

STINA WERENFELS



Foto: Katharina Lüttscher

Stina Werenfels was born in Basel in 1964 and spent her early childhood in the USA, Greece and Spain. After studying pharmacy at the ETH Zurich Institute of Technology, she began her film studies in 1991 at New York University (the Tisch School of the Arts), where she attended master classes given by Spike Lee, Arthur Penn, Sondra Lee and Marketa Kimbrell, among others. In 1994, her documentary **Fragments from the Lower East Side** was made in New York. On her return to Switzerland, she shot the short fiction film **Pastry, Pain & Politics**, in 1998, for which she received the Swiss Film Award for Best Short Film. Her first feature film **Going Private** (2006), also went on to win numerous prizes, including the Swiss Film Award for the Best Cast and the Zurich Film Award. In addition to her work as a director and screenwriter, Stina Werenfels teaches film acting at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). She lives with her family in Zurich.

STINA WERENFELS

Personal Questions – Subjects of Social Relevance

The characters and subjects in the films by Stina Werenfels have little in common at first glance: An evening with bankers (**Going Private**, 2006), a singing hairdresser (**Meier Marylin**, 2003), a Jewish couple and a Palestinian registered nurse (**Pastry, Pain & Politics**, 1998), a pregnant woman with intellectual disabilities (**Dora or The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents**, 2015).

Yet whether it is in a banking environment or a small family, she poses the same questions: What determines our identity? Where do we search for a home, and where do we find it? Which values and moral concepts do we take to orient ourselves in a world where self-fulfilment and self-responsibility are the highest aims and neither tradition nor religion provide any instruction on how to act? Which price do we pay for the freedom we have gained in this way?

In her short documentary **Making of a Jew** (1999) Stina Werenfels says: "I was reared as a Protestant member of society". Yet in her adolescent years, she began to examine and confront the fact that as the daughter of a Jewish mother, she is also Jewish. This heightened her perception for questions of identity in all its forms. Her early childhood in the USA, Greece and Spain contributed to her never feeling quite at home in Switzerland, but rather always being just alien enough to question and challenge what she encountered here – a feeling that she shares with her husband, the filmmaker Samir, who came from Iraq to Switzerland at the age of six.

Even when her interest in a subject is completely personal, she still seeks out the greater social issues behind it.

In 1991, Werenfels began her film studies at the Tisch School of the Arts in New York. The experience she gained there was that much is achievable, yet nothing will happen if you do not go about it yourself. And even if, in the meantime, she feels like a Swiss filmmaker, the film education in New York was decisive for her: "It was important to go abroad. I plunged in a metropolis that conveyed the feeling everything is possible. You could breathe the enthusiasm and curiosity everywhere." Yet for that, she did not want to remain in America and shoot films there. She viewed so much in the USA with a critical eye and faced incomprehension as a result – such as when it came to the death penalty – and that even among friends with a critical attitude. She returned to Switzerland in 1995.

Stina Werenfels knows what she is addressing in her films. Because she takes her own issues and her own life as her starting point. And because she researches long and precisely – or both: In order to uncover the world of business, she worked in the back office of a private bank for her film project about a rising star in the banking community – from which **Going Private** would ultimately be made.

In **Dora or The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents**, she became involved as a mother in a mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, in order to create her main character with her intellectual disabilities, she completed a placement in an assisted living facility and conducted long discussions with numerous specialists in order to shape the role of Dora precisely. Yet even when her interest

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2015 **Dora or The Sexual Neurosis of Our Parents** (fiction)
- 2006 **Going Private** (fiction)
- 2003 **Meier Marilyn** (TV fiction)
- 1999 **Making of a Jew** (episode of the documentary **ID Swiss**)
- 1998 **Pastry, Pain & Politics** (short fiction)
- 1994 **Fragments from the Lower East Side** (short documentary)

AWARDS (selection)

Going Private

Swiss Film Award 2007: Special Prize of the Jury for Best Cast; Filmkunstfest Mecklenburg-Vorpommern: NDR Award for Directing 2006; Viareggio EuropaCinema: Best Film 2006; Zurich Film Award 2006

Meier Marilyn

Swiss Film Award 2004: Best Actress in a Leading Role (Bettina Stucky)

Pastry, Pain & Politics

Swiss Film Award 1999: Best Short Film; Festival del film Locarno: Kodak Prize Pardi di domani 1998; Zurich Film Award 1998

STINA WERENFELS

in a subject is completely personal, she still seeks out the greater social issues behind it. At the beginning of **Making of a Jew**, she herself is the main focus, but then immediately switches the view away from her and questions Jewish families about their identity as Swiss and as Jewish. **Fragments from the Lower East Side** (1994) portrays an Hasidic community which lays down clear rules for its members in all everyday situations and thus stands in contrast to the secular world they are surrounded by, one which has done away with rules and binding moral concepts. In this way, the short film is more than the portrait of a specific Jewish community – by revealing the expanse between constriction and a sense of security that is created by the all-embracing set of religious rules.

