

Absurdistan

A Film by
Veit Helmer

87 Minutes, Color, 2008
35mm, 1:1.78, Dolby SRD
In Russian w/English Subtitles

{WORLD PREMIERE, 2008 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL}



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Written by
Gordan Mihic, Zaza Buadze, Ahmet Golbol, Veit Helmer

Directed by
Veit Helmer

Starring
Maximilian Mauff
Kristýna Maléřová
and actors from 18 countries

a production of
Veit Helmer Film Production

With support of
Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, FFF and MFG

Sponsored by
Bakcell, BMW, Revlon and Avid

Cinematography: **George Beridze**
Montage: **Vincent Assmann**
Casting: **Suse Marquardt, Jessica Horváthová**
Sound Design: **Martin Frühmorgen, Immo Trümpelmann**
Sound mix: **Robert Jäger**
Music: **Shigeru Umebayashi**
Set design: **Erwin Prib, Vaja Djalaghania**
Costumes: **Mehriban Efendiyeva, Serap Bahadir**
Make-up: **Madona Chanturia**
Line Producer: **Elnura Jivazade**

Script editors: **Stefanie Gross, SWR,**
Bettina Ricklefs, BR,
Andreas Schreitmüller, ARTE

Script: **Gordan Mihic, Zaza Buadze, Ahmet Golbol, Veit Helmer**
Producer: **Linda Kornemann**
Director: **Veit Helmer**

Short Synopsis

In a bizarre little village, the dripping of water is more important than the gushing of love...

Somewhere between Asia and Europe lies the god-forsaken desert village of Absurdistan, which a grand total of 14 families somehow manage to call home. For the village, the biggest problem is water...but for the village women, the biggest problem is their lazy men, who won't lift a finger to remedy the situation.

Here, the young Aya and Temelko, friends since birth, have reached the age where their friendship has turned to love. Unfortunately, the date that Aya's grandmother has determined to be ideal for their "first time" lies 4 years in the future, and to make matters worse, they must first bathe together...

When Aya stubbornly tells Temelko that he must solve the water problem before he can come anywhere near her, the village women also take up the cry "No water, no sex", leaving the good-for-nothing men scratching their empty heads. Soon a crazy war of the sexes breaks out and they divide the town in half with barbed wire...

Note

"Absurdistan" – a place, a condition, a feeling? In any event, it is romantic, surreal, boundlessly poetic and timelessly magical: director Veit Helmer firmly sets his third feature film on the outskirts of reality, where tales, magic and visions fuse together. As in his films "Tuvalu" (1999) and "Gate to Heaven" (2003), he sketches a never-before-seen world with whimsical humor, a proliferating wealth of ideas, and an abundance of quotes and references from film history. The film was shot in northwest Azerbaijan, far from the movie mainstream and light years away from standardized European cinema. Helmer has created a modern fairy tale that goes directly to the heart.

It's a very special love story, a film about the power of women and about the "weak sex" – here, the male of the species. As in all of his films, Helmer once again puts together a grandiose cast headed by Czech actress Kristyna Malérová and newcomer Maximilian Mauff ("Peas at 5:30") and featuring more than 30 actors who are all stars in their native countries, be it Latvia, Belarus, Moldavia, Bulgaria, Portugal, Spain or France. Aya's grandmother, for example, is played by the Georgian icon Nino Chkheidze.

The visual design bears the signature of Georgian cameraman Georgi Beridze, whose most celebrated cinematographic work is no doubt "A Chef in Love" (1997) by Nana Dzhodzadze, a bittersweet comedy which was also internationally successful and obtained an Oscar nomination.

Visually innovative, original in its storytelling technique and emotionally gripping – "Absurdistan" is a romantic burlesque, an intoxicating wealth of images bursting with grand emotions and visual sensations. A spectacular display of fantasy.

The Inspiration

The women in the southern Turkish village of Sirt want to force their husbands to repair the decrepit drinking-water pipes with a sex boycott. They had banned their husbands from their bedrooms about a month earlier after getting fed up with having to walk for kilometers to get potable water, reported "Hürriyet."

