

PRODUCER'S PORTRAIT



Clementina Hegewisch (photo © NextFilm)

NextFilm was originally founded in Hamburg by **Pia Frankenberg** and, later on, her husband **Laurens Straub**, one of the co-founders of Filmverlag der Autoren, became a partner. In 1998, Straub took over 100% of the company before **Clementina Hegewisch** became Straub's new partner in 2000. The company then moved its base to Berlin. Hegewisch has been the sole managing director since Straub's death in April 2007. NextFilm has produced the following films since 1998: **The Trio (Das Trio)**, dir: Hermine Huntgeburth, 1998), **Fisimatenten** (dir: Jochen Kuhn, 1999), **Pruefstand 7** (dir: Robert Bramkamp, experimental docu-feature, 2001), **Der Cowboy weint** (dirs: Eckhard Theophil and Thomas Frydetski, short, 2002), **Fuehrer Ex** (dir: Winfried Bonengel, 2002), **Neubau – VW in Dresden** (dir: Thomas Tielsch, documentary, 2003), **Klaus Kuron – Spion in eigener Sache** (dir: Thomas Knauf, documentary, 2004), **Max und Moritz Reloaded** (dir: Thomas Frydetski, 2005), **Coffee Beans for a Life (Mein Ueberleben in Kolbuszowa)**, dir: Helga Hirsch, documentary, 2006), **Detektive oder Die gluecklichen Engel der inneren Sicherheit** (dir: Andreas Goldstein, 2006), **Long Shadows (Schattenwelt)**, dir: Connie Walther, 2008), **Unter Strom** (dir: Zoltan Paul, currently in post-production), **Das Milliardenpiel, der Berliner Bank-Skandal** (working title, dir: Ulrich Stein, in development), and **Die Totenwaescherin** (dir: Ben Verbong, in development).

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FINGER ON THE PULSE

A portrait of NextFilm

"From the outset, we tried to be really topical and socially relevant," says **Clementina Hegewisch** about her collaboration with **Laurens Straub** in the production company **NextFilm**.

The company was initially launched by Straub's then wife, film director **Pia Frankenberg**. When Straub joined the company, their first production together was Hermine Huntgeburth's **The Trio** with Goetz George, Christian Redl, Jeanette Hain and newcomer Felix Eitner, which was released by Warner Bros. in 1999.

Straub and Frankenberg parted ways during the development of their second project, Jochen Kuhn's **Fisimatenten**, with Maximilian Schell and Alexandra Maria Lara in her first appearance on the big screen. Hegewisch joined NextFilm as a new partner when **Fisimatenten** was released in the cinemas in 2000.

As Hamburg-born Hegewisch explains, "Laurens and I had known one another and been friends since 1984 when I moved to Munich. It made

sense to me to team up with him because with NextFilm he already had a structure in place – but only on the condition that the company would operate from Berlin!"

The first production the two developed and produced together was Winfried Bonengel's **Fuehrer Ex** based on the autobiography of Ingo Hasselbach, *Die Abrechnung – ein Neonazi steigt aus*, which was also published by Random House in the USA under the title of *Fuehrer Ex*. The film's world premiere was in the Official Competition at Venice in 2002, followed by festival screenings in Toronto, São Paulo, and Tallinn, among others.

"We then did two documentaries followed by our next feature **Max und Moritz Reloaded**, a rather typical production for Laurens," Hegewisch recalls. Director Thomas Frydetski was one of his former students, screenwriter Eckhard Theophil a good friend and Straub himself took part as co-writer and producer. A couple of years before, he had produced a seven-minute short called **Der Cowboy**

weint, with Theophil directing and Frydetski and Theophil writing.

Max and Moritz Reloaded also marked the beginning of a close cooperation with Kinowelt, significant for both Straub and NextFilm. "In the last two years of his life, Laurens worked as writer and co-director on *Reverse Shot – Rebellion of the Filmmakers* (*Gegenschuss – Aufbruch der Filmemacher*), a documentary produced by Rainer Koelmel and Kinowelt about the history of Filmverlag der Autoren. Kinowelt also handled world sales for the documentary **Coffee Beans for a Life** which I produced in 2005."

Directed by Helga Hirsch, **Coffee Beans for a Life** follows 84-year-old Polish Jew Naftali Saleschuetz who, having emigrated to the USA, returns with his US-born daughter and grandsons for the first time to his native village in Poland to retrace his roots. As Hegewisch notes, "the film was very personal and ambivalent in its message and consequently the subject of much discussion," winning the First Prize and Audience Award at the 14th dokumentArt in Neubrandenburg.

