

Music Box Films Presents

THE CAPTAIN



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S U M M A R Y

Based on the arresting true story of the Executioner of Emsland, THE CAPTAIN follows a German army deserter, Willi Herold (Max Hubacher), after he finds an abandoned Nazi captain's uniform in the final weeks of World War II. Emboldened by the authority the uniform grants him, he amasses a band of stragglers who cede to his command despite the suspicions of some. Citing direct orders from the Fuhrer himself, he soon takes command of a camp holding German soldiers accused of desertion and begins to dispense harsh justice. Increasingly intoxicated by the unquestioned authority, this enigmatic imposter soon discovers that many people will blindly follow the leader, whomever that happens to be.

Simultaneously a historical docudrama and sociological examination with undertones of the absurd, THE CAPTAIN presents fascism as something of a game to be played by those most gullible and unscrupulous.

S Y N O P S I S

Based on an arresting true story, THE CAPTAIN follows a German army deserter after he finds an abandoned Nazi captain's uniform in the final weeks of World War II. Emboldened by the authority the uniform grants him, he amasses a band of stragglers who cede to his command despite the suspicions of some. Citing direct orders from the Fuhrer himself, he soon takes command of a camp holding German soldiers accused of desertion and begins to dispense harsh justice.

L O G L I N E

Based on an arresting true story, THE CAPTAIN follows a German army deserter as he conforms to the evils of Nazism after putting on an abandoned captain's uniform during the final weeks of World War II.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

By Robert Schwentke

Almost 70 years after the fact, the harsh brutalities of World War II still elicit incomprehension and dismay. By present-day standards, the violent acts committed seem abnormal, psychopathic, and horrific.

But horror is a moral, not an analytical, concept.

In order to explain Willi Herold's actions we have to understand the world he lived in and not just our own world. We need to go beyond mere moral responses and experience the world from his point of view. Non-morally, so to speak, see what he saw, feel what he felt.

Our audience needs to experience Herold's historical, psychological, and social reality directly, viscerally, and emotionally. This story won't be told from the outside in, but from the inside out. We will fully immerse the audience in Herold's state of mind.

Our goal is not to justify or forgive Herold's actions by contextualizing them — or, worse, by introducing a moral relativism — but to understand the frame of reference which made these actions possible and so arrive at the general through the specific.

Herold's highly particularized perspective of a specific historical event allows us to glimpse a universal truth about the human condition in wartimes — past and present. Why tell this story? Because: *“Through the past we comprehend the present, and through the present we prepare for the future.”* — Arno Schmidt

In psychological terms, the inhabitants of the Third Reich were as normal as people in all other societies at all other times. The spectrum of perpetrators was a cross section of normal society and no specific group of people proved immune to the temptation, in Günther Anders's phrase, of “inhumanity with impunity.”

They are us. We are them. The past is now.

THE TRUE STORY BEHIND “THE CAPTAIN”

The story of THE CAPTAIN is based in great part on the real-life story of 19-year-old German soldier Willi Herold who turned into a con man and a sadistic despot after finding and wearing the uniform of a high-ranking officer in April 1945.

Willi Herold was born in 1925 in a small town near Chemnitz in eastern Germany. He had started an apprenticeship as a chimney sweep before being conscripted to join the *Wehrmacht* as a paratrooper in 1943. He fought in Italy before his brigade was deployed to serve in Germany.

On April 3, 1945, only a few weeks before the end of the war in Germany, Herold was separated from his troops and found himself alone in a veritable no-man’s-land, making his way north towards the town of Bentheim. Inside a demolished army car, the young man found an officer’s box with a captain’s uniform equipped with war decorations, including the Iron Cross.

Herold began to play the role of the captain, quickly making use of his new powers and soon becoming the commander of a group of soldiers he encountered on the way. The German expression for soldiers who had lost their brigade or were under other circumstances separated from their troops is *Versprengte*, which can be translated as “scattered” or “dispersed.” Towards the end of the war, hundreds of *Versprengte* were on the roads of Germany, as were deserters.

The amount of soldiers under Herold was estimated to have once been around 80 men, with a core group of 12 men remaining until the end. As depicted in the film, Herold could not identify himself according to the rank of his uniform when meeting another officer on the road, but survived only through his brazen, authoritarian, and self-assured behavior towards the real captain.

