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'Dessau Dancers': Munich Review

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Courtesy of Munich Film Fest

The Bottom Line

Charismatic actors who can bust a few impressive moves almost compensate for a lot of material recycled from other films.

Venue

Munich Film Festival (New German Cinema)

Cast

Gordon Kaemmerer, Oliver Konietzny, Martina Willner

Director

Jan Martin Scharf

German director Jan Martin Scharf turns actors Gordon Kaemmerer, Oliver Konietzny and Sonja Gerhardt into breakdancers from East Germany in this entertaining if derivative film.

Under the guise of "acrobatic show dancing," breakdancing is brought to the Communist masses in *Dessau Dancers*, from director **Jan Martin Scharf**. Combining a certain nostalgia for East Germany a la *Good Bye Lenin!* with the impressive moves of youth-driven dance films

such as the *Step Up* and *StreetDance* franchises, this entertaining, 1980s-set dramedy recycles tropes from several genres without ever becoming a single whole, though most multiplex audiences are unlikely to care. A Munich Film Fest premiere, the movie should be an easy sell at home, where dance films are even less common than DDR-set stories, and should give festivals an option for a mainstream crowdpleaser with pretensions of socio-political and historical relevance.

Frank (**Gordon Kaemmerer**) and his best pal, Alex (**Oliver Konietzny**), are both privileged youngsters in 1985 East Germany, as Frank explains in a voice-over, because they're part of the chosen few allowed to train for gymnastics championships. When **Stan Lathan's** U.S. film *Beat Street* manages to be released in cinemas in Ostdeutschland, its glimpse of the improvisation-heavy art of breakdancing in New York inspires the two athletic young men, who practically breakdance out of the screening and onto the drab and depressing streets of their hometown, Dessau. They immediately attract a crowd.

Of course, having a loud and individual-centered Western concept such as breakdance to hip-hop music infiltrate the Communist East provides the film with plenty of opportunities for humor, though screenwriter **Ruth Toma**—who also wrote **Ralf Huettners** *Der Koch*, another crowdpleaser that will be released this year—doesn't exactly "break" any new ground; expected sights such as rigid party members tapping along to the music are repeatedly milked for laughs.

The one nice twist comes early on, as the kids, having been arrested for illegal street dancing, manage not only to talk their way out of jail but also to get the apparatchiks to recognize their moves, re-baptized "acrobatic show dancing," as beneficial for the people. The state even provides them with an official trainer (**Rainer Bock**) and a touring van, and soon their traveling show turns them into the Communist dance equivalent of rock stars.

To add tension to the story, the breakdance newbies are joined by a blond gymnastics champion, Matti (**Sonja Gerhardt**), who's dating a patriotic soldier and who the boys decide must remain off-limits. But this storyline is littered with clichés; when Matti inevitably breaks up with her clearly unsuitable boyfriend, it's only a matter of seconds before one of the youths makes a move.

Despite a short detour into *The Lives of Others* territory, complete with state informers and blackmail, the film's overall tone is a combination of reckless, youthful joy and "Ostalgie," a kind of rose-tinted nostalgia for the DDR that was also the stock-in-trade of *Good Bye Lenin!* There's no real sense that anyone lacks anything materially or that growing up in a country with a semi-totalitarian regime could be a potential cause of psychological damage. When Alex struggles with having to stick to the party line in interviews, it feels less like a betrayal of his moral center than a calculated plot inconvenience.

Since the characters are one step above cardboard cutouts, it's up to the actors to breathe some life into them and at least the leads are appealing. As in *The Kings Surrender*, another Munich Film Fest title, newcomer Konietzny is the standout performer, entirely at ease on the dance floor but also more than capable of emoting when the story requires it (especially in the film's last half hour, when Toma and Scharf almost turn Alex into an actual human being faced with a difficult dilemma before choosing the easy way out). Kaemmerer is fine as the straight-faced lead, whose attempts at growing facial hair underline how desperately he wants to be a grown-up. In the token female role, Gerhardt does what she can with limited material.

The choreography by **Niels Robitzky**, a 1992 world champion in breakdancing, is solid, though it would have been nice to see the crew actually rehearse some of their complex ensemble routines. Production designer **Jenny Roesler** and costume designer **Elena Wegner** get the feel of the period right, and without obsessing over details, while cinematographer **Felix Novo de Oliveira**'s shots adequately showcase the actors' dancing skills but add little in terms of visual panache; a supposedly liberating scene in which the crew breakdances on top of a couple of cars feels almost unadventurous.

Production companies: Boogiefilm, Senator Film Produktion, SWR, WDR

Cast: Gordon Kaemmerer, Oliver Konietzny, Sonja Gerhardt, Sebastian Jaeger, Rainer Bock

Director: Jan Martin Scharf

Screenwriter: Ruth Toma

Producer: Jana Velber

Director of photography: Felix Novo de Oliveira

Production designer: Jenny Roesler

Costume designer: Elena Wegner

No rating, 91 minutes