

# QUIRKY HEIRS OF A GLOOMY LEGACY

**FESTIVAL GERMAN FILM-MAKERS ARE TRYING TO SHRUG OFF A WEIGHTY TRADITION, SAYS STEPHEN DALTON**

SEEN FROM AFAR, modern German cinema often looks like the runt of the Euro-film litter. With scarcely a director under 50 of international standing, and a thin scattering of crossover hits in the past two decades, the country's big domestic studios are reeling from the stock-market slowdown.

Where pre-war German film-making once rivalled Hollywood, it now lags far behind France, Denmark and Britain in overseas brand loyalty and exotic charm.

But the organisers of the 5th German Film Festival, which opens tomorrow at the Curzon Soho cinema in London before going to Edinburgh and Dundee, have a different tale to tell. Theirs is the story of a vibrant, creative, ethnically diverse renaissance, backed by well-funded regional film boards and a newly focused culture ministry under Gerhard Schröder. A generation is anxious to shake off the gloomy legacy of New German Wave heavyweights such as Herzog, Fassbinder and Wenders in order to make their own quirky films with global appeal.

"Everybody still talks about

Herzog and Fassbinder," says an exasperated Iris Kehr of the Export Union of German Cinema, who programmed the festival's feature selection. "People say, 'Why don't you show Fassbinder films?' Well, I'm really sorry, but the man is gone, and there is a whole army of new people trying to get through."

Among the younger directors showcased are Andreas Dresen, whose terrific infidelity drama *Halbe Treppe* (*Grill Point*) finds Mike Leigh-style bittersweet social realism on the German-Polish border, and Christian Petzold, whose unsettling psycho-killer thriller *Toter Mann* (*Something to Remind Me*) comes disguised as a tale of yuppie love. Other highlights include Dorris Dorrie's frothy relationship comedy *Nackt* (*Naked*), which opens the festival, and Stanislaw Mucha's *Absolut Warhola*, an offbeat documentary investigating Andy Warhol's Eastern European roots.

But the week's most exhilarating and iconoclastic entry is probably Michael Hofmann's *Sophtttt!* (see review, page 14). The film follows one eventful night in the life of an angry, self-destructive, sexually and



emotionally volatile Hamburg girl. Hofmann's nerve-jarring character study makes few concessions to orthodox cinematic grammar.

"I'm not the kind of filmmaker who is very interested in seeing other films," explains Hofmann. "I'd rather hear music or read a book. I don't feel I have to make films as part of a tradition. Directors like Fassbinder and Herzog made great films, but that was 20 or 30 years ago. I think you have to move on."

Thessa Mooij, the Dutch-born film officer at London's Goethe Institut, chose the festival's documentary strand. "I've met a lot of young film-makers over the past year or two," she explains, "and they see that whole older generation as a bit of a burden. They tend to address social issues in a much more subtle way. They play around with genres."

Ironically, the one film which most closely conforms to the classic formula of brooding, morally serious Germanic cinema was made by a Scottish-born director, Iain Dillthey. *Das Verlangen* (*The Longing*) is Dillthey's full-length feature debut and film-school graduation project, an engrossing meditation on murder, infidelity and small-town

the characters," Dillthey says. "If you make films I think it's important that you tell the story of the people in the country where you are making the film." Although he left Glasgow 30 years ago, at the age of one, the Cologne-based Dillthey still holds a UK passport and holidays in Scotland. Which might explain his heightened awareness of cultural boundaries, as demonstrated by the Teutonic mood of *Das Verlangen*.

"German films are much better than people think," he argues. "The problem is that German film isn't German any more. The Germans want to make films like the Americans, I think they have lost their identity."

But others celebrate its newly globalised spirit. One festival entry, Peter Behr's *Love the Hard Way*, is an American story shot in English. And Michael Herbig's spoof western, *Manitou's Shoe*, a box-office success in Germany, has been dubbed into English for the occasion.

"It doesn't matter what language people speak," Iris Kehr says. "At the end of the day, people want to connect to the characters. That's the important thing."

● The 5th German Film

**Offbeat generation: Stanislaw Mucha's *Absolut Warhola*, a film tracing Andy Warhol's roots in Eastern Europe, will be screened in the 5th German Film Festival**

**BITE:02**

BARBICAN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE EVENTS

**U Theatre**

**The Sound of Ocean**

03-08 December

*A sensational drumming spectacular fusing rhythm with oriental arts*

*'The Sound of Ocean, according to the rumour spreading around Avignon, is the best performance of the festival'*

Le Monde (Festival d'Avignon)

