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Hedi Schneider steckt fest

Hedi Schneider is Stuck

Sonja Heiss

Producer Jonas Dornbach, Janine Jackowski, Maren Ade, Maria Ekerhovd, Kjetil Jensberg, Svein Andersen. **Production companies** Komplizen Film (Berlin, Germany); Mer Film (Tromsø, Norway); FilmCamp (Øverbygd, Norway); ZDF – Das kleine Fernsehspiel (Mainz, Germany). **Director** Sonja Heiss. **Screenplay** Sonja Heiss. **Director of photography** Nikolai von Graevenitz. **Production design** Tim Pannen. **Costume** Nicole von Graevenitz. **Make-up** Monika Münnich. **Sound** Andreas Prescher. **Music** Lambert. **Sound design** Daniel Iribarren. **Editor** Andreas Wodraschke.

Cast Laura Tonke (Hedi Schneider), Hans Löw (Uli), Leander Nitsche (Finn), Melanie Straub (hearing-impaired woman), Simon Schwarz (Arne Lange), Margarita Broich (Hedi's mother), Matthias Bundschuh (Mr Schild), Rosa Enskat (psychiatrist), Urs Jucker (therapist), Alex Brendemühl (head of NGO).

DCP, colour. 90 min. German.

Premiere 8 February 2015, Berlinale Forum

World sales The Match Factory

A model family's happy life unexpectedly goes off the rails when the care-free Hedi, played by Laura Tonke, suddenly starts having panic attacks. First mental illness and then drug dependency – the happiness that these happy-go-lucky thirty-somethings once took for granted suddenly seems unattainable, and their world fragile and uncertain.

Sonja Heiss takes quite a risk with her second feature film, tackling a serious subject with an unerring grasp of comedy. But the director masters the balancing act between tragedy and comedy with bravura. It's not just Laura Tonke's performance that is splendidly on the brink, such as when Hedi gets stuck in a lift at the beginning of the film and begins a nonsensical conversation with the man who responds to her emergency call. Throughout the film's 90-minute running time, the dramatic structure and editing equally allow for the most absurd ruptures and mood changes, which still always end up leading somewhere. The film repeatedly challenges the audience to revise their hasty judgements, reallocate their sympathies and reassess the plot and actors. Underestimate *Hedi Schneider steckt fest* at your peril.

Christoph Terhechte

"One of the worst things was that I lost my sense of humour"

Like Hotel Very Welcome, this film also takes a humorous look at a generation's quest for meaning. How did you arrive at this combination: a story of romance and illness?

Sonja Heiss: I wanted to tell a love story in which a character's mental illness is like a troublemaker stirring things up. I wanted to explore the fragility of a great love by throwing it dangerously off-balance through the sudden debilitation of one of the lovers. I don't think a film can convey the private terror of psychological crisis, anyway. You can barely describe it in words, let alone in images. That's why I didn't just want to make an observation on illness: I felt that there were too many of those already. I wanted to examine the impact of such an illness on love and on a couple. That meant that the key was in the characters.

How were the characters created?

Hedi Schneider needed to be an extroverted, brave and funny wild woman, and she needed to have a family that, in the context of its normal, stable existence, didn't take itself too seriously. The characters were meant to show that an anxiety disorder can have all kinds of reasons and triggers, but that there's no one specific reason – that it can happen to anyone.

After *Hotel Very Welcome*, I wanted *Hedi Schneider steckt fest* to be a film that approaches the characters in a playful and poetic way. The challenge was not to represent reality, but rather to present the crisis in such a way that the story didn't lose its plausibility or emotional impact. I wanted to alternate between clear realistic scenes and exaggerated, even crazy moments. It was also important to me that the acting was lifelike enough for viewers to be moved and to sympathise with the characters. What I didn't want was for them to observe the characters with distant amazement. In Laura Tonke, Hans Löw and Leander Nitsche, I found the perfect partners for this project. That goes for all of the supporting actors, too.

How did you work with the actors? Hotel Very Welcome was partially improvised. How did you work this time?

This time, in order to make my points more clearly, it was important to me not to use improvisation. I wanted to have more control, spend less time editing and, above all, to accurately translate my idea into film – even though the improvised approach of *Hotel Very Welcome* does offer you the 'gift' of many beautiful moments. In the years since *Hotel Very Welcome*, I've also developed a passion for writing. I'd been working on the screenplay for *Hedi Schneider steckt fest* for a while when I realised I needed a break. I began to write short stories without knowing whether I was even capable of producing literary material. But it worked. My first book, *Das Glück geht aus* ('Luck is Running Out') was published in 2011, and I'm now working on my first novel.

I found literary writing a lot freer, and it's had a big influence on my approach to filmmaking. In a way, I've become more imaginative, my ideas are wilder and my writing is braver. All the same, there are a couple of scenes in *Hedi Schneider steckt fest* that emerged from improvisation, either during casting or in rehearsals. Laura Tonke and Hans Löw are actors who offer wonderful moments with their courage and sense of humour. I took those improvised scenes, worked on them prior to filming

and integrated them into the screenplay. Very little improvisation actually occurred on set.

Why is there so much humour in the screenplay and dialogue?

First and foremost, I think that's just my way of looking at the world. I take it seriously, but not too seriously. Maybe it's a kind of survival strategy. I certainly think we live in a pretty absurd world. When I started writing, it was clear to me that I wanted to make a film that laughs about life, even when it's horrible – because life is sometimes simply too absurd to take it seriously. Nonetheless, it's important to me that I never make fun of my characters. I have to love them if I want to write really good jokes for them. And I have to know them really well. Then I know how they talk.