"We were in the middle of developing our next feature about the Berliner Bank scandal [dir: Ulrich Stein] when Laurens was diagnosed with cancer," she continues. "It really stopped us in our tracks and the company was in limbo from that point on. Nothing much was done until his death in April 2007."

"I thought for quite a long time about what I should do, whether I should look for another partner," Hegewisch says, "and then decided to carry on by myself." Connie Walther's **Long Shadows** was the next project after that and, being a co-production, it helped her a lot in making that decision.

Ulrich Noethen (*Runaway Horse*) plays the ex-RAF terrorist Bernd Widmer who is released back into the community after serving 22 years in prison, and Franziska Petri (*Forget America*) is his young neighbor Valerie who turns out to be the daughter of a man Widmer was alleged to have also killed during the attack on a bank president.

"The project was a stroke of luck. Michael Jungfleisch of Gambit Film, who raised a major part of the financing, asked me if I would be interested in taking over production of the film. I was very attracted to the project because it deals with the effects of political events my generation grew up with and with which I personally am very familiar. When I was a kid, Ulrike Meinhof often came to our house because my youngest sister was in the same class at school as the Meinhof twins." Hegewisch was eleven and just beginning to develop an interest in politics when Meinhof went to Lebanon and took her twins with her.

"I was interested in the way Connie was very personal in her approach to the story," Hegewisch adds. "She didn't try to make it into a political commentary about that time, but is more concerned about the emotional aspects. I see **Long Shadows** as a new start as well as a classical project in the tradition of NextFilm – with a small budget and reflective of contemporary themes. I am really proud of the team and what we have achieved."

The beginning of this year saw the production of NextFilm's eighth feature film **Unter Strom**, the second feature by Zoltan Paul. "I liked the screenplay [by Paul and Uli Bree] right away," Hegewisch recalls. "It is situated between all genres: it is grotesque, an ensemble piece and a comedy. In fact, it has everything that people in Germany say doesn't work! For me, the script works particularly well with the use of intelligent puns, and I have never before had a screenplay

where I had so few problems getting the cast I wanted together. I sent the script off and usually within two days the actors replied with a big 'Yes!'."

Shot in 24 days on location in and around a hunting lodge near Jena, the co-production with cine plus Media Service boasts a who's who of German cinema, theater and TV actors, ranging from Robert Stadlober and Ralph Herforth through Harald Krassnitzer, Catrin Striebeck, Hanno Koffler, and Anna Fischer to Tilo Nest, Franz Xaver Zach and, last but not least, Sunnyi Melles.

Hegewisch particularly enjoys initiating film ideas and working closely with screenwriters and directors in the development phase rather than just acquiring the rights to completed screenplays.

At the same time, she is still working on projects originally set in motion by her late partner. A case in point is Ulrich Stein's planned film **Das Milliardenpiel** (working title) about the Berliner Bank scandal. "In actual fact, Uli is a documentary filmmaker, but he has worked on a lot of reenactments in the past couple of years for films, for example, about Peter Graf and the German secret service BND," Hegewisch explains, adding that the project has received support from BKM and broadcasters NDR and ARTE and will be co-produced with TV presenter Sandra Maischberger's Hamburg-based company Vincent Film. "I see it as both a political thriller and a feature film which is extremely close to reality."

In addition, she is pursuing another of Laurens' ideas for a documentary about the children of the exchange students from Socialist countries who came to former East Germany in the 1960s and 70s. Another feature documentary in development is a co-production with Hamburg's Filmtank, to be directed by Andreas Goldstein, about the 1972 chess world championship in Reykjavik between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky.

Moreover, 2009 could see NextFilm embarking on its first English-language international co-production with an adaptation of Helga Hegewisch's novel **Die Totenwaescherin** (working title), to be directed by veteran Dutch filmmaker Ben Verbong from a screenplay by Hardi Sturm.

"When my mother's novel was translated into Dutch I gave Ben a copy and, as soon as he read it, he asked if I had ever thought of making it into a film," Hegewisch recalls. "The novel actually covers five generations of women undertakers, but we have chosen one figure for a story set in 1850 at the beginning of the industrialization of Germany."

"It is a wonderful and heartbreaking love story, but not only that. It is also a story about strength and believing in your own abilities and consequently about emancipation. Visually, Ben and I are thinking about *Tess* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*" she notes, pointing out that she "would like the film to be shot in English as an international co-production because I truly think it's a global story."

Clementina Hegewisch spoke with Martin Blaney