Most of the women took part in the boycott. They thus succeeded in getting the men to repair the pipes and ask the government for aid. "Our wives have the right to protest," says the village elder Ibrahim Sari. "But we're the ones who suffer."

(reported in the Berlin daily "Der Tagesspiegel" of 14 August 2001)

Production Notes

Where is this village of Absurdistan?

Director Veit Helmer: "Somewhere between Europe and the Orient. But you would have to search for it for a long time... In the Caucasus, every government claims land from its neighboring countries. Absurdistan, however, is a village that no one wants. In fact, every country would love to be able to palm it off on its neighbor, since its residents are so obstinate."

The film was shot in Lahic, a mountain village in the northwest of Azerbaijan, five hours by car from Baku. It took over 50 days to shoot the film, between June and August 2006, with an international team of 50. A crazy thing to do since Lahic, in spite of an internet café, seven mosques and two tea houses, is actually quite cut off from civilization. There was a lot of work to be accomplished before the first "Sakit" (the Azeri word for "silence") could be heard before the first take.

Veit Helmer spent four years looking for the right village: "It took me several years to find the ideal location. It was important that the site could not be recognized. It had to be a village in the desert, with cobblestones and lots of shops. Everyone had a tip for me. I traveled thousands of kilometers in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Armenia and Morocco. Nothing radiated the right magic. Just as I was about to give up all hope, I found what I was looking for in a remote area of Azerbaijan: wonderful villages that were more beautiful than I could have ever imagined."

Regarding his cameraman Georgi Beridze, Veit Helmer says: "I met Georgi at the Tbilissi Festival in 2001 and was immediately won over by his warmhearted personality. I made an option agreement with him one year before the start of the shooting, since he is the most gifted cameraman in the Caucasus, if not in all of eastern Europe. With his stoic, yet relaxed manner, he is a perfect complement to me – when things get turbulent, you can count on him to be the rock of Gibraltar."

Long Synopsis

Legend has it that when God split up all of his lands, there was one group of representatives that showed up late. But because they were a cheerful lot, God gave up the land he planned to keep for himself and retired to Heaven. He's probably still laughing, because the arid wasteland he gave them is as dry as a bone. Welcome to Absurdistan...

In this small nothing village in the middle of nowhere that 14 families somehow manage to call home, the young Temelko and Aya have reached the age where their friendship has turned into love. But when Aya's grandmother consults the stars and sets the ideal date for their "first time", it comes with a catch – they have to wait four years - and both must bathe beforehand.

With the town's ancient water pipe now producing only a dribble, the young men are shipped off to the city to learn how to fix the water problem. Just short of four years later, the young men solved their problem – they simply never came back. Temelko is the only one that returns...

In his absence though, the village has gotten dirtier and the women angrier with their lazy, good-for-nothing men who haven't lifted a finger to solve the water shortage. Then, when Temelko steals precious water to fill a small swimming pool so that he and Aya can have their all-important bath, she furiously tells him that until he fixes the water problem, he may not lay a hand on her. Soon, all the village women take up her defiant cry of "No water, no sex!", leaving the disbelieving men helplessly scratching their empty heads.

(continued)

The "Bed Boycott" rapidly turns into an insane power struggle as the women and men, arming themselves with guns, hammers, pitchforks and anything they can get their hands on, split the village into two warring camps. Soon a painted white stripe appears down the town's center, followed rapidly by barbed wire.

It's not long before the men get thirsty - and not for water - so they attempt to sneak off to the city under the cover of darkness. The women, however, capture them in a well-laid ambush and herd them back into town with shotguns.

With time rapidly draining away, the madly determined Temelko enters the dangerous cave that contains the village's water source to make one last frantic attempt at a repair. It might be too late though, because Aya and the other women, no longer willing to go with the flow...or lack of a flow...have decided to leave the village and their men in the dust...

Interview with "Absurdistan" director Veit Helmer

In a report on the shooting of "Absurdistan" the film is called a "silent film in esperanto." In what genre do you categorize your third film?

