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Sethu Das / October 2011

"Water Makes Money, Not Maxim"

What happens when a cinema owner; a musician; a dancer cum film costume designer; a painter cum filmmaker and a designer-activist meet for a chat? It turns into a free wheeling discussion on matters as diverse as — How to show a failed film, to how to get into a trance through dance and music... Along the way, they grapple with their insecurities; talk about what ails the visual and electronic arts medium, about performances that made them connect with The Divine Presence. Sethu Das, Co-founder of Design & People in conversation with **Siegfried Daiber of The Maxim Kino** of Munich and his close associates — **HW Mueller**, **Alexander Devasia** and **Sylvie Bantle**.



WHEN I arrived at The Maxim, one of the oldest movie theatres in Munich, to meet with Siegfried Daiber, he was preparing to screen 'Water Makes Money', a documentary by Leslie Franke.

"I do not expect many people to turn up for the screening, so we can have a good conversation. By the way, do you drink?" asks Siegfried Daiber — often called 'Siegi', pouring beer into his glass. Siegi was enthusiastic about starting a long conversation on the topics he loves. As we started the conversation, the lone viewer for the screening of the day turned up asking how much a ticket costs. "Five Euros," Siegi proudly announced. The young man looked happy to be alone inside the 'Kino' to watch Water Makes Money. But things do not move very fast at The Maxim. After purchasing the entry ticket one has to wait as Siegi needs to close the café, then step out of the building to enter the projector room. He then has to return to the cinema hall from another door to introduce the film to the 'gathering' and later to the coffee shop to continue his usual conversations. The Maxim of Munich makes sure that there is always a ticket and enough leg room for its viewers.

There is a great difference between making popular cinemas and making cinemas popular. Siegi, an electrical-engineer turned cinematographer seems to be more committed to making cinemas popular. Opened at Landshuter Allee 33, Munich, on September 14, 1912, The Maxim has seen changes and survived while other great cinemas in Germany died. It's very first owner of was a wealthy photographer. Later, a projectionist took over. From 1980 till today, The Maxim is in the capable hands of a filmmaker-activist — Siegi (Currently preparing to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of this historic cinema hall in 2012). The Maxim is already come to be known as Siegi, and Siegi as The Maxim. His profound message to the world is printed on his business card: "The cinema of tomorrow will be the cinema of yesterday, or it won't be there anymore!"

To understand Siegi and the Maxim culture of Munich one must understand few others associated with him in his efforts to keep the tradition of sound and light alive. Therefore I decided to include three more people who knew him well — HW Mueller, Founder of 'Festival of Failed Films' in Germany; Alexander D, a contemporary Indian artist and filmmaker whose award-winning documentary was screened at the Maxim and his wife Sylvie Bantle a costume-designer-turned writer and visual artist.



The Maxim, Munich, Germany. (Photo: Sylvie Bantle)

Excerpts from the conversation:

Sethu Das: Siegi, you've been struggling to keep The Maxim alive. It is one of the oldest cinemas in Munich today. What inspires you to keep the Maxim culture alive and active in this era of multiplexes?

Siegfried Daiber: My intentions are to keep good cinema away from popular ones. It is not a commercial cinema and therefore should not have to address issues that can be done through other popular medias. Two weeks ago we showcased some films that dealt with the subject of intellectual fantasies. I know very little about Indian films. But India seems to be following the right path, not us. And India should not follow our path.

Sethu Das: Alexander, in the past we had people like Siegi back in India who used to do similar things. Some of our best filmmakers have made many sacrifices trying to promote good cinema among the masses. Do you think we have anyone in our country today who does similar things?

Alexander D: I do not think so. I haven't come across anyone in recent years. There were many in the past who were involved in similar activities with parallel cinema. But they would disappear, sooner or later. Somehow this did not happen with Siegfried Daiber. He continues to keep his spirit and the old tradition of Germany alive. I met him ten years ago during the International Film Festival of Munich documentary screenings. During the festivals the Maxim is crowded, not otherwise. Here people have had a tradition of arranging 16mm projectors, using a simple canvas as a screen, and travelling from one part of Germany to other to screen good films in villages and towns. They disappeared but Siegi survived.

