

CASA NOVA GENE

A FILM BY LUISE DONSCHEIN

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Synopsis: A person enters the frame dressed up as a bird. In a dressing room, John Malkovich sheds the costume of Casanova. A young woman's skirt is just as orange as the beak of a zebra finch singing in a cage. White lilies stand at the foot of a statue of the Virgin Mary, red roses in front of the window of an SM studio. There the quiet game of submission in exchange for money, in a museum an embrace, a poem whispered in the ear. Children playing in a forest in autumn. A forest in summer, framed by light. An orgasm and a dance. CASANOVA GENE is a film about desire.

Technical Specifications:

Original title (German): CASANOVAGEN

International title: CASANOVA GENE

Germany 2018

67min.

Shooting format: Super 16mm, Color

Screening copy: DCP

24fps

Aspect ratio: 1:1,78

Sound: 5.1

Original language: German, English

Subtitles: German, English

World premiere: Berlinale 2018, Forum

Cast

FAISSAL AHMADZAY

KARLA BAUER

LUISE DONSCHEN

MARLENE DONSCHEN

WOLFGANG FORSTMEIER

JULIAN GILLMANN

ERIK HAMANN

KARL HORRES

REINER KNAACK

LILA-ZOÉ KRAUSS

SYLVIA KUHN

VIKI KÜHN

MATTHEO LANGE

LUMI LAUSAS

JOHN MALKOVICH

GUY MARSAN

KARIN MARTIN

ALEXANDER NHAM

ELIJA POTT

DAVID REIBER

UNDINE DE RIVIÈRE

LUCIE DOS SANTOS

ALINE SAUER

CHRISTEL SCHÜTTE

GURDEEP SINGH

LISA SPERLING

DANIEL STRYCZEK

JOCHEN UNVERHAU

LEIA WENDLING

MARTHA ZIEGLER

ZACHARIAS ZITOUNI

Crew

Script, Directing, Editing, Production
LUISE DONSCHEN

Cinematography HELENA WITTMANN
Sound FINLAY BRAITHWAITE, NIKA
BREITHAUPT, STEFFEN DANEK, LOUIS
FRIED, KARSTEN KRAUSE, NIKOLAS
KUHL, JULIA TIELKE,
ROMAN VEHLKEN

Dramaturg HERBERT SCHWARZE

Research THERESA GEORGE

Camera Assistant JOSEFINA GILL,
PAUL SPENGE MANN, JULIA TIELKE

Shooting at „Toom Peerstall“

Assistant Director MANAKA NAGAI

Costume Designer KATHARINA DUVE

Choreography GUY MARSAN

Lighting Technicians MARTIN „MARF“
BRUNNBAUER, JULIAN GILLMANN

Music ERIK MANOUZ

Sound Design NIKA BREITHAUPT

Production Assistant MELISSA

ESPINA, PHILIPP HARTMANN

Film Production Accountant

FRANK SCHEUFFELE

Film Processing ARRI MEDIA GMBH,
DEJONGHE FILM POSTPRODUCTION

Film Scanning ARRI MEDIA GMBH

Head of Production Telecine

FRIEDA OBERLIN

Sound Mix ROMAN VEHLKEN

Color Grading TIM LIEBE

Title and Graphic Design

STEFFEN GOLDKAMP

Translation and Subtitles

MAYA CONNORS

Script, ensuring material for irretrievable
events and festival presentation supported

by FILMFÖRDERUNG HAMBURG

SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN

Production funding for short films by
THE GERMAN COMMISSIONER FOR

CULTURE AND MEDIA

Festival presentation supported by

GERMAN FILMS



Biography of the Director: Luise Donschen was born in Berlin in 1982. She studied Anthropology, German Philology and Film in Hamburg and Belgrade. She graduated in 2012 from the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. Her graduation film GIVE ME BACK MY OWN PICTURE PERFECT MEMORY! was screened at film festivals internationally. CASANOVA GENE is her debut film.

Filmography:

CASANOVAGEN

CASANOVA GENE

2018, 67min., Super 16mm/DCP

MACHT, DASS MIR INNE WIRD,

WAS ICH DURCH EUCH VERLOREN HABE!

