



MFG
BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG

FILM FACTS

Southwest

1.2024 April

English Edition



Cranko

NEW MOVIES COMING SOON TO CINEMAS

Cranko

Joachim A. Lang / Zeitsprung Pictures

Führer and Seducer

Joachim A. Lang / Zeitsprung Pictures

The Empty Grave

Agnes Lisa Wegner and Cece Mlay /
kurhaus productions



Führer and Seducer



The Empty Grave

film.mfg.de



"THE ULTIMATE BALLET AND STUTTGART MOVIE" – CRANKO

© Zeitsprung / SWR, Stephan Pick

Scene from "Cranko" with SAM RILEY in the title role and ELISA BADENES as prima ballerina Marcia Haydée

COMING SOON TO CINEMAS "The fact that John Cranko was able to make such a high impact in this line of art in any other city than Stuttgart would not have been possible" is the conviction of director JOACHIM A. LANG – at least during the 60s. Cranko was the right man in the right place at the right time. Director and scriptwriter JOACHIM A. LANG and producer TILL DERENBACH from Zeitsprung Pictures speak about the film "Cranko".

It was in the capital of the German State of Baden-Württemberg, where the genius artist – who had been exiled from the apartheid state of South Africa and moved to England – found a sounding board for the "willingness of the audience to be enchanted by a special kind of magic" which inspired and eventually kept him there even though he had already taken on jobs at other stages (such as in Munich) and was offered further engagements.

"And yet it didn't look good when Cranko was a guest at the Stuttgart Ballet" is what JOACHIM A. LANG learned from his research and talks with former ensemble members: "His style to not solely rely on balletic perfection but the person and displaying his vulnerability through dance was seen with skepticism at first", says LANG. "There was also resistance to him making Marcia Haydée prima ballerina". But it wasn't long until he was able to convince his ensemble and the Stuttgart audience "to paint pictures onto the stage with moving bodies", explains LANG: "Cranko was one of the greatest choreographers in history, an artist who created images and scenes for the big topics of mankind: living, loving, and dying."

According to director LANG, one of the most impressive examples is a scene from "The Lady and the Fool" where two clowns sit lonely on a park bench. Over the course of the ballet, they vie for the hand of a society lady who even-

tually chooses one of the clowns, and at the end of the play, all three sit on the bench. One of the most impressive images defining Cranko's art. The highly talented choreographer "had been striving for perfection in art and love his whole life" and was torn by his desires, says LANG. The fact that John Cranko was gay and had many lovers "was almost common knowledge in Stuttgart, but with an artist, even more so a genius like Cranko, it was tolerated" – despite article 175 of the German Criminal Code which criminalized homosexual activities and was still in effect at the time. In Stuttgart, Cranko experienced even more tolerance than in any other place during his life, which was part of the special relationship the ballet's director shared with his audience and the basis for the development of what many described as the "ballet wonder", explains scriptwriter and director JOACHIM A. LANG.

The fact that he tried to commit suicide had to do with a central theme in Cranko's life – the desperate quest for love and failing in that respect – JOACHIM A. LANG elaborates. "But it was during his darker days that he created masterpieces. For example, in 'Opus 1', in which he recounts a life in eleven minutes, from birth to death, life as a celebration and cry of desperation at the same time", LANG describes the choreography. "Marcia Haydée once said he did not rule with fear but with love", states the director.

In his film, LANG characterizes Cranko as someone who never acted aloof or elitist – aside from his wish for artistic perfection – "but with a popular side that did not shy away from other people. He took his ensemble out to bars and they painted the town red on a regular basis". This is why his film is "a Stuttgart film," JOACHIM A. LANG adds smiling, "we're showing the magical spots of Stuttgart".

COMING SOON TO CINEMAS

John Cranko, too, was a personality of extraordinary talent – “a pop star of ballet”, says producer TILL DERENBACH from Zeitsprung Pictures. But this is as far as any parallels with Joseph Goebbels go. The challenges for the shoot, however, were similar: “For Cranko, we also had to find meticulously selected motives and historically correct sets and costumes. But here, we were also able to indulge more in the extravaganza and beauty of the FRG’s 60s”, tells DERENBACH. The zeitgeist was more open-minded compared to the Third Reich “yet the story still needed a clear approach”, states the producer. “Which generally meant: how can we cooperate with the Stuttgart Ballet in the best way and how can we find suitable actors?”

