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'Paradise' Trilogy Director Ulrich Seidl 'Proud' of Austrian Films' 'Harsh' Worldview (Q&A)

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The controversial Vienna-based auteur talks about why he wants to show the world as hell.

Having premiered individual installments of his *Paradise* trilogy at Cannes, Venice and then Berlin, **Ulrich Seidl** has been travelling the film festival circuit for much of the past year to promote the films. But his appearance in Hong Kong was special, as the city's annual international film festival becomes the first stop, after the Berlinale, to screen all three entries in a row. Seidl himself was pleased too at the sold-out screenings for *Love* (about a middle-aged woman who travels to a Kenyan resort and buys sexual services from a "Beach Boy"), *Faith* (revolving around a devout Christian's anguish as she battles with her Muslim husband) and *Hope* (centering on a teenager's experience

in a diet camp and her unreturned affections for her on-site doctor).

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Ulrich Seidl's 'Paradise: Love' Wins Austrian Film Prize »



Visiting Hong Kong with his teenage son, Seidl is on a prolonged break after years of non-stop work in the production of the *Paradise* trilogy, which he said could be viewed either as individual films or as a whole (the protagonists of the three films hail from the same clan). Praised by some and criticized by others for his unflinching depiction of dysfunctional individuals and the circumstances which shaped them, the auteur talks to *The Hollywood Reporter* (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/>) about his latest tableaux of some of the lives and how he might be stirring even more



versy later with his next documentary.

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/paradise-hope-berlin-review-419582>

Paradise: Hope: Berlin Review



Paradise: Faith: Venice Review



<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/cannes-review-paradise-love-326278>

Paradise: Love: Cannes Review



<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/strand-releasing-ulrich-seidl-paradise-love-paradise-faith-paradise-hope-trilogy-368952>

Toronto 2012: Strand Releasing Nabs U.S. Rights to Ulrich Seidl's 'Paradise' Trilogy



Hollywood Reporter: Why did you decide to have a photo exhibition and the launch of a photo-book in Berlin, just as the third installment, *Hope*, premiered there at the festival?

Ulrich Seidl: I always wanted to use the images in the films as photographs and show them without a context - because I think pictures in my films are like tableaux so I to see how they by themselves. The three films have three different spheres and settings, and it's tempting to create a book to show the differences and connections between these "paradises."

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THR: It's interesting to see this endeavor as a reframing of your images – as social frameworks, that of institutions, seem to drive your work, just like how the *Paradise* films tackle institutions like Kenyan holiday resorts, religion and diet camps. Why were you interested in looking at controlled environments

like these?

Seidl: Actually I had this concept 20 years ago already that life is constrained by institutions. You were born in a hospital, which is an institution; you go to school and the church; you serve the military, and then you die in a hospital. And then all the government departments that you have to approach to do administrative work about your life. So life is an institution and a prison as well.

THR: So in what ways do you think "paradise," the one which is to exist in afterlife, will be an institution?

Seidl: I don't know what's there after you die. But paradise is a place you are longing to, somewhere you imagine to be.

THR: Is the title ironic, given the milieus you showed in your three films are hardly happy places but spaces defined by rules and leading to disappointment?

Seidl: Of course it's not ironic. A paradise is a place where you look for dreams you long for. I'm describing people finding their ways to what they want. The films don't describe paradise itself but where they want to go. For me, pessimism is not something worse than optimism. It's just something different. So what I'm describing here is how you're looking for ways to change something, maybe something you could call hope. I didn't make the world more evil; I'm just telling stories and giving you news about what the world is like.

THR: Do you think current social systems, like capitalism, are to blame for these horror stories, as you mentioned how the three tragic protagonists in these films are defined by their "low market values"?

Seidl: Of course capitalism has created an unfair world and it's getting even more unfair. Especially the powers are changing, not just globally but in one society: you know, looking at [the middle-aged sex tourist] Teresa in *Love*, the way she's looking for young, black guys – the reason lies behind the ways of our own society, how we define beauty, something which is not in her reach anymore. This is the reason why she's longing for something somewhere else.

THR: You've tackled *Love's* theme of sex tourism before in *Import Export* in 2007; the religious conflict between a married couple which drives *Faith* is similar to the real-life story in your documentary *Jesus, You Know*. How did you arrive at the story for *Hope*?

