



Empresses of the Alps

Wonder women give Austrian films a fillip

Female filmmaking collective cultivates a fresh perspective

By CATHY NEILS

Finding a female lens on the male-dominated Austrian film world used to be like looking for a golf ball in the snow-white peaks of the Tirol. But all that has changed as femme auteurs become a creative force to be reckoned with.

Barbara Albert, Jessica Hausner, Ruth Mader and Gabriele Kratzbinder are just a few of the new empresses who are changing the shape of local films and how the film community views its surroundings.

Film festivals were quick to catch on to the trend. Mader's "Struggle" was programmed in Cannes' Un Certain Regard sidebar in 2005 and Hausner's sophomore feature "Hotel" appears this year; Venice featured Albert's "Northern Skirts" in 1999; Locarno plumped for Andrea Maria Dusi's "Blue Moon" and Albert's "Free Radicals."

Even that male bastion, publisher ORF, appointed Monika Lindner as general director in January 2002, providing another strong female role model.

"It's a phenomenon," says Martin Schweighofer, head of the Austrian Film Commission. "The situation is unique. It's almost a female dominance."

As a group, the women are changing the image of Austrian films.

"They have a new way of showing Austrian reality, an emotional neo-realist style," says Alexander Dumreicher-Ivanceanu of production company Amour Fou. "They're telling stories that haven't been told before."

"For the first time you feel the dark side," Albert says of recent history. "You have to face it. There is something heavy on our shoulders," a heaviness she traces back to the rise of neo-nationalism in the early 1990s.

During this period, the extreme far right Freedom Party won a majority in the Austrian Cabinet.

The party, whose leader, Jörg Heider, was accused of being a Nazi sympathizer, even caused the European Union to suspect that Austria's participation might have been in jeopardy.

Voters later deserted the party after bitter internal squabbles.

But it is not just hard-line politics that shaped the femme helmers' thinking. The emerging style may be traced to the directing program at the Vienna Film Academy, where students

give equal importance to fiction and to Austria's love of documentaries.

The directors are incorporating mockumentary style into their pics (like Barbara Graefner, in "My Russia"); or moving between documentary and fiction films (as Sabine Derflinger, who followed doc "Roamer Girls" with downbeat drama "Völlgas"); or re-invigorating doc filmmaking (as Matira Kudlacok, with "In the Mirror of Maya Derren"). They are also bringing elements of reality into their features, as in "Northern Skirts" or "Struggle."

"All the films are very different, but this is a common point, that they focus on Austrian reality," Dumreicher-Ivanceanu says.

"Auswege" by debut director Nina Kusturica, a Russian-born graduate of the Vienna film Academy, is a fact-based feature about domestic violence; Ulrike Schweiger's "Twin," tells the story of a 13-year-old city girl who is transplanted to a small Alpine town.

Similarly, Derflinger's "Völlgas" focuses on the dark side of Alpine tourism. Rather than dwell on the "winter wonderland" of postcard Austria, pie tells the story of Evi (Henriette Heine) whose Alpine reality is long hours of work, unfriendly colleagues and nights of refuge in alcohol and anonymous sex.

Bady Minck joins Kusturica as one of the new crop of foreign women drawn to Austria to make films. Luxembourg-born Minck's "In the Beginning Was the Eye" challenges the

idea of a picture-perfect Austria as a writer probes the country by comparing it to a range of postcards. The kitsch tourist images are reinterpreted by Minck to combat national clichés.

Some women have broken into production, including Gabriele Kratzbinder, who formed the hot production company Amour Fou with business partner Dumreicher-Ivanceanu. Despite the renaissance of female talent she believes the numbers are still stacked in favor of men.

"I feel a bit lonesome at times. There are only a few of us," Kratzbinder says. "When I started out, it wasn't a question of being male or female. It's only now that I realize I'm alone and facing 40 men in a meeting."

The young producer is one of the people responsible for turning the spotlight on her helmer sisters. One of Amour Fou's first

productions was Mader's "Struggle." "I have a strong interest in female directors, but they are not my only focus," says Kratzbinder.

Albert and Hausner joined forces with two male colleagues from the Vienna Film Academy to found their own production company, Coop 99. The company was unique in forging a bond between the upcoming generation of filmmakers.

"There always were women directors," Albert says. "What is new now is that we are very much connected."

Albert, for example, not only writes and directs her own films, she also scripted Kusturica's "Auswege" and co-wrote "Struggle" with Mader. Hausner moonlights as a casting director. "We help each other, work together, talk to each other, recommend each other's companies," says Albert.

If Austrian men are worried they are not showing it, "It's a wonderful fact that female directors are on the spot," says producer Denny Krauss of Dor Film. "Years ago I was desperately seeking a female director and couldn't find anyone. This search is over now, and their performance is wonderful to see."

Dumreicher-Ivanceanu agrees. "I always felt there weren't enough films made by women." He may have good reason for that sentiment — he is married to Minck.

For now, the women seem unstoppable and chances are they'll be coming to a cinema near you. Schweighofer plans a series of screenings in London and Los Angeles, possibly under the title "The Wild Women of Vienna."



WOMEN ON TOP: "Struggle," top, directed by Ruth Mader, inset, and "In the Beginning Was the Eye," below, by Bady Minck, left, are changing the face of Austrian cinema.



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