For me, the charm of movie-making lies in the filmic narration, in finding images that convey emotions rather than putting words in the mouths of actors. The film thus becomes a universal art form. I like to break up genres and mix them according to what is better suited to a particular scene.

How did you get the idea for the film? Was there an initial spark?

In 2001 I read an article in the "Tagesspiegel" about the women in the Turkish village of Sirt who started a strike: they would refuse to have sex with their husbands as long as the men did not repair the water pipes. I suddenly had the idea that I wanted to make a film about a young couple caught in the middle of such a strike.

What was the biggest challenge in the production process?

Azerbaijan hasn't had a film infrastructure since the collapse of the Soviet Union. One year before the start of the shoot I gave workshops in order to teach Azerbaijan film students about how to work on the set. I had to build up everything from scratch. Accommodations and meals for 90 people in mountain villages that only get electricity a couple hours a day and can only be reached by horse when the weather is bad. The camera and lighting came by truck from Iran. The catering truck, stocked with 30,000 meters of film, took a week to get here from Germany. The team came from Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey, Iran, France, Germany. I had cooks who usually work on oil rigs in the Caspian Sea. There was a Babylonian confusion of tongues on the set.

How did you proceed for the casting?

When you've got practically no dialogue, you're free to cast all over the world. You obviously have bigger chances of getting great actors. I went overboard with "Absurdistan" and hired casting directors in 28 countries to interview altogether 2,400 actors in all of Europe (except for Scandinavia), Central Asia, the U.S., Cuba and Iran. The best 400 actors were invited for a second round of intensive improvisation. The choice was relatively easy, however, since the favorites stood out from the masses. Actors from 16 different countries came to the shooting. It was the first time that I chose a German for a lead role in a feature film.

Could you please complete the sentence "Absurdistan" is...

.... a journey to an unknown land with strange men and women and a young couple that is burning with longing for its first night together.

Maximilian Mauff as Temelko

Despite his young age (he was born in 1987), Maximilian Mauff has already had the opportunity to display his many-sided talent in numerous roles in both TV and feature-film productions. His first main role was in Kai Wessel's "The Year of the First Kiss" (2001), in which the then 14-year-old took on the role of a teenager in love.

Maximilian Mauff's other notable work includes playing a hard-core right-winger in Mirko Borscht's award-winning "Combat Sixteen" (2004), as well as roles in Jörn Hintzer and Jakob Hüfner's ironic comedy "Measures to Better the World" (2005) and Lars Büchel's 2004 production "Peas at 5:30". Furthermore, he acted in Dennis Gansel's "The Wave", which played in competition at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. "Absurdistan" is Maximilian Mauff's first international production.

Kristýna Maléřová as Aya

Kristýna Maléřová, born in Roznov pod Rahostem, Czech Republic, in 1985, studied acting at the Janacek Conservatory in Ostrava. After completing her studies, she began an engagement at the Theater of Cesky Tesin where she still performs today. She has taken on such challenging roles as Jeanne d'Arc (J. Anouilh - L'Alouette) and Jill Tanner (L. Gershe - Butterflies are Free). After making a name for herself on the theater stage Kristýna Maléřová now makes her film debut in "Absurdistan".

Nino Chkheidze

The legendary Georgian actress braved the hardships of the shooting of "Absurdistan" in spite of her 86 years. The actress, who is an institution in her native country, made a lasting impression in this role as well through her presence and sense of timing. Nino Chkheidze made her screen debut in 1955 in "Magdana's Donkey" (director: Gengiz Abuladze / Rezo Chkheidze). The film was even shown in the theaters in the U.S. in 1958. In addition to her stage work, she has starred in a number of Georgian feature films, most recently in "The Chained Knights" (2000) by Goderdzi Chokheli