Siegfried Daiber: Yes, some people with just a projector, a canvas screen and a stock of films in their backpack travelled from small villages to towns for a week or more to show German films. They were Wanderkinos (Temporary cinema halls). Those people even collected money to travel to other towns with films. This continues for a month. We have extremely different cultures. I am sure you may find similar people in India today. But here in Germany this culture has vanished with the 60s, after which television became very popular. It was difficult to think of running a Kino like this. With television a lot of good things happened, but a lot many good things disappeared too. I remember seeing a documentary film on the Indian way of showing films in villages and travelling around with cinema.

Sethu Das: Do you receive support from people who love your way of keeping the tradition of light and sound alive?

Siegfried Daiber: Not enough. As you can see, not much financial support comes to me. Funds were always a problem. It depends on how much you have to spend for your activities and how much is your income. Though people continue to visit this place, we do not make much revenue. This Kino had many owners in the past. In 1979, a group of people came forward to take over this place. And it was not very easy to take over this place. The previous owner of the Maxim felt that I being an Electrical Engineer by profession should be able to solve the technical problems of the machines around. They needed someone who had the technical knowledge. Today I am the only person left in my group still running the Maxim.

Sethu Das: What do you think are key reasons for a drop in the number of visitors — changing interests or other reasons?

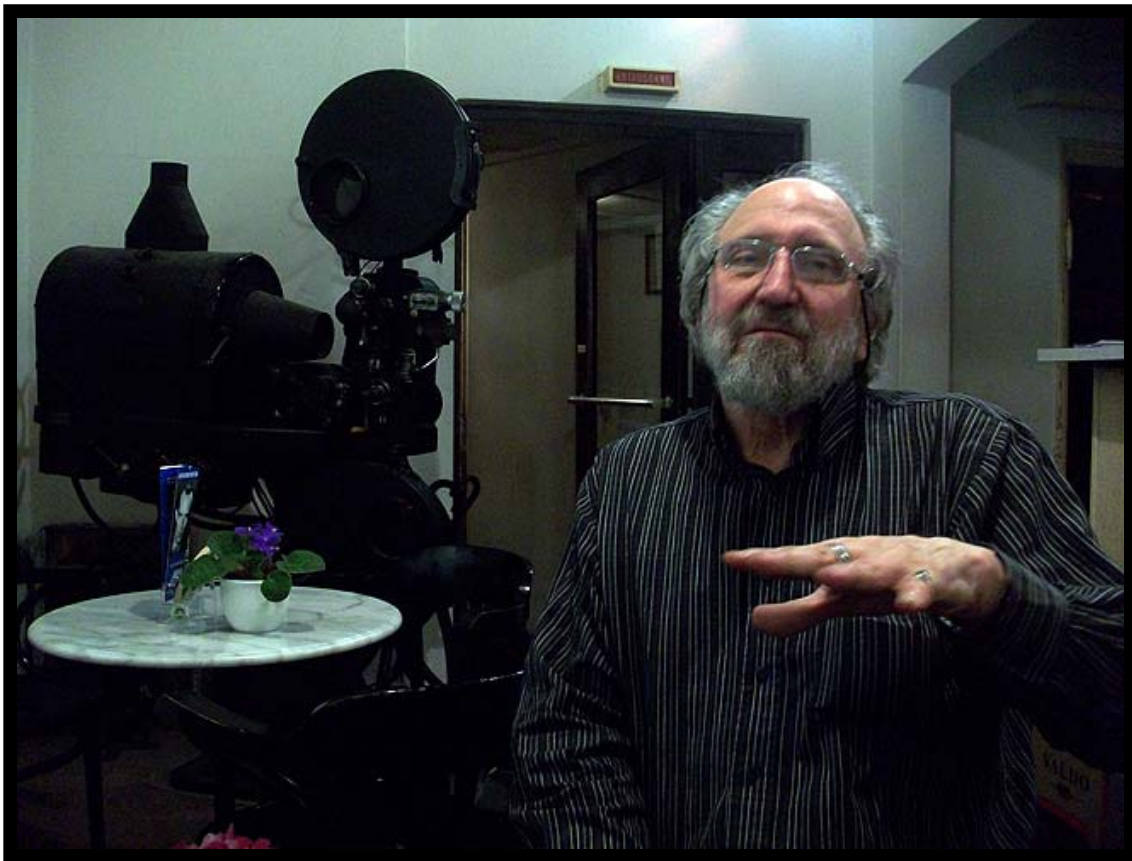
Siegfried Daiber: There is nothing new about this. And yet, the decrease is not much. Most people still frequently visit Maxim in spite of having many commercial cinemas around. As long as I can finance this place, I am happy. At the end of the day, it is not just my decision, but that of others as well to keep the place alive. There is only one other Kino that still runs in Germany. Though I don't know if there are any such Kinos in the suburbs of Germany.

