

TIFF: 'A Heavy Heart' Marks Impressive Debut from New German Talent



'A Heavy Heart'

Courtesy of Toronto International Film Festival

by Scott Roxborough

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The debut feature is director Thomas Stuber's follow-up to his Oscar-winning short.

After winning a German film award, and a student Oscar, for his short film *Of Dogs and Horses* in 2012, **Thomas Stuber** chose an unusual project for his feature-film follow up: a boxing movie. In reverse.

“You're classic American boxing film is all about the young guy from nowhere who works hard, fights his way up and triumphs, winning fame and fortune,” says Stuber. “My film flips that narrative. It's about the decline of a once great boxer.”

Decline both metaphorical and physical. *A Heavy Heart*, which premiered in TIFF's contemporary world cinema section, follows Herbert, a washed-up former East German boxing champion who, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, is reduced to working as a bouncer and debt collector. His social deterioration then become literal when he is diagnosed with ALS and finds his once powerful body withering away.

“It becomes about someone who has always defined himself through his strength and his muscles, who has built up a shell around himself,” says Stuber. “When he starts to lose that, The world is pulled out from under his feet. He is forced to acknowledge his own vulnerability. Slowly, this carapace of his peels back and he starts letting people in.”

The film's star, acclaimed German character actor **Peter Kurth**, went through the physical transformation of his character. Months before shooting, Kurth bulked up, adding 35 lbs of

muscle to resemble a former fighter. During the 35-day shoot, which was shot entirely in chronological order, he slowly lost it all, starving himself to mirror Herbert's decline.

“Peter's an acting animal, nothing can knock him down,” Stuber says. “He spent months researching the role, not just to physically transform but also time with ALS sufferers to understand how the illness works on the body, and the mind.”

The result, in *Heavy Heart*, is an acting master class. Kurth's performance starts out big and physical, the tough guy used to throwing his weight around, and is gradually reduced. Towards the end of the film he is acting almost entirely with his face. Then, after Herbert loses his voice, just his eyes.

While Stuber insists his film could have been set anywhere, *A Heavy Heart* is firmly rooted in Eastern Germany, in the director's home town of Leipzig. Herbert's predicament – a once strong and proud man left adrift and in decline – stands, metaphorical, for the fate of so many in the former GDR.

“I know these stories very well, the stories of those who suddenly find the world they knew doesn't exist anymore,” says Stuber. “In the East, we are, in a way, all post-Berlin Wall kids, struggling to find our way. I wanted to tell the story of the people in that region, but I didn't want to make a political film, about the Stasi or whatever. Others have got there before me.”

Despite the grim subject matter, *A Heavy Heart*, if not quite delivering a happy end, does finish on a more upbeat note, as Herbert, suddenly vulnerable, tries to rekindle his relationship with the daughter he abandoned.

“Of course it's sad, the last hour is about watching someone die, but I think it does get lighter in the end,” the director says. “As he slowly accepts his illness and his fate and finds peace with it.”

After a critically well-received debut at TIFF, *A Heavy Heart*, and Stuber, are attracting attention from Hollywood. Agents are circling the young filmmaker and there is discussion of a possible remake. It is still early days but the 34-year-old director has given notice as a talent to watch.