

## WENN DU ANGST HAST NIMMST DU DEIN HERZ IN DEN MUND UND LÄCHELST

If You Are Afraid You Put Your Heart into  
Your Mouth and Smile

Director Marie Luise Lehner

Austria | 2025  
87 min. | German, English with English subtitles,  
German Sign Language  
Suitable for ages 12 and up

**Screenplay** Marie Luise Lehner. **Cinematography** Simone Hart.  
**Editing** Jana Libnik, Joana Scrinzi, Alexandra Schneider. **Music** n. n.  
**Sound Design** Lenja Gathmann. **Sound** Ines Vorreiter. **Production**  
**Design** Julia Libiseller, Gerald Freimuth. **Costumes** Marlene Pleyl.  
**Make-Up** Nora Conradi. **Casting** Martina Poel. **Producers** Katharina  
Posch, Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer, Markus Glaser.  
**Production company** Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion (Wien,  
Austria). **With** Siena Popović, Mariya Menner, Jessica Paar.

### Synopsis

Slowly, 12-year-old Anna and her deaf mum are starting to feel a bit cramped in their flat. It's not just the lack of privacy that's causing friction – Anna has just started secondary school and quickly realises what's important now: brand-name clothes and a sense of belonging. She quickly gets hold of a fake Ralph Lauren jumper, but money's still tight. In her debut, director and author Marie Luise Lehner stages a confrontation with classist structures, which Anna tackles with a mixture of shame and grit. She finds an ally in Mara, who challenges others with feminist issues and who also lives alone with her queer father. Lehner stands by her heroes unconditionally, giving them space for introspection and outbursts, allowing them to row back and reconcile. Not fitting in allows them to get to know and appreciate who they are. Lehner flies the flag of solidarity, quite naturally and with plenty of references to pop culture. And closes with a liberating "Fuck you, Vienna", high above the city's rooftops. (Carolin Weidner)

**Marie Luise Lehner**, was born in 1995 and lives in Vienna. A filmmaker, author, and punk musician. After studying at the Institut für Sprachkunst at the University of Applied Arts, she studied screenwriting at the Film Academy Vienna. She is pursuing master's degrees in directing at the Film Academy and in contextual painting at the Academy of Fine Arts. She has written scripts, prose, and two novels. Her short films have been shown at various international film festivals and her literary works have received many prizes. Since 2012, she has caused a furore with her feminist punk band Schapka.

**Films:** 2016: Kaugummizigaretten / Candy Cigarettes. 2018: Geh Vau / Sexual Intercourse. 2020: Zwischenräume / Gaps. 2022: Mein Hosenschlitz ist offen. Wie mein Herz / The zip of my pants

is open: Like my heart. 2023: Im Traum sind alle Quallen feucht / In their dreams all jellyfish are wet. 2025: Wenn du Angst hast nimmst du dein Herz in den Mund und lächelst / If You Are Afraid You Put Your Heart into Your Mouth and Smile.

### Director's Statement

#### Towards Pride

Finding one's own identity and belonging amidst social inequality, gender questions and relationships

**IF YOU ARE AFRAID YOU PUT YOUR HEART INTO YOUR MOUTH AND SMILE** is a film about class differences. A film about the closeness of a mother and child, but also, ultimately, about closeness between people. It deals with deafness and recounts self-discovery. Finding the way to where one wants to belong. To one's own desires. To gender identity. From shame to pride.

Marie Luise Lehner

### Interview

#### Inner Perspectives

**Marie Luise Lehner talks to Carolin Weidner and Christiane Büchner about the classism and ableism depicted in the film, parent-child relationships, and working with the young cast**

*Carolin Weidner: Marie, both your books and your movies have wonderful titles like FLIEGENPILZE AUS KORK or MEIN HOSENSCHLITZ IST OFFEN: WIE MEIN HERZ (The zip of my pants is open. Like my heart.). The film you will present in Forum is called IF YOU ARE AFRAID YOU PUT YOUR HEART INTO YOUR MOUTH AND SMILE. Can you tell us a little about that?*

Marie Luise Lehner: The title is a quote from a book by Aglaja Veteranyi called 'Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht' (Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta). And the full quote is, 'If you are afraid, you put your heart into your mouth and smile, says my mother.' Which was a little too long. I already had to fight to keep such a long title at all. The working title was 'Anna Mindestsicherung.' But that doesn't translate so well to cultures outside Austria (Literally: Minimum security, or means-tested minimum income covering Austrians who do not qualify for unemployment benefits – Trans.). With 'Mindestsicherung', I liked how it is also about 'security' and that word has so many meanings. But my producer wanted a title that could be translated into English, so I went looking. Aglaja Veteranyi is an author who has accompanied me for quite some time. Just like her book, which I've read again and again.