Unfortunately, this generation is different. The Maxim is still good enough to hold film festivals. We used to hold regular film festivals. In 2006 the last film festival was held here. It's been many years! The end was near. They were not keen on showing films at The Maxim (Laughs).

Sethu Das: What about the projector near the entrance door? Is this an old one?

Siegfried Daiber: Yes. It is very old. I can prove it. I bought this some years ago. I stopped using it for screenings as some spare parts were missing and it does not work anymore. I have not paid much for this projector. This is not an antique for me, this is a backup. The original owners were happy to get rid of it and make 150 Euros from me. It is a power projector which makes excellent projections.

(The conversation between us is interrupted by the lone watcher of the film asking for another of beer. Siegi goes back to the cinema hall.)



Siegfried Daiber, proud owner of The Maxim with the projector he bought for a throwaway price. "This is not an antique for me, this is a backup. The original owners were happy to get rid of it and make little money", says 'Sieg' as often called by his close friends. (Photo: Sethu Das)

Sethu Das: What exactly did you mean by unsuccessful films?

HW Mueller: I believe that cinema is the media that should interest us very much. Because in cinema there are people who are ready to take a physical risk to their form. I consider television to be like sleeping pills! Valium! I don't want to use it.

Sylvie Bantle: According to Mueller he could also watch fish in an aquarium or a washing machine for hours. When he watches television, he does not and cannot expect much. It is just for relaxing and falling asleep.

HW Mueller: Yes, synchronically sleeping! But I am not alone! (Laughs)

Sylvie Bantle: I don't agree. I check out the magazines first to find out what's on television and then I watch only the programmes I like. For instance when there is a good film, even at midnight or later, like a Tarkovski film, I only want to see that or "Themenabend" — a special themes program.

HW Mueller: I like the Maxim which shows "The Dictator". You may have seen the film ten times on TV, but you still go to the cinema because you want to experience it in a cinema hall.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, I think so. Because in TV — except with few channels like BR, 3sat, Arte, others always have breaks with cheap commercials. In the cinema when the light goes off, we can't get up again to take a beer from the fridge or answer a phone call. One really needs to concentrate continuously for few hours.

HW Mueller: You can say it more sharp: TV is escaping from life!

Sylvie Bantle: In a cinema you enter an unexpected space.

HW Mueller: Yes.

Sethu Das: Can you answer my first question — when exactly did you start this movement and what exactly do you mean by unsuccessful films?

HW Mueller: Sure... this is very difficult to answer! It was a very personal decision to start this movement. How do I define unsuccessful films... mainly these films are too long — a common mistake. They are too long because the filmmakers want their films to be different from the TV show format. And the second point is, the producers give funds only for production — not for marketing and promotion — which is equally, if not more important. They put all their resources and energy into making the film. Once that is done what do they do? They don't look to the market for money to support a good strategy.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, for distribution.

HW Mueller: I find this very annoying. It makes me angry. I have spoken to directors who have made really great films, and they say: "I am so tired, Mueller, just take my film!" And that is such a pity. Because they are burnt out. Of course, it is their hard work that made the film. But how can they forget the selling aspect? It is not funny.

