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FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION

CORSAGE

A FILM BY MARIE KREUTZER

2022 – AUSTRIA, LUXEMBOURG, GERMANY, FRANCE – DRAMA
– GERMAN, FRENCH, ENGLISH, HUNGARIAN – 113’

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Empress Elisabeth of Austria is idolized for her beauty and renowned for inspiring fashion trends. But in 1877, 'Sissi' celebrates her 40th birthday and must fight to maintain her public image by lacing her corset tighter and tighter. While Elisabeth's role has been reduced against her wishes to purely performative, her hunger for knowledge and zest for life makes her more and more restless in Vienna.

She travels to England and Bavaria, visiting former lovers and old friends, seeking the excitement and purpose of her youth. With a future of strictly ceremonial duties laid out in front of her, Elisabeth rebels against the hyperbolized image of herself and comes up with a plan to protect her legacy.

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE KREUTZER - Director

“She just disappeared right in front of their eyes.” – Marie Kreutzer on Corsage

Marie Kreutzer, like (almost) everyone of your generation, you grew up with Romy Schneider as Sissi. The trilogy still screens on television every Christmas here. It depicts Empress Elisabeth as a young obedient monarch in a kitschy, folklore-style setting. Your Elisabeth, on the other hand, is 40, so she’s an old woman by the standards of her day, grappling with her life and searching for some way to escape its constraints. What interested you about this Elisabeth – and what do you think about the Sissi films?

I had actually never seen the Sissi trilogy until I started doing research for *Corsage*. But of course depictions of Sissi were everywhere nonetheless. I’ve lived in Vienna since 1996, and you see her face a hundred times in every souvenir shop. Sissi is certainly our city’s central tourist attraction. The project started out with Vicky Krieps asking me years ago if I’d like to make a Sissi film with her sometime. Because the souvenirs were the only association that occurred to me, I replied: What on earth for? But somewhere inside me the idea was bubbling away and after a while I began to read up on her. I approached the material with an absolutely open mind, with no idea whether anything would come of it; I just wanted to see if there was something there that touched me and appealed to me. And I very quickly discovered that this was the phase in Elisabeth’s life when, on the one hand, she began to rebel against all the ceremony and, on the other hand, started to withdraw and isolate herself; a time when it had quite obviously become impossible for her to squeeze herself into a predetermined template. There’s that sense of always having to live up to an outsized image of yourself, as that’s the only way for you to gain recognition and love – I found that both extremely interesting and universal.

Your Empress Elisabeth lives in a tight corset of self-restraint and societal censure. At first she is still keen to measure up to her own aspirations, as well as satisfying public expectations that she will conform to an idealized image. For decades she helped cement that image with her cult of beauty and iconic braided hairstyle. But Elisabeth has grown older – and is tired of passing muster as an image of perfection. Is that just a problem for Elisabeth or a perpetual state of affairs in women’s lives?

I wouldn’t have been interested if it had just been a problem for her. Many of the expectations Elisabeth had to contend with continue to be imposed on women today. Being beautiful is still seen as a woman’s most important and valuable trait. Historical progress has not altered that, despite the women’s movement and emancipation. Women are still considered less valuable if they are overweight or older. An attractive female partner still boosts a man’s status. The only difference between then and now is that people used to talk openly about it: “All you need to do is be appealing – that’s why I chose you, that’s why you’re here”, Franz Josef tells Elisabeth. In 2022, women are supposed to do a great deal more and fulfill many more expectations – but also to stay beautiful, slim and young while they’re at it. After a certain age, women can’t win no matter what they do; they are accused of being vain if they get

“some work done”, but people comment on their wrinkles if they don’t. That’s a particular issue for women in the public eye, like Elisabeth, but it affects all of us because they have a kind of emblematic function.

Riddled with despair, Empress Elisabeth increasingly withdraws from her life. That’s exactly what the real Elisabeth is said to have done: In later life, she only appeared in public with her face hidden behind a veil, she travelled extensively, and even had a double to take her place on official occasions to avoid having to attend. How important was historical accuracy to you in *Corsage*?

It was important to me, as ever, to know the rules so that I could break them. I did really in-depth research in particular on that phase of Elisabeth’s life, but took a lot of liberties with the content and form when turning it into a cinematic narrative. All the “mistakes” in what we recount or depict were not something that simply happened when we were shooting, but were instead all artistic decisions. I was never interested in making a nice, tidy biopic. But of course it was the facts – that Elisabeth didn’t show her face after a certain age – that actually inspired the plot, sparking this story within me. After all, it is incredibly compelling to realize that she essentially disappeared right in front of their eyes.