In the Emsland, a sparsely populated area in northwestern Germany, the Nazis erected fifteen detention camps, six of which were exclusively for members of the *Wehrmacht* who had been accused of desertion, insubordination, corroding morale, or other misdemeanors. Herold and his men arrived at Camp II, the detention camp Aschendorfermoor, on April 11, 1945.

Against the organizational structure of the camp and, initially, the will of its superintendent, Herold and his men installed a completely arbitrary summary court of their own, justifying their cruel murders and random executions with the lie of having orders from Adolf Hitler himself. Despite the lack of (written) proof, all of the officers believed him.

On April 12, 1945, Herold and his men asked inmates to dig a 1,800-meter-deep pit and began executing them with an anti-aircraft gun. Later they would use machine guns to kill the soldiers, push them into the pit, and throw hand grenades into the hole. By the end of the night, 98 soldiers were executed. The mad atrocities of Herold’s reign even exceeded the deeds shown in the film, including drowning the inmates, forcing them to undress, and chasing down deserters.

Between April 15 - 18, Herold and his men reorganized the camp completely, sending soldiers back to the *Wehrmacht* and accepting others into their group. On April 19, Allied Forces bombed the barracks and destroyed the camp completely. Herold and his men continued their killing spree on their way to the small town of Papenburg. Their terror regime included a public hanging, the execution of alleged spies, and the killing of a farmer raising the white flag of surrender.

On April 28, the German military police finally arrested Herold. During his time in jail, the Red Army reached Berlin and Hitler committed suicide. Herold confessed his deeds but was let go by the tribunal. Herold was asked to join "Operation Werewolf," one of the last Nazi plans to form a resistance against the Allies, but Herold escaped to Wilhelmshaven. Ironically, a British marine soldier caught him stealing a loaf of bread, which precipitated his story eventually being revealed and presented to a British military court. Willi Herold was sentenced to death on August 29, 1946. Herold and five other men were killed by guillotine. He was 20 years old.

Willi Herold would later be known as 'the executioner of Emsland.' He killed almost 170 people.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ROBERT SCHWENTKE

By Toby Ashraf

THE CAPTAIN is set during the last days of WWII and is based on the real-life character of Willi Herold. When did you first get the idea of turning his story into a fiction film?

National Socialism was a dynamic system — it took a great many people for this cultural catastrophe to occur. I was interested in the back row of perpetrators. Some were ideologically driven, others were opportunists, legitimized thugs, or simply got out of the way of evil. These were not the architects of the system they served, but the people who lived next door to you — the “little people” who kept the Nazi system alive and going. I knew I wanted to make a movie from the perspective of these perpetrators, and so I started to search for a suitable story.

What fascinated you about the perspective of the perpetrators, since it bears the risk to make the villain the hero and tell a film through the eyes of someone who is very difficult to identify with?

It confronts the audience with a different set of propositions than a movie that allows them to graft onto a morally upright character. We all hope and imagine that we would have been morally upright and brave enough to oppose the system. But history and the facts don't bear that out. I wanted there to be no explicit moral compass, forcing the audience to find their own point of view, to ask themselves, “What would I have done?” We are standing close to the abyss again and it is important to confront it. Contemplate our own limitations, strengths, and beliefs — not to pretend it is going to resolve itself.

THE CAPTAIN is your first period picture. How long and specific was your research concerning set design, scenography, costumes, and such?

Once I had come across the story of Willi Herold, I tried to figure out how to make it into a film and what kind of film I wanted it to be. What would be my movie about violence and the German National Socialist past? I realized that I had to do a lot of research and read books on history and psychology, diaries, and novels by the meter in order to find the answer to: “How could this have happened?”

I read the last remaining file on the case at the state archives in Oldenburg and visited the Gedenkstätte Esterwegen — the Emsland work camp memorial — where a former prisoner had built a miniature of the camp from memory. The proportions were purposefully inaccurate: towers were too tall, fences too thick, the gate impossibly solid — a subjective, not factual view of the past. It affected me more deeply and rang truer than a proper scale model would have. Even though THE CAPTAIN is not told through the perspective of the victims, this kind of experiential view of the past became a guiding principle for me and inspired me to make the movie with a level of abstraction.

