

'Original Bliss' ('Gleissendes Glueck'): Munich Review

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Munich Filmfest

'The Lives of Others' co-stars Martina Gedeck and Ulrich Tukur headline Sven Taddicken's German-language adaptation of a short story collection by A.L. Kennedy.

The rapprochement of two lost souls is traced with slow-moving precision in *Original Bliss* (*Gleissendes Glueck*), Sven Taddicken's German-language adaptation of the eponymous short-story collection by esteemed Scottish writer A.L. Kennedy. The decidedly adult-targeted drama stars *The Lives of Others* co-stars Martina Gedeck and Ulrich Tukur in the kind of complex and risky roles that are rarely taken on by famous actors anymore — call it their *Eyes Wide Shut* — and this alone should ensure a level of curiosity among the arthouse cognoscenti when it opens locally in October after premiering at the Munich Film Festival last week.

Small theatrical releases are also a possibility in high-end art houses in major cities offshore, though *Original Bliss* will probably be more at home at festivals, where some of the film's themes, which include human loneliness, the crutches of religion and self-help books and the compulsiveness of sexual obsession, will sound like recommendations rather than potential distribution risks. Karlovy Vary snatched up the film's international premiere.

Helene (Gedeck) is stuck in a loveless marriage with Christophe (Austrian actor Johannes Krisch), a man with occasional bouts of violent rage who's still not over Helene's strict religious past and all the ways in which it has shaped her devout and submissive personality — though, in one of the film's many fascinating paradoxes, there's a clear sense Christophe

wouldn't be able to live with anyone who'd be the opposite of his meek, compliant and depressed wife.

Things start to change for Helene when she hears about the Kybernetics theories of Dr Eduard Glueck (Tukur), a popular self-help guru promoting a new book. Innocent as she is, she approaches him at a symposium and unburdens herself, in the hope he'll be able to help. What she doesn't expect is that he turns out to be as lonely and unmoored as she is; where she's suffering from feeling abandoned by God's Love, he's incapable of intimacy of any kind because of a passive sexual addiction: porn.

For those unfamiliar with Kennedy's book, this sudden turn into what seems like more lurid material might come as a bit of a shock, especially since it seems to be about the last thing that an until recently very pious woman might want to consider talking about and much less actually dealing with. But Taddicken and co-screenwriters Stefanie Veith and Hendrik Hoelzemann have drawn the complex protagonists and their backgrounds and needs in ways that make it entirely plausible that these two very different people might find hope and solace in each other and would want (and actually even require) to get to know each other better.

One of the loveliest surprises is that a lot of the film's sharp observations are also darkly funny. Indeed, Taddicken constantly manages to sneak in bits of humor without ever making fun of these brittle and often hurting characters. And the narrative has quite a few surprises in store in other ways as well, with the film not immediately turning into a straightforward love story between damaged souls. There is a section in the pic's second half during which Helene and Dr Glueck — Glueck ironically means "happiness" in German — go back to their previous lives and only correspond by writing (heard in voiceover). Though this unexpected turn of events could have used a clearer motivation, the willingness to admit that these characters need to resolve certain issues on their own or that some alone-time is needed for certain personal insights does highlight to what extent the film privileges something resembling actual human psychology over more facile movie clichés.

Of all the actresses of her generation, Gedeck has played some of the meatiest and most complex roles in German cinema, and her Helene is another fully formed and vanity-free performance that's simply mesmerizing. Her work is all the more impressive because, especially in the movie's first half, Helene is almost catatonic, yet viewers have no problems seeing the potential inner strength and resolve lurking inside the beaten gray mouse and Gedeck slowly allows the flickers to turn into a fire.

Tukur's character arc is practically the opposite, as he plays a celebrity author who knows what's good for others but who struggles to apply it to his own character, thus going from a position of dominance and wisdom to one of questioning, self-doubt and trial-and-error. The way in which Taddicken handles his character's sexual proclivities and problems is mostly intelligent and sensitive, except for a couple of fantasy sequences that are borderline overkill.

One of the things that emerges from editor Andreas Wodraschke's smart intercutting between the stories of these characters is the idea that it might take a relationship with another person to come to terms with both your own failings as well as your innermost desires but that encountering such a person doesn't mean everything is suddenly solved. Quite the contrary, as that's the moment the work on oneself can begin in earnest.

Though clearly meant to illustrate a breaking point, a few slow-motion shots meant to illustrate domestic violence have a crystalline and clearly surreal quality that, instead of just

contrasting with the more darkly naturalistic footage, seems to have been imported from a cool music video or a slick commercial, thus taking viewers momentarily out of the film. Other technical credits are modest but otherwise polished.

Venue: Munich Film Festival

Production companies: Frisbeefilms, Cine Plus Filmproduktion, Senator Film Produktion, Sky Deutschland

Cast: Martina Gedeck, Ulrich Tukur, Johannes Krisch

Director: Sven Taddicken

Screenplay: Sven Taddicken, Stefanie Veith, Hendrik Hoelzemann; based on the short stories by A.L. Kennedy

Producers: Alexander Bickenbach, Manuel Bickenbach

Co-producers: Marc Gabizon, David Kehrl, Frank Evers, Helge Neubronner

Director of photography: Daniela Knapp

Production designer: Juliane Friedrich

Costume designer: Ute Paffendorf

Editor: Andreas Wodraschke

Music: Riad Abdel-Nabi, Wouter Verhulst

Casting: Anja Dührberg

Sales: Picture Tree International

Not rated, 102 minutes