Sylvie Bantle: I feel the same situation exists in other fields too — like in art or literature. You spend a lot of time in writing a book, making a painting, creating music or a film. That is only a percent of your energy, money and time. The bigger challenge is marketing. For example, when I have a reading or a performance for my Project Brandloch, my God, how many days I sit and make phone calls, write emails. Sometimes I get so fed up that I say to myself: No, I want to write my novel and do my actual work! From what I understand, a lot of visual artists like painters, sculptors etc. are more successful today because they are actually very good marketing artists! According to me artists themselves should not be doing this work, professional marketing people should do this.

Sethu Das: What Mueller is trying to say is that if we are not good at marketing ourselves we are going to lose in today's 'market.'

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, that's right!

Sethu Das: Sylvie, after you made the award-winning documentary film and found that to be 'unsuccessful' in terms of marketing, did you immediately find Mueller?

Sylvie Bantle: I don't remember how I met Mueller. I think it was through the Maxim! There I saw these flyers about Festival of Unsuccessful Films. I checked the website and got to know more about Mueller.

HW Mueller: It is also because I have some background in the media field. The festival is very well known and that leads to some interesting situations. People with connections somehow seem to be suspicious — "Oh, what is that?" they say. And then at first they want to sound me out — "Is it good or bad?" Now distributors call me because they realise we have a big pool of films. Take for example Regina Ziegler, who participated with a film. She started in the seventies and really had a message to give through the films she produced — all of which failed commercially. In the meanwhile she became very famous. I find it painful that there are such remarkable films from the seventies that did not find an audience. They were her sweat and blood, her struggling years... and they amounted to nothing as far as people were concerned. Maybe they were ahead of their time. So I thought I could create a platform and try a little experiment for them. May be this film had to mature first before it could find the right audience.

Sylvie Bantle: The audience had to mature for this film!

HW Mueller: Exactly.

Sylvie Bantle: Mueller is now quite known with this festival, in the media all over Germany and he gives interviews on the radio also.

HW Mueller: And on TV.

Sylvie Bantle: But sometimes, when people contact you, at first they are a bit skeptic, right? They think "Will it be good or a bad idea to give my film to this festival?" I feel we the audience has to mature first for such films. We may not like them now, maybe a few years later.

HW Mueller: Yes, then there is also this discrepancy between demand and reality — like the Oscar Awards — when you make films, the competence of a film is the success. Some people once threatened to file a case against me. Film Academies (Filmhochschulen) are very problematic. Young students of Film Academies want to make films in the filmschool, not to learn about film, but to make a film. That is the reason to go to a film institute. And the rights of the films are with the schools. They have come to me with their films.

Sylvie Bantle: Oh, have they approached you with their films?

HW Mueller: Yes, but they don't want this festival.

Sylvie Bantle: That's interesting.

HW Mueller: Basically for the film schools any film can be shown in a festival, yet in Berlin there is one that did not permit me. If any of their students shows his film in my festival, they threaten to file damages against me. The students are under a lot of pressure. All they want is their films to be seen so at times they approach me. Now I have a case, which will blast this year. A film was entered by a film school which I'm going to show, and there's another one from Munich too. The film school has prohibited me from showing this film. They do not agree with the product, so it's like saying they failed. That of course is a big problem for a film school that has produced two Academy Award winners. And that's why I simply say — if you think you know exactly what is good or bad — then it is revealing of the whole system. I will show it and say "Ok, if they make a case against me, for sure there will be a big bang." It is no more a question about aesthetics, but power!

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, that will be an interesting discussion, an interesting conflict!