GIVE ME BACK MY OWN PICTURE PERFECT MEMORY!

2012, 25min., HD/DV/S8

ZWISCHEN DEN GRENZEN

BETWEEN THE BORDERS

together with Laura von Bierbrauer

2005, 25min., DV

Working on the Film:

A Conversation between Adnan Softić and Luise Donschen

Adnan Softić: Your film is composed of seven very different episodes, each one referring to and questioning the topic of desire in various facets. It was made over the course of 5 years. How did you start?

Luise Donschen: I had a script, because from the very beginning I thought a lot about how these different parts could come together in the film. I wanted to avoid using certain means to create a connection, and that's why I made sure to pay attention to recurring elements in the encountered worlds: objects, movements, clothes. I wrote the script after having already spent a lot of time with the protagonists. The film was then shot in phases over a period of 5 years. During this time, I rewrote the script consistently, using the already filmed footage as a basis to strengthen the thematic connections. At a later point, the editing process replaced the script and I shot new scenes to add to this. But I could only start with the final cut when I had all the footage in front of me and the shooting period behind me.

There is a performance right in the first scene: A person dressed up as a flamingo enters the setting, which is clearly located in Venice, then gradually the view gets blocked by photographers and tourists until the flamingo disappears. It all seems choreographed, even the tourists seem to know what they should do. Why do you start the film with this scene?

This take is one of the first we shot. It stands at the beginning, because it already hints at many things that show up again later. The performance you mentioned is important as well as the ritualized process: the costume, the pleasure in movement, and the

oscillations between genders. There is a great beauty in all this and something very mundane at the same time.

At the same time, the film provides an insight into ornithological research. The male finch chases the female back and forth in a cage. A scientist observes this on a computer.

The image, but especially the sounds the finches make, reminded me a lot of a simple video game from the beginning of the 90s in which you could collect points by jumping.

A newspaper article about the finches was the starting point for the film. I remember the picture of the male zebra finch. I liked its piebald plumage, the orange beak and the graceful inclination of his head. The article was mostly about the female finches and their cheating behavior. It was described as genetic collateral damage of the male's evolutionary useful polygamy. I found this entanglement of a very conservative approach in the modern guise of genetics interesting and went to Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Seewiesen to talk to the senior scientist of the "Casanova gene" test series. I liked the place right away, these rooms in the middle of the forest; and I liked the seriousness and calm of the work being done there. The courtship dance of the finches was very beautiful to look at, and I was soon able to discern the female from the male by their songs. The finches and their researchers persuaded me to go from thinking to seeing and hearing. In the editing process, I re-established this movement.

I remember a scene, where the Dalai Lama was astounded when Richard Gere told him that it's not real when he plays a role. The Dalai Lama repeated, "It's not real?" and laughed out loud. I think the way

in which you stage John Malkovich is set right at that ambivalent border of acting: he appears as an actor of Casanova, but at the same time as Casanova himself. You could say that (play-)acting exists to prepare us for the real (that which comes after the game). But at the same time, a good game always denies its utility and seems only to follow its own goals: giving us the joy of play. There is always something that is hidden and must be wrapped up well if it is to be well received. Our own role also remains a mystery at best.

As we know, Fellini told Sutherland lies, saying he was the most beautiful man, so that he would play his role as Casanova perfectly and march through the image as a “walking erection”.

This matter with Sutherland amounts to a dubious trick. I’m not interested in working with people like that. But generally, the indirect contains a certain delight that, if it is benevolent, can be beneficial in working with performers.

The character of the trans man is fictional, but not imaginary.

Approaching my protagonists, I was only interested in things that happen in public. I didn’t want to draw a secret from them. I got to know the person behind the character of the trans man through his political activism. But because the film seeks to approach this very personal moment of transition, this was the character that I felt the most need to protect. I wanted to protect the person behind the character as well as the character himself. That’s why I started to work with fiction. I only realized later that using fiction became a possibility to create coherence for the film.







You appear in the film as well, admittedly as a filmmaker, but not an uninvolved one. Can you tell me something about your relationship to the protagonists?

