

BETA CINEMA presents  
a production of ZEITSPRUNG PICTURES in co-production with SWR, Maya and Act

# FÜHRER AND SEDUCER

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY  
**JOACHIM A. LANG**

STARRING  
**ROBERT STADLOBER**  
**FRITZ KARL**  
**FRANZISKA WEISZ**

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*"FÜHRER AND SEDUCER is a masterpiece, we only wonder why it was not produced ten or twenty years ago. The light it sheds on the historical figures of the Nazi era opens up a new and challenging perspective for the viewer – because it also demands reflection on ourselves ..."*

– Charlotte Knobloch, Holocaust survivor

*"This film explores a subject of topical importance: the influence of propaganda, the destructive effect of disinformation that is claimed to be true, just as it is spread on the Internet today."*

– Elly Gotz, Holocaust survivor

*"This is why this film is so important: it is a warning and admonition that the threats made by the right-wing extremist forces must be taken seriously, and all democratic forces need to be brought into play in order to prevent this."*

– Leon Weintraub, Holocaust survivor

*"When I left the movie theater, I was deeply moved, even overwhelmed. I would describe the film as monumental. If it can open the eyes of even a few to people's vulnerability to propaganda and persuasion, it will make a positive contribution to global peace efforts."*

– Eva Umlauf, Holocaust survivor

*"The film is important to raise our awareness of the current falsifications that are systematically spread by right-wing politicians, in order to promote exclusion and disenfranchisement of groups of people such as asylum seekers, in order to generate approval for violence and war."*

– Ernst Grube, Holocaust survivor

*"This film shows very vividly what people are capable of doing to people. Unfortunately, it is highly topical and thus particularly important. Because NEVER AGAIN is NOW."*

– Eva Szepesi, Holocaust survivor

## LOGLINE

While Hitler is at the height of his power, his Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels is the creator of the pictures of the flag waving crowds and anti-Semitic films like "Jud Süß," that prepare the people for the mass murder of the Jews. When the war is lost, Goebbels conceives his last staging, with the murder of his family, Hitler's and his own suicide in the Berlin bunker.

Seven Holocaust survivors share personal experiences with Hitler's and Goebbels' actions throughout the film.

## SYNOPSIS

The plot of FÜHRER AND SEDUCER spans the period from March 1938 to May 1945. In 1938, Goebbels is at the peak of his power for the moment and approval of Hitler's policies reaches unprecedented levels. The dictator is now marching resolutely toward war. But the propaganda up to now has strongly emphasized peace, so that a sudden and quick change of direction is not possible. Goebbels' work comes under heavy criticism from his Führer, and he tries everything in order to regain his standing and fuel the population's enthusiasm for war. He launches the pogrom of November 9, 1938 and plans the anti-Semitic films JUD SÜSS (Süss, the Jew) and DER EWIGE JUDE (The Eternal Jew), where Hitler is involved in the details of production. The media mobilization gets into gear, propaganda organizations are founded. An almost perfect and controlled staging of propaganda takes place, particularly at large mass events. The highlight is the victory parade which is planned in detail and follows the capitulation of France. In 1941, Goebbels is back in Hitler's favor. With the "Russian Campaign," Hitler's war is now really getting underway and the mass murders are reaching their peak.

After the defeat at Stalingrad, Goebbels prepares to retaliate, calling for "total war." He delivers the Sportpalast speech, his masterpiece of propaganda. Again and again, he calls for a more ruthless approach and urges his Führer to be more vehement in his public appearances. But the situation is becoming increasingly hopeless. At the end of 1944 at the latest, it becomes clear in view of the catastrophic situation that Hitler has no alternative plan. With his propaganda Goebbels is now increasingly concerned with leaving behind his image of the Third Reich for posterity. This includes its downfall. After Hitler's suicide, with the murder of his family and suicide Goebbels performs the most radical propaganda act still possible to him.

## PRESS NOTE

Around 80 years ago the greatest crimes of humanity took place: the Holocaust and World War II. FÜHRER AND SEDUCER searches for answers to important questions of history in a way that has never been shown before: How were the perpetrators able to carry out their crimes, and why did the majority of Germans follow Hitler into this catastrophe? Author and director Joachim A. Lang (MACK THE KNIFE – BRECHT'S THREEPENNY FILM) examines the period from the so-called "Anschluss" of Austria in March 1938 to the downfall culminating in the murder and suicide in Hitler's bunker in May 1945. Fateful years of world history in which Adolf Hitler conceived and put into action his two most important personal goals: to expand the "Lebensraum of the Germans" in the east and to exterminate the European Jews. The end of this bloody period sees 60 million war dead, including six million murdered Jews.

This would not have been possible without the powerful propaganda machine spearheaded by Joseph Goebbels. The minister shaped the public image of Nazism, an image that continues to exert a destructive influence to this day. Goebbels insidiously and effectively twisted news into lies, films into anti-Semitic works of hate, documents into forgeries, speeches into tirades. And even today, in the age of fake news and disinformation warfare, the same mechanisms of propaganda are used by modern agitators and rulers in order to gain and abuse power.

FÜHRER AND SEDUCER goes straight to the center of power. The film makes it possible for us to examine history while offering a penetrating view of human behavior and the essential mechanisms behind public images and public language up to the present day. In order to avoid the usual portrayal built upon staged images, the film opts for a fictionalization based on historical sources, including authentic dialogues. This is supplemented by archival footage, rarely shown until now, in addition to an interview sequence with a Holocaust survivor.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

JOACHIM A. LANG

This film is a courageous undertaking, but an indispensable one. About 80 years ago, the greatest crimes in human history took place: the Holocaust and World War II. There were 60 million deaths in the war, including six million murdered Jews. These crimes were committed by perpetrators whose manipulation strategies serve today as a model for populists who trample on human rights and democracy all over the world. The memory of these archetypes of populism – Hitler, Goebbels, and the leading Nazis – provides a cautionary tale of what can happen and how quickly a civil society can descend into a barbarism in which humanity and all moral principles are overridden.

The film is highly topical in light of recent events, and deals with one of the biggest questions of history: How were the perpetrators able to commit such unimaginable crimes with millions of innocent victims, and why did the majority of Germans follow Hitler into the war and the murder of European Jews? This topic has preoccupied me a great deal, since it belongs not only to our past but also to our present. Especially at a time when populists are on the rise worldwide, when far-right parties are in leading positions in governments, when anti-Semitic acts of violence are increasing, and when the crimes of the Third Reich are being downplayed more and more. For me, the quote by Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi that begins and ends our film holds true: "It happened, and therefore it can happen again. That is the core of what we have to say."

But how can we succeed in understanding the incomprehensible, in fathoming the inconceivable, and in showing the unshowable? I am convinced that this is only possible if we show humanity's greatest criminals for what they are: people of flesh and blood. At first this seems like a breach of taboo, a risky venture that is perhaps best left alone. Because we have become accustomed to seeing the leading Nazis quite differently, in a way that allows us to comfortably distance ourselves from them, as sensational demons and one-dimensional psychopaths.

There are many films about the Third Reich, mostly told from the victim's perspective, an important and necessary way of approaching the Nazi terror. Other films, even well-made ones such as *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS*, attempt an exaggerated, even satirical view, but precisely for this reason are not committed to historical truth. When Hitler and his entourage are shown, they often appear as icons of horror, both in documentary and feature films. Filmmakers are usually reluctant to focus on people like Hitler, Goebbels, Stalin, or Mussolini. This is done with the best of intentions. But then you achieve the opposite of what you want to achieve, because you are avoiding one of the most important questions in history. If we depict these criminals in a film only as one-dimensional peripheral figures, or even as screaming laughingstock characters, we won't be able to understand them and their actions. We also learn nothing for the present, even though it would be so important to make today's demagogues and their strategies of persuasion transparent. The danger is not in humanizing these criminals, but in demonizing them. As demons, it's easy to keep them away from us. But they were only able to carry out their crimes because they were human beings and also had traits that we all recognize in ourselves.

