Kinski junior:
Hommage an die Filmgeschichte
TO THE MAX!
A BERLIN FILMMAKER ON HIS WAY UP

INTerview: JüRgen Llossau Photos: Carl Dierstorfer, Michael Ihnow, Timothy Yaresco, JüRgen Llossau & Peter Wolf

Max Sacker moved to Berlin to make movies. But making movies is only half the challenge. Finding an audience, raising awareness, making an impression on producers and distributors – these are the real challenges facing an undiscovered filmmaker. Then he stumbled upon the Los Angeles-based online competition www.filmaka.com. With a grand prize of 2 to 5 million dollars toward feature film funding up for grabs and a jury of internationally esteemed actors, filmmakers and producers, filmaka.com was just the outlet he needed. That is, if he could overcome the obstacles presented by the competition.

In order to qualify for the annual feature film competition, Max had to create a series of short films on various topics, each of which had to be completed within a month and had to be no longer than three minutes.

He climbed up the competition ladder with his films ‘Tesla’s Suicide’, ‘Execution’ and ‘Astro-Christmas’, but it was his final short film ‘The Secret Adventures of the Projectionist’ that left such a lasting impression that he was flown to Los Angeles to meet producers Deepak Nayar and Sandy Grushow, as well as the rest of the Filmaka team. In the end, another contestant won the grand prize.

but smallformat believes that the 16mm films produced by Max and his cameraman, NOVOS Super 8 Prize winner Dustin Wallrap, are of such a high standard that they deserve to be recognized. And Max won’t give up. He will continue making movies. Shot on film, of course.

Filmmaker Max Sacker (right) with cameraman Dustin Wallrap who won the NOVOS Super 8 Film Award last year. Beside Wallrap is his Russian Kiner 16 mm camera.
"In Berlin I finally got my hands on Super 8 and then 16 mm cameras. Now I'm addicted."

My biggest mistake back then was to arrogantly claim that high definition video was the way of the future and that film was dead. There was so much hype about new video formats that it was easier to make that argument than to experiment with the older equipment. It was years later, in Berlin, when I finally got my hands on Super 8 and then 16 mm cameras. Now I'm addicted. I buy old Soviet cameras on eBay, run about through flea markets and am currently trying to learn as much as I can about processing film by hand. Celluloid film is fantastic: it is literally a living, breathing organism and working with it is not only very rewarding, but it forces you to think in a much more disciplined manner. I don't feel like I'm turning the clock backwards at all. The experiences I have gained from shooting on film have prepared me for the future.

1. Why do you insist on shooting film?

Max Sacke: As a kid I used to draw a lot of comic books. At some point I decided to animate my drawings and the seeds were sown when I was given a Hi8 video camera for my 12th birthday. I abandoned the comics and started making little home movies with my friends. After high school I went to film school in London, which was a waste of time in some respects. We were only taught how things are done in the film industry and that kind of homogenised everyone's work. Developing creativity and individuality were not really on the lesson plan.

2. You haven't been living in Berlin for very long, where are you from?

Max Sacke: I was born in Munich, moved to San Francisco when I was six, then to Hong Kong, then to London and now for the last three years I've been in Berlin. My father works for the Goethe-Institut, so his job transfers allowed me to see a bit of the world at an early age.

3. Do you only shoot on 16 mm or have you worked with Super 8?

Max Sacke: I love Super 8. I bought a Canon 1014 XL 8 a few years ago. During that time I lived in Berlin-Neukölln, and having shops like ASA 90, Foto Braun and the Andex film laboratory around me made me feel like I lived in the Mecca of the German Super 8 scene.
During that time I shot a film called ‘Mullet Madness’ around my neighbourhood. I couldn’t believe that the mullet hairstyle still existed, so I took my Super 8 cameras with me and started following shady characters through the streets of Neukölln. Then I got a projector to view the rushes and started processing Super 8 in my bathtub. Sometimes it’s good to be unemployed.

How did your collaboration with Dustin Wallrup come about?

Max Sacker: I met Dustin at the 2007 NCMOS Super 8 Film awards in the Babylon movie theatre when he won the first prize for his short film ‘Dusch.’ I was very impressed by his film and told him about my plans for the Filmaka.com competition. He was immediately on board and brought his Staubfilm team with him, consisting of about five very capable crew members.

Dustin Wallrup: I am a cameraman. My production team consists of an assistant director and four gaffers and grips. Together we call ourselves Staubfilm.

Max Sacker: Oh and we have to mention Heleen Gerritsen. She’s a producer from a small production company called A-Film Productions. She believes in our work and runs a fantastic show. Without her production abilities I think a lot of our ideas would never materialize.

How do you finance your films?

Max Sacker: We try to eat less. I’ve pretty much depleted Grandma’s inheritance fund. All of my accounts are currently empty. If you tally it up I probably spent between Euro 7,000 and 10,000 on ‘The Secret Adventures of the Projectionist.’ All the crew members worked pro bono. Mr. Ludwig Drees from Andex Filotechnik gave us a special discount rate and Mario Loose from screen shot supported us for our Telecine transfers. And we were also able to get a backlot set at Studio Babelsberg for free. We were supported by a lot of people and I’m very grateful for that.

Why did you choose Filmaka.com?

Max Sacker: Because it’s run by professionals and because there are several established filmmakers backing it up. You submit a film and you get feedback from people like Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, John Madden, Neil Labute or Paul Schrader. Those kinds of responses make you addicted to the site.