The tension between the private and the social has shaped the director's complete oeuvre in vastly different ways: While her own concerns and her own identity represent the starting point for the filmic confrontations she undertakes in her earlier pieces, she shifts the tension in **Going Private** into the film's characters: The men bear their neoliberal ideal of work and the profit-maximising behaviour that matches this, one that has been instilled in them professionally in the banking world, into their private lives.

The tension between the private and the social has shaped the director's complete oeuvre.

Dora or The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents seems, at first glance, to be concerned with the subjects of disabilities and sexuality. At second glance, the film is also a drama about a mother and her daughter – which is quite a personal subject for Stina Werenfels, who is herself a daughter and a mother. And at third glance, it is concerned with even more: "I was fascinated by the brutal, the archaic power that emanated from the piece by Lukas Bärfuss, which was the basis for the film. It has something disturbing about it, and it says something ambivalent about our society. That's what interested me."

Vastly Different Worlds

In Stina Werenfels's films, worlds collide into each other. And this already becomes apparent in **Fragments from the Lower East Side**. When the Orthodox Jewish protagonists accept the rules and commandments in their religion without any objection at all and speak in a completely self-evident manner about what this means in practical, everyday things, then the stark contrast in the way they live compared to a non-Orthodox audience becomes clear even without commentary.

The fiction film **Pastry, Pain & Politics** amasses in thirty minutes every conceivable prejudice and cliché from, about and to do with Jews and Arabs – and takes them to absurdity. A Jewish and a German couple meet by chance on holidays in Switzerland just before the Jewish man is taken to hospital with a heart attack. He is treated there by a registered nurse, one whom he regards

STINA WERENFELS

as competent – until she reveals herself to be Palestinian. Already during the financing phase, this film project met with scepticism as it seemed too risky for many. The correspondence on the film became thicker than the screenplay, the director mentioned in retrospect.

By bringing together different worlds, as indeed different views and images of the world, Stina Werenfels questions those things which appear self-evident, such as the moral concepts of the audience – and that nowhere so radically perhaps than in **Dora or The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents**. Of course we wish for the young intellectually disabled woman to have sex, in which she takes such undisguised and obvious pleasure, such that the audience is on her side in an instant and perhaps even her overstrained mother can smile at it all. But to have her own child? Is this, its logical consequence, to be accepted and approved now as well?

The director does not shy away from confronting the audience with this taboo, before she immediately pursues the next one: The mother, an apparently highly reflective woman

“The prevailing opinion in television is that a comedy has to be sweet. But I think that if it's not evil too, then it's not really funny.”

full of love and affection when dealing with her daughter's disabilities, screams out her disappointment at her life with her disabled daughter in an outburst of despair. Her motherly love, which is supposed to be so unconditional, reveals cracks which we would prefer not to become aware of. And viewed from the outside, Dora's first sex is a rape. Yet the audience's gaze prefers to remain on her face, in which only vast amazement is evident, but no defence, no pain. Feminism has shifted our attention to the subject of rape, the disabled people's associations to the sexual abuse of people with disabilities; and we feel we have an idea about it. But this scene forces you to reconsider principles and preconceived notions.

Seriousness with Humour

One's own identity, the economic crisis, a disabled daughter – these are difficult subjects that Stina Werenfels confronts and explores, and she does so with great seriousness. But she also does it with just as much humour. A dark humour however, that likes to leave you feeling unsettled afterwards.

In **Pastry, Pain & Politics**, for instance, the Palestinian nurse desperately tries to get off the bus which is about to cross the Swiss border, because leaving the country could risk her losing her residence permit. And when she finally manages to do so with the words: “I'm Palestinian and I know how to stop a bus”, you have already laughed before you have even worked out on just how many levels this laughter is incorrect.

Making of a Jew is part of a compilation film entitled **ID Swiss**, in which seven entirely different directors undertook a documentary search for a Swiss identity, or even an “idée suisse”. On a filmic level, Stina Werenfels directly asks herself the question here of what it means for her to be a

STINA WERENFELS

Swiss woman with a Jewish mother. She contrasts the all-embracing, serious subject with a second line of enquiry: Stina at the hairdresser. A Jewish woman? A non-Jewish one? Long hair? Which kind of Jewish woman? Or maybe short hair? In this way, the questions follow each other with equal weighting and the self-irony removes the gravity from the subject.