An approach that goes much further is one that tries to understand the seduction strategies of the terror and unprecedented crimes as perpetrated by people. Only then can they be prevented by people. This is the clear stance of the film.

Such an approach can only work in a fictional film, since almost all the historical footage was staged by Goebbels with the intention of deceiving the audience at the time in addition to posterity. Thus we don't have images of what was going on behind the scenes, we have to make them. Our idea of the Third Reich was shaped by one of the perpetrators himself, Joseph Goebbels. The materials he created define our image of the past to this day. These documents purport to be objective and are often used as such.

However, they were the result of an enormous staging effort aimed at the present and, towards the end of the Third Reich, increasingly at posterity. If we only ever see Hitler and his entourage in the staged documents, we run the risk of falling for Goebbels' deception. Goebbels was the seducer in the Nazi dictatorship, the consummator of the Hitler myth. He was a kind of prophet of the Führer, who was for him a messiah. Our film attempts to deconstruct the image created by Goebbels and to offer insights behind the facade that have not been seen until now. It shows the methods Goebbels used to bring the population to support Hitler's criminal aims. We look over Goebbels' shoulder while he is staging his lies. We are interested in the reality that is hidden behind the official images of the Third Reich, in the truth behind the scenes. Whoever has seen the film will see Goebbels' materials with different eyes, no longer as documentary images but as staged distortions of reality. At the same time, they will look at the reality of images in general more critically, they will be fundamentally more vigilant against manipulation by the media, even in our current time.

Probably no one has ever had such wide-ranging power over the media as Goebbels, and no politician has ever done this job as comprehensively as he did. Goebbels developed rules for mass persuasion that are still valid. Today the influence of the media is far greater than it was then, which is why insight into the propaganda mechanisms used in the Third Reich is as indispensable as it is topical. Goebbels is a kind of father and master of fake news and, with much more skill and brilliance than his imitators, succeeded in making sure that what is faked is not recognized as such by contemporaries, and sometimes even by later generations. This makes it much more effective, as he repeatedly wrote.

In order to get closer to the reality, the sources were extensively evaluated. The aim was to develop a script in which almost everything that Hitler, Goebbels, and the top Nazi leadership say is documented. This is an important feature of the film; the way the characters talk is more or less the way the top Nazis really talked. The dialogues contain many verifiable quotations from a wide variety of sources. The film does not show the image officially communicated by Goebbels, which is what we see in an uncritical use of newsreels, but rather the truth behind the facade. The result is an unvarnished look inside the apparatus of power. It is based on the latest scholarly findings. A consultant of the film is one of the leading experts on the Third Reich, the internationally renowned historian Thomas Weber.

Our film shows a kind of "making of" the Third Reich, it offers a look behind the scenes. It shows what goes on backstage, for example what happens before and after the infamous Sportpalast speech. And we see clearly how Goebbels conceives the speech, rehearses it in front of the mirror, then edits it like a director and producer. The whole thing is revealed as a multimedia production: first as a live performance in the Sportpalast, then edited and with a time delay on the radio, the next day in the newspapers, and finally in the newsreel. The film exposes the staged documents of the Third Reich as deception, and makes the viewer more generally alert to the power of images and more suspicious of manipulation strategies. It is a film against seduction.

In this way we are attempting something new in terms of both content and form. The film shows the perpetrators as human beings with all negative attributes; only the fictional form permits the viewer a closeness to the characters and their deceitful depravity. The insidiousness of propaganda is experienced emotionally and the real threat perceived much more strongly than is possible in documentary form. The fictional form is also indispensable because the contemporary documents we have are staged and made with the intention of deceiving the viewer. If we see through the criminals of that time and their strategies, we will also be able to tear the mask off the faces of today's charismatic swindlers. The film looks beyond the past and makes it clear the extent to which our civil society is endangered and how quickly barbarism can appear. The world is unraveling, many countries are in danger of following incendiary leaders and seducers, today's demagogues who deceive by any means, jeopardizing democracies and doing away with human rights. What happened is not dead, it is not gone, it follows,

pursues us if we choose to ignore it. This is why our film is so important. With my work and all my energy, I want to contribute to what is most important of all: that what happened never happens again.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

FÜHRER AND SEDUCER is about the greatest crimes of mankind, the Holocaust and the Second World War and one of the most important questions in history: Why did the majority of Germans follow Hitler into war and the Holocaust, and how did the perpetrators manage to commit such unimaginable crimes with millions of innocent victims? Our film is a taboo-breaker, a venture that deals with the subject in a way never seen before: We show the perspective of the perpetrators. This is necessary and indispensable. For only by looking at the greatest criminals in human history from close up, by getting closer to them, can we tear the mask off their faces, make the mechanisms of demagoguery transparent and also disarm the agitators of the present.

We all know Hitler and the leading Nazis so far only from their staged appearances, with which Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels wanted to shape the image of National Socialism. This image still has an effect today, on us as well; it is the result of a staging. Our film breaks through this staging and looks behind the scenes. All dialogues are based on quotations and substantiated by well-founded sources. It is incredible how the Nazis expressed themselves and how they acted. You will see it in our film. I (Joachim) spent decades combing through all available documents for this. This is how or similar to how they actually spoke, acted and implemented their murderous plans, together with countless Germans who were willing to follow them and who were themselves responsible for their deeds.

This is outrageous, it has never been done before in a film, and it leads to insights and glimpses like you have never had before, and at the same time it is a breaking of taboos to show the Nazis as human beings. The shock is horrific because the viewer gets so close to the leading rulers in his cinematic experience, only to have them immediately deconstructed and made transparent again. Our film does not deal with the image officially conveyed by Goebbels, which is often used in both documentaries and feature films. We deconstruct this image; we show the truth behind the facade. The result is a unique, unvarnished look inside the power apparatus. For the portrayal of the Holocaust, we deliberately refrain from a fictional representation. A reenactment of the Shoah is forbidden by the dignity of the victims. In order to get closer to the truth, our film uses the confrontation of fiction and reality in decisive sequences. We give the victims their voice, the last survivors of the Holocaust tell of the crimes themselves and speak directly to the viewer: Charlotte Knobloch, Margot Friedländer, Elly Gotz, Eva Umlauf, Eva Szepesi, Leon Weintraub and Ernst Grube. They all know the concept of the film and, like us, want to open the viewer's eyes so that the past is not repeated. This is a cinematic experiment that counters fiction with reality. Our film looks behind the facade of the Inner Circle. The film shows what happens backstage, such as what happens before and after the infamous Sports Palace speech. It becomes clear how Goebbels conceptualizes the speech, rehearses it in front of the mirror and then edits it like a director and producer. The whole thing appears as a multimedia production: first as a live performance in the Sportpalast, then time-delayed and edited on the radio, the next day in the newspapers, and finally in the newsreel. The film exposes the staged documents of the Third Reich as deception and makes the viewer fundamentally more alert to the power of images and more suspicious of manipulation strategies. It is a film against seduction. The fictional form is also essential because the contemporary documents are staged and made with the intention of deceiving the viewer. We must draw the world's attention to the subject that is so topical and contribute to the most important thing: that what happened never happens again.



## INTERVIEW WITH JOACHIM A. LANG

DIRECTOR & SCREENWRITER

*Let's start with your life. When and how did you first turn your attention to Joseph Goebbels?*

Joachim A. Lang: As a teenager I read Eugen Kogon's book *The SS State*, I was shocked, the greatest crimes in human history were only a few years ago and people had already returned to everyday routine. I wanted to understand and find answers to the crucial question: How were the perpetrators able to commit such unimaginable crimes with millions of innocent victims, and why did the majority of Germans follow Hitler into the war and the Holocaust? This topic has preoccupied me since then. Whether we like it or not, every German has had and still has to do with this past.