In the film “dancers took on the roles of the dancers of the time”, says director LANG. “To coordinate the schedules was another obstacle”, reports producer TILL DERENBACH, “especially when the time pressure of making the film is known and that all ballet shows are scheduled for two years in advance”.

“Here, it’s a clash of two worlds that usually don’t match”, says DERENBACH, admitting that he had nothing to do with ballet whatsoever before this film. “But I was amazed by the dancers’ enormous discipline” is how the producer explains his experiences in retrospect: “Disciplined work is mandatory for filmmaking in order to stick to the schedule. But the efforts in ballet – which should not be noticeable to the audience during the show – are on a totally different level”, says DERENBACH. The producer tells us that compared to the few other films about ballet, this time it is different in the way that “the camera was very close to the expressions” almost directly depicting them in their essence. And we were not able to fudge the dance scenes by way of editing: “it had to fit regarding the dancing”.

Zeitsprung Pictures was given the mandate because of their expert knowledge in realizing historic plots, “it was a unique journey”, says TILL DERENBACH: “We’re portraying the morals, manners, and customs during the time, which, based on the character of John Cranko, addresses existential issues such as being alone and the humanistic dimensions in art”, explains DERENBACH. We “explored the radiant power of ballet” and can accordingly convey it as “paintings in space expressed through dance”. The cooperation with the Staatsoper Stuttgart (State Orchestra) added to that as they contributed the score for the dance scenes which was specifically performed over three days – “for which we are very thankful” emphasizes DERENBACH.

JOACHIM A. LANG: “It was my aim to create the first actual ballet movie with ‘Cranko’, a film that lets audiences experience this form of art in all its depth and emotionality, and takes us on an emotional rollercoaster ride with one of the best choreographers; an attempt to get a grasp of the very soul of dance through the depiction of this genius’ life and work”.

Both the producer and the scriptwriter and director highlight the importance of casting the eponymous main character to complete a successful shooting: “SAM RILEY is ideal for the role”, says LANG: “That we signed him eventually marked the initial spark, we knew that it’ll work and that we now had a flow in harmony. He carries the film even though he is the

Co-producer and dramatic advisor SANDRA MARIA DUJMOVIC (SWR) on “Cranko”

Our film is not a biography; we wouldn’t be interested in such an approach. Our film has much more to offer as we aim to get a grasp of the soul of this genius, his visions, and his artistic DNA. This, of course, can only be achieved through his work, his pieces of art, which are among the most beautiful, and touching in the world exploring essential, universal, and human topics like the greatest of arts: the art of loving.

But what is it that makes Cranko’s work so unique? This is what we explore in the film. Just like under a magnifying glass, we intensely show how Cranko was able to turn a provincial company from Stuttgart into a worldwide ballet wonder. He reigned with the love and passion of a genius who inspired and motivated members of the ballet with devotion. Because Cranko knew that the pieces would only be as good as the dance of his company. Dance had never been seen in the way it is depicted in this film. We translate both the dance and its magic from stage to the art form of film. This could be a magical blueprint for all of us: the best we could achieve if we as a society combine our best capabilities as a whole.

only depicted ballet dancer who actually isn’t a dancer.” SAM RILEY was able to portray both John Cranko’s sensitivity and determination which in turn enabled him to create maximum performances – in a way that brought tears to the eyes of those who watched and used to know the real Cranko, states JOACHIM A. LANG.

Alongside RILEY, today’s international stars of the Stuttgart Ballet play their former role models, ELISA BADENES as the great Marcia Haydée, FRIEDEMANN VOGEL as Heinz Claus, ROCIO ALEMAN as Birgit Keil, and HENRIK ERIKSON as Egon Madsen. HANNIS ZISCHLER plays Direktor Schäfer, who promoted Cranko as much as he became exasperated with him. The shooting took place at original locations such as Neues Schloss (the New Castle) and Staatsoper (Opera House) in Stuttgart. The latter will be hosting the premiere on September 20th, 2024.

