



Casting

Nicolas Wackerbarth

Producer Franziska Specht. **Production company** SWR – Südwestrundfunk (Baden-Baden, Germany). **Director** Nicolas Wackerbarth. **Screenplay** Nicolas Wackerbarth, Hannes Held. **Director of photography** Jürgen Carle. **Editor** Saskia Metten. **Sound design** Jürgen Kramlofsky. **Sound** Tom Doepgen. **Production design** Klaus-Peter Platten. **Commissioning editor** Jan Berning, Katharina Dufner.

With Andreas Lust (Gerwin), Judith Engel (Vera), Ursina Lardi (Almut Dehlen), Corinna Kirchhoff (Luise Maderer), Andrea Sawatzki (Annika Strassmann), Milena Dreissig (Ruth), Nicole Marischka (Hanne), Stephan Grossmann (Manfred), Marie-Lou Sellem (Mila Ury-Tesche).

Colour. 91 min. German.

Premiere February 11, 2017, Berlinale Forum

For her first television film – a remake of Fassbinder's *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* – director Vera wants the perfect cast. But the first day of shooting is fast approaching and the numerous casting sessions have yet to find a suitable actress to play the leading role. Although the producer and crew are getting ever more exasperated with Vera, Gerwin is happy about the extra work, as he earns his money as an audition reader, delivering the lines of dialogue to the starry candidates at the various castings. When the male lead suddenly has to back out, Gerwin thinks that this might just be his chance.

Director Nicolas Wackerbarth captures the complex essence of Fassbinder's film and simultaneously creates a profound work of his own. *Casting* takes an unflinching look at the murky depths of human relationships driven by power, passion and desperation. Yet Wackerbarth also brings bitter truths to light about power relations and dependencies in the German television industry almost in passing. *Casting* is both intelligent and entertaining, marked by exciting turning points, humour and the breathtaking acting performances by a truly virtuoso ensemble.

Ansgar Vogt

The concealed desire

Auditions are often decided the moment someone walks in the door. Every gesture, every expression, every sentence is under observation. Since there is not yet a common contractual basis, those involved act as if they were encountering each other in friendship. All desire remains politely concealed, along with all competition. It is a charged situation. This is the basis of the film.

Nicolas Wackerbarth

“Authenticity is the highest aim and is celebrated ad absurdum”

Casting is the second film that you have developed in improvisation with the actors.

Nicolas Wackerbarth: Actors play actors. This doubling allows an interesting interplay between documentation and staging. *Unten Mitte Kinn* was about young acting students subjected to their elite training in an imposed community. In professional life, in contrast, one must rely on oneself, and everyone must find his or her own way, alone, to prevail on the market. That's why *Casting* aimed to follow individuals in their mid-forties – like the unemployed Gerwin – in their rebirth as actors. On the set we jokingly called it our over-forty party. Working improvisationally enabled us to capture the struggle for expression and the searching movements when speaking.

There was no script with dialogue?

My co-author, Hannes Held, and I had worked up detailed scenic descriptions and a dramaturgical arc in advance, so that we knew what conflicts had to succeed each other. But the actors were told the plot only bit by bit, individually, each day. Since no one knew what his casting partner had planned and how he would respond verbally, it was not only an emotional, but also an intellectual challenge. It's a lot of fun. More than stepping up to the marks and reciting texts.

What interested you about the topic of the casting process?

Fear of finding oneself left up on the shelf at age forty is widespread, and not only among freelance artists. As we developed the material, economic pressure concerned us less than the self-induced pressure to succeed, which is found not only in the creative professions in our society. Casting may also have become a film about people who can't fulfil societal demands – and who can?! –; people who feel inadequate and criticise others as being inadequate.

Why did you choose Fassbinder's Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant for the film-within-the-film plot?

This theatre play interacts in many ways with the history of film. Petra von Kant is a successful fashion designer. Having become a prominent, public person, she can no longer be sure whether people love her for herself or only for her fame and the economic possibilities that her powerful position entails. With our main character Gerwin, the situation is reversed. He doesn't give a shit about himself – he can't buy anything with a self. He now wants to finally have professional recognition, which has been denied him up to now.

Everyone in the film fights to be able to work. By now, Fassbinder's works have become part of the established cultural

canon. So the producer adorns himself with it, although he has never delved into this work, because, as Fassbinder's seventy-fifth birthday approaches, it offers him the chance to make a film again. The director has acquiesced to this suggestion. For an uncompromising director like Vera, it probably isn't such a great idea to agree to such a dubious compromise. While Fassbinder was venturesome in throwing himself into relationships that provoked public opinion and had an idea of a political body, Vera is a late bloomer – like me, by the way. She carefully looks for an approach that would allow her to preserve her self-image as an artist with integrity, while keeping all her options open for a career in the film industry. Things are similar with her reader. He clings to a straw to preserve his chance for work. Even for the seemingly successful actresses who are invited, having to audition never stops.

In Casting, we experience – sometimes comically, sometimes painfully – what the actresses and their reader Gerwin are willing to do to be cast. Is the process of jumping through hoops worse for actors being cast than for people in other job application situations, because we expect actors to bring so much of their personality to the job? With Gerwin, it really hurts to see how he subordinates himself to whatever he thinks is opportune at the moment.