*Very often in one's own family. How about in your case?*

Joachim A. Lang: In the village where I grew up, when I first started going to school a third of the inhabitants were displaced people who were forced to leave their homeland as a result of the Second World War. As a very young man, my father had to go through terrible war experiences. He suffered all his life. My mother had to leave her hometown with her parents and her brother. So for me it was always clear that I would not join the military, and my parents also supported my decision. On the other hand, there is also hope in such a terrible story. It is a special achievement that in post-war Germany, so many refugees and displaced people have succeeded in being integrated. I talked to my parents very often about their experiences and of course I asked questions like: What could be done, what did you do, how could the Holocaust and World War II happen, these two greatest crimes in human history? I wanted to understand, and this was one of the reasons why I went on to study history. I see *FÜHRER AND SEDUCER* as my mission. This film was missing, it absolutely had to be made.

*There is a truly vast number of fictional and documentary films about the Nazi era...*

Joachim A. Lang: Apart from comedies, *FÜHRER AND SEDUCER* is the first fictional film in twenty years to focus on Hitler and his entourage. Considering that *DOWNFALL* only shows the last twelve days, it is the first film ever to center around the leadership clique of the Nazi regime in the decisive years from 1938 to 1945. But about the existing films: there are some that are quite outstanding, but not on this subject I just mentioned. Let's start with the documentary films, *SHOA* for example is a milestone. All the films that focus on material from the Third Reich have to confront the problem that most of the historical footage we have was staged by Goebbels and the Nazi propagandists. So there is a great danger of making oneself a slave to the material because it always contains this underlying intention. That is why we need to create the images that don't exist. And these can only be fictional images. One example is the Sportpalast speech. We look over Goebbels' shoulder at how he manipulated. Whoever has once understood how manipulation and demagoguery work through this example will also apply this to other examples and look at today's images more critically. It is a film against manipulation, a film against seduction.

Among the fictional films, victim films are the most frequent. And rightly so. There are quite outstanding ones, so I didn't want to make another. When Hitler and his entourage are portrayed fictionally, they often appear as sensational demons or screaming laughingstock characters, which is then called "particularly courageous." I see these portrayals as problematic, not only because they are false, but because they prevent the necessary realization of why so many Germans followed the criminal regime into war and mass murder. When you reduce the years of terror to a horrifying spectacle of psychopaths, you create demons that block deeper insights. Ultimately, such depictions are in the tradition of the

post-war period, when the crimes of the Third Reich were blamed on an allegedly insane leadership clique with diabolically ingenious abilities. An approach that tries to understand the unprecedented crimes as perpetrated by people leads us much further. Only then can they be prevented by people. But if we show them as people and not as simplistic demons, it is risky.

*You begin with a secretly-recorded conversation of Adolf Hitler.*

Joachim A. Lang: ... which many historically educated people don't know about, and when they hear it they often don't recognize who is talking. Our image of Hitler is quite different, from documents staged by Goebbels. I begin with this in order to call attention to my method. It is important to be careful in dealing with documentary material. I need to deconstruct and decode it in order to get behind the curtain and into reality. That is my aim.

*Before the film, you did an enormous amount of research and preparation over many years, including sifting through, evaluating, and working with countless sources and scholarly papers. Was there a point during this process where you felt you were doing too much research, that you needed to disengage in order not to get overwhelmed?*

Joachim A. Lang: No, I want to know as much as possible, preferably everything that is available. The material is almost endless, the Goebbels diaries alone fill volumes, he wrote daily entries in his diary. They were intended to be published later, so of course you have to be especially careful, then there are table minutes, memoirs, thousands of primary sources about the Nazi regime, about the war and the Holocaust and so on.

*What is a reliable source for you?*

Joachim A. Lang: None of them at all, I have to critically examine each one for its value as a source and deal with it accordingly. It is quite clear that the Goebbels diaries only show his point of view, in the way he wanted to appear in public and to posterity. This has to be exposed. That is why I like to work with a subjective perspective instead of a direct portrayal. There is a scene where Goebbels introduces his lover to Hitler's entourage. Here I created a scenario where he brags to her, wanting to show how close he is to the Führer and how incompetent the others are. In this way, I make the source and its perspective visible and point out that you have to be careful: what is being shown is Goebbels' view. This is just one conspicuous example. But this question relates to my entire artistic work, where I look for ways to portray reality. I don't take any stock in the claim that I am depicting reality, that is not possible. In that way you can only show one surface aspect. I want to make a suggestion about how reality works, the viewer must be made aware of this and it has to then be turned over to him for critical examination.

*Films can always deceive, images can manipulate, so even FÜHRER AND SEDUCER openly confronts this fact?*

Joachim A. Lang: That's what I mean. Especially in the case of a film about deception with images, it is very important to convey this. For example, I always make it clear what is fiction and what is a historical film document. Unlike in some films, the newsreels are not presented as reality but as a staging. Our film shows how Goebbels influences the masses, like in the Sportpalast speech. We show the official images and confront them with the reality behind them. The viewer is always aware of what is fiction and what

is historical document. The Nazis deceived viewers with their images by implying that they depicted reality. A film that seeks to expose these procedures can't use the same procedures. This involves revealing what is otherwise often hidden. It is always clear to the viewer which images show the real Nazis and which show our actors, one means being the use of color. This conflict is not concealed, our film deals with it openly. In line with this, the actors in our film do not imitate, they interpret. Instead of portraying a surface, we try to grasp the essence.

*What was the most clear-cut principle in a fictional treatment?*

Joachim A. Lang: Not to re-enact the Holocaust, this is out of the question in our film.

*Other films, for example SON OF SAUL by Hungarian László Nemes, are very explicit in visual terms...*

Joachim A. Lang: Each film follows a different concept, for our film the reenactment of such inconceivable suffering would have been wrong. I decided to combine the staged scenes with documentary footage of the terror in order to show: It is not fiction! This is unusual and I know very well that the film industry would have liked to also have had a positive hero. This is what I was urged before working with Till Derenbach, who immediately understood my concept. But that would have been simply wrong. My research has shown that there wasn't any positive counterfigure surrounding Joseph Goebbels.

*So you would have had to invent the positive counterfigure.*

Joachim A. Lang: And that is exactly what I do not find legitimate given my aim in this film. I work differently.

*Is the often-spoken-of "fascination with evil" completely foreign to you?*

Joachim A. Lang: Absolutely, yes! I know too many victims' fates, too many traumas. I deeply hate everything the Nazis embody. What they did to people, to the world, to all of us, is inconceivable.

*The historian Thomas Weber served as a consultant, i.e. scholarly "backup," for FÜHRER AND SEDUCER. Do you see him as personally committed to his role?*

Joachim A. Lang: Everyone involved in the film is personally committed, that is unshakable. Thomas Weber is very important to me. To be good, you have to risk something and Thomas is the ideal person for me to talk to, my corrective, indispensable for me. For the treatment, historian Peter Longerich gave important suggestions, he has written standard works on Goebbels, Himmler, and Hitler, and my teacher as a historian is Eberhard Jäckel. Till Derenbach and Zeitsprung had the courage to produce this film, which involves considerable risks. I don't know anyone else who would have been able to do this and who would have taken on and overcome all these difficulties. And my dramaturge and editor Sandra Maria Dujmovic is the most important, she is the best professional I know and can imagine, without her I would not have been able to do it and without her the film would not have existed.

*What was important in the conception and development of the three main characters, Magda and Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler?*

Joachim A. Lang: Before I write even one line, I need to understand the characters. I did not find this difficult with Goebbels, his diaries provide deep insights. Goebbels was a ruthless careerist, cynic, and opportunist. In other circumstances, he could have served a different regime. Magda Goebbels was a fervent Nazi, before that a woman of the world. She was fascinated by the image of the revolutionary Goebbels, but even more so by Hitler, who also found her very attractive. She was very close to Hitler, independently of Goebbels. At the top echelon of the Third Reich there was a kind of triad. When Hitler ended Goebbels' affair with Lida Baarova, Goebbels had to realize that he could not break out of it. From then on, he had a marriage of convenience with his wife. The murder of the children was Goebbels' last act of propaganda, with what was for him the greatest of all deeds he wanted to show to posterity his unconditional loyalty to his Führer. For Magda the suicide was also an act for Hitler, she thought a life without him and National Socialism was not worth living.

