



PHOTO: Skye von der Osten

Talking straight

FOLLOWING HIS SUCCESS AT THE 2003 BERLINALE, GERMAN DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/JOURNALIST JOCHEN HICK IS BACK THIS YEAR WITH *THE GOOD AMERICAN*, HIS SEVENTH FILM IN SELECTION.

BY JACKIE HOO Jochen Hick doesn't see himself as a 'gay filmmaker'. Fair enough. Although undeniably gay in their subject matter - from ageing porn stars in LA to gay rednecks in Germany's beloved Swabia to Russian gay rights activists and, now, rent boys in New York - Hick's documentaries never shy away from the plain complexity of human existence: a condition shared by hetero and homo alike. Films about queers that don't portray them as wild hedonists, flamboyant activists or victims are a refreshing exception to the rule. Here's a filmmaker that doesn't need to spell out his sexual orientation before grabbing his film prize: a Berlinale Teddy in 2003. How about a 'hetero' Bear?

Following the success of his earlier films - including *Talk Straight: The World of Rural Queers*/*Ich Kenn Keinen - Allein unter Heteros* which won him the Teddy and *East/West - Sex & Politics* (released in cinemas last year) - Hick's back in the Berlinale official selection for the seventh time with *The Good American*, a dive into the world of male prostitutes. The film is also the unsettling portrait of Tom Weise, a 'small guy' who made it big in the NYC escort scene with a successful online rent boy business and wild, wild Hustlaball parties. Here again Hick doesn't shy away from unveiling the cracks and crevices in his protagonist's carapace: digging a bit deeper, beneath the smooth skin of convenient surfaces.

Your film *The Good American* is about the subculture of hustlers, but it revolves around one main protagonist. What did you find so compelling about Tom Weise?

We did interviews in San Francisco, Miami, London and Paris, but in the end it was hard to find someone who had the slightly awkward kind of personal story that intrigued me: Tom had had no contact to his family for 15 years and he had gone to New York because he was very depressed about having HIV. In the US, he found all these people dealing with HIV much more easily - at least apparently - than in Germany. There were other things: the fact that he's a small guy, that he started to hustle, that he was in this environment with all these extremely beautiful people and how he dealt with it. I also found interesting the fact that he had a political approach to it - at least in the beginning. Tom was also very open about what HIV did to his body. I think he was very courageous to talk about these issues because most of the time people hide it when they have lipodystrophy [as a side effect of antiretroviral drugs]. But he was really straightforward about these things.

Tom Weise seems to have it all: the fun, the successful business, the great boyfriend. He's made it in NYC! Little by little, though, cracks become apparent ...

The film leaves the person to create his own drama. The film is very personal: I hope it has the right amount of distance. And Tom Weise sometimes tries to create his own biography, which is a bit a gay thing, like 'my life is a drama'. In the end, when he stands in front of the laundry his parents used to own in Hanover, you can see it's been a bit like a 'Peter Pan' journey: the eternal child finally coming home.

You follow your subjects pretty closely. Do you have to spend a lot of time with them?

It took quite a while to get Tom to really forget about the camera. It takes a lot of time, a lot of situations and it's really about collecting moments. The most interesting scenes are the spontaneous ones, the conversations between characters ... Often the stupidest, most irrelevant things turn out to be the most revealing .

It's a really un-intrusive approach to documentary making: a theme, a main character and action!

Of course I talk a lot with the protagonists beforehand and I know what I'm interested in. But I don't say I want to have *this* story with *these* turning points here and there. I am very open to what really happens to these people, to which situations they get in and what unfolds.

Sometimes things don't unfold the way you would expect or want them to. Everyone will think at the beginning: he's an illegal alien of 15 years in the US returning to Berlin, he'll have major problems leaving the country. And he might have *really* big problems in Germany, but then he will meet his

parents and this will be the most moving scene etc. I had to accept that everything was actually much easier - and that that is also part of the story: he returned to Germany without any problems and in the end he didn't even want to meet his parents, and I said, 'OK if someone really is finished with his parents then he doesn't have to meet them for the film!'

