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'The Kings Surrender' ('Wir waren Koenige'): Munich Review

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The Bottom Line

A superior, sprawling cops-and-crooks saga.

Venue

Munich Film Festival (New German Cinema)

Cast

Ronald Zehrfeld, Misel Maticovic, Mohamed Issa, Hendrik Dury, Tilman Strass, Oliver Konietzny

Director

Philipp Leinemann

German director Philipp Leinemann delivers an impressive genre film with a huge ensemble, led by Ronald Zehrfeld, Misel Maticovic, Mohamed Issa and Oliver Konietzny.

Members of a German SWAT team start dropping like flies in the early scenes of *The Kings Surrender* (*Wir waren Koenige*), the impressive second outing of writer-director **Philipp**

Leinemann. This fast-paced genre item features a sprawling cast with over 30 main speaking parts between cops and crooks, though, almost unavoidably, some turn out to be in both categories. Reminiscent of the recent spate of high-quality Scandinavian crime films with their knotty but still coherent plots and impressive acting, this nail-biting crowdpleaser should do solid business at home, where it'll be released in November, and will also appeal to events and distributors with a more mainstream sensibility. Some sharp producer will no doubt move in on remake rights sooner rather than later.

Macho men Kevin (**Ronald Zehrfeld**) and Mendes (**Misel Maticевич**) head up a division of the Sondereinsatzkommando or SEK, the German SWAT, in an unnamed big city. In the film's tense opening section, their men prepare to enter the apartment of a major dealer, though not everything goes as planned: One of the dealer's accomplices escapes, a policeman (**Godehard Giese**) is shot and a cat has to be liberated from the oven.

From the get-go, Leinemann, editors **Max Fey** and **Jochen Retter** and cinematographer **Christian Stangassiner** establish that this is a gritty story in which things get messy quickly, some good guys get hurt, at least some bad guys always manage to get away and some things seem to happen randomly, just like in real life.

Instead of cutting from the crime scene to Police HQ or the hospital, as in a more traditional film, Leinemann introduces several initially unrelated plot strands that almost all play out outdoors (the office isn't seen until well into the film's second half) and introduce several much younger protagonists: Nassim (**Mohamed Issa**), an impressionable immigrant's son who's still in primary school; the older boy he looks up to, Thorsten (**Tilmann Strauss**); Thorsten's friend, Ioannis (**Oliver Konietzny**), who starts working at the corner store of Nassim's father (**Ramin Yazdani**); and an early twentysomething bully (**Frederick Lau**) who thinks nothing of bossing Nassim around.

How the stories of the cops, the kids and the criminals slowly converge and often unexpectedly connect is one of the wonders of Leinemann's screenplay, which constantly pushes the action forward as it nimbly switches between plot strands. What makes the film a superior entry in the genre canon, however, is the fact that, thanks to impressively detailed writing and practically flawless casting, so many of the characters emerge as individuals even though most have just a handful of scenes. There's a clear sense of who almost all these men (there's only one significant female role) are, what they want and how their primal needs are often frustrated.

Having to save money and even potentially close a SEK unit adds internal pressure for the crime fighters, whose lives are further complicated by the presence of a few bad apples. The writer-director gets bonus points for allowing different types of villains to co-exist; some simply have a rotten character, but others are forced by circumstances to make quick, often very bad decisions. The result is that even some of the shady characters are relatable to some extent.

Zehrfeld and Maticевич provide a fascinating study in contrasts, though the true standout of the film's second half is mesmerizing newcomer Konietzny (also a lead in this year's *Dessau Dancers*). His Ioannis emerges as something of a plot pivot, his actions and fate allowing Leinemann to reveal the true nature of a lot of the people around him.

Production values are sharp across the board, with cinematography and production design clearly borrowing a page from the Scandinavian thriller handbook.

Production companies: Walker Worm Film, ZDF, Arte

Cast: Ronald Zehrfeld, Misel Maticevic, Mohamed Issa, Hendrik Duryrn, Tilman Strass, Oliver Konietzny, Frederick Lau, Torben Liebrecht, Simon Werner, Adrian Saidi, Hassan Issa, Katharina Heyer

Writer-Director: Philipp Leinemann

Producers: Tobias Walker, Philipp Worm

Director of photography: Christian Stangassiner

Production designer: Petra Albert

Costume designer: Sonja Hesse

Editors: Max Fey, Jochen Retter

Composer: Sebastian Fischer

Sales: Summiteer Films

No rating, 107 minutes