The most difficult thing for me was to understand the figure of Hitler. I actually came to my solution through Goebbels. Goebbels had a strictly Catholic mother, he repeatedly writes that he admires her, that she believes much more than he can. This is exactly what fascinated him about Hitler. Unlike Goebbels, Hitler believed in what he said. Only in this way could he order the greatest crimes that were ever committed and answer for them with conviction. He had two goals: living space in the east with the associated world war, and murder of the Jews. He believed in these two goals and tried to achieve them by all possible means.

*Was it difficult to find the right speaking tone for these main characters?*

Joachim A. Lang: It was difficult before I understood them. We are dealing with the very top leadership ranks, with characters you think you know from their external appearance and their language. In addition, we are talking about a whole seven years, not just a short part of their life. This is a challenge. I tried to make them comprehensible with actual quotes from them. This significantly shaped the tone. Words such as "emotional acrobat" or "flathead without sense and understanding" come from Goebbels himself, much of what he or Hitler say are quotes. In the leadership clique, there was often a chatty tone about trivialities or rivalries, and then the content of the conversation suddenly turned, without changing the tone, to the murder of millions of people. This simultaneity makes everything even more horrific.

*The Holocaust survivor Margot Friedländer always emphasizes that she speaks above all for those who live. For the young who learn and understand. Shouldn't we be much further in understanding and wanting to understand almost eight decades after the end of the war?*

Joachim A. Lang: Absolutely. We're even moving backwards. Unfortunately, this is what makes our film so topical. The war in Ukraine, the war in Israel and Gaza ... when I was on the phone with one of our eyewitnesses, he was stuck in Tel Aviv shortly after the terrorist acts of Hamas, in Germany there are anti-Semitic riots. The film could not be more relevant. For me, the most important experience related to this was the screening with a survivor. I sat with Sandra Dujmovic and the eyewitness in the movie theater, after the film she remained quiet for a few minutes, moved. Then she stood up, congratulated and hugged Sandra and me tightly, and said, "This film should have been made twenty years ago. Then we wouldn't be where we are today." For me, that was the most important feedback of all.

## INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT STADLOBER

plays JOSEPH GOEBBELS

*Mr. Stadlober, were you surprised by the offer to play Joseph Goebbels?*

Robert Stadlober: Yes, very! Joachim A. Lang called me and told me about a new film project about Nazism, first without talking specifically about the role he had in mind for me. We already knew each other from working on MACK THE KNIFE – BRECHT'S THREEPENNY FILM, when we talked a lot about political topics, and I thought: Yes, maybe he's doing something about Karl Liebknecht or Ernst Thälmann, or a historical person I don't know yet. But then we talked about the propaganda machine in the Third Reich and finally Lang's wish for me to play Joseph Goebbels.

*How did you respond?*

Robert Stadlober: I gulped, took a very deep exhale and, I think, even laughed a bit loudly.

*Because you could never have seen yourself in this role?*

Robert Stadlober: It was actually an instinctive defensive reaction, because I have been personally interested in the history and politics of this period for many years, and of course also in the man Goebbels, for whom I feel a deep revulsion. The call was not about a quick yes or no, I thought about it for a long time and was pretty sure that I did not want to accept the role. There were more conversations with the director, he explained to me his motivations for FÜHRER AND SEDUCER, that in his opinion, the complexity of this part of German history and the monstrosity of manipulating people could only be understood through a fictional film. I thought about it again and the project began to appeal to me. Ultimately because we probably don't need any big discussions to realize the fact that many methods from that time are still being developed and used openly today. People continue to fall for propaganda and false promises. So gradually and in small doses, I started to approach the challenge of interpreting Joseph Goebbels. Small doses because you can't read the Goebbels diaries every night before going to bed. In any case, I couldn't have endured it without becoming cynical.

*So at first it was the real Goebbels who preoccupied you. You weren't yet thinking about possible ways of portraying him as an actor?*

Robert Stadlober: No, because as an actor you usually need a kind of basic fascination with the character. For a fictional serial killer, I may be able to feel an interest in the horror film genre and in this way go beyond the limits of what is bearable. With reality, which includes historical people, it is more difficult. For example, I wondered if I wanted to understand the psychological abysses of Goebbels at all. Do I need to in order to interpret him?

*Then why did you accept the role in the end?*

Robert Stadlober: To explain why, I first have to make a brief digression. At the Hebbel am Ufer Theater in Berlin, I did a play about Franz Jung, the initiator of the Berlin Dada movement and at the same time a professional revolutionary, stockbroker, and anarcho-communist. A real enfant terrible, a maniac who even stole a ship to take Lenin to St. Petersburg. He was an unbelievable person with extreme psychological abysses. With him too, in preparing the role there was a point when I no longer wanted to

come closer to his soul, but I wanted to know all the more the significance that Jung had had for the history of the twentieth century. Together with the Dadaist Wolfgang Krause-Zwieback, we found a way not to want to understand this person in an esoteric way, but to create a figure that can be viewed and examined on the stage so that the mechanisms of fascination with Jung can be explored. I thought of this work when it came to Goebbels. I was wondering if I could possibly also use this approach for the camera. That is, whether I can interpret someone without wanting to penetrate him psychologically. Since it had worked with Franz Jung, my motivation, and in fact my ambition, was to also give it a try with Joseph Goebbels. Because I believe this can result in political and aesthetic insight. It can help to decipher a person, to discover something that remains hidden in the written word or in a documentary film.

*... or that in the documentary, due to the staging aspect, is even overtly camouflaged.*

Robert Stadlober: Yes, because we know of no photos of Goebbels that would have tarnished his image, that show him in the way he dealt with his women or colleagues. You never see him in weak moments, hardly ever limping.

*It's actually a great opportunity for fiction, and also a great opportunity for an actor.*

Robert Stadlober: That's how I warmed to the idea. It's important that we don't invent anything new in FÜHRER AND SEDUCER. The Goebbels diaries are written in such detail that they offer plenty of material, especially if you can read between the lines. Today Goebbels notes how incredibly disappointed he is with Adolf Hitler, and tomorrow he celebrates him again as an incredible genius. He had an almost irrational fascination with him at times. So Goebbels is sometimes taken in by himself, and it is just at such moments that he becomes very tiny and effectively ridiculous. That in turn also interested me, together with realistically teasing out the absurdity and comedy in all the cruelty, but above all showing the character in these little moments.

*And in his skepticism. Goebbels' doubts about the war and the "final solution" add an important nuance to the character.*

Robert Stadlober: At first he had doubts, yes. He is genuinely alarmed when Hitler announces his idea of war to him. But then when Hitler starts carrying it out, and this shows what an unbelievable cynic Goebbels was, he immediately embraces the situation. He then keeps the wheel of horrors turning, because even the audiovisual material of what they did was controlled by him. He was absolutely not interested in whitewashing these actions. From 1943, Goebbels knew very clearly that things would not end well for the Nazis, but he also wanted to stage their place in history in his own way. We shouldn't forget that all the visual material we are familiar with from the Nazi era was at least rubber-stamped by Goebbels, if not actually staged by him. In the last phase of the war, he himself finally rises to the top leadership ranks, to the position he had always wanted. However, it was walking a tightrope, as Hitler repeatedly threatened him with withdrawing his favor.

*Do you see the role of Joseph Goebbels as a direct link to the characters you have already portrayed from the Nazi era, like in ENEMY AT THE GATES, JUD SÜSS – FILM OHNE GEWISSEN, and DIPLOMACY?*

Robert Stadlober: I told myself that after *DIPLOMACY*, the portrayal of evil Germans is over. Also because I think that so many other stories from this time have not yet been told but are definitely worth telling, from Catholic pastors to social democrats and the communist resistance. So many people who did so much good were outlawed, gassed, and deported, and we often give our attention only to their rulers and murderers. I read *The Aesthetics of Resistance* by Peter Weiss as an audiobook when I was twenty-four. I worked with the ideas of Herbert Marcuse for the theater when I was in my early thirties. For a long time, I have been absorbed by the work of Stefan Heym, for me one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. Despite the inconceivable barbarism, he retained his hopeful humanism and spent his entire life identifying and analyzing the mechanisms that lead to the abyss. My entire mental world is involved with this period, and very often from the victim's perspective. Maybe it was really the right decision for me to play the man who wanted to eradicate all the progressive thinkers and writers, and to retrospectively put a spoke in his wheel.

