimed for their high quality. Some attracted significant audience numbers last year, such as Friedrich Kappeler's "Warum syt Dir so truuriig?", about Bernese songwriter Mani Matter, "Elisabeth Kübler Ross", Stefan Haupt's homage to the famous psychiatrist who made a lifetime study of death, and Lausanne film-maker Jean-Stéphane Bron's witty look at the federal parliament, "Mais im Bundeshaus". Added to this, Christian Frei was nominated for an Oscar in 2002 for his "War Photographer". Documentary films can be made with a manageable amount of manpower and technical effort, often on a small budget, and are also of interest to foreign TV channels.

Yet a country's film scene is largely defined by its fiction film industry, and in this respect things are looking up, although Switzerland still has some way to go. There is still a dearth of good scripts that reflect the unique nature of Swiss culture but still tell a universal story. Only then will foreign producers be interested in getting involved.

State cultural promotion authorities have recognised the value of film, and the Federal Office for Culture (FOC) has continually increased its grants. The 2004 credit for films is around CHF 35 million, of which some CHF 22 million is earmarked for promotional measures for films. Of this, over CHF 4 million flows into the so-called success-dependent film promotion (Succès cinéma). Since 1996 film-makers and cinemas have received additional compensation dependent on audience numbers: a good model.

In addition to public funds, the Swiss film industry is supported by Swiss television. In 2004, CHF 17 million was invested in the production of eight Swiss TV films. Added

to this, cinema films are subsidised to the tune of millions of francs as part of the "audio-visual pact".

Naturally, donors want to have a say in productions, and this sometimes leads to friction. The formal and narrative differences between the big screen and the TV screen are a fact of life. A TV film needs a good story and a convincing cast, and should not be totally dependent on visual escapades or battles involving mass destruction of material. A current example shows how it should be done: Christoph Schaub's TV production "Sternenberg" (2004), a home-grown comedy with Matthias Gnädinger, was brought to the big screen by the Swiss subsidiary of US film giant Buena Vista International (which had already released "Achtung, fertig, Charlie") prior to TV release, and attracted an audience of 100 000.

Such statistics demonstrate how Swiss fiction films are increasingly gaining ground. Another contributing factor is the fact that video production methods have made it easier to make films. Take 38-year-old sculptor, rock musician and film-maker Luke Gasser from central Switzerland: with a mini-budget, a little help from friends and bags of enthusiasm, he demonstrated his many talents with "Baschis Vergeltung" (2000) and "Fremds Land" (2003). The latter film was seen by an audience of 15 000 and was more successful than many more heavily subsidised works.

The likes of Luke Gasser are injecting life into the film scene. The same is true of newcomer Manuel Flurin Hendry, whose first-ever film, "Strähl", an atmospheric drama about the drug scene in Zurich's Langstrasse, made its mark through its fresh "cinéma-direct" approach. Hendry comes from the talented stable of Zurich's film production and author group "Dschoint Ventschr". The consortium is headed by inventive film-maker Samir, who is now filming "Snow White" after a break of several years.

When it comes to broad appeal, a great deal of hope is being pinned on Michael Steiner, an inventive young director who directed the film adaptation of the cult youth novel "Mein Name ist Eugen" on a budget of CHF 6.3 million. Interestingly, the government sanctioned a contribution of CHF 1 million for this project: the maximum permissible amount.

Things are happening in Switzerland's hard-pressed film landscape. On a visit to the 2004 Locarno Film Festival, Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin emphasised that film promotion is high on the government's list and that, despite pressure to cut costs, the budget for films is to be increased in the near future. This would once more allow donors greater freedom to continue supporting artists like quirky Bernese screenwriter-filmmaker Clemens Klopfenstein, who was awarded the first film prize in 1998 for "Das Schweigen der Männer. In his "Das Schreien der Mönche", Klopfenstein will soon be bringing a Swiss "dream couple" to the screen in the form of Bernese rocker Polo Hofer (59) and former Bond girl Ursula Andress (68). More importantly, however, up-and-coming young artists will receive even more resources and assistance in order to turn their visions into reality in a cosmopolitan business. Finally, inspired by new ideas and faces, Swiss film will become more diverse and more self-confident.

The Swiss film industry has no need to emulate Hollywood formats. But it would be nice if films from Switzerland better reflected what our country has long represented: an open-minded, cohesive and multicultural island at the heart of Europe. Cinema is the most popular form of culture. It would be better for all if artists and political-social bodies worked more closely together to achieve a reasonable balance between art cinema and commercial cinema, of which the "Achtung, fertig, Charlie!" farce is just as much a part as any serious drama about minority groups.



*Michael Lang is a free-lance journalist based in Zurich.

Translated from German.

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Swiss film industry

www.procinema.ch

Swiss Film Centre

www.swissfilm.ch

Federal Office for Culture

(Film Section)

www.kultur-schweiz.admin.ch/film