

'A Heavy Heart' ('Herbert'): TIFF Review

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Courtesy of Toronto International Film Festival

The Bottom Line

A raging bully faces his final heavyweight fight in this glum but moving Euro-drama.

Venue

*Toronto Film Festival
(Contemporary World Cinema)*

Cast

*Peter Kurth, Lena
Lauzemis, Lina Wendel,
Edin Hasanovic*

Director

Thomas Stuber

An ailing former boxing champ tries to make amends for a lifetime of regrets in former student Oscar winner Thomas Stuber's emotionally raw debut feature.

The ballad of a washed-up ex-boxer searching for redemption in a **Fassbinder**-style demi-monde of lost souls, *A Heavy Heart* is a bleak but powerful character study from the young German writer-director **Thomas Stuber**, a former Student Academy Award-winner. The essential plot has many parallels to **Darren Aronofsky's** *The Wrestler*, though the emotional tone here is more somber and the purgatorial urban setting more grim. World premiering in Toronto this week, Stuber's first official full-length feature makes few concessions to entertainment, but packs enough Euro-glum clout to punch above its weight with festivals and niche theatrical audiences.

Herbert (**Peter Kurth**) is a 60-ish ex-boxer in the East German city of Leipzig, way past his prime but still powerfully built, and still making a living with his fists. Covered with scars and tattoos, his brawny body resembles a giant map of ancient battles won and lost. Three decades ago, under Communist rule, he almost got a shot at the Olympics. Nowadays he coaches young fighters while scraping a living as a nightclub bouncer and debt collector for a small-time mobster, breaking noses and blacking eyes when necessary. Once, he could have been a contender. Now he's a permanent resident in Palookaville.

Hot-tempered and thick-skinned, Herbert mostly lives within an ultra-masculine domain of shabby gyms, tattoo shops, strip clubs and dive bars. Long estranged from Sandra (**Lena Lauzemis**), the grown-up daughter he abandoned as a child, he is also callously non-committal in his on-off sexual relationship with Marlene (**Lina Wendel**), who plainly needs more from him than he can give. Though he harbors vaguely paternal feelings for his young boxing protege Eddy (**Edin Hasanovic**), Herbert's warmest emotional bond seems to be with the pet fish he keeps in his cramped apartment.

Collapsing in the shower one day, Herbert is initially too proudly macho to investigate. But medical tests soon become unavoidable, and show he is suffering from a progressive motor-function disease. His body begins to slowly seize up, his limbs stiffen, his speech slurs. Robbed of physical prowess, he loses his job and becomes an easy target for former enemies seeking revenge. Resolving to make amends with Sandra, he tracks her down at her home, but his violent temper and her decades-old bitterness make for very volatile chemistry. Racing against time, Herbert struggles to express long-dormant feelings of fatherly love before the final bell rings. Regrets? He's had more than a few.

Filmed in mostly hand-held close-up in a desaturated range of grubby brown hues, *A Heavy Heart* is almost obstinately, unrelentingly ugly in both look and theme. The single-person focus and tragic plot trajectory make it gruelling and monotonous in places, especially when Stuber shows Herbert's worsening condition in brutal detail, including his failing sexual and bodily functions. But it remains sufficiently gripping thanks largely to an impressively muscular performance by Kurth, who convincingly maps all the psychological stages of his decline from raging bully to wounded, soulful, remorseful ruin. In case it's not clear, this is not an ideal first-date movie, but it still lands a few knockout emotional blows.

Production companies: Departures Film GmbH, Deutschfilm GmbH

Cast: Peter Kurth, Lena Lauzemis, Lina Wendel, Edin Hasanovic

Director: Thomas Stuber

Screenwriters: Thomas Stuber, Clemens Meyer, Paul Salisbury

Cinematographer: Peter Matjasko

Editor: Philipp Thomas

Music: Bert Wrede

Producers: Undine Filter, Thomas Král, Anatol Nitschke

Sales company: Picture Tree International GmbH

Rated 14A, 109 minutes