*You are very subtle in using both Goebbels' dialect and his physical disability. Was this a balancing act?*

Robert Stadlober: No, because that too has to do with Goebbels himself. He came from the Lower Rhine and always wanted to drop his dialect and try to speak High German. But what remains is not the broad Rhenish from Cologne, it is the dialect of his homeland that he lapses into again and again. As for the physical aspect, I didn't want anyone to feel pity for him. That would be a completely wrong emotion, so I only suggested his limping, although there is certainly original footage of him where he barely makes it up the stairs.

*You are also a musician and singer. Did this help you for the role?*

Robert Stadlober: Absolutely, you can control the vocal nuances better. For me, language is music, in everyday life I often sit down and listen to people, pay attention to their nuances, observe what this does to my idea of them. Goebbels left behind torrents of words, you have to place beats, know where there has to be a crescendo and decrescendo, where to talk pizzicato, forte, and fortissimo. I can't do anything with non-musical lines, and unfortunately Goebbels' lines have rhythm, otherwise they would never have worked so well. And he had writing and improvisational talent. But as an actor, you are of two minds because you ask yourself: Can you be fascinated by this? Is it all right to recognize intellectual abilities as abilities that could bring about such horrors?

*Let's look at a notable scene: During shooting, what did you see in the mirror when "your" Joseph Goebbels was rehearsing his infamous Sportpalast speech?*

Robert Stadlober: I saw what frightens me the most: not Goebbels himself, but the ideas, all that this person caused and unleashed. Maybe it was his ghosts? During the shooting period, I had a nice apartment in a 1950s building in Bratislava where you could climb up to the roof from the bedroom. I often lay there at night, looked at the stars and learned my lines. After shooting this really intense mirror scene, I had to call my best friend and tell him my doubts about whether it was really the right thing what I was doing right now. We had to talk about the other world that stood up to Hitler and Goebbels and all the criminals, had to make sure that there was Herbert Marcuse, Hans and Hilde Coppi, the Red Orchestra, that in reality what I had said in the mirror that day was not what won. Goebbels wanted the complete reversal and redefinition of art and aesthetics, and he failed!

*Outsiders often trivialize the frequently difficult transformation process of an actor or actress into the character and back with words such as "slip in" or "slip out." What helped you unwind at the end of a day of shooting?*

Robert Stadlober: On the way to my apartment in Bratislava every evening, I walked through a park with a beer garden and a small alternative open-air café. There were young people there laughing, dancing, smoking, drinking beer, kissing. I sat down with them, watched them, smoked a cigarette and listened to Joe Strummer. Always! There wasn't any other music, just his two solo albums after The Clash. I don't know why to this day, but it was the only music I could stand. Joe Strummer was the only person who could sustain me through this hell. And these people in the middle of Europe, which also exists no matter which government may be in power. Things really turned out differently from the way this guy, who I had to play during the day, was so eager to imagine. And now it's still up to us to make sure it stays that way.



## INTERVIEW WITH FRITZ KARL

plays ADOLF HITLER

*Mr. Karl, as an actor in his mid-fifties with the right physique and a native of Upper Austria, would you normally hope for the opportunity to play Adolf Hitler to pass you by? Or for it to come your way?*

Fritz Karl: In the case of Adolf Hitler, it is not like being asked if you want to play a detective. Detectives are a dime a dozen, playing Hitler is a rather rare experience. Personally, I was hoping that someday I would get the chance to play this figure. Simply because I have been preoccupied for a very long time with National Socialism and the horrible individuals it produced.

*How do you find portrayals of previous Hitlers in film? And did you have another look at the most important ones in preparing the role?*

Fritz Karl: I've seen almost all of them. There have been so many serious and less serious attempts, the danger of the sensational and the caricature was and is always there. Unfortunately, I was always left with the impression that it really couldn't be possible that Hitler was always just screaming, barking, and growling. You simply have to study the historical documents or take a closer look at André Heller's film *IM TOTEN WINKEL*, about Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge. She provides a lot of information about how Hitler talked in everyday life and how he behaved, charming and engaging, without that piercing look we are familiar with from the public speeches. I was very interested in developing Hitler's character from this basis.

*Without revealing the secrets of your work: How do you develop the character of Adolf Hitler? For example, how do you find the right voice for the character from the original material, knowing that except for the sequence heard at the beginning in *FÜHRER AND SEDUCER*, we don't have any documents that aren't staged?*

Fritz Karl: I'll reveal something technical: Every day before the start of the shooting, I listened to this conversation between Adolf Hitler and Carl Gustav Mannerheim on headphones in order to get into this tone, the sound and manner of the voice again and again. It couldn't be too harsh, that was important to me. Then there was the incredibly long process of external transformation into the character. Many don't know that Hitler had blue eyes. That already surprised some people on the set when I showed up with blue contact lenses. My makeup artist, I think, suffered a lot on my account every day. For that I would like to apologize to him again, but it was a very good and extremely important collaboration. What I saw in the mirror every day had to be right. I'm very finicky about that.

*How did things go for you in that mask, with the mustache and shaved hair, in those suits and uniform?*

Fritz Karl: Everything changed, especially in my surroundings. People backed away, some didn't recognize me at all.

*Beyond the external resemblance and tone, you had to develop a character. How did you approach this?*

Fritz Karl: I had to look in advance at what Adolf Hitler was like, find out about his character, his strengths and weaknesses, difficulties and fears, why as a vegetarian he constantly ate cream scones and watched movies all night long. You don't just read a single biography, but every one available, although I already

knew a lot thanks to my interest in the time period. For the film I learned some details I hadn't known up to then. From the beginning, it was important to me to find out how Hitler could have behaved as a man of flesh and blood, outside of this public image of him.

*Bruno Ganz said of his interpretation of Hitler in DOWNFALL that he felt he had "dirtied himself a little" with the role. It took some time for him to shake it off. How was it for you?*

Fritz Karl: It's really interesting, but I was personally finished with the character of Adolf Hitler after working on FÜHRER AND SEDUCER. I came home after the shooting and it was over. Done with! Past! I spent an insanely intense time with Hitler for this film and I didn't dirty myself in any way. On the contrary, I wanted to make something visible, above all the truth that behind ruthless mass murderers and manipulators, there are people.

*Is FÜHRER AND SEDUCER a courageous undertaking for you?*

Fritz Karl: In any case, I never had the feeling that the courageous undertaking in this film lay in the answer to the question of whether I could do it or not. It was a given for me, because it is absolutely clear that as a human being I distance myself from the actions of the Nazis. For me, what was more important was the aim of the film, to build a bridge to the present day, the call for caution when we look at what kind of information and images we are being flooded with. It has become damn hard to draw a clear objective conclusion on so many topics.

*Twenty-four days of shooting sounds pretty ambitious, especially for a leading role like yours.*

Fritz Karl: Well, there was no alternative to this pressure. We got up in the morning, were on set all day, and after shooting we were still working on the lines for the next day. It was a frenzy, a really feverish delirium. Robert Stadlober and I spent most of our time together and we took great care of each other. Every day in the morning we went through this transformation, which after a certain point had something completely preposterous about it, he with his clubfoot and the mask, I in my clothes, with my mask, the mustache and contact lenses – a strange couple ... And, yes, we are both Austrians so, with all respect, you connect above all through humor.

*Let's make a brief excursion back to your youth. What was your history class like?*

Fritz Karl: I had a history teacher who had himself been in a concentration camp and survived. He would often put the history book down and talk freely. It was incredible. A completely different kind of history lesson. Later in Vienna at the theater I met many people with Jewish roots, and it was also the time when the affair involving former UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim was coming to a head. So as an alert, open-minded person, you inevitably had to deal with the history of Austria. My interest was definitively piqued.