Seidl: When I was writing the script with my wife [writer **Veronika Franz**], we had this idea of writing these stories about three women. So I took the two you mentioned and there's the question of who the third one is. The idea was to show a different generation from the two women so that's how

we came to the idea of the girl. And we had these images in my mind of diet camps in the US – and there's also this connection with the mother [Teresa in *Love*] who's overweight.

THR: Originally *Hope* is meant to be the second installment and *Faith* the finale. Why were the two films swapped in order of appearance?

Seidl: This is the experience we had in the editing room. I was editing 90 hours of footage for 1 1/2 years, and so it's a very long way to find the right order to tell the narrative. So we have to make the right decision. We thought of putting *Faith* as the last one but we didn't do that because it's too heavy – we don't want audiences to, after six hours of watching the film, have that one in the end. Instead you have *Hope*, the young people – and it's a better narrative to end the film.

THR: How was it working with a non-professional actor, Melanie Lenz, in the lead role in *Hope*?

Seidl: Working with non-professional actors, like **Peter Kuzungu** in *Love*, **Nabil Saleh** in *Faith* or **Melanie** in *Hope*, it doesn't matter whether they are in the lead roles or not. It's about how to get the best out of them. The only difference of course is that Melanie is very young – she was 13 when she made the film – so we needed a longer preparation because the most important thing is to build a trust, that she's telling me what she's thinking and she has a natural way of acting in front of the camera.

THR: How did you get your non-professional cast to remember they are not playing themselves but fictional characters?

Seidl: In all three cases, I always took the roots of their own personalities to the characters. There's always a connection between what a character should be and what [the actor] is: it's always bringing their own experiences into the story. Like Peter's experience as a Beach Boy and the interactions with his Sugar Mamas. Melanie's taking her experience of being overweight into her character.

THR: Is it why you want non-professional actors in your films, so that they could bring their own real-life experiences?

Seidl: I'm doing the same also with actors. I'm taking what they have in their personalities and take it into their characters. It's also the case of **Margarethe Tiesel**, a professional actor, to take herself into the role of Teresa [in *Love*]. She has a kind of humor and she has had a person and she took it into the role. If she doesn't, the character doesn't work.

THR: Werner Herzog once praised your work because "never before in cinema have I been able to look straight into hell." Are you comfortable with such a perception of your films?

Seidl: Herzog is very talented in forming one sentence which is very extreme. But he's correct: I'm showing all human beings are making their own hells. But, well, if you wouldn't believe there is a way out of this hell you wouldn't make films. You have to have belief in human beings and that life is worth living. But sometimes when you look around sometimes you don't see that.

THR: Herzog's comment matches some people's perception that you're trying to provoke certain reactions in your audiences. What do you think of this view of you as an agent provocateur?

Seidl: Well I'm not provoking for the provocation; that's not my aim. I want to touch, irritate or make people a little bit dismayed as I want them to see themselves in the film and see the way they get into the film.

THR: I was asking this in the context of your next documentary, *In the Basement*, which is about people's attachment to their cellars. Given the high-profile cases of men locking women up underground and doing unspeakable things to them, are you worried that people would think you want to stir things up with this?

Seidl: But I've had this idea since I was shooting *Dog Days* [in 2001]. I was thinking of all these semi-detached houses when you have small living spaces for families but the underground spaces are much, much bigger – so I was interested in how people were spending all their free time in these spaces. It's going to be a male film because basements are very male spaces – its' for doing your training, drinking or handicrafts.

On a psychological level, basements are very dark and there are criminal places happening – and as a

child you're afraid of going there. When the audiences see the basement, they will of course think of those cases of [Josef] Fritzl [who held his daughter captive for 24 years in a cellar, assaulting and impregnating her in the process] and [Natascha] Kampusch [who spent eight years locked up in a cellar], you can't really get them out of your head.

THR: I was asking this because your compatriot, Stefan Ruzowitzky, once complained how people kept on bringing cellars up when he told people he's Austrian around the time when the Fritzl and Kampusch cases came to light.

Seidl: Obviously I do have a problem with that because it's obvious there are criminal things happening everywhere in the world – there are cases in Belgium or places you've never even heard of. But Austrian films seem to reflect reality in a harsh way – but in a way we can be proud of that because we can ask: why aren't films from other countries doing that?

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