*CW: What kind of book is it?*

MLL: Aglaja Veteranyi is from Romania and fled the Ceausescu regime with her family. Then they toured Europe as a circus family. And the book is semi-autobiographical, but also very fantastic and playful. Extremely well written, but in a very simple

language, because Veteranyi, whose first language is Romanian, wrote it in German. It's a novel about growing up.

*CW: I like that we've come straight to the subject of language, because you deal with it very strongly. To prepare for this conversation, I read a few of your things and I can also sense in your writing what you say about Veteranyi. Very short, clear, and strong sentences. How did you move from writing to filmmaking and how do they cross-fertilise each other?*

MLL: Thanks for the nice compliment. The great thing about writing is, of course, that, unlike with filmmaking, you don't need any seed money. Writing was the most accessible thing I could start with and I began as a teenager. My mother worked in a literature institute, so literature was very important in our home. But film too, since we didn't have a TV and our Internet was very slow, but for that reason we went to the movies once a week. My mother read to me for a very, very long time. Until I was ten, because I'm actually dyslexic and couldn't read until much later. So literature and writing already played a role early on in my life. When I was 16, I won my first literature prize. Then I started writing a newspaper column, paid too. But I was really interested in film. Then I studied creative writing in Vienna. The programme is called 'Sprachkunst' (Language Arts). First I discovered audio dramas and thought it was so amazing that when you make an one, you decide how long a person spends with a sentence. Or how long the pauses are or how I can have another influence through the sound design. I shot my first short film with friends who had also never made a film before. I'm really happy that I came to film through literature. It was good to be in art school before film school, because my novels had already given me a certain confidence. It was not so easy to break me. They tried to, but I already had something up my sleeve and could defend myself. When I started studying, there was only one female professor at the Film Academy Vienna, for media studies. In all the departments where you learned practical filmmaking, there were only men. But I knew there was a space outside the university where I could somehow get through with what I do.

*CW: How do you come up with your characters?*

MLL: Each character has a lot to do with me and I am also each character when I'm writing. I have to put parts of myself into this character to be able to understand it at all. Then there are real people who I know and who I think of. For **IF YOU ARE AFRAID YOU PUT YOUR HEART INTO YOUR MOUTH AND SMILE**, I started with a radio segment about a study. The study said that lots of kids in Austria don't attend ski week because their parents can't afford it, and their shame is also too big for them to seek out financial assistance. They prefer to say their kids are ill. I was raised by a single parent too, so the subject is close to me. And in Austria, skiing is very relevant. And it is totally a question of class because skiing is so expensive. It's an unusual cultural asset. Then I thought about how it must be for kids whose mother's decision forces them to lie at school. That was the starting point. And also the scene of being the only kid at a birthday party without a purchased present to give. Those were two things that were there from the start and out of which I created this world.

*CW: In the gift scene, you make a small cameo when one of the girls gives a gift of your novel 'Im Blick' (In View). I liked that. Your debut novel 'Fliegenpilze aus Kork' is about a single father and his daughter, in a rather precarious situation too. Did you already know back then that you wanted to take a look at a mother/daughter relationship in another project?*

MLL: You don't know if he's a single dad. But there is still something that overlaps with my first book. There is so much you can deal with in a child/parent story. I'm extremely interested in the ambivalent feeling between shame and love and I think it's how a lot of people feel about their parents. You love them, but you are also dependent on them and they are incredibly

awkward. These things are all there at the same time. In 'Fliegenpilze aus Kork', too, for example. In that book, there are autobiographical connections to my childhood and I found the reception very exciting. People said it was about poverty. That doesn't have a lot to do with how I see my childhood. On the other hand, after the reading, people came up to me to tell me stories about their fathers. And a whole lot of people said: "The father you describe is exactly like my father." I found that interesting because the father in the book is very specific. I think that for people it was more the feeling of how the relationship feels than the character himself.

*Christiane Büchner: What I really liked about your film is that you notice that it is a dynamic process. I mean, the daughter tries to make up her own rhyme about how she wants to stand in the class, how she wants to be seen. And at the same time, the mother also tries tinkering with her own life, with the new husband, for instance. And they are both connected through an unbelievably affectionate relationship, which is, however, permanently needed too. I found that deeply touching and also wonderfully broken down into the scenes. Some of them are really short. You have the feeling a page is turned and then you're somewhere else. I'd be interested in how you shaped it.*