*And what was the situation like in your family?*

Fritz Karl: My great-uncle was in the Waffen-SS and was involved in war crimes. Everyone knew about it and it was very strange, especially as a child. On Corpus Christi Day, my great-aunt and great-uncle did not stand at our grandparents' grave, but over at the war memorial. "I had a comrade" was played and

those at the war memorial cried a lot. In my great-aunt's inn, the picture of their dead son hung next to the Mother's Cross, there the prolonged "brown arm" could really be felt. My father explained things to me and told me to also talk to my great-aunt and great-uncle if I wanted to know something about history. And my great-aunt showed me an illustrated book in 3D with the title Der Anschluss. You put on glasses, slid the pictures, and saw Adolf Hitler looking over from Germany into his old homeland. "So you know how it really was," said my great-aunt. It was spine-chilling!

## INTERVIEW WITH FRANZISKA WEISZ

plays MAGDA GOEBBELS

*Your colleagues Robert Stadlober and Fritz Karl brought a strong personal interest in contemporary history and political relations to FÜHRER AND SEDUCER. How about yourself?*

Franziska Weisz: It was no different for me, on the contrary. I had to step back a bit, I tend to politicize. I received the script back in 2020 and had only one reaction: I want to play Magda Goebbels. On the one hand, there is the allure of playing someone who really existed. On the other, the challenge that it is a person whose actions I can only condemn. How do you breathe life, real and also positive feelings into a character even though you don't like her? How can the portrayal be believable without glamorizing the person? I think Magda Goebbels is a monster, while Magda Goebbels sees herself as a queen.

*It sounds like a balancing act...*

Franziska Weisz: This balancing act made it extremely interesting for me to play the role. It is for a role like this that I became an actress. I also saw the topical aspect of FÜHRER AND SEDUCER right away, in that the means of waging war have not changed at all. Evil words precede evil deeds. We so easily say that we're smart now, that we've learned so much from history, but then we still fall for the exact same things. No, the stories about the Nazi era have not been told exhaustively as is often claimed. If you look around in today's world, it is clear that they have not yet been told enough. What I am really afraid of are the many disinformation campaigns that have the same destructive power as propaganda back then. They divide society and provoke hatred and incitement. Fake news, the term often used today, was already an essential part of warfare under the Nazis. That is why I think it is so relevant to address the life and dangerous work of Goebbels. And Magda is an integral part of it.

*Portraying a historical figure who actually existed requires an interplay of instinct and research. It is difficult to reflect on instinct, but what was the basis of your research?*

Franziska Weisz: The book *The Women of the Nazis* by Anna Maria Sigmund was very helpful because through it I got to know Magda's origins, family history, and important life decisions. For example, the fact that her first great love was a Jew surprised me tremendously during my research. Of course when I play Magda Goebbels, I also have to know what Joseph Goebbels was like, how Adolf Hitler came to power, all that. I need to know the historical sequence of events and devote close attention to these three people. Goebbels' diaries were also a very good basis.

*The biographical scope for Magda Goebbels is narrowly defined by the years 1938 to 1945 covered by FÜHRER AND SEDUCER.*

Franziska Weisz: And in this narrow, well-defined space, you have wonderful freedom. It may sound like a paradox, but it is true.

*There is this vast amount of staged film footage from the Nazi era showing Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. What can be gleaned from this in terms of Magda Goebbels?*

Franziska Weisz: There are little films where you can also hear her voice, see her movements, that was important to me. Then there are a number of photos of her, including the reconciliation photo with

Joseph from Obersalzberg which is mentioned in FÜHRER AND SEDUCER. Especially in pre-war times, Joseph Goebbels staged the family in an idyllic world, and of course the children always look like angels. From today's perspective, the Nazis are backward-looking and reactionary, but at that time the Nazi elite was considered ultra-modern and chic. Now the Goebbels family would probably be called an influencer family.

*By the number of children alone, the Goebbelses resembled a perfect model family.*

Franziska Weisz: Yes, the German woman with her many children in an intact family, the Nazi ideal! I believe that Magda Goebbels not only wanted to match this image more and more with every child, but that she became even more beautiful after every time she gave birth. Having this aura of motherhood meant a lot to her. A way to please the beloved Führer. That was her task in the propaganda.

*How did what you learned about Magda correspond with what you were looking for in your interpretation?*

Franziska Weisz: It helped tremendously to know that this woman really was the first lady. She believed from the bottom of her heart that Adolf Hitler considered her the queen of an everlasting empire, the greatest, most powerful, and most desirable woman. This must have spurred her on tremendously. Immersing myself in this feeling was fascinating for me. So I also looked at a few other great first ladies of the world like Michelle Obama or Jackie O. These references sound strange and out of place here, but they are not. Magda did not see anything questionable about her actions. She was a convinced Nazi and saw herself as part of a salvation-bringing elite.

*FÜHRER AND SEDUCER shows Magda Goebbels repeatedly in highly ambiguous scenes with Adolf Hitler. It almost seems like they have their own special world.*

Franziska Weisz: It's hard to imagine, but Hitler is said to have been very charming. Knowing that about him was important to me. He could twist women around his little finger, he was attractive. Hitler's relationship with the two Goebbelses resembled a ménage à trois, and Magda's great love was of course for the Führer, but she and Joseph Goebbels had promised him to remain the great model couple. The fact that they got married at all was for Hitler. It was an arrangement. Hitler deeply adored Magda, and even after their first meeting, he is said to have said: "This woman could play a major role in my life, even without my being married to her. She could be the opposite pole of my one-sided masculine instincts in my work ... too bad she's not married." To me, this is how I understand it: He, the great "pop star" and leader of an empire, must of course not be taken. He is just playing with the fact that the women are lying at his feet. So half the people are already behind him. He thus keeps Magda very close to him, but she has to be married in order to avoid gossip. Especially during wartime, her husband is the mouthpiece to Hitler. He is even closer to the Führer, Magda wants to get as much out of this as possible. Incidentally, I do not believe there was ever any intimacy between Hitler and Magda Goebbels, even though she was often alone with him. She was completely satisfied with how things were. It was enough. The Führer as an untouchable object of yearning. This also fits well with Magda's staging as an icon.

*While your male colleagues are transformed much more elaborately behind their mask and costume, in your character you remain comparatively pure, have to express a lot through looks, gestures, and an*

*inner world projected outward. Was this an extra challenge? Toward your husband alone, your face shows the whole range of hatred, indifference, admiration, and disgust.*

Franziska Weisz: What helped me a lot was my clear inner attitude toward the character. I felt no uncertainty whatsoever.

*An especially powerful scene is when Magda hears about the death of her stepfather Richard Friedländer, a Jewish businessman. Here you play a full spectrum of emotions in a few fractions of a second...*

Franziska Weisz: Her stepfather Friedländer is said to have been more of a father to her than her biological father. She evidently loved him very much. Her grief over his death is immediate, but her conviction that National Socialism is the right thing for all people is even greater than the grief of the individual, and this certainty also comes to her immediately. In the end, when it is clear that she is going to kill her children, these feelings come up a second time. Of course she loved her children, but she did not want to inflict on them a life without National Socialism. She sacrificed maternal love for a belief. To have this conviction, this delusion, is as horrific as it is fascinating.

*There were many joint rehearsals with Robert Stadlober and Fritz Karl in the run-up to the shooting. How important were they?*

Franziska Weisz: Extremely important! I felt that the three of us were really ready to play these roles. And we knew who we were behind the roles. I also noticed what the difficulties of my colleagues were. Everyone thinks they more or less know what Hitler or what Goebbels was like. One simply knows less about Magda, so there is less far for her to fall. I'm full of admiration for Robert and Fritz, they have done amazing work. To play people you naturally hate. To portray people as human beings who have done monstrous things, without caricature.

