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Winkelried – The Swiss “Braveheart”

Michael Steiner, winner of the Swiss Film Prize and director of Switzerland's third biggest box office money-spinner (“Mein Name ist Eugen”, 2005), has now released a new hit: “Grounding – The End of Swissair”. The pace and fascination of the film inspire optimism about the future of films made in Switzerland. By Alain Wey



Director Michael Steiner – shooting star of Swiss cinema

Is Swiss film-making alive and well? Since the beginning of the new millennium, we can answer with confidence “Yes—more so than ever.” Swiss films are pulling in Swiss cinema audiences to even better effect than some major American productions. Michael Steiner is one of the new generation of directors making attractive, popular and profitable Swiss films for the cinema. In January, his third venture “Mein Name ist Eugen” [“My Name is Eugen”], won him the Swiss Film Prize, presented in conjunction with the Solothurn Film Festival. He took this opportunity to announce his next project: “Grounding – The End of Swissair” – a swift-paced, exciting business thriller. Attracting over 200,000 cinema-goers within the space of four weeks, this film has been a resounding hit. In view of the explosive subject matter, it has even been called “the most daring work in the

history of Swiss cinema.” The Zurich-based director can congratulate himself. He has found the recipe for a Swiss film that is a success at home. Michael Steiner works at his film studio, Kontraproduktion AG in Zurich, together with scriptwriters, technicians and musicians. An encounter with a “self-taught director with his roots in pop culture”:

Journalist, press photographer, then director at Condor Film in Zurich, Michael Steiner, now 36 years old, made his first cinema film in 1991 at the age of 22. “The new generation of Swiss film-makers works with different media, different contents and different narrative modes, in terms of scripts as well as images and scenes,” explains the successful director. “It’s my impression that successful filming depends more on script-writers than on directors – in other words, on people like Michael Sauter and

his partner David Keller.” Sauter’s record includes the scripts of “Ready, Steady, Charlie!” (which sold 560,514 tickets), “Mein Name ist Eugen” and “Grounding”, the biggest Swiss cinema hits of recent years.

The box-office success of a Swiss film in Switzerland depends on its ability to spark enthusiasm in local citizens. “The most important thing first of all is to be successful in the local market and to prove that people go to the pictures when you make a good film. The subject matter is of paramount importance. ‘Eugen’ and ‘Grounding’ are clearly aimed at the Swiss market. Both subjects have a firm hold on Swiss memories: the Swissair crisis and the story of Eugen. The latter is based on a book that German-speaking Swiss people read at school. It’s about people like themselves, they can identify with it.” The Swiss clichés used in “Mein Name

ist Eugen" make people laugh at themselves. "As far as 'Grounding' is concerned," and here Michael Steiner is amazed, "the film has angered every film-goer I've met. It rekindled the rage people felt at the loss of Swissair. Everybody wanted to keep the national airline..."

This analysis also applies to Switzerland's two biggest ever box-office hits: "The Swissmakers" (940,103, viewers, 1978) and "Ready, Steady, Charlie!" (560,514 viewers, 2003). "The Swissmakers" dealt with immigration: an important issue for the Swiss. Not as a drama, which wouldn't have worked, but as a comedy. "Ready, Steady, Charlie" took off for different reasons. That one was the first real comedy in Swiss German and made for a young audience. It is crucial for the local market to make films in Swiss German."

Steiner is happy about the revival of Swiss film-making: success with the public is worth just as much as the best financial backing from state and industry. For "Mein Name ist Eugen", Michael Steiner's team achieved a first by having the support of a strong partner from private industry as co-producer – the insurance company Mobiliar Versicherung. "Without them, we wouldn't have been able to finance the film (budget: CHF 6 million), the state grants wouldn't have been enough." Searching for private investors is typical of Steiner's approach: in addition to the Swiss Department of Culture, the canton, the city of Zurich and the Swiss television station DRS, more than 30 other sponsors financed "Grounding", including Swiss companies Amag, Migrol and Bally as well as the Japanese enterprise Sharp and the US company Reebok.

