

Introduction by Camilla Baier

This year's FOKUS: Films from Germany showcase invites you to explore the many facets of personal and collective identity. In these films, compelling characters navigate belonging, resistance and reinvention, struggling to assert autonomy in the face of societal constraints. Whether through historical or contemporary lenses, humour or drama, via the inner workings of relationships or the external pressures of tradition and authority, these narratives offer lively portrayals of individuals finding their way, searching for freedom and summoning the courage to challenge the status quo.

Together with our partner cinemas, FOKUS presents a diverse and engaging selection of German cinema, covering a range of themes and genres, all screened in their original language with English subtitles.

We begin with *Tandem – In welcher Sprache träumst Du? (Langue Étrangère)*, a stirring coming-of-age drama that sets the tone for a season focused on identity, connection, and the complexities of contemporary Europe. When shy and lonely Fanny and budding eco-activist Lena meet through a French-German student exchange, they embark on an emotional journey shaped by language barriers and political tensions, through which they discover that true connection goes far beyond words. The film resonates with the challenges facing not only young people today—climate anxiety, rising nationalism, collective reckoning, and the search for belonging—but also with a continuous sentiment seen across the season's films, which push the boundaries of cultural understanding and explore the resilience needed to face an uncertain world.

Building on these themes around the far reaching consequences of climate disaster and political oppression, *Einhundertvier (One Hundred Four)* offers a raw, visceral portrayal of the global migration crisis. This 90-minute documentary follows a sea rescue in real time, capturing a desperate journey for safety, and providing a sobering reflection on humanity, empathy, and survival. *Einhundertvier* pushes viewers to confront ethical and moral boundaries, compelling them to reckon with the failures of governments to address these urgent issues.

In a similar vein, *Ellbogen (Elbow)* turns its lens on Hazal, a 17-year-old from Berlin, whose greatest wish is simply to find a chance in life. Struggling to secure a job, she faces prejudice at every turn. When a dramatic incident forces her to flee to Istanbul, she must navigate an unfamiliar world on her own. This exploration of young women fleeing oppressive circumstances continues in *Rebellinnen – Fotografie. Underground. DDR. (Rebels)*, which documents the courageous work of three photographers under East Germany's restrictive regime. Their art becomes an act of rebellion, questioning authority and transforming repression into creative expression. When their conflict with the Stasi escalates, they are faced with an impossible choice: stay or leave.

This theme of defiance and the fight for individuality is powerfully echoed by *Shahid*, in which Iranian filmmaker Narges Shahid Kalhor uses satire to challenge political and familial

expectations. In reclaiming her identity, she confronts German bureaucracy in an effort to shed a family name that continues to, literally, follow her around, symbolising the struggle to assert autonomy in a conformist world.

Much like Narges in *Shahid*, the title character in *Elaha* is similarly bound by tradition. Milena Aboyan's nuanced debut feature tells the story of a headstrong young woman torn between familial obligation and personal freedom, patriarchy and self-determination. As her wedding approaches, Elaha desperately attempts to reclaim a supposed "innocence" that she has lost (chosen to give away), torn between her love for her family and the yearning for an independent life.

Much like Elaha's struggle to balance tradition and self-determination, *Kohlhiesels Töchter* (*Kohlhiesel's Daughters*) takes a lighter, yet still poignant, approach to familial expectations. Ernst Lubitsch's recently restored 1920 take on *The Taming of the Shrew*, which premiered at the 2024 Berlinale, humorously follows two daughters in a Bavarian village—one rebellious, one obedient—as they wrestle with love, familial pressure, and the village brute. Lubitsch's deft mix of comedy and social commentary made this one of the greatest cinematic successes of the Weimar Republic, offering a playful yet insightful look at how personal desires and expectations often collide within the family unit.

The theme of self-discovery continues with *Knochen und Namen* (*Bones and Names*), a sensitive exploration of dedication and identity within a relationship. Fabian Stumm's debut feature delves into the complex terrain of trust, desire, and self-expression, capturing the emotional intricacies of love and transformation as a couple navigates their shifting dynamic, mirroring the search for their place in life and their positions in relation to one another.

Wochenendrebellen (*Weekend Rebels*) takes a different but equally compelling approach to the journey of self-discovery. Through a father-son story, it delves into the transformative power of love and connection. Mirco and his ten-year-old autistic son, Jason, set off on an adventure across Germany, breaking free from the routines and rules that define their lives. Jason, who insists on experiencing all 56 teams in Germany's first, second, and third football leagues live in their respective stadiums before choosing a favourite, challenges his own boundaries in a heartfelt journey of growth and the lengths we go for those we love.

In a different setting, *Die Theorie von Allem* (*The Universal Theory*) also unfolds as a journey—this time, one of suspense and intellectual intrigue. Johannes, a physicist, travels to a Swiss alpine hotel for a conference where an enigmatic scientist is expected to unveil a groundbreaking theory. Set against the epic backdrop of the Swiss Alps, the film's stunning black-and-white cinematography and powerful soundtrack intensify the sense of isolation and suspense. This dark and atmospheric film noir weaves a narrative full of mystery, tension, and an exploration of the unknown.

We're also excited to welcome friend of FOKUS Frauke Finsterwalder, whose *Sisi and I* opened the 2024 festival, as she revisits her debut narrative feature, *Finsterworld* (2013). This film

blends dark comedy with surreal elements to delve into the complexities of navigating both the personal and collective (German) identity. Through a series of quirky, at times unsettling episodes, it weaves together the lives of diverse characters whose paths intersect in unexpected ways.

And finally, *Another German Tank Story* adds a touch of satirical humour to this selection, exploring the clash between tradition and modernity. Set in a small former East German village, the film follows the arrival of an American film crew and the absurd situations that arise when local cultures intersect with global influences. It offers a playful yet thought-provoking reflection on heritage, identity, and the forces of change.

Together, these films offer a rich tapestry of narratives that examine how individuals and communities shape their identities, resist conformity, and seek transformation—whether through humour, resilience, art, or love.