## CONTEMPORARY WITNESS MARGOT FRIEDLÄNDER

Born in 1921

*"I survived. I can speak for those who are unable to speak. I speak not only for the six million Jews, but for all the people who were killed at that time. People did it. Because they didn't recognize people as people."*

Margot Friedländer, a Jewish Berliner born Margot Bendheim, was the only survivor of the Holocaust in her family. After training as a seamstress, forced labor, and many years underground, she was deported to Theresienstadt in 1944. She lived in the USA for over six decades together with her husband, and returned to Germany permanently in 2010. Since then, Friedländer has been a well-known contemporary witness who appears in numerous public events where, tirelessly and energetically, she stands up against forgetting and urges vigilance and remembrance.

## INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS WEBER

Historical adviser to the film

*Is there less propaganda today than before?*

Thomas Weber: No, quite the opposite in fact. Unfortunately, we are currently living in a golden age of propaganda again, but today we give propaganda other names. We now talk about disinformation and manipulation. "Propaganda" is only used in the context of war. But it's still the same wine that we have simply given a different label.

*Has anything changed in the way disinformation and manipulation are practiced today since the days of Joseph Goebbels' propaganda?*

Thomas Weber: The patterns of disinformation and manipulation have basically not changed since the deaths of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels in the rubble of Berlin, apart – and this is quite essential – from new technologies. These bring innovations, act as fire accelerants and explain why the danger posed by disinformation and manipulation is greater today than ever before. This danger will continue to grow exponentially through further technological innovation. Here, the handicraft of Joseph Goebbels unwittingly mixes with the technology from Silicon Valley. This can lead to a total meltdown.

*Are the information warriors of today aware that they are plying the same craft as Goebbels and Hitler?*

Thomas Weber: Not all, but many are and they do so quite consciously. Today many people study Goebbels and Hitler very closely and even take them as a role model to find out how to do politics. They don't even have to be Nazis. In parts of Asia, for example, Mein Kampf is a bestseller, and not because all the buyers are anti-Semitic and believe in fascist principles. No, they read Mein Kampf as a manual for political leadership and align their own actions accordingly. It is more the case that the information warriors' targets are not aware that they are being tricked in the same way as people in the 30s and 40s. This is one of the reasons why it is so fatal that there is such reluctance, particularly in Germany, to seriously deal with and discuss Hitler and Goebbels.

*What are the information warriors of the present and past aiming at?*

Thomas Weber: Both in the domestic and foreign spheres, there are two strategies; sometimes only one is pursued and sometimes both are mixed. The first strategy is about getting people to change their attitudes on contentious issues and change their political and social behavior in line with the information warriors' goals. These can be decision-makers, but also normal people. Examples include the Nazis' attempt to persuade British decision-makers to agree to a supposed peace treaty with Germany. Or it's about getting people to put the cross in the right place, from the point of view of the information warriors, in referendums or elections. Another example would be Putin trying to convince his own people to go to war with Ukraine. Or how Hamas, with manipulation and promises of salvation, tries to get young people to become terrorists.

*And what is the second strategy?*

Thomas Weber: The second strategy is about weakening and destabilizing societies and states from within or from the outside. This is done either in the hope of bringing down political systems or of



strengthening the position of one's own country vis-à-vis the target country of the disinformation and manipulation. It's first of all about sowing doubts. Alternative narratives are promoted until no one knows what is false or true. An example would be the actions of Putin, or the Chinese government's information warriors in America and Europe. Here it's often not about getting decision-makers or the population to make a certain decision, but about weakening them. For example, in 2016, the Kremlin did not expect Hillary Clinton to lose the election. The aim was the domestic political weakening and erosion of the American political system.

*How are images used here?*

Thomas Weber: The way visual material is used has hardly changed since the times of Joseph Goebbels. If today, for example, BBC Verify journalists demonstrate that in the war between Israel and Hamas, millions of videos shared on social media were created on the basis of old footage which is placed in a completely new context and sold as new, then the parallels with the past are more than evident. This is clearly and exclusively about targeted manipulation through deliberate misinformation. In addition, today as then, the opponent is blamed for "false flag operations" – deliberate attacks on one's own population or infrastructure – or "friendly fire," which results in death – i.e. accidental attacks on one's own population or infrastructure.

*So what can be done?*

Thomas Weber: The first step is to become aware of the problem in the first place, to become attuned to the basic patterns and mechanisms, to become aware of how ubiquitous manipulation and disinformation are. FÜHRER AND SEDUCER helps viewers recognize these basic patterns and apply them to their own world here and now. One can certainly provide the tools to learn to distinguish things, to check sources again and again against experiences and examples from the past. In this way, you can deprive manipulation and disinformation of the oxygen they need to survive. By understanding disinformation and manipulation in the past, a basic scheme of understanding forms in our minds of how disinformation and manipulation work which goes beyond the concrete examples one studies. I believe it is a learning process we can decide to enter into, it is similar to the path every child goes through. An overall understanding gradually develops.

*There is a lot of public talk about the need to develop media skills. Often this is simply buzzwords, hardly accompanied by any suggestions on how to achieve it, especially with regard to media education in schools. And there is another split: as parents you want to educate your children to trust, but at the same time you ask them to distrust images and information. A dilemma?*

Thomas Weber: I don't think so at all. You just need to know how and where trust arises, and where it is appropriate to question things. Ultimately, you have to learn repeatedly through experience. It's about learning who to trust and where to be critical. If we blindly believe everyone, democracy dies. But if we no longer believe anyone and are cynical towards everyone, which is the second strategy of disinformation and manipulation, democracy also dies. When we learn to put a stop to the information warriors' game, we reinforce pre-political values such as trust, moderation, tolerance, solidarity, empathy (including towards opponents), justice, patience, and a concept of freedom that is committed to the freedom of everyone and not just our own group. For years, we have been witnessing an erosion of these pre-political values which will destroy democracy and freedom if we do not stop and reverse it.

*Joseph Goebbels says in FÜHRER UND SEDUCER that propaganda has to have to do with reality. Has anything changed?*

Thomas Weber: Not at all. Disinformation and manipulation have to be based on the life experiences of those they are directed to. They have to be so real that they are at least plausible. That is why disinformation and manipulation necessarily have to depict realities in order to turn them on their head.

*Let's consider those media outlets whose reporting is considered reputable. With them, where do the most avoidable mistakes still happen? As one example, the excessive personalization. We talk about Russia and say Putin, about Hungary and say Orbán, about Syria and say Assad ...*

Thomas Weber: I wouldn't see these examples as a mistake. The cases you mentioned are prime examples of those in which the top leadership of the country and the entire population are equally important. Here again we come back to FÜHRER AND SEDUCER. Hitler and Goebbels could not have acted without the support of the population, and yet the question arises as to why the broad mass of the population behaved in this or that way in concrete terms. So there are personalizations that are often really needed. There is always potential for radicalization in societies, especially in times like today, but without leadership and seduction, the damage this radicalization causes remains limited. Regarding the example of Putin and Russia: Of course, Putin is a product of Soviet and Russian society. His behavior is a logical, but not inevitable consequence of it. The war in Ukraine has many structural reasons, but without Putin's decisions it would not exist in this form. And here again we are back to propaganda, disinformation, and manipulation, because there are of course clear strategies in Russia for turning people into supporters of this war on a large scale.

*Also decisive is the social and societal ground that disinformation and manipulation fall on, how receptive the population is to them. Is there a direct line through the decades in this regard?*

Thomas Weber: There certainly is. And identifying it is much more important than endlessly speculating about whether today's politicians are comparable to Hitler. Internationally, I am repeatedly asked: Is Trump Hitler? Is Erdoğan Hitler? For me the question is wrong, because it is not about the outward form of authoritarianism, which can be very different, but about the driving forces for new authoritarianism and for the breakdown. Of course, these driving forces don't always have an opportunity. There are times or areas where resilience to disinformation and manipulation is greater than in others. But the basic principles that are exploited to change people's behavior through disinformation and manipulation are the same. For example, people's sense of injustice is used to steer it in certain directions. In the same way, we know that whenever people, in their own perception, think they are living in a permanent existential crisis, a golden age for disinformation and manipulation begins. We are living in such a time again.