The TV movie **Meier Marylin** is a comedy centering around a hairdresser who would really like to be a crooning pop singer. This was the first time that the director took a screenplay penned by someone else as the basis for her production, and she was aiming to ensure "that it would even be a bit more nasty. The prevailing opinion in television is that a comedy has to be sweet. But I think that if it's not evil too, then it's not really funny." And in this regard, Stina Werenfels comments as follows on all her films: "I'm always delighted when the audience dares to laugh." Her dark sense of humour she acquired from her father.

Fields of Vision

She developed the separate film languages that shape her two cinema release films with two different cameramen: For **Going**

Private, she sought ways together with Piotr Jaxa to penetrate the smooth surface of the designer house at the lake and the faces there aiming to be representative. The camera sweeps through the events independently like an eye from the outside and conveys the impression that not only are the characters watching each other, but that an additional factor is also looking incessantly for something beneath the surface.

In **Dora or The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents**, Stina Werenfels also intended to formally express how different the world looks in the eyes of her protagonist and in each of those within her environment. The cameraman Lukas Strebel and the director found a convincing solution here that matched this bipolarity on a visual level, yet which proved complex during the production process: They shot each scene twice, once with classic narrative camera shots – as the view of the surroundings. Then for Dora's phenomenological view, so-to-speak, the crew shot the same scenes a second time, but this time with a different camera and using special optical lenses. The experimental elements, such as looks into the camera, extreme close-ups, slow motion sequences, distortions and light polarising effects are part of the concept.

An Actor's Director

For Stina Werenfels, directing the actors represented a fundamental element of her training in New York, which was shaped especially by the actress and teacher Marketa Kimbrell. The director likes to work with theatre actors in her fiction films and develop together with them the details which are

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Senta van de Weetering is a film and literature scholar who lives in Zurich. She works as a communications specialist focusing on film, training, advanced training and health care. She is a member of the programme team at the Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur short film festival and is responsible for the marketing activities at the Xenix art-house cinema, among others.

STINA WERENFELS

not visible on stage – a thought flitting across a face, or a minimal change in an expression.

In **Going Private**, Stina Werenfels succeeded in creating the optimal conditions for her work with the actors and integrated them into the project at a very early stage: Using a film treatment consisting of images from the author Petra Lüschof as her basis, she then withdrew for ten intensive days of improvisations together with her cameraman and actors. Following this, the screenplay that resulted was used at the beginning of the shoot, before it was further developed yet again.

Even though there was a long preparatory period for the film **Dora or The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents**, she still had little time available for rehearsing. Yet despite this, Werenfels remained steadfast in her aim of wanting to work together with the actors and take them to their limits as far as possible. A unique challenge in this regard was the role of the intellectually disabled Dora. The main actress Victoria Schulz had not attended acting school at the time when the film was shot. Stina Werenfels decided to work with her in a very physical manner and forego any psychologising or intellectual approach. In this way, she allowed the young actress to delve completely into her role.

Stina Werenfels has described working with actors as the nicest, the most beautiful aspect of her profession. And despite all the formal attention to detail that characterises her films, it is her grasp of nuances and the intensity of the performances that remain most powerfully in our memories.

Text: Senta van de Weetering, November 2014

Directed by: Stina Werenfels
Written by: Stina Werenfels, Boris Treyer (based on a play by Lukas Bärfuss)

Cinematography: Lukas Strebelt
Editing: Jann Anderegg
Sound Design: Peter Bräker
Music: Peter Scherer

Production: Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion AG, Zürich; Niko Film, Berlin; Aleppo Films, Zürich; Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen; Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Berlin; Magmafilm GmbH, Essen

Original Version: German (french/english subtitles)
World Sales: Wide Management, Paris
www.dora-derfilm.ch

Dora is cinema on a grand scale. [...] sparkling with emotion, with an exquisite visual language and a first-rate leading actress. Hans Jürg Zinsli, *Berner Zeitung*, 23.01.2015

The truly great achievement of this film consists of the fact that it is indeed based on an unbelievably clever, consistently well thought-out situational stocktaking. Yet both above and beneath that you find cinema, with images and moments that go straight to the heart, make your stomach churn, and elicit a laugh or a smile. And this is when a film comes alive. [...] *Dora and The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents* is an artwork with a high life expectancy. Michael Sennhauser, *srf.ch*, 24.01.2015