MARIAN B. METZNER and ROBERT GEHRING (both MFG), JAN KRÜGER (Port au Prince Pictures), SANDRA MARIA DUJMOVIC (SWR co-producer), SAM RILEY, JOACHIM A. LANG (director), MFG CEO CARL BERGENGRUEN (from left)





PROPAGANDA AS POLITICS – "FÜHRER AND SEDUCER"

© Zeitsprung / SWR Stephan Pick (2)

Scene from "Führer and Seducer"

COMING SOON TO CINEMAS This year, the Cologne-based company Zeitsprung Pictures GmbH of producers MICHAEL SOUVIGNIER and TILL DERENBACH offers moviegoers a chance to make two leaps into German history in the previous century – featuring two title figures who couldn't be more different.

Two protagonists whose lives and work are in strong opposition are at the center of both films by JOACHIM A. LANG, "Führer and Seducer" and "Cranko"; on the one hand NSDAP propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945), who willfully put his manipulative, rhetoric talent into the service of the worst war criminal in global history. On the other hand, John Cranko (1927–1973) who hailed from South Africa and passed away early in life, the legendary director of the Stuttgart Ballet Company in the '60s, who had been longing for "perfection in art and love".

Director JOACHIM A. LANG and one of the Zeitsprung Pictures producers, TILL DERENBACH, joined us for a talk about their work on both the MFG-funded productions.

"Since I was 13 years old I kept asking myself how the leading Nazis were able to commit the most horrible crimes in the history of mankind and why so many had followed them," says director JOACHIM A. LANG in our interview, adding: "These inconceivable crimes were committed by perpetrators whose manipulative strategies are the blueprints for today's populists, who spurn human rights and democracy all over the world." Looking at the growing strength of far-right populists and an increasing minimization of Nazi crimes he adds: "Goebbels developed the rules of manipulating the masses which still apply. Today, the impact of the media

is bigger than before and that alone makes an insight into the mechanisms of the propaganda during the Third Reich a topic as essential as up to date."

So, there is reason enough to take a closer look at both Hitler's practices and those of his propaganda minister Goebbels was what JOACHIM A. LANG thought more than ten years ago when he started to focus on this project – "a venture", as he admits. The former SWR editor, who had already come up with several biographies of famous contemporaries (Heinrich George, Bertolt Brecht) of the unstable 30s in Germany with the films "George" (2012) and "Mack the Knife – Brecht's Threepenny Film" (2017) as scriptwriter and director. But to put the highest Nazi rulers themselves at the center was new to LANG.

Existing reservations in Germany to show the leading Nazis as protagonists of films and to "advance into the core of power" instead of yet again extending the images of Hitler and his close circle as marked by Goebbels stagings that have been circulating until today, were the main reasons why financing the film in Germany proved to be very difficult according to JOACHIM A. LANG and producer TILL DERENBACH. The only support came via the SWR (co-producer and dramatic advisor: SANDRA DUJMOVIC) and the DFFF (German Federal Film Fund); the MFG was able to provide Line Producer Funding for the VFX parts. "Actually, the film was planned as a German-Austrian coproduction", says TILL DERENBACH.

Abroad, however, "they understood the concept as 'a currently vital and necessary education' in political manipulation", says JOACHIM A. LANG. "Despite the difficult two-year-long

COMING SOON TO CINEMAS

financing phase we did not abandon the concept", says DERENBACH. Eventually and via some detours, DERENBACH found partners (Maya Productions) in Slovakia, who not only lend support concerning finances but also with great locations and contacts to Slovakian government circles.