HW Mueller: Yes. And the festival is a festival for the people. It is democratic. That's why when people ask me how I choose the films — I can hardly say that this film is good or that one is bad. Not possible. I can't act as if I'm the one, who knows best. But for the sake of selection, the reasoning behind a film is the most important criteria and that's why I always write my comments on each film. But there are filmmakers who will then withdraw their film and say, they do not agree with my context. And then there are the films which suddenly become successful. We experience this often during the festival. A film had to withdraw because it went to Rotterdam and was shown there in the competition section. This case was clear, he just withdrew the film. It is also interesting that there are some films which are successful abroad, but not in Germany. I don't want to accuse anybody, maybe just a few who we meet. There is for example a demand for modernity, for the so called crosswire climbers, the so called awkward cussing, for the so called lateral thinking. This is the reason some people find this festival an extreme threat. And Sylvie, it really astonishes me sometimes how I can withstand that. I am facing some really negative energies. I try to keep away from them, but there are people who talk so bad about me — the funny thing is, they don't even know me. But I provoke something in them that has nothing to do with me.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, because everybody is under so much pressure to be successful! And nobody asks about the content, or questions the aesthetics. Only success matters to them. You may be a murderer, but if you are successful, it's Ok with them.

HW Mueller: We are not living in a dictatorship. If we were, then things would be different. But we live in a post-democratic society, it functions differently — it functions by ignorance. For instance if Michael Naumann, the German Culture Minister, writes to me that I can never expect support from his ministry, and then I ask him: "Mr Naumann, what kind of thinking is that?!" How they get rid of somebody that has a deep insight. How such people think! And then these people dissociate from us — I inquired of everybody that time... I don't get any support here in Munich. The 'film police' does not see any merit in this festival. They judge us by reading the program... and once I made a spelling mistake! The fears I cause in these people show through! How quickly they try to dissociate with me. Instead they should appreciate the fact that I put myself in the line of fire — by facing up to the media and answering their barrage of questions. Is being media savvy such a bad thing? The media matters a lot. These are the people in this game.

Sylvie Bantle: The 'Kulturreferat' (The State Cultural Department) sent him a letter saying he can never expect any support for his festival. So he has every right to question — we are not in a dictatorship, but we are in a democracy — am I wrong? We should be forthright in questioning whether something or someone is right or wrong.

HW Mueller: It is only a question; this festival is only a question! Not for you but for me.

Sylvie Bantle: Of course for me too! I saw some films and started questioning, is it good or not, and why. That curiosity keeps you alive. Who are the Police? Who is God? Who is to say it is good or not! In my thirties I was in the field of fashion designing, I was tailoring from home. But I was very involved with the fashion and the film scene; I created costumes. And I have always felt this: these stupid people, they respect you when you are fully in with the trends. But that trend may get outdated tomorrow! You have to be in the new trend the next day.

HW Mueller: But I must say that the mainstream is not wrong! Success or failure is the issue! They are two sides of the same coin! The pre-condition for success or failure is always the act. And each action is in general a success. And in this point I am not only philosophical but practical too. If I decide to stop breathing, I am dead.

Sylvie Bantle: The basic for success or failure is action! And that itself is already success.

Sethu Das: Are you saying that mainstream is not a fault?