INTERVIEW WITH VICKY KRIEPS - Elisabeth

"I'm giving her a chance to do everything she couldn't do back then." – Vicky Krieps on Empress Elisabeth

Vicky Krieps, how did you come to play Empress Elisabeth?

Well, I knew Marie Kreutzer because I had played the lead in her film *We Used To Be Cool (Was Hat Uns Bloß So Ruiniert)* depicting a young mother struggling with parenthood. After shooting wrapped, we were both absolutely certain that we wanted to do another project together. Not long after that, I asked Marie what she thought about "Sissi". The idea occurred to me as I'd seen Romy Schneider in the "Sissi" films at our neighbor's place when I was 15 and read Empress Elisabeth's biography pretty much in parallel. As a teenager, I had all kinds of questions when I finished the book. Why did Empress Elisabeth have fitness equipment built for her? Why did she refuse to be painted after she was 40? I told Marie all that and she didn't say a word at first. But then something amazing happened, which reflects what I think is one of women's great strengths: putting ideas into action rather than just talking and talking. And so one day, a year after we had that conversation, I opened my mailbox and there was an envelope with the finished script. Marie had just added a note saying something like: "I went back to the archives. You were right". That was so classy.

And what did you do next?

Without a moment's hesitation, my reaction was: Let's go for it!

Empress Elisabeth rides, excels at many sports, speaks multiple languages, and, above all, is anorexically thin. How much time and energy did it take for you to become this monarch?

I don't think I've ever had to work so hard for a role. And I was lucky: I could already ride very well, which meant I didn't have to start from scratch, but just needed to learn to ride sidesaddle. I guess it wouldn't have been possible otherwise in just two months. I learnt to ice-swim in the Danube in sub-zero temperatures, which is pretty complicated. You get into the cold water and your body activates its survival reflex – it just wants you to get out of there. But then your mind kicks in; it has to gain the upper hand to convince you everything is fine. On top of that, I had to learn fencing and Hungarian. That was a huge challenge, as it's a language where you can't draw on any other phonetics to get your bearings. Marie definitely didn't want me to lose weight for the role, but of course I did lose a few kilos with all the training. Looking back, that actually ended up helping for the corset. In any event, wearing a corset was a really memorable experience. It wasn't just about only being able to have liquids like soups or smoothies when I was in the corset; that tight constriction also hugely affected my emotions. When I put it on and got laced in, I would immediately feel

sad. When I took it off, I used to feel happy and could laugh again. Perhaps that's also because the diaphragm is where the corset presses most tightly. I read somewhere that it's the seat of all our emotions. Realizing the impact that wearing corsets must have had on women generally back then was a really fascinating physical experience.

What was it like being a woman in 19th -century Europe?

I did some research for the role and found some books and magazines from that era. They explained how women were meant to behave and how they were supposed to dress and talk. Marriage market conventions in particular exerted enormous pressure on women. Back then, if a man married outside his class – for example, if a nobleman wed a commoner, which would have been quite unusual – the bride would promptly be given a noble title. The exact opposite applied for women. If a noblewoman married a commoner, she would need to find even more money to avoid slipping down the social ladder. Just like today, a woman was also expected to be the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the best of all. And of course, everyone lost out in that kind of competitive set-up. Above all, women's influence steadily waned as they grew older. In those days, women essentially became invisible when they turned 40. Making herself disappear was also a desperate stab at self-empowerment on Elisabeth's part.

In *Corsage*, Elisabeth is overwhelmed by fate. Everything she tries by way of distraction appears to be in vain until ultimately the empress comes to a tragic end. Couldn't she have saved herself?

I think Elisabeth fell prey throughout her life to a certain melancholy, as was common in that era. Depressive tendencies are also documented in her family. Elisabeth was fascinated by poetry, by Heinrich Heine's poems. What's more, narcotics used to be viewed as medical treatment back then. Cocaine and heroin naturally penetrate deep into the brain and alter people's perceptions. We should always factor in that influence when we think about Elisabeth. And then, of course, there is the tight corset, that feeling of always virtually suffocating, being unable to breathe. In addition, she constantly subjected herself to a kind of slow torture, with diets and endurance sports. That was of course so she could somehow get in touch with herself. That all meant that the possible course she could follow grew narrower and narrower, making it increasingly unlikely she would find a way out. Because I realized that as an actress and of course gradually really empathized with the constraints my character faced, I would often attempt to give Elisabeth a little freedom through my performance. When we were filming, I often thought: I'm giving her a chance to do everything she couldn't do back then. Smoking, giving someone the finger, cutting off her hair. As an actress, I'm a fan of confrontation and surprises. That's why I'd often really fool around when I wasn't on camera. That was my way of experimenting. Above all, the big question for me was: What happens when we all stop pretending?