"The enormous helpfulness we received even offered us the chance to use the offices of the culture minister among others" reports DERENBACH. The legendary producer JAN MOJITO (Beta Film) also provided vital support. They were able "to get out the most" of the few available means in Bratislava", says TILL DERENBACH, "especially since we could not fall back on the infrastructure of a big film industry in Slovakia". The Line Producer Funding for the VFX parts "were an important financing module", highlights producer DERENBACH, whose stamina has been rewarded with more than 20 sales abroad, among those several European distributors. "A substantially high number of copies are scheduled by the distributor in France", reports DERENBACH. JOACHIM A. LANG adds: "These sales and the euphoric reviews abroad so far" prove "that the fear to depict Hitler and company to educate people" is obviously not as common as in Germany. JOACHIM A. LANG's script – including its dialogues – is mainly based on protocols and self-testimonies: "The way the characters talk is the way – or a similar way – how the top-level Nazis actually spoke." He also points out, though, that regarding the historical images from 'Wochenschau' shows

Co-producer and dramatic advisor SANDRA MARIA DUJMOVIC (chief editor SWR culture and feature film special projects and cultural documentary) on "Führer and Seducer"

As chief editor of feature film special projects, I want to produce films of vital relevance, films that provide insights and remain valid. This film is about the most horrible true story in the history of mankind, which means we were obligated to adapt it carefully.

Just because you are afraid of depicting real historical characters who have committed atrocities that doesn't mean you should not make films about them. In my opinion, it would be really helpful and gratifying if we began to take a closer look at the effects of manipulation through the media and cognitive warfare. Joseph Goebbels was very modern for his time, also in the way he worked with various types of media. To understand the mechanisms, you must explore them first. Especially today, as fascism and anti-semitism are globally on the rise again, it is more vital than ever to make a film that is trying to provide insight. How could Goebbels unite a broad share of the Germans behind Hitler's criminal aims, the Holocaust and World War II, why were so many of them part of that?

A topic of great importance that has not been told in a feature film in this way. And that is exactly what our film wants to achieve, this is the question we want to explore, that was our incentive.



Scene from "Führer and Seducer" with ROBERT STADLOBER as Joseph Goebbels and FRITZ KARL as Adolf Hitler

and other sources are mostly "propagandistically glossed over, official depictions" by the Nazis, which – when used unthinkingly and in a truncated manner today – entail the risk of making an impact as intended by Goebbels. Instead, LANG aims at "taking a look behind the curtains of power" and enhancing the visibility of Goebbels' tricks for the viewers: "for example how Goebbels had conceptualized the speech later held at the Sportpalast, how he rehearsed it in front of the mirror and subsequently edited it like a director or producer". LANG is certain: "There is no danger in the humanization of these criminals but in demonizing them."

The enacted scenes are necessary because otherwise, we would have had to rely on material staged by Goebbels; we create images that do not exist, and we look into the heart of power.

The film starts with the 'Annexation of Austria' by the German Reich when Hitler was at the height of his power and takes us, via the war and Holocaust, to the murders and suicides at the Führerbunker. According to LANG, staged scenes or re-enactments of the Holocaust cannot be allowed – this is why he shows archive footage and statements from Holocaust survivors like the now 102-year-old Margot Friedländer or Leon Weintraub. "These moments of reality thrown into the storyline" complement the victims' perspectives and "reach beyond a past that has not been completed", says the director.

LANG and producer DERENBACH emphasize that their film "is, unfortunately, a highly topical issue" as it shows how "fragile and threatened our civil society is and how rapidly barbarism can emerge" if we are taken in by the lies and false promises of the new seducers.



© kurhaus production

WORLD PREMIERE AT THE 74 BERLINALE: "THE EMPTY GRAVE"

COMING SOON TO CINEMAS "The Empty Grave" follows the emotional journey of two Tanzanian families in search of their stolen ancestors. Their quest leads them to Germany, where tens of thousands of skulls and bones from former German colonies are stored in museum depots — a haunting legacy of colonial plunder in the early 20th century, taken for racist research and as macabre trophies.

Set in the present, the film unveils the enduring traces and traumas inflicted by colonial crimes on families and communities. It navigates the obscure maze of German and Tanzanian bureaucracy, revealing the struggle to reckon with this painful history. While the issue has gained political attention, the film shifts perspectives and highlights the resilience of the families while scrutinizing the complexity of identifying and repatriating these human remains.