That's brave. Some filmmakers would have set things up for maximum emotional climax.

Yeah - right now people who finance movies are very much into these documentaries where the story is all scripted and has big drama. I know people who do interviews with the people beforehand and when they shoot they wait until they get the perfect dialogues to fit with the rest of the film. But I really prefer a complex, more open structure.

And it sometimes works: *Talk Strait* won you a Teddy Award at the 2003 Berlinale.

Yes, it still fascinates people: they don't run out of my movies, they really like them! But of course to do this you have to be very entertaining and show people and situations they've never seen before.

Like the subculture of hustlers in NYC and Berlin. When Tom Weise comes back to Berlin after 15 years, he experiences culture shock.

Many things about him have become Americanized. How he promotes things, how he talks about them. That's why he's called "the good American": he's so upbeat and eager. But then in Berlin he sees that there is a much lower energy. People would rather have a large sex party than a huge show like the Hustlaball ...

Everything seems so much more professional in the US ...

It's just a totally different feeling: for example, the escort scene would never work here. There are so many good looking unemployed guys who don't work as escorts: if they do it's ok, but if they don't it's also ok because they get Hartz IV. In NYC you're pushed to do something, you have a bigger motivation. You're driven by money, but also by the fact that you have the biggest domestic market of the world behind you, so whatever you do, it can be really successful. Just see how successful Tom Weise's website got in only a few years.

And we're talking about a business that, if called by its real name, would be illegal in the US because it's prostitution ...

Even pornography is not allowed in many cities in the US, but still it has the world's biggest pornography market. They say the US is not liberal but anyone can order a porn DVD because you just click "I am over the age of 18", whereas in Germany the person who sells the DVD has to prove that the person who orders it is over 18. You're not allowed to show a dick but you can show piss on stage ...

SPOTLIGHT ON

Jochen Hick

The Good American / Panorama

Your film in three words starting with the same letter.
Sexy, special, serious, spruce, stubborn, smart.

Why make films?

It's my job. That's how I earn my living.

With which genre should your films be shelved at a DVD rental store?

'General Interest'. 'Must See!'

Define a 'good film'.

A good film entertains, informs, tells a story, shows unknown realities and is really unique.

What would you like the audience to say when they leave the screening of your film?

"Wow! More please. Give this director money to produce."

Worst compliment/best insult you ever received?

"He is extremely good at sex." [Laughs.]

Best film last year?

Woody Allen's *Vicky Christina Barcelona*, because this 73-year-old man manages to produce one film every year in some sort of independent manner and without seeming to become senile.

Sum up your Berlinale film in a few words.

A small-built German survives in NYC and succeeds in big business, in party-making and in the marginalised field of gay male escorts.



A German hustler in your film complains that "something's definitely missing" at the Las Vegas Hustlaball ...

Penetration. Yes, you can't show penetration on stage in the States.

On that score Berlin is more permissive: here you can have all the sex you can't have there ...

In America, it's bigger: more shows, more professional. In Berlin there's much more sex, but that's Berlin's reputation. American gays travel here for the sex. The Germans have this reputation for being a lot more kinky and into S&M and all these strange things.

The *Good American* isn't another gay rights film. There is something refreshingly non-militant or demonstrative in your tone. It's more an exploration of a subculture and individuals.

I'm really interested in marginalized groups: what they do, how they function, how they recreate their own system. I try not to be politically correct because - especially in the gay world - it's kind of the death of everything, but also I just don't see all the heroes some gay and lesbians like to proclaim they have.

East/West shows what really happens at these demonstrations, why they were organized and who organized them. The right to demonstrate is actually guaranteed by the constitution. But then there is no discussion about it at all and, worse, the reaction of most gay people is, 'Oh I find those demonstrations idiotic. Beaten up? They should've asked themselves why this is not allowed in the first place.' They're reasoning backwards. That's an overall problem in Russia: all political movements are so weak and small. The Kasparov marches never attracted more than a few hundred people - that's nothing ...