When acting, Gerwin doesn't subordinate himself. On the contrary. He is stubborn and resists advice. Twisting oneself into a pretzel in front of the camera is counterproductive; actors know this very well. What I think this profession illustrates well is the contradiction in the art business between venerating lofty ideals of art and the real motivation, which is self-interest. I don't believe – and I think the film shows this, too – that actors are per se more opportunistic than directors or producers... or lighting technicians. Athletes – now, they are sometimes extreme [laughs]... but okay, they can't even paint their fingernails in rainbow colours without getting flak from the sporting federations.

You, too, have worked as an actor. Did your own audition experiences find their way into the film?

I know both sides: the woes of the director and those of the actor. I not only went to be cast and could tell you some anecdotes that are embarrassing for me, I also once worked as a reader. That was when a friend was casting her feature film. While the great actresses of her generation streamed in and out, one after the other, I could observe how hierarchy, fear and joy were displayed in little and bigger gestures. It was also interesting to see how the wish gradually grew in me to become part of the film, myself. To me, it seems almost inevitable that this comes with the position of reader and gives that profession a bitter taste. You go through the script with professional actors, joke and playfully try out various possibilities. The longer the casting process lasts, the more you feel a part of it. A fallacy. As soon as the audition is over, the actors begin working and the reader... goes home. I also liked the idea of filming someone who is not otherwise filmed.

How did you choose your actors? Did you hold auditions yourself?

I give myself plenty of time and make sure the hierarchy is as flat as possible. So I usually meet two actors alone on a rehearsal stage and have to come up with a spontaneous improvisation. That way, the pressure to deliver something good is initially on me and not on the actors.

How do you prepare the actors, and how much do you intervene in the action when shooting? How great is your actors' freedom? And how great your re-conquest of power when editing?

With improvisation, the actor enters an open field, lays himself open, and that's why I would never interrupt and judge suggestions. Feelings like shame and false ambition don't lose their inhibiting power until you steer head-on toward them. With their unabashed acting offerings, the actors help me understand how a scene functions in detail. As soon as that is clear – and it can take a while – the whole thing takes off as if on its own. A nice half-hour take can then be edited into a scene, and we see later how it fits into the whole structure. Toward the end of shooting, when all the participants have internalised and reflected on the characters and themes, it always gets easier, and we get to the point fairly quickly.

In recent years, because of the casting-show genre, 'casting' has become a tremendously popular term. In that genre, a finished surface is presented, but your film expects its public to open itself to it and then gives the viewers downright intimate glimpses of the creation of roles. What was your aesthetic intention with the film?

The casting shows trigger grand emotions like triumph or disappointment and then repeat them in slow motion with music, if the tears seem authentic to the picture editors. Authenticity is the highest aim and is celebrated ad absurdum. Instead, I try to penetrate a situation and not to present its quotation as the continuation of the story. Here I'm less interested in what's genuine than in the fake. I think the lie is more interesting. A human being is, after all, a chatty, social being. Aesthetically, I wanted to give visibility to the process of acting, the performance itself. That's also why I work with very experienced actors who can act out an audition situation and comment on it at the same time. I hope this produces a false bottom that makes the whole thing more interesting and thus also more amusing.

You produced Casting with a television broadcasting company in its studios and rooms. Was that important for the film? Does the film allude primarily to television? Is television even capable of self-irony?

To make the competing interests in the decision-taking process of casting transparent to the viewer, we had to locate the production of culture. For example, the film doesn't show the chaotic, poorly funded shoots of an independent feature film, but the pre-production of a German television film. This presents the director and producer with different conditions. The chance to make the film at the SWR broadcasting company's studios, together with the SWR team, accommodated us. Only when you succeed in describing a situation exactly does the universal character of a story develop. One of the reasons I think the unfulfilled yearning of someone in his mid-forties who, as a young actor, wanted to be 'bigger than life' and now has a second chance is interesting is that the casting process has meanwhile extended to our private communication. Presenting oneself with photos and staging one's life with cinematic procedures has become part of everyday life. Thus it seems that actors and politicians are no longer the only ones striving for the commodity of attention.

Interview: Annette Gilcher, January 2017



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Nicolas Wackerbarth was born in Munich in 1973. He studied acting at the Bavarian Theatre Academy in Munich from 1992 to 1996. After his first theatre job at the Schauspiel Frankfurt, he was a member of the ensemble of the Städtische Bühnen Cologne from 1997 to 2000. He then studied directing at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB). Nicolas Wackerbarth has been co-editor of the film magazine *Revolver* since 2004. As well as working as a director, writer, and actor, Nicolas Wackerbarth teaches at various art schools and curates film programmes and panel discussions. He lives in Berlin.

Films

2004: *Anfänger* (30 min.). 2006: *Westernstadt* (38 min.). 2007: *Halbe Stunden* (20 min.). 2011: *Unten Mitte Kinn* (89 min.). 2013: *Halbschatten/Everyday Objects* (80 min., Berlinale Forum 2013). 2017: *Casting*.