The separation between the performer and the person behind the performer is important to me. The performer protects the person, and I always made sure to pay attention to on which side of the border I find myself. For this it was really good that the first episode we shot for the film was the scene with John Malkovich. The experience of showing yourself and the concreteness of the film footage accompanied me throughout the whole shooting process. You can only protect the people until you finish shooting. After that they are characters, and just like the footage, they are unrelenting in their inevitability.

On the other hand we watch Undine. With her, sado-masochism is cultivated as sex drive and becomes a service provision. Why do you eschew explicit and hard scenes?

I watched many sessions in Undine's studio and most parts appeared strange to me. On the other hand, from the beginning I was fascinated by her calm voice and her ability to accept everyone as they are. Using that as a basis, we developed the session that is seen in the film together.

Then we have the figure of Jesus from Christianity as an intangible, bodiless object of desire. It's noticeable in this episode that you leave your role as the observer, become active yourself and address your relationship to the priest. You're looking at a painting of flowers and you suddenly embrace him.

In the museum, I tried to tell in very few shots what constitutes our relationship. It is constitutive that



the other always remains as such. Elija is a monk. He believes. I don't. Attempting a personal approximation would let the relationship fall apart. That's why certain things are only negotiable over an indirect route, for example through art. Nevertheless we are close. The images I found for this are now in the film.

The priest doesn't get to speak. And no one else speaks about their desire either.

The persons behind the characters would have been speaking and they, for me, are not a part of the film. When a priest talks about his desire, it can seem as a justification.

The episodes are linked in a quiet way. Neither do the protagonists talk about themselves, nor do you use voice-over. In addition, you stage each scene in a very specific sort of way. It must have been a very big challenge to give everything rhythm and structure.

The editing process was complicated. I wrote, shot, and edited again and again over the course of 5 years. The last shooting period was in early summer of last year. I absolutely wanted to avoid having to hold the film together through interviews or voice-over. That's why I gently tried to create other connections in the footage. I worked with certain settings, with movements, with clothes. I always looked out for what already existed in the different locations and what I could add, without forcing an artificial link. The film offers its own sensual reality that has its origin in my desire toward the depicted worlds. This reality is something unique that I can't explain and I had to let it find its own form during the editing process. Starting out from islands, I then edited in a nonlinear way.

The film footage plays a significant role as well: You

decided to shoot on Super 16mm, which certainly makes sense for the coherence of the very different image types used in the film.

I imagine the impact on organizing the shoot and the production as a whole to be quite big though. It's a low budget film and you surely couldn't always shoot what you wanted to.

I imposed certain restrictions on myself and accepted others. The scene with John Malkovich was the first we shot for the film. To be able to get him to take part at all, I decided to film the conversation in one take. That means, after his performance John Malkovich left the stage and we filmed the conversation for 11 minutes, the length of one 16mm-reel. After that he had changed and left the dressing room. This restriction was a huge relief to me and let me focus on my simultaneous work as director and performer. Going out from this specific dressing room and the composition of the image at the beginning of the scene, cinematographer Helena Wittmann and I decided to shoot in 16:9. In this way, the shooting format was set. When it became clear that we would only receive the funding for a short film, I decided together with the team to continue shooting on 16mm. We felt like the work would be more focused that way. It was obvious that I would have to prepare the shooting units very well, for footage as well as time-economy reasons.

In addition to that, it was an advantage for the staging of the bar scene that you worked with film footage. The scene and the location don't seem authentic, and the plot appears to be particularly choreographed. For example, you see how someone else's hand lights the woman's cigarette, how she then drops this smoked cigarette on the floor and how finally the other's foot stamps it out. There seems to be something ri-

tualized, arranged and attributed here as well.

I developed the whole bar situation based on the story of the trans man. He especially suffered from the social attribution of being a woman and less from the female body. I now let the actress walk through the bar and observe in the same costume I wore in the Malkovich scene. But her male environment doesn't let her look, pushes her back instead and distracts her. She insists on her position, returns to it and from there watches the dance with which the film ends.