"The Empty Grave" is a compelling German-Tanzanian collaboration by kurhaus production and Kijiweni Productions, directed by AGNES LISA WEGNER and CECE MLAY. The film is a co-production with 'ZDF - Das kleine Fernsehspiel' and received financial support from MFG Filmförderung Baden-Württemberg, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM), and the German Federal Film Fund (DFFF).

STATEMENT OF THE DIRECTORS

In museum basements in Germany, thousands of boxes are hidden in the dark. These are not artifacts but human remains – who were these people? Far from being objects they are people whose lives were part of societies, part of communities and part of families. Ours was the work to reconstitute personhood.

The search began in Tanzania, formerly the largest colony of "German East Africa", referred to by Germans as "Ein Platz an der Sonne" (a place under the sun). The German colonial rule is said to be one of the most brutal of all. It was a system that relied on forced labour, sexual violence, physical punishment and arbitrary hangings. During this colonial period, communities were decimated as men, women and children disappeared, torn from their families, sometimes after public executions.

One of the largest and most brutal colonial wars was waged across the midlands to the Southernmost tip of what was then known as Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania). The Majimaji War and its aftermath claimed the lives of around 300,000 people. This war was the largest resistance towards colonial German rule and it unified the nation. The gravity

of this history is paramount to the national identity of Tanzania. However, in Germany, the Majimaji War is practically unheard of.

This film breaks the silence. It gives the audience an opportunity to learn about colonial crimes that have been shoved under the rugs for over a century. And it asks crucial questions: How does a family, a community live with intergenerational trauma? Who is responsible for the actual restitution of ancestral remains? Which role do communities and families play in this process? Who will have the patience and tenacity to search for individual ancestors and how will this be financed? And what it all comes down to: How do we want to live with each other?

AGNES LISA WEGNER studied American Studies as well as Film Sciences in Berlin and African-American Studies at Harvard University. After receiving her M.A. from FU Berlin, she worked with German human rights organizations for several years (Pro Asyl, Forum Menschenrechte). In 2013, she began to work as a freelance writer and filmmaker. Since then, she has written and directed numerous films that were presented at international film festivals, on German public television as well as Netflix Europe. Her award-winning documentaries – among them "King Bansah and his daughter", and "No fucking ice cream" – are characterized by her intense engagement with topics such as discrimination, racism, human rights and solidarity. She lives in Mannheim, Germany.



© AEDT Stefan Krempl

Directors **AGNES LISA WEGNER** (middle) and **CECE MLAY** (left) with the producers **DANIEL REICH** (left), **CHRISTOPH HOLTHOF** (second from right) and **AMIL SHIVJI** (right) at the reception of the MFG in Berlin, February 2024

CECE MLAY enjoys the communal work of filmmaking. She is currently at Kijiwani Productions working as an Assistant Director and Creative Supervisor. She has been working through different departments collaborating with artists from various disciplines and backgrounds with the projects being produced by both Tanzanian and international film-makers. These stories take a critical and honest exploration into the social, the political and the historical. Her work ranges from tv series, award winning feature length and short films and documentaries: "Siri ya Mtungi" (2013–2014), "Shoe Shine" (2014), "Aisha" (2016), "Vuta N'Kuvute" (2021), "Apostles of Cinema" (2023). She lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPH HOLTHOF

kurhaus productions Baden-Baden

Can you tell us about any special challenges?

CHRISTOPH HOLTHOF: Emotionally, *THE EMPTY GRAVE* was a very intense production. It was equally challenging and straining to explore the dark sides of colonial history, and more so doing this mainly from the victims' perspectives. There were no easy answers to questions like in which way should we narrate the atrocities committed during Germany's colonial rule, what should be shown in the film, and what should be left out. Additionally, the issue had increasingly come into the public spotlight during the two years of production time so we had to readjust the shooting over and over again. For instance, one time we had just completed editing and learned that Frank-Walter Steinmeier was heading to Tanzania to meet up with our protagonists. We had to re-open the editing process and send out the crew again.

How was the cooperation with the team members in Africa?