Werenfels demonstrates with her cameraman Lukas Strebelt the courage to accord the film extraordinary optics. From the very start, she compels us into Dora's subjective view and leaves us there to marvel, wonder and horrify. [...] This immediately creates a vast sense of intimacy and then a distance to this over-intimacy just there where everything is suddenly affected by a sense of oppression. Hansjoerg Betschart, *Tageswoche*, 24.01.2015

DORA OR THE SEXUAL NEUROSES OF OUR PARENTS



| 2015 | DCP | colour | 90' | Switzerland / Germany | Original title: Dora oder Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern

Dora is 18 years old and full of the joys of discovery. Her mother Kristin has just recently taken Dora off her sedative medication. Unrestrained, the intellectually disabled young woman now plunges into life and takes a liking to a man. Soon the two of them spontaneously have sex – to the horror of Kristin. Without her parents' knowledge, Dora continues to meet the shady man, who is visibly taken by her liberated sensuality. While her mother tries in vain to have a second child, Dora becomes pregnant.

When I saw the premiere of Lukas Bärfuss's theatre play "Die sexuellen Neurosen unserer Eltern" in 2003, I was spellbound by the sense of ambivalence that this evening at the theatre triggered off in me. The question hung in the air forever: What is morally right and what is wrong? Since then, I have been constantly engaged with this question and it has led to this film. Stina Werenfels

International Premiere at Berlinale Panorama 2015

Directed by: Stina Werenfels
Written by: Petra Lüschow,
Stina Werenfels
Cinematography: Piotr Jaxa
Editing: Isabel Meier
Sound: Luc Yersin

Sound Design: Florian Eidenbenz
Music: Winfried Grabe
Cast: Michael Neuenschwander,
Bettina Stucky, Susanne-Marie
Wrage, Georg Scharegg, Leonardo
Nigro, Mikky Levy

Production: Dschoint Ventschr
Filmproduktion AG, Zürich; Schweizer
Radio und Fernsehen

Original Version: Swiss-German/
German/English (german subtitles),
World Rights: Dschoint Ventschr
Filmproduktion AG, Zürich
www.nachbeben.ch

Going Private is in fact a close look at the desperation of wealthy banking execs and their families trying to keep their lives from unraveling. [...] It's something the Swiss, whose banks are practically synonymous with the country, obviously know a lot about. Ed Meza, *Variety*, 12.02.2006

The Swiss director Stina Werenfels has sharpened her blade. *Going Private* is a spirited satire on the world of the upscale middle class: On their lack of shame and conscience, their avarice and displays of dubious wealth. Non olet? In fact the money stinks to high heaven here says the director almost scornfully. And it would be hard to bear, were her chamber piece not underscored with a biting sense of wit. Julian Hanich, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 10.02.2006

Stina Werenfels introduces her cast in an easy manner, revealing their weaknesses without decimating their characters – as she still needs then for a masterful game of lies and truth about the price of every human relationship after they become worthless. [...] Just before the end, Susanne-Marie Wrage delivers an absurd mono-logue, a moment of dramatic excellence, of which the film has several to offer. Christina Bylow, *Berliner Zeitung*, 17.02.2006

The manner in which humans, nature and design in ornamentation dissolve and blur in the visual composition is ingenious. The ornamental is reified nature, the party poses for an evening invitation among business associates, reified inner lives. The camera work by Piotr Jaxa, which registers everything with a micro-sensitivity for person and object, is extraordinary. [...] Rapid and minutely detailed, this almost Ibsenian genre picture recounts from today. Martin Walder, *NZZ am Sonntag*, 15.01.2006



2006 | 35 mm | colour | 96' | Switzerland | Original title: Nachbeben

The investment banker Hans-Peter, or HP as he is called, has survived the stock exchange crash well – apparently. At a barbecue evening with his banker friends and their wives, HP's Danish au pair girl threatens to expose her relationship with his married boss. HP wants to do right by everyone. But by the next morning, he has lost everything: His home, his wife, his friends and his job.

Although the subject-matter is tragic, I regard the story as a "Comédie Humaine" in which the aim is to put the greedy, vain and lying sides in us humans under the microscope, and that with a slice of humour. Stina Werenfels

Directed by: Stina Werenfels
Written by: Eva Vitija, Petra Volpe
Cinematography: Eeva Fleig
Editing: Markus Welter

Sound: Hugo Poletti
Sound Design: Jürg von Allmen
Music: Domenico Ferrari, Corinn Curschela

Cast: Bettina Stucky, Stefan Kurt, Pablo Aguilar, Max Rüdinger, Sibylle Courvoisier, Ursula Andermatt

Production: Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion AG, Zürich; Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen
Original Version: Swiss-German
World Sales: Telepool GmbH, Zürich