How did that insight change your perception of Willi Herold's character then?

To be honest: the more I learned, the less I understood, and I came to the conclusion that it's not about trying to analyze who the character of Willi Herold is or to apply terminologies from clinical psychology. Whenever I tried to put a name to it, it felt reductive, pat. I decided everybody needed to make up their own mind about who Willi Herold is and why he did what he did. There is an intentional blank spot at the center of the character that allows the audience to find their own answers.

Did that idea change over the course of writing the script?

It crystallized but there is still something that startles me to the degree that I can't explain at all. What's happening in the world right now, sadly, is helping me understand how easily democracy can be subverted, used, and abused. There are certain conditions required for atrocities and genocides to occur. It starts with the rhetoric. Dehumanize the opponents. Create a them-against-us situation. Then we are told that the rules of civilization no longer apply. Killing is OK. This goes hand in hand with the legitimization of crimes committed.

Would you call *THE CAPTAIN* in any way an authentic period film?

I am not a fan of the "fetishism of authenticity," which is a wonderful phrase German film critic Cristina Nord once used when she talked about how German films about the Nazi past have all essentially become the equivalent of British heritage movies. The fallacy is that if you get the costumes and the car details right, you get the time right. But since none of the people involved in making the film were alive at the time, and all we can do is to research and look at photos and films of the time and read up about it, this so-called recreation of reality is pure artifice. History is a look back from a specific present with its particular biases and preoccupations. I never wanted to pretend this wasn't the case. Of course, we got all the uniforms right since *THE CAPTAIN* is a movie about uniforms. But we took a lot of liberties with everything else. I wanted to make sure that there was a layer of abstraction in everything we did. Sets, acting, tone.

Talking about your cast: Making this film must have been quite a challenge for them, especially for your young main actor Max Hubacher. How did you prepare your actors for this very specific setting and how did you work with them?

I think a lot of it was set by the script. If you look at some movies that deal with violence, brutality, and the darker side of humanity, most of them give you a little hole, through which you can escape — be it humor or be it the one character you can grab on to. My script didn't have any of that — it didn't let you off the hook. I think this idea was very clear to everyone involved when they read the script.

What kind of experience did the actors have during the shoot?

Every one of the actors fell apart at some point — mostly while we were shooting in the camp. Max Hubacher, who plays Willi Herold, went into shock when we shot his visit to the detention barracks, with all the prisoners present. Bernd Hölscher, who plays Schütte, started to cry after his character shoots the prisoners in the pit. We never showed them, but there were always people in the pit, and I had instructed them to beg for their lives — some did it so successfully that after I said “Cut,” Bernd Hölscher just started to weep. It was very hard for him to continue shooting that night. I went into shock when Milan Peschel’s character walked across the (invisible) dead bodies in the pit. It got us all at a certain point.

Did you rehearse much with your actors?

We did extensive rehearsals for several weeks. Neither the tone of the film nor the acting is naturalistic. We needed to calibrate the tone and the intentions to make sure that we didn’t tilt too far into one or the other direction. The actors worked really, really hard to walk that line.

It’s the first film you ever shot in black-and-white. What was the idea behind that decision?

There is a story that Martin Scorsese shot tests shots for *RAGING BULL* in color and showed them to Michael Powell who said, I’m paraphrasing, “You cannot make this film with all its blood in color, people won’t be able to look past the blood, past the red. You need to make this film black and white!” This struck me as amazingly astute in terms of how audiences perceive violence in film and I thought: We have such a bloody tale here; I need people to somehow not be completely blocked and repelled. It was also an intuitive choice because I know the past mostly through black-and-white photographs. The third reason was aesthetics: I wanted the film to have an abstract quality. There is an intentional theatricality to the film that black-and-white is suited for better than color.

You live and work both in the USA and in Germany. Do you expect audiences to react differently to your film?

It’s hard to predict, but Germans haven’t seen these kinds of characters in a German film. I think there is going to be a bit of a cognitive dissonance that American audiences might not experience. It’s the same way that Germans watch *12 YEARS A SLAVE* differently than Americans do. It’s just a difference in culture.