During shooting and editing, the jokes are constantly being tested. If every detail isn't right – if the timing is off or the camera angle's wrong or whatever – they can easily get lost. I also have a tendency to write dialogue-based jokes that need time to be understood. That can work well at the beginning of the film, but, at the height of a conflict, the joke has to be really strong for the audience to take the time to appreciate it, and then to really laugh.

With Hedi Schneider, though, there's another backdrop to the humour. For a while, I suffered from anxiety and panic attacks myself. One of the worst things about that time, for me and for others, was that I lost my sense of humour. I still clearly remember the sense of relief I felt the first time I made a really good joke again. Above all, I remember finally regaining the ability to joke about myself and my situation. That's one of the reasons Hedi Schneider turned into a comic character. Through her, I wanted to show that you don't have to be an introspective, anxious, melancholic person to be affected by that kind of thing.

Apart from that, during the period in which I was having anxiety attacks, some really bizarre and extremely funny things happened to me. Of course, it wasn't until later that I saw them like that.

Can you give any examples?

I remember one psychiatrist who quoted Goethe at great length, when all I really needed was a few pills as fast as possible. With another therapist, I spent weeks drawing a little cross on a squeaky whiteboard next to 'minus five' on a scale of minus seven to plus seven. One day, I put the cross next to 'minus four', and the therapist was beside herself with excitement. It's really difficult to find the right help – that's what Hedi and Uli experience in the film, too.

The way in which the two characters deal with the crisis also tells us something about our generation. We have a different approach to mental illness.

Previous generations probably weren't so ready to ask themselves whether it was worth staying in a relationship. People's approach to those kinds of problems wasn't as open, nor was it as focused on finding solutions. It wasn't 'normal' to see a therapist. People were much quicker to stigmatise, to categorise you as 'crazy'. I'm not certain, but perhaps the current incidence of anxiety disorders also has something to do with society. Every day, we have to decide between far too many options; we're constantly asking ourselves whether what we're doing will make us 'happy'. Apart from anything else, we often

strive to achieve a permanent state of happiness, and that can only result in disappointment.

I don't, however, think that we're now totally open and accepting of mental illness. Things are much better than they used to be, but, for example, if somebody suffers from panic attacks, some people still interpret that as being 'crazy'. Nowadays, everyone has 'burn-out'; hardly anyone has depression. 'Burn-out' makes it sound like someone's just been working too much: it suggests there's a reason for the illness and, what's more, the reason is a perfectly respectable one. On the other hand, 'depression' suggests that the person is just inexplicably mentally ill – despite the fact that millions of Germans suffer from depression and anxiety disorders.

In the film – the scene in Hedi's office – I suggest that we still don't live in a totally unprejudiced society. It was important to me at least to scratch the surface of this topic. Hedi returns to work and everyone else is supposed to look after her. They watch her like a zoo animal; she can't even go to the toilet in peace. Of course, her colleagues are asking themselves how she'll behave now that there's something wrong with her head. And then there's Hedi's mother, who doesn't understand why her daughter suddenly has to have 'that kind of problem'. Mostly, she thinks Hedi needs to pull herself together.

What happens to a relationship in this kind of phase? What's the survival strategy for love?

'How can a relationship survive something like this?' was the question I kept asking myself when I was working on the screenplay and then the film. After all, the person you loved, respected and admired is gone. They've been replaced by someone who's lost their strength, humour, courage, intellect, curiosity, sense of empathy, physical presence... This someone is exclusively concerned with themselves and their own negative thoughts; they don't really notice you anymore. But they still need you – they can't survive without you. The healthy partner is now irrelevant; life revolves around the ill person and their irrational anxieties, around the pain they're feeling because they think they might die of a cold or never again make it around the corner to the supermarket. How can you keep your love alive when you pity your partner? How can you hold on to your positive feelings when, sooner or later, you're overcome by the anger that comes from having totally lost your own place in life? And how can you stay positive when you're constantly surrounded by these negative thoughts and actions? I think a couple can survive that kind of experience, but I think it's extremely difficult. And that the scar will always remain. Inevitably, the relationship will be irreversibly changed.

By the end of the film, despite the therapy and their sense of humour, have Hedi and Uli lost the battle for their love?

I don't know, but I'm hopeful that they haven't. I think everyone sees the ending differently, depending on their own life experience and point of view.

When they decide to be happy again for this one, single day, they're reconnecting with the playful approach to life and love that we saw at the start of the film. Now, though, there's a distance between them that wasn't there before. Maybe it's the distance that exists in a relationship before it transforms into something new. Or maybe it's the beginning of the end. I do, however, believe you can always rekindle old feelings, even if you think they're gone forever. That's why I gave the film's final

moment to Hedi and Uli: we don't see how it ends. It might be that their tentative attempt is futile and their relationship still doomed to failure – I consciously chose to leave that possibility open.

Source: production



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Sonja Heiss was born in Munich in 1976.

From 1998 to 2006, she studied at the University of Television and Film Munich. Her first feature film, *Hotel Very Welcome*, was also her graduate thesis film at the university. From 1998 to 2004, she was a casting director in advertising. She has directed commercials since 2003, and from 2005 to 2011, she has worked with Jan Bonny as

part of the duo Sonny & Bonny. In 2011, she published her first book of stories, *Das Glück geht aus* (Berlin Verlag / Bloomsbury). Sonja Heiss lives in Berlin.

Films

1999: *Schnell und Sauber* (12 min.). 2001: *Karma Cowboy* (Co-director: Vanessa van Houten, 45 min.). 2004: *Christina ohne Kaufmann* (15 min.). 2007: *Hotel Very Welcome* (Perspektive Deutsches Kino, Berlinale 2007, 89 min.). 2015: *Hedi Schneider steckt fest / Hedi Schneider is Stuck*.