



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 16 June 2023

CORSAGE

Austria / Germany | 2022 | 114 min | Cert 15

Director: Marie Kreutzer

Screenplay: Marie Kreutzer

Starring: Colin Morgan, Vicky Krieps, Finnegan Oldfield, Florian Teichtmeister



'A Lion doesn't lose sleep over the opinion of a sheep,' Vicky Krieps' Elisabeth mutters between drags of her cigarette early on the film *Corsage*. Elisabeth Amalie Eugenie von Wittelsbach that is. Later Empress Elisabeth of Austria, better known as 'Sissi'.

Empress Elisabeth has been immortalised on film most famously in the Sissi trilogy, a series of 'Heimatfilme' (regional films) from the 1950s and an absolute staple of German television. These would become responsible for the doe eyed, rosy cheeked image of a beautiful young empress in puffball dresses most often associated with Elisabeth, as well as catapulting German actress Romy Schneider into stardom where she would for many years remain synonymous with this titular heroine.

Now the Austrian director Marie Kreutzer dares to take a new, modern look at the life of the monarch and, in doing so, explores completely different facets of the Sissi that I grew up watching with my grandmother every Christmas on TV. In *Corsage* there is not a trace of the romanticised image of an obedient young empress floating through splendid rooms at Vienna's Hofburg, but a portrait of a mature public figure locked in a golden cage. The result is an original, critical and reckless reconstruction of the later life of Elisabeth that not only offers an alternative to the cult films with Romy Schneider, but deliberately breaks with historical accuracy and thrives on modern interventions.

Kreutzer had not set out to make a historical film at all. It was really down to the actress Vicky Krieps, who had reached out to the director with whom she had worked with on *We Used to Be Cool* (2016). Krieps was looking to work together again, when she suggested collaborating on a biopic about the much

a souvenir shop cliché, a tourist magnet alongside Mozart,' Kreutzer has said, but she was open to see if there was something in the material she found around Elisabeth and the House of Habsburg that may resonate with her.

It was the gaps that she found in the stories about this 19th century icon that were not covered (or rather purposefully left out) in the romantic period dramas of the 50's and the many other depictions that have emerged in the 100+ years since her death that intrigued Kreutzer. Her interest lies in the interior life of her characters and how they are treated by society. So only when reading Elisabeth's correspondence, the poetry she wrote (but did not allow to be published until 60 years after her death, by which time the prevalent Sissi narrative had already been cemented) and diaries of her lady in waiting was Kreutzer's curiosity piqued. She started to sense small acts of rebellion at a later stage of Elisabeth's life, when she was no longer 'the young and beautiful empress.'

What Sissi really looked like at that stage of her life, we will never know, as she refused to let herself be photographed or sit for portraits after her 30th birthday. But neither the director nor Vicky Krieps, who not only planted the seed for this project, but would also produce the feature and star as Elisabeth, saw this and the lack of secondary sources as an obstacle, but rather further licence for creative freedom.

We are introduced to Kreutzer and Krieps' Elisabeth when she is about to turn forty and is constantly reminded, admonished and even eventually cynically serenaded about the scrutiny regarding her appearance she is under from the court, the tabloids

and even her loved ones. The birthday song at her celebration dinner is a German version of Jolly Good Fellow, and has the line 'Hoch soll sie leben, Schön soll sie bleiben!' — Long may she live, May she stay beautiful! It almost sounds like a threat, as she fears for her once so much admired beauty.

Kriepps believes Elisabeth was the earliest victim of celebrity culture as we understand it today; the tabloids are waiting for the first signs of decay, while Sissi fights doggedly with the most rigid diets and excessive exercise to maintain her iconic image, her corsage being laced tighter and tighter. She hates the pressure that weighs on her yet craves compliments as a substitute for the freedom she longs for.

This Sissi was to be a relatable one. Although this is the story of the empress of Austria, the female experience of having high expectations placed on her by society that she no longer wants to fulfil (and probably never did), is something many of us can relate to. So Sissi is portrayed as a woman with vices, with emotions and reactions — she smokes, she may flip the whole room off when walking out of a dinner party or she may call someone an *Arschloch* for not giving her the answer she wants to hear. We will never know for sure, but chances are the 1877 Elisabeth will have navigated some of the true historical events depicted in the film slightly differently than we witness Kriepps do in *Corsage*. The empress that Kreutzer has written and Kriepps brought to life on screen is one that is allowed to show the multitudes of this woman and character whose choices, albeit historically inaccurate, still feel inevitable.

It is only fitting that Marie Kreutzer is joining the rank of filmmakers that understand the freedom of straying visually and atmospherically from the source material to tell punk revisionist histories of their historical female figures. Like Sofia Coppola (*Marie Antoinette*), Yorgos Lanthimos (*The Favourite*) and most recently Pablo Larrain (*Spencer*) Kreutzer breaks free of historical objectivity — and of the corsage — to embrace a new truth that cuts her fiercely independent heroine loose from the constraints of her era to live life on her own terms.

Glasgow Film Theatre

Camilla Baier, film programmer and co-founder of feminist film collective Invisible Women