

## 'The Most Beautiful Day' ('Der Geilste Tag'): Film Review



4/1/2016 by Boyd van Hoeij

Florian David Fitz and Matthias Schweighöfer headline this German comedy-drama, also written and directed by Fitz, which is currently the year's biggest local box-office champion. To lose one terminally ill manchild might be regarded as a misfortune; to lose two starts to look like carelessness, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde. And yet, this is what is scheduled to happen in *The Most Beautiful Day* (*Der Geilste Tag*), the second directorial effort from Munich-born actor-screenwriter Florian David Fitz (*Jesus Loves Me*, *Vincent Wants to Sea*). Fitz here co-stars alongside the hugely popular German star Matthias Schweighöfer (*The Break-Up Man*) and the duo play young men who meet in the hospital where both are diagnosed with terminal illnesses. To make the most of the days that remain, they decide to get their hands on a lot of money and go out with a literal, pistol-generated bang at the end of a road trip through picturesque Africa. With a solid take of over \$12 million in five weeks, it is currently the most popular local title of 2016 as well as the fifth highest grosser overall. Further theatrical possibilities, especially in territories between Mitteleuropa and Russia, are a given.

Fitz's first feature-length screenplay, for Ralf Huettnner's *Vincent Wants to Sea*, also involved a man with Tourette's on a life-changing road trip by car, while the actor's turn in 2014 Toronto title *Tour de Force* involved both a terminal disease and a road trip — by bike and to a country where euthanasia is legal, yes really! — so it's inevitable that there's a sense of déjà vu to some of the material here. What's new is the pairing of Fitz and Schweighöfer, with the latter also producing via his Pantaleon Films, and the two easy-on-the-eyes yet pretty cool stars are clearly the main reason for local audiences to go and see this otherwise relatively predictable affair.

The dark-haired Fitz is Benno, who has had fits of narcolepsy his whole life but who now also has an incurable brain tumor. He ends up in the hospital in the room next to curly-haired blond Andi (Schweighoeffer), who has pulmonary fibrosis and no immune system left, so both will soon be dead men. Though their initial rapport is antagonistic — the better to make their eventual friendship a surprise for all the viewers for whom this is their very first storytelling experience — the two end up going on a road trip together, with the idea being that they'll kill themselves after they've lived the most beautiful day of the title. Since it's the 21st century, they also document their every move for Andi's equally ailing YouTube channel, which initially has 12 followers (including four doctors and three dead people) but then, also rather predictably, explodes.

While the reasoning behind their trip is easy to understand, since they have nothing to lose, how they pay for their adventure is one of several of the film's rather odd attempts to wring humor out of amoral behavior. This is a hit-and-miss tactic both here and elsewhere in the film, including in the in-media-res opening, in which Benno points a gun at Andi's head while the latter explains in a rather facile voiceover what is going on.

The first stop of the two, who've christened themselves the "Bett Men" — i.e., badass Bed Men, since they technically should be bed-ridden — is Mombassa, Kenya, where the devil-may-care Benno picks up British chicks much to the dismay of the always slightly panicky Andi. The latter character's sexual inexperience is the backbone of the first on-the-road comical setpiece and Schweighoefer here shows exactly why he's such a star, remaining likeable, cute and endearing as the increasingly unlikely pratfalls, bodily harm and embarrassments pile up. However, the sequence's final wink-wink punchline, which involves a (totally offscreen) foursome, only barely manages to avoid that dreaded staple of mainstream comedies: gay panic.

The screenplay, also by Fitz, has to work a little too hard to find the right balance between getting what it wants out of Africa, such as gorgeous landscapes and sunsets or early-morning hijinks involving urine and a lioness, while mostly ignoring the depressing realities of the nations in Eastern Africa that the two are traveling through on their way from Kenya to Cape Town. A noteworthy compromise in this regard is the presence of a local stowaway kid who travels with the duo for a while and whose presence offers a glimpse into the lives of the locals. However, he's not in the movie long enough to have any real impact and somewhat bizarrely, Fitz fails to meaningfully connect him and his reality to the soul-searching that his characters are doing as they try to find out what the most important things in life are before they die.

All of the leads' antics in South Africa, which involve a quick cameo by German-Romanian actress Alexandra Maria Lara (*The Reader*, *Rush*), also feel a bit too calculated to deliver the desired emotional wallop while Fitz has to resort to pretzel-shaped plotting to nonetheless come up with a happy ending for his film about two as-good-as-dead protagonists. Though Fitz sees medical issues more like sources of humor than anything serious, the film's tone does gradually slide from comedy-drama to a more melancholy dramedy, with the final reel's feel rather serious overall.

However, despite these structural and storytelling misgivings, there's an infectiousness to the rapport between Fitz and Schweighoefer that makes it a pleasure to simply be in their company, whether they're hanging upside down from a crane in a panic in an unnamed shantytown bordering on a forest or are simply shooting the shit in their mobile home. The two clearly enjoyed filming this together and it shows.

The assembly of the film is glossy on all levels, from Bernhard Jasper's location-showcasing cinematography to Siggi Mueller and Egon Riedel's score, which helps tug at the audience's heartstrings even if their brains might be wondering whether this all really makes sense.

*Production companies: Pantaleon Films, Erfttal Film, Warner Brothers Deutschland*

*Cast: Matthias Schweighoefer, Florian David Fitz, Rainer Bock, Andreas Dubois, Jackie Hill, Alexandra Maria Lara, Frederic Linkemann, Robert Nickish, Caroline Rapp, Robert Schupp, Tatja Seibt, Maria Vos*

*Writer-Director: Florian David Fitz*

*Producers: Marco Beckmann, Dan Maag, Matthias Schweighoefer*

*Director of photography: Bernhard Jasper*

*Production designer: Gabriella Ausonio*

*Editor: Stefan Essl*

*Music: Siggi Mueller, Egon Riedel*

*Sales: Picture Tree International*

*No rating, 113 minutes*