The Villagers

The watchmaker, the barber, the carpenter, the doctor, the baker – along with their wives and children. There are 14 families in the village. Many roles for the international ensemble with which director Veit Helmer populated the streets of "Absurdistan." Many of the actors from 16 nations are stars in their native lands. To name but a few: Suzana Petricevic comes from Belgrade and will be starring in the next film by Emir Kusturica. Azelarab Kaghat from Morocco became internationally known through his role in Giuseppe Tornatore's "Malena" (2000). The Belgrade native Vlasta Velisavljevic has played in over 120 Serbian and international productions for cinema and television. Otto Kuhnle starred in Wim Wenders' "Wings of Desire" (1987) and was in Wenders' "Die Gebrüder Skladanowsky" (1995) as well. Hendrik Arnst recently appeared in Stephen Daldry's "The Reader" and in Ute Wieland's "FC Venus" (2006), Peter Bogdanovich's "The Cat's Meow" (2001) and Jean-Jacques Annaud's "Enemy at the Gates" (2001). Portuguese star Helder Costa played Colin Firth's grumbling but warmhearted future father-in-law in Richard Curtis' bittersweet comedy "Love, Actually" (2003) and Sarah Bensoussan of France was already spotted in Jean-Luc Godard's "For Ever Mozart" (1996).

Director – Veit Helmer

Born in 1968, the multi-talented Veit Helmer is as well a writer and producer with his own production company, Veit Helmer Film Production, which co-produced "Absurdistan" with arte, BR and SWR. It was at the age of 14 that he shot his first film, later beginning formal studies at the Munich Film School, where he became known for his offbeat short films. In 1995 he co-wrote the feature-film "A Trick of Light" and acted as assistant director to Wim Wenders. The film went on to premier in Venice in 1997. His own very first feature-film "Tuvalu" became a runaway success, being invited to 62 different film festivals including San Sebastian, London, Berlin and Karlovy Vary and was honored with an impressive array of 30 various awards, both national and international. His second feature-film, "Gate to Heaven" (2003) also had a substantial international impact and was sold to a large number of different countries.

A member of the European Film Academy, Veit Helmer gives lectures on filmmaking throughout the world, including film schools in Beirut, Tbilissi, Djakarta, Tashkent and Bogotà.

Screenplay – Gordan Mihic

Born in Mostar in 1938, Gordan Mihic is one of Serbia's most prominent scriptwriters, who began to make a name for himself in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1960s. Western audiences have become acquainted with his work particularly through his scripts for Emir Kusturica's films "Time of the Gypsies" (1988) and "Black Cat, White Cat" (1998), as well as the drama "Someone Else's America" (1995) by Goran Paskaljevic. After "Gate to Heaven" (2003), "Absurdistan" is Veit Helmer's second project with Gordan Mihic.

Camera – George Beridze

George Beridze was born in Tbilissi, Georgia, in 1954. After graduating from the State University, where he studied mathematics and directing, he pursued his studies in cinematography at the Georgian Institute for Theater and Film until 1986. George Beridze has filmed more than 50 international features, short films and documentaries, and about the same amount in commercials and music videos. Among them is "The Chief in Love" (1997, director: Nana Jorjadze), which Georgia submitted to the Oscars as best foreign language film and which won a nomination; "Over het met geweren in de lucht vuren" (director: Sander Blom, 2002), "Poetin's Mama" (director: Ineke Smits, 2003) and "Russian Triangle" (director: Aleko Tsabadze, 2006), "Songs from the Southern Seas" (director: Marat Sarulu, 2008). Among the awards which Beridze won as cameraman are the "Golden Eagle" at the International Film Festival in Georgia for "The Lullaby" (1994) and "Atu-Alaba" (1996), the NATO (Georgian film award), also for "The Lullaby," and the Mze at the People's Film Festival in Tbilissi for "7 Days in Tibet" (2005).

Music – Shigeru Umebayashi

The Japanese musician Shigeru Umebayashi was born in 1951. He began to achieve international celebrity in the early 1980s as a composer of sensitive yet hauntingly penetrating soundtracks. He wrote the music to "Hannibal Rising" (2007) and is now regarded as the personal composer of Chinese director Wong Kar Wai. After collaborating with him on "In the Mood for Love" (2000), "2045" (2004), "House of Flying Daggers" (2004), and "My Blueberry Nights" (2007), he is also slated to pen the score to Won Kar Wai's current film "The Lady from Shanghai."