

Karlovy Vary: Sven Taddicken on Adapting A.L. Kennedy's 'Original Bliss'

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COURTESY OF TOM TRAMBOW

Variety speaks with German director Sven Taddicken about his latest feature, “Original Bliss,” an adaptation of Scottish author A. L. Kennedy’s 1997 work, which has its international premiere in competition at Karlovy Vary Film Festival.

The film, which stars Martina Gedeck and Ulrich Tukur, revolves around a woman in a failing marriage who embarks on an unlikely romance. “Original Bliss” is produced by Frisbeefilms, Cine Plus Filmproduktion and Senator Film. Picture Tree Intl. is handling world sales.

Taddicken’s works include “Getting My Brother Laid,” his debut feature, and “Emma’s Bliss.” When he’s not making films, Taddicken teaches directing and writing at the Met Film School Berlin. He has also taught in Kenya as part of fellow German filmmaker Tom Tykwer’s One Fine Day film-training initiative in Nairobi.

What was it about A.L. Kennedy’s novel that inspired you to adapt it for film?

I once listened to the novel more or less by accident while being stuck in a traffic jam on the German Autobahn. A.L. Kennedy’s story starts out as a funny odd-couple-romance. Then it gets darker and darker, and guides you through the unexpected depths of its characters: the famous psychologist Eduard Gluck and his weird sexual longings, and housewife Helene Brindel, who is stranded in a dangerous marriage with her violent husband, asking herself: Is the loss of “faith” the result of my situation – or did it actually cause it?

In the end the story releases you with such a cheeky barefaced happy ending that you never expected to be believable — but it is. I was so moved that I wrote myself a note that I would

like to make a film “like that.” It seems like a crazy and fateful coincidence that Alexander Bickenbach from Frisbeefilms rang me up a couple of weeks later to offer me the chance to write and direct this novel. Needless to say that this was the most enjoyable traffic jam I remember.

What do actors Martina Gedeck and Ulrich Tukur bring to this particular story?

They are both extremely experienced actors, in fact the most experienced actors I’ve ever worked with. They fully dedicated themselves to their characters and both gave a unique performance that is far from routine. Martina Gedeck approached Helene Brindel in a very serious and thoughtful way, which made this fragile character believable. And Ulrich Tukur approached Eduard Gluck in a very playful and charming way, which makes Gluck lovable, in spite of his uncommon interests.

The book is set in Scotland — what kinds of changes did you have to make to the story for a German adaptation? I guess it helped that the main characters have German-sounding names?

Well, the book takes place in Glasgow, London and Stuttgart, Germany, where the two main characters meet for the first time at a conference on psychology. I changed these locations to Königswinter (in the film an anonymous town in the west of Germany), Berlin and Hamburg, and made the story take place completely in Germany, for mainly practical reasons: In our situation this was the only way to get the film financed in Germany.

And yes, A. L. Kennedy references to the German language are quite funny, especially giving Eduard Gluck a last name that actually means “happiness” (Glück) in German.

You have made a broad range of films but relationships and intimacy seem to be elements in a number of your works — are you attracted to stories of couples coming together, of human connection?

For sure. I guess a question that drives me is: Do I deserve love? Or do “we” deserve love.

While working on this film I realized this for the first time. It’s the same question that drives Max, the shy car-salesman in trouble, in “Emma’s Bliss,” or mentally-handicapped Josch in “Getting My Brother Laid.” The characters I’m interested in are often in need of love and are unsure if they are allowed to receive some.

What filmmakers would you say inspire you?

So many. I take inspiration from the old-new British cinema: Leigh and Loach. I enjoy Almodovar’s playfulness and his love for cinema – and for “Original Bliss,” Daniela Knapp [the cinematographer] and I watched a lot of Douglas Sirk’s work from the old days. His combination of romance and violence was a big influence for “Original Bliss” and gave me confidence to touch these difficult scenes.

You also teach film — what does it contribute to your professional life?

Teaching makes you realize what you actually know – and what you don’t know. It’s a great thing to do, and it even gave me more confidence in directing.