PRODUCTION NOTES

THE CAPTAIN was shot in 41 days. Principal photography took place between February and April 2017 near Wroclaw, Poland, and in and around Görlitz, Germany. Ironically termed “Görlitwood”, the small town Görlitz in East Germany with a population of fewer than 60,000 has become a popular filming location for Hollywood productions in recent times, with films such as Stephen Daldry’s THE READER (2009), Quentin Tarantino’s INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS (2009), and Wes Anderson’s THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL (2014) being shot here.

Because much of the film takes place outside during the last two weeks of World War II in late April and early May of 1945, it was important for THE CAPTAIN to be shot during late winter and early spring in order to achieve an accurate look for the film.

Rehearsals with the actors started as early as summer 2016. Since the real-life character of Willi Herold was only 19 years old when he started his terror regime in 1945, it was crucial for Robert Schwentke to find a young actor who not only bore some resemblance to Herold but also looked young enough to fit the part. 23-year-old Swiss actor Max Hubacher, who already gained praise and won the Swiss film award at the age of 17 for his part in Markus Imboden’s THE FOSTER BOY (DER VERDINGBUB), was selected for the part.

International audiences know popular German actor Alexander Fehling, who plays Nazi Captain Junker, from his part in Quentin Tarantino’s INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS. He is also the lead in THREE PEEKS (DREI ZINNE) by Jan Zabeil, which premiered at the 2017 Locarno Film Festival and was part of the 2017 Toronto Film Festival in a Special Presentation.

Frederick Lau (Kipinski) has starred in internationally acclaimed arthouse hits such as VICTORIA (Sebastian Schipper, 2015), A COFFEE IN BERLIN (Jan Ole Gerster, 2012), and THE COUNTESS (Julie Delpy, 2009). Milan Peschel (Freytag) starred as a father diagnosed with a brain tumor in the highly acclaimed drama STOPPED ON TRACK (HALT AUF FREIER STRECKE, Andreas Dresen, 2012), which was part of the 2011 competition program in Cannes.

This is the ninth collaboration between cinematographer Florian Ballhaus (son of legendary German cinematographer Michael Ballhaus) and director Robert Schwentke. Their other works include THE FAMILY JEWELS (EIERDIEBE, 2003), FLIGHTPLAN (2005), THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE (2009), R.E.D. (2010), INSURGENT (2015), and ALLEGIANT (2016).

Ballhaus also collaborated with Hollywood director David Frankel on such hit comedies as SEX AND THE CITY (various episodes, 2003), THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA (2006), MARLEY & ME (2008), and HOPE SPRINGS (2012).

One of the main shooting locations, the work camp containing the barracks, was built in Poland specifically for the film and then blown up in real time to simulate Allied Forces’ bombed attack as realistically as possible. The VFX of the film were produced by the German CGI and VFX

company Mackevision, which is based in Stuttgart. Mackevision worked on the productions of INDEPENDENCE DAY: RESURGENCE (Roland Emmerich, 2016) and GAME OF THRONES.

ROBERT SCHWENTKE BIOGRAPHY + FILMOGRAPHY

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Schwentke was born 1968 in Germany. He studied Literature and Philosophy at the Eberhard Karl University in Tuebingen and later earned an MFA in directing from the American Film Institute.

FILMOGRAPHY

2017	THE CAPTAIN (Writer and Director)
2016	THE DIVERGENT SERIES: ALLEGIANT (Director)
2015	THE DIVERGENT SERIES: INSURGENT (Director)
2014	<i>The Novice</i> — “Pilot” (Director)
2013	R.I.P.D. (Director)
2010	RED (Director)
2009	THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE (Director)
2009	<i>Lie to Me</i> (TV Series) — “Pilot” (Director)
2005	FLIGHTPLAN (Director)
2003	EIERDIEBE (Writer and Director)
2002	TATTOO (Writer and Director)
2001	<i>Tatort</i> (TV Series) — “Moerdergrube” (Writer)
1999	<i>Tatort</i> (TV Series) — “Drei Affen” (Writer)
1998	<i>Tatort</i> (TV Series) — “Bildersturm” (Writer)

CAST BIOS + FILMOGRAPHIES

Max Hubacher (Willi Herold)

Born in Bern, Switzerland, in 1993. Started acting for children's theatre at the age of seven. Played in theatre productions at Schauspielhaus Zürich, among others.