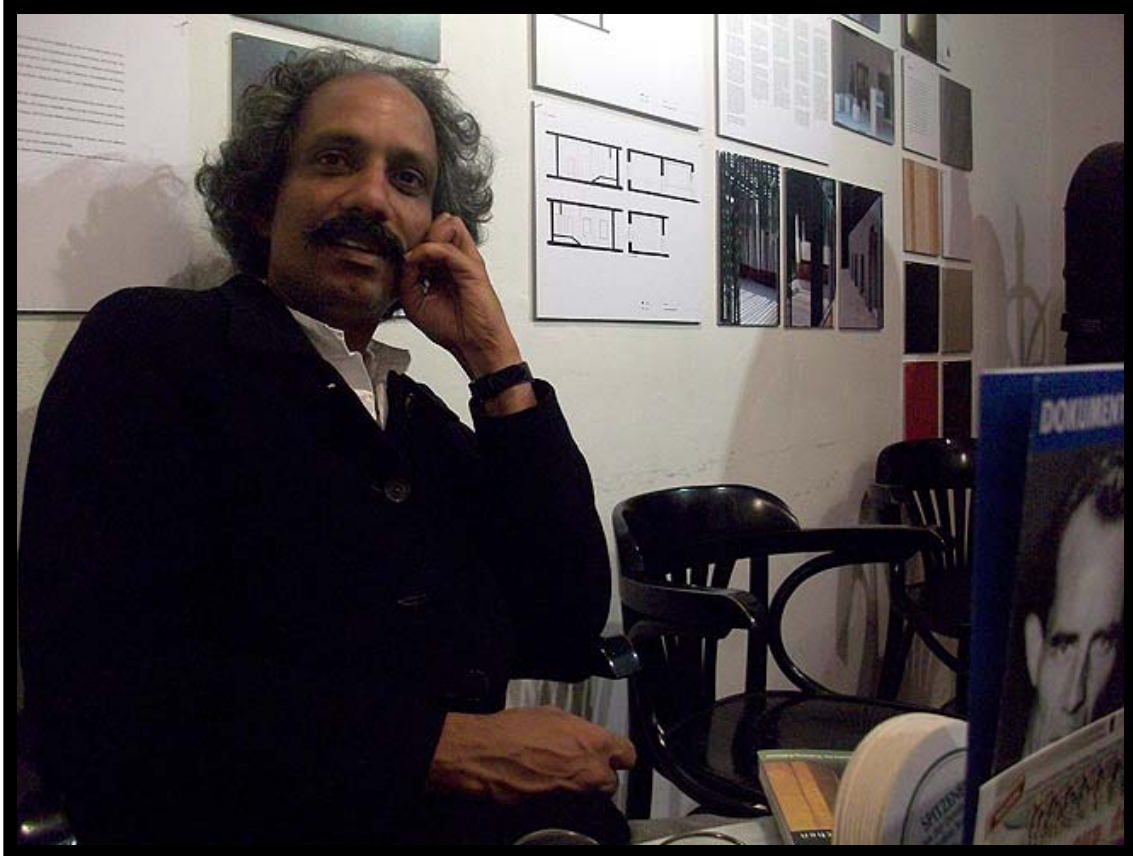
HW Mueller: Not wrong! Why? I have seen many mainstream films and some of them are very good! I am not a judge for aesthetics. I see mainstream films and sometimes I like them. Mainstream is not wrong. This is a very basic aesthetic question that I'm asking here. And often I experience that people of the audience become very angry. Why is that? Especially when it is a very nice film! I myself would have said, oh, I didn't like it. And there I am as the festival director, I probably look wrong too. And sometimes people come out and say, oh very bad, but I'll come again tomorrow.

Sethu Das: So you feel happy!

HW Mueller: Yes, happy. It is like experiencing the impossible! But I see that happening.

Sylvie Bantle: What is interesting to note with this festival — what I mentioned before about the trends in the fashion field... here at the festival, there it is more like a dictatorship actually.

HW Mueller: Really, really!



Born in Alleppey in India, Alexander Devasia moved to Germany in the 90s to live and work there as a painter. During his time in Europe, he was able to make 'Mortuary Joseph', 'Shanti Bhavan', 'Chakara' and many other documentary films in association with Sylvie Bantle. His passion to make and reach more people with his films brought him closer to The Maxim culture of Munich. (Photo: Sethu Das)

Sylvie Bantle: Dictatorship is the trend, but then, I wear a dress that does not adhere to any trend, you can't even say it is conservative or too modern. But with your festival, people will have to make their own decisions, do I like it or not, without the big censors.

HW Mueller: That is a very delicate question, because everybody has to decide for him or herself.

Sylvie Bantle: That is very difficult, and that is the need!

HW Mueller: It is, I mean — it's why one is urged into taking a decision. And this circumstance is I think a very basic democratic foundation, that everybody has to decide for him/herself. To return to the audience this freedom of decision, that for me is super-exciting.

Sylvie Bantle: Because it is not trends or the super mainstream or success, so the viewer who is seeing a film in this festival, has to decide for him/ herself and feel for him/herself. Is it good or not? Do I like it? Or what I am doing with this? Because no dictatorship or market says: this is successful, this is good! And this is the exciting part, to bring people to this situation.

HW Mueller: In my moderation I say, I am inviting you for this film, don't look at what is wrong in it, look instead at what is good in it. And it is very difficult. I have seen many films and said, "Oh God, this is so horrible", but when I look at what are the reasons that make this film bad, I see some very small things, which is great. So it can't be all that bad... And there is one more thing. Each Festival has a distinct 'Corporate Identity'. Some have a lot of supporters. We are the festival without supporters. We finance our own festivals. Many people don't believe it is possible.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, they cannot believe that we have no sponsors.

