

## **An interview with director Robert Schwentke about THE CAPTAIN**

Interview: Toby Ashraf

*THE CAPTAIN is set during the last days of WW II 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 I so I started to search for a suitable story.

*So at first, there was the idea to make a film about the phenomenon of a generation, and Willi Herold’s story offered itself to you later, so to speak?*

Yes.

*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 realised that I had to do a lot of research and read books on history and psychology, diaries and novels by the meter...trying 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 workcamp 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: In a way 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 genocide 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 a 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 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 and the black-and-white suited that 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 for example might not experience. It's the same way that we watch 12 YEARS A SLAVE differently than Americans do. It's just a difference in culture.