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A night scene in Bakeberg - light, as long as the generator runs...

Dustin Wallrap and the Arri 16 mm camera.

gets the right to enter in the annual competition. Unfortunately, the dollar isn't worth much right now.

Q: Where did the idea behind your annual competition film 'Projectionist' come from?

Max Sacker: You're always given a topic at filmaka.com. It turned out to be 'the secret adventures of' for the annual competition. Heleen and I always talked about wanting to make a costume epic in a classical style, so that fit the topic very well. I knew that the final film was a kind of business card to showcase my abilities so I decided to compress as many styles and cinema periods into the three minutes as possible. The tricky part was weaving that together into a story.

Then the fun began: the film had to be written, budgeted, cast, shot, processed, telecined and edited within a month. We didn't have time for storyboards or shot lists. Everything was improvised on location based on the script.

Dustin Wallrap: And then there were the special effects. For instance, the scene where the woman is created in the mad scientist laboratory is stitched together with four layers of footage. The first layer is the mad scientist (Nikola Kinski) as he pulls the lever that starts the electricity and then clears frame. Without moving the camera, we then shot the second image, which was the naked woman (Senta Dorothea Kirschner) as she appears in the machine in the background.

Then there are the two background spaces where the scientist runs around.
How did you get Nikolai Kinski as your main actor?

Max Sacker: My parents knew his family from when we lived in San Francisco. Like me, Nikolai grew up in California and when he moved to Berlin I saw a few of his theatrical performances. They left an impression on me and I knew I wanted him to play the lead. He struck me as a very versatile actor and I noticed that was able to transform his facial expressions in a really dramatic way. When I approached him about the project he was very enthusiastic about it and managed to fit in the time. My hunch was right. He is fantastic to work with and looking back at it now I can't picture anyone else in that role. I think he enjoyed working on the film too.

We found our lead actress, Senta Kirchner, through the Cheh United website and after a grueling last minute casting session she was absolutely heaven sent. I was very impressed by her natural ability to deliver English lines. She was totally accent free and when she auditioned with Nikolai there was a great chemistry in the room. She was fantastic on set too. I can still picture her shivering before her scene at four in the morning on a windy February night. She really gave it her all.

"We shot the Roman Technicolor scene in the cellar of an old beer brewery where you could taste the mould and fungus in the air."
sequence and the shots in the cinema. You only had four days to shoot. How did you manage it?

Max Sacker: Each of the locations was allocated one shooting day. In the morning I would rehearse with the actors while Marc-Oliver Lau and his incredible art department dressed the set. Then the gaffers would light the set and then we'd shoot into the night. We only managed to wrap on time on the last day.

Q: Sounds like a demanding shoot.
Max Sacker: It was. We shot the Roman Technicolor scene in the cellar of an old beer brewery where you could taste the mould and fungus in the air. When we lit the fires for the various Roman torches that decorated the scene, the room was filled with nauseating fumes. During the film noir scene, our generator lost power and we had to make do with half of our lights. That's why the rear projection in the car is very dark. If we had Vision3 500T, maybe we could have had more detail to play with, but Kodak hadn't released the stock at the time.

Q: What cameras did you work with?
Dustin Waller: We shot on the Arriflex SR2 and 35 as well as a Russian Kino 16 SX 2 M. We got the Kino on eBay for $800. We have now repaired the image registration issues and the camera runs beautifully. The film stock we used was Ferrania R100 black and white reversal film and Kodak Vision 2 200T and 500T.

Q: How many other competitors made it to the final round?
Max Sacker: 32, of which seven were invited to Los Angeles: Three Americans, one Englishman, a Mexican, a woman from Denmark and myself.

Q: Were you free to choose your shooting format?
Max Sacker: Yes. Most people shot on video. I'm very proud of the fact that I am the only competitor that shot consistently on film and judging from the e-mails and messages I received, I think a lot of people appreciated that.

Q: But you didn't win the first prize. What will you do next?
Max Sacker: Keep going! There will hopefully be many opportunities with Filmika in the future. They are working together with a top talent agency in Los Angeles.

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why be in the dark?

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Makeup: completely professional — but everyone worked pro bono. Professional Manual Hill created the hairstyles.

Angels and their motto is to reward creativity, so let's hope that something comes of that. Other contestants have been offered web series, feature film deals or even video game development. Who knows?

But regardless of what happens with Pilanaka, my next aim is to create a 20 to 90 minute short film to be shown at film festivals. We need to create a longer film, as the three minute format is not ideal for theatrical projection.

What might your next film look like?

Dustin Wallin: I have been developing a 3-D monster movie. I think 3-D movies are coming back and I am currently getting in grips with the technology. I've been thinking about it for over a year now.

Max Sacker: There's a retro wave going on. Film is sexy again. I'm wondering when producers will catch on to it. Even directors like Robert Rodriguez and James Cameron are bringing back in-cinema tricks and outdated aesthetics. I'm working on a short film about a man and a mosquito at the moment. I'd also like to shoot a feature about a dictator in a fictitious world, with a zeitgeist reinforced by several distinct 16 mm or 35 mm celluloid aesthetics.

But that's a production that will require serious funding. So in the meantime, my team and I are gathering short ends, working on our own dark room, developing our own telecine machine and waiting for that big Hollywood contract.