MLL: Thanks. What I can say is that the film also changed again in the editing. The script is longer. There are a lot more scenes in the script and we shot a lot more scenes too. We ended up with a huge amount of footage. And I think that was also good for the editing. The fact that I had the feeling I can reduce and then really expand things that worked best. Mariya Menner and Siena Popović, who play the mother and the daughter, were both unbelievably good. Mariya Menner saw Siena during the casting and fell in love with her right away. She has four kids herself and her oldest daughter looks very similar to Siena. Mariya is a very warm, affectionate person with killer charisma. She enters a room and captivates everyone immediately. There is something actorly about it, like many people who speak sign language, something pantomime-like and witty. And Siena had never acted before, except for an advert in Serbia. Her first language is Serbian. When we started rehearsals, she often spoke with a bit of the voice of a dubbing actress, because she learned German through TV. I wanted her for the film, because I found her very clever. During the first casting session, there was an improvisation scene where she had to tell a kid during lunch break that her mom was going to have an abortion. The kid reacts with disinterest so that Siena's impulse in the improvisation was to defend her mother. She told the other kid that they had no idea what a second child means financially. She was the only one who understood that abortion is a question of class.

*CB: I think it is great, by the way, that you used a different title, because it would have been a big burden for both of them. All the classism that confronts them – you notice it from your own class muckhill. It would be have been daft if it had already been more or less written into it. And how cleverly Anna deals with it is enormous. She knows the dos and don'ts. Did you do research in schools beforehand?*

MLL: I shot in the Akademisches Gymnasium in Vienna. It's a public school. It looks the way it looks. It's in the first district and kids from rich families go there. When I was casting, I ran into a lot of incomprehension when I said I wanted a school class where the kids know each other. Or I want to cast kids who are friends with each other because that is very different than the normal casting process. I also wanted the kid extras to be part of the group. I didn't want a division between extras and child actors. This means the entire class is made up of kids who really went to school there. Since I was able to get to know them a little, I also learned more about the reality of their lives. Plus, I have two sisters who are 16 and 20 years younger than me. I spoke to them during the writing process. I'd like to say one more thing about classism. It was important to me to show it from an

inner perspective, in which it isn't about 'they are so poor'. I don't want to look down, but instead to look up. And I want to look with pride. And it is very important to recount how they know the codes. 90% of the time, they can be imitated. From the outside, you don't notice it. But the moment it's about where you live or if you can go to ski week, no tricks work. I also recount the change from middle school to Gymnasium in the film. In middle school, she was a good student. But now she's struggling to keep up. You often need after school help to make it through class. Or parents who learned it too. And not only does classism play a role there, but in Anna and Isolde's case, ableism does too, because it is just incredibly hard for deaf people to receive secondary education. For instance, Mariya Menner could only take part in classes in school because her teacher broke the law and did sign language in her class. She grew up in Tyrol, and in Austria at that time it was forbidden to teach in sign language in public schools. Those were still laws from the Nazi era. Which led to many people being shut out of education. Completely. I think it's important to tell stories about people who actually do everything right, but can't get further due to social circumstances.

*CB: What struck me throughout the movie is that there are an incredible amount of very powerful internal references. In fact, nothing happens to show anything, but things happens from the inside out. Despite all the classism, which is noticeable, the class does show cohesion. It's not bullying, but always remains transparent.*

MLL: I think it's mostly that way in reality too. There are probably even extremer scenes that would go more in the direction of bullying. But there are a lot of related situations. Everything is simply there. That's why I had more of a need not to show the kids so brutally, as they may have been, in order to avoid falling into the trap of saying rich people are evil. It was also important to me that the film never adopts an attitude in which the actress playing the mother is shown without her own agenda. There's the scene in which Anna says to her, "you were never in secondary school and you have no idea how it is". Right after that, a man in the park sings the song "Du glaubst, ich bin blöd?" ("You think I'm stupid?"). And the man in the park is my dad. He never went to secondary school either. In terms of the dramatic structure, a lot of people said to me, cut that scene out, because it offsets the gravity of this conflict right away. But it was important to me never to adopt an attitude in which it could be misunderstood that I don't want to catch them. Also, when she is naked in the shower and the light goes out, I wanted her to say she knows what caused the power to go out and for her to regain control. For her never to be in a situation in which she is the victim, but is always raised up again as a person with an agenda and as a subject.

*CW: I'd like to briefly talk about Daniel Sea, who acts in the film and is not an unknown. How did that come about?*

MLL: Funnily enough, we studied together at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ashley Hans Scheirl's class. At the same time, I grew up with THE L WORD and saw him in the series as a teenager and thought it was a fantastic idea to have someone like him – the first trans man to appear on TV – in my cast. Then I thought about what kind of role I could give him. It wasn't so easy because for people in SAG-AFTRA, there are a whole lot of conditions for how the set needs to be. But it was his wish to act in the film.

*CW: Marie, I hope we see each other in Berlin and can continue the conversation. And that you are duly celebrated and can enjoy your time before it starts.*

MLL: The film will be ready tomorrow. It's a load off my mind.