

Thomas Stuber • Director

by Moritz Holfelder

28/06/2016 - German Films sat down with the director of *A Heavy Heart* to present a portrait of his origins, habits and inspirations



From an ashtray, a pillar of smoke rises straight towards the ceiling, a long worm of ash hanging on a cigarette as if a joss stick has been lit to create the right atmosphere. *Gleis 8* is a pub in which Herbert might sit, the poverty-stricken boxer suffering from ALS in **Thomas Stuber**'s first film for the cinema, *A Heavy Heart*, which was released in Germany in March. It's a pub exuding the demi-monde, smelling of alcohol and smoke, where men huddle: leading peripheral lives, lonely and contemplative, gazing into their glasses, or, like the old guy opposite, slumped, staring at the tracks, as though waiting for a train that will carry them away and finally deliver them from this existence.

The pub suits Thomas Stuber. There is something real, something undisguised about it. He often comes here together with his friend and screenplay author, Clemens Meyer. When they return to Leipzig from events and cinema premieres, they end up in *Gleis 8*, entering this transit area before heading home, just for one more brandy. During tricky phases in the screenplay, the two of them sit here two or three times a week some times, talking about films, about the piece they are currently writing, or "just chatting", as Stuber puts it.

Those wanting to grasp how this director who went to the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg from 2004 to 2011 sees the world cannot get around *Gleis 8*. Watching life at work. Not showing the beautiful in a beautiful way but discovering the beautiful in the marginal – without turning it into kitsch or resorting to romanticising. "I would like to be representative of cinema with great pathos and emotion, not the sort that anatomises things," Stuber says. "I stand for a celebration of pain, tragedy and emotion using powerful images. That's what I want to see in our cinemas."

His film *A Heavy Heart* is a melodrama that brings us closer to a man, to all his poverty and pathos, his helplessness and hopelessness, his isolation – but does so with such tenderness that it will be a long time before we can forget this fallen boxer from Leipzig (played by **Peter Kurth**). At the end of the film we want to embrace him.

A Heavy Heart is one of the best German feature films of recent years, but the Berlinale still didn't want to show it, so it ran at the big North American festival in Toronto, where it was much applauded, then afterwards at the Hof International Film Festival in Upper Franconia. The critique after its cinema launch in Germany was really good. The reviews repeatedly commented that this up-and-coming director from Leipzig, who had won the Silver Student Oscar for the best foreign language short with his graduation film *Of Dogs and Horses*, recalls Rainer Werner Fassbinder and his male melodramas of the 1970s.

Thomas Stuber is surprised by this, as Fassbinder was never a role model he related to: "Someone in *The Hollywood Reporter* invented that business with my Fassbinder style after Toronto, and then it was read and copied by a critic here. That's how that idea was born. But Douglas Sirk is a far more important director for me. Fassbinder loved his work, too. So there is a connection. What's brilliant for me about Sirk, somehow, is that he was in Leipzig (who was artistic director of the Altes Theatre from 1929-1935) when he was still Detlef Sierck. Then he was banned from working. He escaped to America and called himself Sirk. Just like my boxer Herbert wants to make it over there, and dreams of Chicago."

We could probably sit in this pub opposite platform 8 for much longer. There's a lot to talk about, like how hard it is to combine a career as a filmmaker with his desire for family life – Thomas Stuber has just become a father for the second time – but my train is due to leave.