ABOUT MARIE KREUTZER - Director

Marie Kreutzer, born in Graz, is one of Austria's most important and established filmmakers. After graduating from the AHS Modellschule, an alternative school with an artistic focus, she began her studies at the Film Academy Vienna in the field of screenwriting and dramaturgy with Walter Wippersberg and graduated with distinction. Afterwards, she worked as a script supervisor and in continuity in cinema and TV productions and made a variety of award-winning short feature films, which were shown at numerous festivals.

Her first feature film, *The Fatherless (Die Vaterlosen)* (2011), has been shown and awarded at numerous festivals, including the Berlinale Panorama Special 2011. In addition, the film was nominated for the Thomas Pluch Screenplay Award and the Austrian Film Award. This was followed by the feature films *Gruber Is Leaving (Gruber Geht)* (2015), *We Used To Be Cool (Was Hat Uns Bloß So Ruiniert)* (2016) and the TV film *Die Notlüge* (2017), which were also shown and awarded at festivals. Kreutzer's films *Gruber Is Leaving* and *The Ground Beneath My Feet (Der Boden Unter den Füßen)* have been enormous audience successes and are already among the classics of contemporary Austrian film. With *The Ground Beneath My Feet* she was finally able to attract international attention in 2019: The gripping, feminist psychodrama with Valerie Pachner, Pia Hierzegger and Mavie Hörbiger ran in the competition of the Berlin International Film Festival, received fantastic reviews worldwide and several awards. In addition to her work as a director, she worked as a lecturer at the Vienna Film Academy and as a screenwriter and dramaturge. Marie Kreutzer has been a board member of the Drehbuchverband und Drehbuchforum Austria since 2007 and a member of the supervisory board of the Austrian Film Institute since 2017.

FILMOGRAPHY

2022	CORSAGE Feature, 113'
2022	VIER TV, 88'
2019	THE GROUND BENEATH MY FEET (Der Boden Unter Den Füßen) Feature, 108'
2017	DIE NOTLÜGE TV, 90'
2016	WE USED TO BE COOL (Was Hat Uns Bloß So Ruiniert) Feature, 96'
2015	GRUBER IS LEAVING (Gruber geht) Feature, 104'
2011	THE FATHERLESS (Die Vaterlosen) Feature, 104'

CAST

Elisabeth	Vicky Krieps
Franz Joseph	Florian Teichtmeister
Marie Ffestetics	Katharina Lorenz
Ida Ferenczy	Jeanne Werner
Fanny Feifalik	Alma Hasun
Ludwig II, King of Bavaria	Manuel Rubey
Louis Le Prince	Finnegan Oldfield
Rudolf	Aaron Friesz
Valerie	Rosa Hajjaj
Marie, Queen of the Two Sicilies	Lilly Marie Tschörtner
Bay Middleton	Colin Morgan

CREW

Writer/Director	Marie Kreutzer
Producers	Alexander Glehr, Johanna Scherz
Co-Producers	Bernard Michaux, Jonas Dornbach, Janine Jackowski, Maren Ade, Jean-Christophe Reymond
Executive Producer	Vicky Krieps
Associate Producers	Jani Thiltges, Claude Waringo, Amaury Ovise
Director of Photography	Judith Kaufmann BVK
Editor	Ulrike Kofler
Production Designer	Martin Reiter
Costume Designer	Monika Buttinger
Makeup Design	Maike Heinlein, Helene Lang
Music	Camille
Sound Mixer	Alain Goniva, Carlo Thoss
Sound Design	Nicolas Leroy, Angelo Dos Santos
Re-recording Mixer	Loïc Collignon
Line Producer	Gottlieb Pallendorf
Casting	Rita Waszilovics
Production	Film AG
Co-production	Samsa Film Komplizen Film Kazak Productions ORF Film/Fernseh-Abkommen ZDF/ARTE ARTE France Cinéma
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