HW Mueller: But meanwhile we have sponsors, who say: "We want to support you!" Actually, most of the Festivals have a Corporate Identity, because they have partners, producers perhaps... But our festival has none — we say: we are very open.

Sylvie Bantle: And independent.

HW Mueller: Independence is a market! Independence is a label too.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but it is really independent.

HW Mueller: No! I am not independent. I am depending on my audience!

Sylvie Bantle: Yes of course, you are depending on your audience. But at least you can choose for yourself or decide for yourself. You are independent when it comes to your decisions!

HW Mueller: Oh no. This term 'independence' is very complicated, because it is totally occupied.

Sylvie Bantle: Rather the word 'Independence' is misused.

HW Mueller: 'Independence' could also mean a new trend. And I say I don't follow trends. That's not my frame for the future. What about my aesthetics? That's the more important question. I think all projectors can show a film, but my projectors show a different kind of film. When I see a film and don't understand it, that's my chance. That is my big chance. For me film is a form of art. When it is a form of art, it is scientific; it asks questions about philosophy and life. When I see a film, I ask questions about my own life. When I see a film and get answers, what does that mean? And if the question is that nobody understands this film, then that is a great question. What is the reason a man or a woman makes a film? To make a film is not like making a picture or playing the trumpet. To make a film you need people, you need money and you need so much time. Why would someone do such a thing?

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, and lot of passion and patience!

HW Mueller: And that's why I have a lot of respect for filmmakers. In general they put so much of their energy into their work.

Sethu Das: What would be the number of people approaching him to share, showing their films in this festival?

HW Mueller: This question I will never answer! Hella is a woman in Berlin, who is organising a bit there and doing the press work. For very different reasons, because this question is an judgemental question. If you look closer, what is the real content of this question: How much value does this festival have? How much resonance? What meaning does this festival have? This question is a judgemental question and that's why I will never answer! Let me explain why it is judgemental. Because, suppose I ask you: how many children do you have? Oh, you have ten children? Oh you are a very big man! Oh, you have only one. You know, what I mean... (Laughs)

Six years ago when I saw films at Hamburg Short Film Festival, they provoked neither questions nor answers in me. Later, in Hamburg I saw a big flyer: 1000 entries! And I thought, what is the meaning of that? Is it a question about the kind of films, or about how many films? Quality vs Quantity. So this question is a judgemental question and I will give nobody an answer. (Laughs)

HW Mueller: Every journalist is so eager to get to know!

Sylvie Bantle: Mueller doesn't answer this question to any journalists!

Sethu Das: His festival should not be judged by the number of people. Is that what you meant?

Sylvie Bantle: No, the number of applications! There may be more people sending their films than you can put in your festival program?

HW Mueller: I don't know.

HW Mueller: Let me tell you about this one instance... once I tried to select — I think, it was for the Festival... I watched a film for selection at the Festival and afterwards I couldn't sleep at night. It was so bad that film. From a schoolgirl in Stuttgart, it was so bad, so crazy and I thought to myself — I can't show that! Impossible! I could not sleep that night; I just kept thinking whether I should show it, how would people respond? In the morning I sat on the computer and saw it once again. I tried to look at what was good in this film. And finally I found something really good in it. It gave me the courage to show it, to take a risk. I showed this film even though I know I was taking a big risk. But people came to me and said: "Hey, it was great!" And that's why I don't judge a film as either good or bad. It all depends on how I can place them in the cinema. And sometimes it also happens that films are withdrawn. It is an enormous process.

Sylvie Bantle: Sometimes people withdraw their films. At first they apply and then they withdraw.

Sethu Das: Why?

HW Mueller: Reason could be varied... two days ago someone withdrew a film because I gave him a short answer. A director sent me his film and asked: "Can I win a prize?" I replied: "No, you cannot win a prize!"

Sethu Das: So there is no prize!