Filmography (selection):

- MARIO (2018), director: Marcel Gisler
- DRIFT (Driften) (2015), director: Karim Patwa
- A DECENT MAN (Nichts Passiert) (2015), director: Micha Lewinsky
- NIGHT TRAIN TO LISBON (2013), director: Bille August
- THE FOSTER BOY (DER VERDINGBUB) (2011), director: Markus Imboden
- BOLD HEROES (STATIONSPIRATEN) (2010), director: Mike Schaerer

Milan Peschel (Freitag)

Born in East-Berlin, German Democratic Republic, in 1968. Studied acting at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts. Played in theatre productions at Volksbühne Berlin, Thalia Theater Hamburg, and Maxim Gorki Theater, among others. Directed numerous theatre plays and has acted in almost 60 film and TV productions.

Filmography (selection):

- OLD AGENT MAN (KUNDSCHAFTER DES FRIEDENS) (2017), director: Robert Thalheim
- THE MANNY (DER NANNY), (2016) director: Matthias Schweighöfer
- WHAT A MAN (2011), director: Matthias Schweighöfer
- STOPPED ON TRACK (HALT AUF HALBER STRECKE) (2011), director: Andreas Dresen
- NETTO (2005), director: Robert Thalheim
- HAMLET_X (2003), director: Herbert Fritsch

Frederick Lau (Kipinski)

Born in Berlin, Germany, in 1989. Started acting at the age of 10. Has played in nearly 90 productions.

Filmography (selection):

- GUTLAND (2017), director: Govinda Van Maele
- 4 BLOCKS (TV series) (2017), director: Marvin Kren
- VICTORIA (2015), director: Sebastian Schipper
- NEUE VAHR SÜD (2010), director: Hermine Huntgeburth
- THE WAVE (DIE WELLE) (2008), director: Dennis Gansel

– SECOND HAND CHILD *Second Hand Child (WER KÜSST SCHON EINEN LEGUAN?)* (2005),
director: Karola Hattop

Alexander Fehling (Junker)

Born in Berlin, Germany, in 1981. Studied acting at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts. Played in theatre productions at Berliner Ensemble, Deutsches Theater, Maxim Gorki Theater, and Sophiensaele, among others.

Filmography (selection):

- THREE PEEKS (DREI ZINNEN) (2017), director: Jan Zabeil
- *Homeland* (TV series) (2015), director: various
- LABYRINTH OF LIES (IM LABYRINTH DES SCHWEIGENS) (2014), director Giulio Ricciarelli
- YOUNG GOETHE IN LOVE (GOETHE!) (2010), director: Philipp Stölzl
- INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS (2009), director: Quentin Tarantino
- AND ALONG COME TOURISTS (AM ENDE KOMMEN TOURISTEN) (2007), director: Robert Thalheim

CAST + CREW

CAST

Max Hubacher	Herold
Milan Peschel	Freytag
Frederick Lau	Kipinski
Bernd Hölscher	Schütte
Waldemar Kobus	Hansen
Alexander Fehling	Junker
Britta Hammelstein	Gerda Schütte
Sascha Alexander Geršak	Sichner
Samuel Finzi	Roger Kuckelsberg
Wolfram Koch	Schneider
Marko Dyrlich	Brockhoff
Hendrik Arnst	Konteradmiral Weyher
Haymon Maria Buttinger	Dr. Kremer
Alexander Hörbe	Schnabel Wirt
Eugénie Anselin	Irmgard
Sebastian Rudolph	Gefreiter Paul
Blerim Destani	Dahler-Kaufmann

CREW

Director of Photography	Florian Ballhaus, ASC
Production Design	Harald Turzer
Concept Artist	Sasa Zivkovic
Costumes	Magdalena J. Rutkiewicz-Luterek Michał
Editor	Czarnecki
Music	Martin Todsharow
Casting	Anja Dührberg

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