In the film, a protagonist says: "In Russia, if you own a pipeline, i.e. if you're rich and powerful, nobody cares whether you're gay or not."

I think that's true for any country. Unless at some point they want to get rid of that gay person for any reason - then they can say 'he's gay' or catch him having sex somewhere where it's still illegal. But in Russia especially, money makes anything possible. I know a lot of Russians who fly over to Berlin on Friday evening to go out to Berghain.

skin. Like being a Caucasian in Moscow. Most people in Russia don't really know what a gay guy looks like exactly.

Did you show your film in Russia?

People told me Russia is not ready to see films like that. In Russia, you can see films about Chechnya, violent films about the whole world, and then Russian politicians decide that people are too sensitive to deal with the problem of five to 20 people who are not even naked on the street or even carrying a placard - this is a thing I can't accept.

But then with *Talk Straight* you showed another reality within western democracies: that it's easier to be outwardly gay in a big city than in a small Swabian village. In many rural places, it's still perceived as shameful.

First let's be clear: you will always find people who don't like gays but they will rarely say it in public because now it's not politically convenient. I think no current politician thinks that they can profit from being anti-gay.

There are those like Roland Koch [Hesse's CDU

I try not to be politically correct because, especially in the gay world, it's kind of the death of everything - but also I just don't see all the heroes some gay and lesbians like to proclaim they have.

Is that because in Europe and North America gays are not really outcasts anymore?

In the western world, there are still problems of discrimination but I don't think that gays and lesbians have that privilege - and sometimes I wish they saw more of the bigger picture. But, of course, there are countries where it is really a fight.

Like in Russia which you showed in your film *East/West*.

What struck me was that although there is this kind of marginalization for most people in the gay scene, it's not seen as a great thing within the community to do something political against the current situation. To be honest, it was a bit the same in Germany too: doing something political as a gay activist here has always been seen as a little unsexy. But in Russia it's just a really small group within the community that does anything at all.

Because, as you show in the film, many people think sexual orientation is a private matter that should remain that way. This is somehow Putin's hypocritical line: the state shouldn't meddle in people's sexual inclinations ... And meanwhile activists are being beaten up before the 'benevolent' eyes of the police.

Yeah and no one realizes what really happens.

They catch the last flight back on Sunday night which is Monday morning, arrive at 5:00 and at 10:00 they're in the office, and then everything is fine and you have great nightlife and there is really no problem.

So being gay is a luxury ...

Ironically, many gay protagonists of *East/West* don't have a lot of money, they are really poor people - students or people that don't even have the permission to live in Moscow. Actually, in many poorer countries gays don't go to the clubs because they can't afford it, they don't know other gays and can't dress like 'them'. So this whole thing is constantly shifting from the social point of view. Ironically, wealth, success and the gay scene go hand in hand.

Also: it's better to be gay, rich and *white* than gay, poor and *black*! That's what another (Armenian) protagonist of *East/West* sums up nicely when he says he can't be sure why he got beaten up in the streets of Moscow: for being a queer or just because he's dark-skinned...

This statement really shows that the being gay thing is in many cases not as dramatic as something else, for example, the colour of your

premier who warned of homosexuality becoming a 'cult' after his education minister came out as a lesbian], but it's more of a kamikaze thing for them: they attract problems even from the conservatives. Something interesting in *Talk Straight* was that while of course many people feel they can't out themselves because of all the problems, there are also all these characters who say, "Why didn't I out myself 30 years earlier? I outed myself only now and nobody said anything negative about it, only one person in the village!" So somehow fear creates oppression. Though of course I can understand why some people keep it a secret - and of course, as a gay you only have the option of coming out or not saying anything. Or saying it, but in an elegant way.

But the very idea of outing is strange. If I am gay should I always have to introduce myself with 'hello, I am a lesbian'?