A film about a Swiss historical event? Steiner has already toyed with the idea. "I would like to make a film about Winkelried – the soldier who threw himself onto the enemy lances at the Battle of Sempach (1386) to breach the Austrian ranks. That is my most ambitious project for Switzerland. The story would start with the Battle of Morgarten and end with the Battle of Sempach. Sort of 'Braveheart' style – that would be great. But it would take huge amounts of money, and I don't see myself being able to do it for another ten years or so. I estimate the budget at around CHF 30 million. It would have to be an international production, because it would be nonsensical to make such a lavish film for the Swiss cinema. I would need foreign partners who would guarantee right from the start that the film would show all over Europe and in America." On behalf of film fans all over the world, and especially in Switzerland, let us hope that this big project will come off one day.

www.kontra.ch, www.procinema.ch

"MEIN NAME IST EUGEN"

The adaptation of Klaus Schädelin's book "Mein Name ist Eugen" was Michael Steiner's third project aimed at cinema audiences. It tells the story of four little boys in Switzerland in the 1950s. Endless pranks and parent trouble make Eugen and Wrigley turn their backs on Berne and leave for Zurich to hunt for treasure, with a secret card in their pockets. Wrigley found the card in the cellar, and wants to find its owner: Fritzli Bühler, who is thought to live in Zurich. On the way, the boys have a chance encounter with a group of boy scouts, and join them on their trip to Ticino. They then escape by bicycle, taking their friends Eduard and the somewhat reluctant Bäschteli with them. Their parents soon discover the group's flight, and set out immediately to fetch the runaways back. Told like a fairy tale, but packed with modern gags, "Mein Name ist Eugen" brought more than 538,000 people flocking to the cinemas. The film was third on the Swiss box office hit list in 2005, after "Madagascar" (686,027 tickets sold) and "Harry Potter" (612,000).

www.eugen-film.ch



"GROUNDING – THE END OF SWISSAIR"

Based on the book "Swissair, Mythos & Grounding" ["Swissair, Myth & Grounding"] by Bilanz editor-in-chief René Lüchinger and a survey of eye-witnesses conducted by Michael Steiner, "Grounding" maps out the last days of the debt-burdened national Swiss airline, which became insolvent and was finally nailed to the floor by creditors on 2nd October 2001. The docudrama combines real people with fictional figures, archive documents from German Swiss television with elements of soap opera. "A dramatic storyline simply had to be built into it as a background for showing the grounding's victims," explains Michael Steiner. "I wouldn't have made the film if I hadn't been so outraged myself about this debacle. By 2002, I still just couldn't believe that Swissair had gone. I thought it would rise again. They couldn't just let the world's best airline disappear off the face of the earth. I didn't think it was possible – and I reckon most other Swiss people felt the same way."

www.groundingfilm.ch

Above:
Hanspeter Müller-Drossaart as
Mario Corti in "Grounding"

Left: Box office hit
"Mein Name ist Eugen"

"I REALLY WOULD LOVE TO MAKE A FILM WITH AL PACINO"

What are your cinematic influences? "Very broad. When I made 'Grounding' I was undoubtedly influenced by Michael Mann, but with 'Eugen' my inspiration came more from Jaco Van Dormael ('Toto the Hero', 'The Eighth Day') and Jean-Pierre Jeunet ('Amélie')."

Which genres do you particularly like? "Mafia films. If I had the material I would like to make one set in Switzerland. 'Scarface' with a Zurich accent, for example."

Is there one director who is your particular idol? "Probably Michael Mann, who made the 'Miami Vice' series. His best film was 'Heat'. But 'The Insider' was great too. However, I am also a fan of Francis Ford Coppola, Sergio Leone ('Once Upon A Time In The West', 'Once Upon A Time In America') and Martin Scorsese for his Mafia films."

What film would you like to make?

"I would like to make a film of the life of Wernher von Braun. It has never been done. The man who invented the rocket for Germany and developed the moon rocket for the Americans. His biography is fascinating: as a child he wanted to explore the moon – and ultimately he realised that dream."

Which actor would you like to make a film with?
"Al Pacino."