CHRISTOPH HOLTHOF: From the very beginning, we knew that we could only make the film in collaboration with a Tanzanian team. The directors Agnes Lisa Wegner and Cece Mlay went every step together from research to the last day of postproduction. But for the production team, too, there was no classic division between us and our co-producer Amil Shivji of Kijiwani Productions. Alongside organizing the shoot-

ings in the respective countries, we were also strongly involved in content-related discussions. We had long talks about perspectives and perceptions with both directors, which was extremely beneficial for the project in the end.

What are your strategies for the commercial exploitation?

We were able to gain the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung as a partner for the German cinema release in May. Together with our distributor Salzgeber, we plan to not only just screen the film but also add subsequent discussions. To do this we want to involve local groups and organizations. We're also planning a theatrical exploitation in Tanzania with Kijiwani Productions. This, however, is not going to be very easy as Tanzania does not have a traditional cinema landscape. We are currently looking for partners who could support us in taking a mobile screen across the country, so that the communities in more rural regions will have access to the film, too. Interview: hey

KURHAUS PRODUCTION is an independent German film production company, founded in 2007 by **CHRISTOPH HOLTHOF** and **DANIEL REICH** in Baden-Baden. kurhaus production develops and produces feature films and documentaries as well as series for the international cinema, TV and streamer market. The company's award-winning films are engaging, courageous, relevant and touching. They are screened at the most important film festivals all over the world.

■ NILA'S DREAM IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Cinema release: 11 April
Script, director and coproduction:
NILOUFAR TAGHIZADEH
Production: Windcatcher Productions
Documentary

Leyla and her six-year-old daughter Nila are inseparable. But Nila is the product of a so called "temporary marriage", which leaves her legal status unclarified and prevents her from going to school. Leyla relentlessly fights for her daughter's custody.



© Windcatcher Production



© Constantin Film Verleih

■ GIANTS OF LA MANCHA

Cinema release: 1 May
Script: CARLOS KOTKIN, PABLO BIONDI, GONZALO GUTIÉRREZ
Director: GONZALO GUTIÉRREZ
Production (G): Studio 100 International
Animation: M.A.R.K.13™ Stuttgart
Children animation film

Alfonso Quixote is an 11-year-old boy with a huge imagination. As the rightful descendant and legitimate heir to Don Quixote and just like his great, great, great, great grandfather, he is constantly protecting his beloved town in La Mancha from monsters, which no one else can see.

■ TOUCHED

Cinema release: 2 May
Script and director: CLAUDIA RORARIUS
Production: 2pilots Filmproduktion, Soquiet Filmproduktion, SWR, WRD
Drama

Maria, a caregiver, undergoes a transformative journey when she encounters Alex, a paraplegic resident. They embark on a forbidden relationship, fueled by their sexual discovery and deep connection. As their bond deepens, Alex's demands and humiliation push Maria to her limits.



© 2pilots



© Der Filmverleih

■ WAR AND JUSTICE

Cinema release: 6 June
Co-camera, script and director:
MICHELE GENTILE and MARCUS VETTER
Production: Filmperspektive/
Elsani Film, arte
Documentary

The documentary tells the 25-year history of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in its mission to end the most serious crimes against humanity. But once war is launched, can the ensuing crimes be prevented at all? Or is former Nuremberg prosecutor Ben Ferencz right when he says that the greatest war crime of all is war itself?

■ LIPSTICK ON THE GLASS

Cinema release: 25 July
Script and director: KUBA CZEKAJ
Production: INDI Film
Horror drama

Fascinated by a mysterious figure called The Something, a woman loses control of her life and embarks on an adventurous escape, leaving her husband and daughter behind. The Something eventually drives her into the arms of a mysterious women's sect whose sinister machinations are gradually revealed to her.



© Zeitsprung Pictures



© Seven Elephants

■ TREASURE

Cinema release: 26 September
Script: JOHN QUESTER, JULIA VON HEINZ
Director: JULIA VON HEINZ
Production: Seven Elephants, Kings & Queens Filmproduktion
Drama

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, music journalist Ruth and her father Edek, a Holocaust survivor, go on a tour of his homeland of Poland. Their journey takes them to Warsaw, Łódź, Krakow and the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Ruth wants to discover her own roots and to explore her family's history.

■ Submissions Deadlines for Funding Applications: <https://film.mfg.de/service/einreichfristen>