The problem is if you don't say something it's stupid and if you say something it's also stupid because, why do I have to say anything? But, interestingly, for many gay people it's not an issue because they are so inside the gay world they don't even know any straight people anymore: they have their gay doctor, their gay magazines,

their gay festivals. They can choose all the other gay people in the whole community and the gay-friendly people that come with it ...

Isn't that a problem ... The emergence of a gay ghetto?

It is a problem because you have to feel the difference. Straight people are confronted by both sexes and in order to approach the other sex they have to feel the difference, which can be very hurtful. Sometimes gay people - and that's why narcissism is so strong - don't have to, maybe, in the beginning. Sometimes you could even go through your whole life and see the other person as your mirror because he's the same sex and maybe the same stature and you know those gay couples who almost look alike. So I think from time to time you have to feel the difference. Nowadays some young guys will say: 'I don't define myself as gay, I never had a problem with being gay.' That's nice, but please let them get out of their gay world, travel to another country and get insulted or beaten up and they will realize what it still means to be gay.

But your rural gays 'feel the difference' without necessarily being victims?

What I found interesting in *Talk Straight* is that although there were sometimes clashes with straight people, you also see how many straight people try to be understanding. Of course there's still no real understanding at all because a bit more is needed to understand. It's the same as if you're the only Jew in the village. As long you're a nice guy who doesn't open his mouth too much, who is not too flamboyant or in-your-face, it's ok. But as soon as there's anything that's perceived as a problem, all the negative things come back.

Or they treat it like a predicament or even a handicap ...

Yes, there's a passage in *Talk Straight* when this gay guy is at his *Stammtisch* with these straight people and they're all trying to say something nice about him, but they're always saying the wrong thing, which is even worse than not saying anything at all. Things like: 'Oh I have no problems with him ... But if my son was gay I would be very depressed.' But the straight people really tried to talk and that's really nice: in these small towns, they are forced to do that. They sit together and they talk together - and though they may talk past each other. In a big city that kind of conversation would not even take place: there's no need to talk to people who aren't gays.

Do you consider yourself a gay filmmaker?

I consider myself gay - not a 'gay filmmaker' because otherwise I would have to call straight filmmakers 'straight'. What would that mean? Most of what I did for TV was not 'gay'. Actually when I went with my straight film scripts, there were TV people who said: 'But as a gay filmmaker, do you really have the sensitivity to put yourself in the character of a straight person?' But the most interesting films about straight people have been done by gay directors, from Visconti to Pasolini! Also, they'd rather use a straight filmmaker to direct a film about a gay theme, because that way they think they can always be sure that it will translate for the rest of the world - as if with a gay person it might end up 'encoded' or something.

But hasn't gay cinema become more fashionable?

With *Brokeback Mountain* we saw that a gay filmmaker can make a gay film that can have a big budget. But gay films almost always have the

problem that they're produced on a low budget. Very little money is put into gay filmmaking and that's why they don't look as professional. They can't really compete: you can't always be 10 times more original or 10 times more creative than someone who has a big budget, because filmmaking has a lot to do with money.

But gay elements are everywhere, from Hollywood films to TV programmes.

Yeah, absolutely. On the one hand, German TV loves gay things: there was this gay carnival group on *Wetten Dass?* (primetime game show), now there's *Bauer sucht Mann* on RTL (Farmer Seeks Man). Most TV series nowadays try to have at least one gay character. They see there is an audience, a market for it. But still, things are not as advanced as they look: do you remember any primetime TV programmes with a gay main character? Big channels prefer programmes about the love lives of animals than the love lives of gays!

For a very long time in America, black actors were confined to supporting roles: now they have a black president ...

For a while after he came out with his book, [Berlin mayor] Klaus Wowereit was presented as a credible contestant against Merkel. Everything is possible. In America you would have to first solve problems such as marriage, and arrive at an accepted status, especially a legal one. And there's the big role of religion. So I doubt it would happen - unless there was a gay figure who was also a little bit conservative, pro-family, a little bit religious, but not too much. Socially-minded but not too threatening. Anyway, do we really know what Obama will do? In the end no one knows, but never judge a book by its cover, right?



The Good American