Adnan Softić is an author, artist and director. His installations and multimedia exhibitions are regularly shown in Germany and abroad. Softić has been awarded various prizes, most recently he was a fellow at Villa Massimo in Rome. Further information is available at kinolom.com

Esther Buss: Tactile Relationships Gazes meet, hands caress the back and feet or grasp damp moss, and bodies embrace gently. Sunlight flooding through the windows flickers like a film projector in trance and leaves behind enraptured reflections. Perhaps the best way to approach Luise Donschen's hybrid debut film is through its tactile relationships. "Casanova gene" (2018) is carried by touch – touch that is thoughtful and quiet, occasionally even whispered. And not the least created by the film footage itself: The soft, velvety texture of the images shot with a 16mm camera (Cinematography: Helena Wittmann) reaches out as well. Only the term "Casanova gene" attests to a rather stubborn connection. The image of the flamboyant seducer and cosmopolitan does not quite fit in with the soberness of science and research.

The starting point of Donschen's film is a long-term study at Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Seewiesen. Subject of the research is female and male infidelity among the mainly monogamous zebra finches. The advantages of promiscuity for the male are apparent, as he can increase his number of offspring. Concerning the females however, who inherited the "Casanova gene" from their fathers, scientists came to the conclusion

that cheating is not beneficial for them in an evolutionary-biological sense.

While Donschen's film apparently seems to be following the mode of a typical research project during the first few minutes with rigorously framed tableaux of video monitors, cages and aviaries and a "real" interview with a scientist, it soon shifts its attention to other areas, characters and approaches to film narration.

With an attentive gaze toward people and spaces – and toward how people move in these – "Casanova gene" describes the wide-open field of desire, body and seduction in consistently static shots. Apart from the scientist, the protagonists of the film are a dominatrix, a trans man, a monk and several children. The character of Casanova only appears in the film in fragments and afterimages: through atmospheric relationships (the carnival in Venice), quoted texts (someone reads from his memoirs "The Story of My Life") and through the actor portraying Casanova in a play, John Malkovich. Shedding his costume in the mirrored dressing room, he is also slowly shedding his role, while at the same time being interviewed by Donschen about his seduction techniques, his sanguine temperament and related matters.

The film also creates a kind of iconographic history across disparate spaces and social milieus: mirrors, ritual objects such as flowers or candles, and the act of dressing and undressing as an essential part of role play or role work and the touches mentioned at the beginning run through the film as a clear thread. In the scene with Malkovich, dressing and undressing also becomes a game of appearing and disappearing: After the actor has left the frame, the filmmaker takes his seat.

Pairing, that the title inevitably invokes, only appears selectively in "Casanova gene". As the scientist explains, copulation of the zebra finches excitedly jumping from perch to perch only takes about one to two seconds. And even if there are moments of a touching closeness between the sex worker and her client in puppy play – the gentle scenes in the studio are a contradiction to every BDSM cliché – the majority of the film consists of moments of introversion and self-reflection and other forms of contact: from looking at a painting in the museum to embracing a tree and all the way to the union with God as part of holy communion.

The bar scene stages a highly stylized, peculiar mélange of suspense, slackness, boredom, searching for contact and wanting to be alone.

But here too, the point is not about two people finding each other, but about how something gets lost: A man who used to be a woman is talking about his sense of loss concerning his now missing uterus.

A critical reflection of gender binary that is manifested in the research project appears in “Casanova gene” not only with this transsexual character. The Casanova quote also attests to an awareness of gender policies. Thus the Venetian writer extensively ruminates on an asymmetry between the genders, mainly referring to the danger of becoming pregnant as a consequence of female desire. The film confronts these female “vexatious evils” with various female authors: Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Dutch still life painter Rachel Ruysch, and Kate Bush. After showing its more controlled aspects in elaborate scripts, rehearsed poses and established rituals throughout the film, the final scene lets Bush’s eccentric song “Wuthering Heights” momentarily unleash desire in a dance: “I’m coming home!”

Esther Buss is a freelance film and art critic who lives in Berlin. She writes for Jungle World, Spex, der Freitag and Kolik.film among others.

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