*Does fear play a major role here?*

Thomas Weber: Yes, it is above all an existential fear. The perception is spreading that the country's government and elites are no longer able to get a grip on the crisis and that individual and collective survival is therefore no longer guaranteed. Then people say: "They're incapable!" and old certainties are left behind, people are looking for new answers and new leadership. This can also lead to good things when people in autocratic states suddenly listen to democratic voices. Unfortunately, it is often the other

way around. This allows warriors of disinformation and manipulation to present themselves as prophets of redemption and renewal. In terms of people's sense of crisis, I see a direct line between the present and the time examined by FÜHRER AND SEDUCER.

*"Those who do not remember history are doomed to repeat it" is a popular saying. The real world is full of repetitions. How do we break the cycle?*

Thomas Weber: We won't break it, but in specific situations we can deal with it better. We can also build resilience to the power of disinformation and manipulation in times when people perceive they are living through an existential crisis. This is why I have been involved with my heart and soul in FÜHRER AND SEDUCER. Making the world a more peaceful place is possible. I believe this. Although it may not seem like it, it has been shown and scientifically proven that over the past centuries, the willingness in societies to commit violence has decreased. It is problematic if we look only at cases of collapse in order to learn lessons about how to save democracy. We should take the examples from the past century alone where democracy survived and where there has been resilience. In Germany democracy collapsed, yes, but why did democracy survive in France or the Netherlands in 1933 despite being on the verge of collapsing? And why, after the Second World War, were there attempts at reconciliation between Germany and some of its neighbors as early as the 1950s, and elsewhere only thirty years later? Couldn't the very knowledge of what led to success in these positive cases give us the tools we need today to learn how to reconcile hostile groups, to overcome polarization, to help pre-political values prosper again and allow freedom and democracy to prevail? This knowledge would give us resilience in the face of leaders and seducers who use disinformation and manipulation. For this to be possible, however, we first have to understand the mechanisms of disinformation and manipulation as they have been practiced since the times of Hitler and Goebbels – and especially again today.

## THE CAST

### **ROBERT STADLOBER**

*as JOSEPH GOEBBELS*

Robert Stadlober is one of the most versatile actors in the German speaking territories: he has appeared in over 100 productions, including over 50 cinema roles, and has been cast by directors such as Schlöndorff, Dörrie, Kreuzpainter, Schlingensief, Hausmann and many more. Stadlober has been honored for his unique acting several times with various awards and nominations, including the Bavarian Film Award, the Hamburg Theatre Award or the Premio Bacco. The 40-year-old works as an actor, director, author, and musician. His most recent works include EIN GANZES LEBEN by Robert Seethaler, Josef Hader's Berlinale entry ANDREA LÄSST SICH SCHEIDEN and AM ENDE WIRD ALLES SICHTBAR based on the novel by August Schmölder "Der Totengräber im Buchsbaum". Stadlober can also be seen alongside Birgitte Hobmeier in the six-part thriller series SNOW and will be touring with his own Tucholsky program.

### **FRITZ KARL**

*as ADOLF HITLER*

Karl was born on December 21, 1967 in Austria. After several years as a member of the ensemble at the Theater in der Josefstadt in Vienna, Fritz Karl devoted himself primarily to acting in front of the camera. He was awarded the Max Ophüls Prize for Best Young Actor in 1995 for his role of the young delinquent Mario in Houchang Allahyari's FEAR OF HEIGHTS. In 1998, he was named as one of European films 'Shooting Stars' by European Film Promotion. In 2008, he was nominated for the Bavarian Television Award as best actor in the television film category for EINE FOLGENSCHWERE AFFÄRE (2007). In 2011 and 2020, Karl was awarded the Austrian Romy television prize for the Most Popular Actor.

### **FRANZISKA WEISZ**

*as MAGDA GOEBBELS*

Franziska Weisz, born in Vienna in 1980, lives in Berlin. In 2001, she appeared in Ulrich Seidl's DOG DAYS, which won the Grand Prize at the Venice Film Festival. She then entered the acting profession full time with Jessica Hausner's HOTEL, which had its world premiere at Cannes. At the subsequent Berlinale in 2005, the film earned Franziska Weisz the 'European Shooting Star' award. Further award-winning cinema productions followed promptly and she quickly developed into a sought-after actress, demonstrating her versatility and skill in what are now over 70 German and international productions for cinema and TV. In 2010, for example, she appeared again at the Berlinale in a leading role in the competition entry THE ROBBER, as well as in 2014, in which she played a striking leading role in the competition entry STATIONS OF THE CROSS and, together with the team, was delighted to receive the Silver Bear award for the film. Meanwhile, Franziska Weisz reaches an audience of millions every year with her roles in various genres. Since 2015, she has been investigating alongside Wotan Wilke Möhring in NDR's TATORT. Most recently, she appeared in BIBI & TINA- EINFACH ANDERS (2022) in theaters, on ZDF in the international production THE SWARM (2023) and in the lead role in the ARD/ORF series TAGE, DIE ES NICHT GAB (2023), which became a ratings hit in Austria and created a buzz among the press and public in Germany.

## **THE CREW**

### **JOACHIM A. LANG**

DIRECTOR, SCREENWRITER

Joachim A. Lang, Prof. Dr., is an author and director. He studied German and History at the universities of Heidelberg and Stuttgart. In his early days, he produced documentaries and features and directed television programs, shows and films. In 2013, he realized the German Television Award-winning film GEORGE. In 2018, he presented MACK THE KNIFE - BRECHT'S THREEPENNY FILM, one of the most important German-language films of the year. Lang's work has been awarded the most important film and television prizes, including the German-French Journalism Prize, Bavarian Television Prize, Eurovisioni, German Television Prize, World Gold Medal at the New York Film Festival and the Special Golden Prague Award.

### **ZEITSPRUNG PICTURES**

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Zeitsprung Pictures was founded in 1985 by producer Michael Souvignier and is firmly established in the national and international television business as a specialist for award-winning films, series and documentaries. Souvignier's partner Till Derenbach has been working at Zeitsprung Pictures since 2008 and is responsible for all Zeitsprung productions as managing director and producer. Countless awards such as the International Emmy, the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (DEAR THOMAS), the German Film Award (9 awards for DEAR THOMAS), the German Television Award (OKTOBERFEST 1900), the Grimme Award and many more testify to the success of Zeitsprung Pictures. Michael Souvignier and Till Derenbach are members of the International Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, the European Film Academy and the German Film Academy. Zeitsprung Pictures has produced several award-winning feature films (DEAR THOMAS, MACKIE MESSER- BRECHT'S DREIGROSCHENFILM, ANNE FRANK'S DIARY, etc.) as well as over 100 fictional film productions, and 500 non-fictional productions. Among them are TV movies, series and mini-series for all major broadcasters, such as ARD, ZDF, arte, RTL, Sat1 and streamers, such as Netflix. Zeitsprung Pictures' productions often deal with contemporary historical and socio-critical topics that offer viewers new perspectives and food for thought in order to question aspects beyond everyday life.

## CREDITS- TECHNICAL DETAILS

Historical Drama / 2023 / Germany, Slovakia / 123min

### MAIN CAST

Joseph Goebbels	Robert Stadlober
Adolf Hitler	Fritz Karl
Magda Goebbels	Franziska Weisz

### MAIN CREW

Directed and written by	Joachim A. Lang
Produced by	Till Derenbach, Michael Souvignier
Director of Photography	Klaus Fuxjäger
Editor	Rainer Nigrelli
Music	Michael Klaukien
Post-Production	Basis Berlin
Sound	Blažej Vidlička
Set Design	Pierre Pfundt
Costume Design	Katarína Štrbová Bieliková
Special Effects	Michael Veselý
Production Manager	Marcus Schulze-Erdel
Executive Producer	Jan Novotný
Casting	Marc Schötteldreier
Production Company	Zeitsprung Pictures
Co-Production Companies	SWR, Maya and ActHQ
Supported by	Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, Deutscher Filmförderfonds, MFG and Slovak Ausiovisual Fund
German distribution	Wild Bunch Germany
World Sales	Beta Cinema



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