[...] An odd fairytale about the great dreams of little people that deals in a light handed manner with hypocrisy, the staleness of small town Switzerland and the coexistence of different cultures. With *Meier Marilyn*, Stina Werenfels demonstrates her flair yet again for Swiss sensitivities, without her precise social study ever denuding the characters. Veronika Grob, *Cinema Jahrbuch*, 01.02.2004

Anyone seeking the comical in Swiss film is obliged to tolerate all kinds of profanity in the movies right now. [...] That it can also be considerably more subtle is demonstrated by *Meier Marilyn*, a TV movie from Stina Werenfels. [...] The plot's humour is found less in the crude exposition of the story than in the precision mechanics of the people among each other. Veronika Rall, *WoZ*, 27.11.2003



| 2003 | Super 16 | colour | 85' | Switzerland

Marilyn Meier, 39, suffers from being overweight and is doing quite well running a hair salon in a small backwater town in Switzerland. She gets some solace in her dismal everyday life from her secret affair with the married municipality mayor and her love of music. When her musical talent is discovered, not only does this have an impact on her professional destiny.

Written & directed by:
Stina Werenfels
Cinematography: Patrick Cady

Editing: Sabine Krayenbühl
Sound: Martin Stricker

Cast: Jack Carter, Viola Harris,
Neza Selbuz

Production & World Rights:
Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion AG
Original Version: English

The constellation is a given, the game that Stina Werenfels plays with prejudices is brilliant, not least because she spares no one. She speaks of fears in a way that makes us laugh, as she plays blissfully with everyday snatches of dialogue that she reveals in carefully dosed out moments full of weirdness.

Walter Ruggie, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 26.01.1998

A screenplay with excellent dialogue that heads off mercilessly for every faux pas in a landscape between more or less sedate Swiss xenophobia, Jewish bogeymen and Palestinian-Arabic prejudices, before it steps right into them with a pleasurable political incorrectness. So it's understandable that the actors go about it all with relish. A political comedy from the here and now, and that in three idioms – it would be great to have more of it. Christoph Egger, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 26.01.1998

An absolutely concise screenplay, with intelligent dialogue (that reckons with an intelligent audience), good actors, precise sets far above average and incisive editing. [...] An explosive, engaging plot and soundscape converge here, and that such that no hunger remains. Martin Schaub, *WOZ Die Wochenzeitung*, 18.06.1998

PASTRY, PAIN & POLITICS



| 1998

| 16mm

| colour

| 30'

| Switzerland

An old Jewish couple are planning their summer holidays. She would like to travel to Israel and not stay in Switzerland – the country that turned her back at the border all those years ago. But he refuses to go there, arguing that it is too hot in Israel with too many Arabs there. Then he suffers a heart attack. The nurse who saves his life is Palestinian.

ID SWISS MAKING OF A JEW

| 1999 | 35 mm | colour | 12' | Switzerland

Stina Werenfels was reared as a Protestant. Until one day the questions started about her identity: "Are you Jewish? Are you not?" The director broaches some criteria for being Jewish in an earnest as indeed ironic manner and courageously subjects herself to examination.

Making of a Jew is Stina Werenfels' contribution to the episodic film **ID Swiss**, which was conceived by the producers Werner Swiss Schweizer and Samir (Dschoint Ventschr). Seven young filmmakers confronted and examined their identity in Switzerland in a personal, subjective manner.

Despite the absurd editing, *Making of a Jew* never seems to be thrown together; instead it rambles light-footed between established forms of film documentary and a new digital dynamic. Thorsten Stecher, *Filmbulletin* 5/1999



Written & directed by:
Stina Werenfels
Cinematography: Felix von Muralt,
Thomas Hardmeier
Editing: Sabine Krayenbühl

Production & World Rights:
Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion AG,
Zürich

FRAGMENTS FROM THE LOWER EAST SIDE

| 1994 | 16 mm | colour | 24' | Switzerland

What does an Hasidic rabbi think about the women's movement? How does a woman born into Christianity and who converted to Judaism feel in the women's section of a synagogue? How does an Orthodox man who is drawn to modern life deal with Jewish laws? With a lot of wit and endearment, yet with an earnestness too, the film grants an eye-twinkling view behind the scenes in an Hasidic community in the Lower East Side of New York.

She has succeeded in creating a compact and atmospheric snapshot – a filmic gem. Vinzenz Hediger, *Blick*, 24.10.1994



Written & directed by:
Stina Werenfels
Cinematography: Zak Othmar, Jason
Snyder, Shinako Sudo, Elisa Blatteis

Editing: Angela Zorzi
Music: The Barry Sisters, Ed Goldsmith
Production: Aleppo Film, Zürich