HW Mueller: No, only a honorary mention — a very short sentence. And he replied to me: "This sentence is too short for me! I will cancel my entry!" And he withdrew his film! That's why this festival is a lot of work. So many festivals function like this: they get a television, put in the DVD-player, watch the first few seconds, and say — Oh, it's nothing! For our film festival, you need a little more time. You can't leave anything to chance. We cannot do it fast, like those people. And that's why my task is cut out for me. When I receive a film, I have to first figure out what is its attitude. How do I slot it at the festival? And that is tough for me. A very big challenge to describe films, which don't mean anything to me.

Sylvie Bantle: So his problem is, when he is choosing a film, he has to also choose an attitude for it.

HW Mueller: Yes!

Sylvie Bantle: Even when he can't find any liking or understanding for a film. He has to find an attitude.

HW Mueller: I work for almost a year. I start in April and it goes on till October.

Sethu Das: And when is the next festival?

HW Mueller: We start in December.

Sethu Das: In Munich?

HW Mueller: Yes, in Munich.

Sylvie Bantle: Again at the Maxim?

HW Mueller: Yes. And then we go to Berlin, Leipzig, Cologne, and Frankfurt.

Sethu Das: In other cities like Berlin and Frankfurt do you find people like Siegi to support your kind of activities?

HW Mueller: Yes! This is an interesting question. Because it's a big theme! The cinemas that support me, find it a very small festival. Because I don't pay for the cinema — the cinemas insist we split 50-50 from the entrance ticket earnings. And from this money I have to pay for PR, the catalogues and so on. But it's still very good that I can find reliable cinemas that say: this is so superb. We take risks and don't earn anything. We know we won't earn anything and we still do it.

Sylvie Bantle: So it is great that he can still find cinemas that are satisfied with this little income.

HW Mueller: Yes, they have understood. But there are also other cinemas that have written very wicked emails to me.

Sylvie Bantle: But why?

HW Mueller: In Stuttgart we have a cinema, which is called 'Arthouse', they say: We have so many bad films, we don't need this festival! And I ask: "Where is your spirit? We have a big crisis in the film market." Two years ago we had Arthouse — these special cinemas like Siegi's, it is called Arthouse Films — and these Arthouse films are going to the mainstream film cinemas and that is a big problem for the small cinemas. The owners of these small cinemas are shocked and afraid to do new things.

Sylvie Bantle: Afraid to try new things?

HW Mueller: Yes, afraid to try new things! But we experiment in the moment for movie technology. There is a revolution going on in the cinemas. Because, everybody can now make films of a reasonably good standard for the cinema — almost everybody! And we have cinemas with the techniques; they can show techniques with video. I think, that is a very great chance. But the first step is to show it, and that's a risk. So when I see Siegi or other cinemas that run a show in spite of just two or three people in the evening, I feel good. This situation exists mainly with cinema owners who come from an older tradition.

Sethu Das: Is it a very scary situation?

Sylvie Bantle: Oh yes, it's a scary situation because the money doesn't come like in the case of Siegi!

HW Mueller: These small cinemas get money from the administration — and the people in these administrations are sitting like 'film-police'. They wonder: "What? Unsuccessful films? This is useless!" For example I have a cinema in Hamburg and gets big support. They are afraid to slip into another context.

Sylvie Bantle: Does Siegi get any financial support?

HW Mueller: Yes. From 'Kulturreferat', Munich administration, and 'Bundesförderung', the state administration.

Sylvie Bantle: Because he has the old style cinema?

HW Mueller: Siegi is an exception I must say. From all cinemas I know, Siegi is an exception. He is still living in the 60s or 70s, but he is open to taking risks. I think that is special. I think Berlin is very open. It is a development that has taken place in the last few years. Meanwhile I have managed to get other cinemas too. In Berlin I could get five cinemas, because now they are really crazy for that. Because Berlin lives very much in the present — it is current, it is trendy. We have Knut Elstermann, who is known for his 'Leit-Reportagen' about the Berlinale. He is a big fan of my festival and his reports about us are always very good.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, I think it is a little bit different than Munich. Because in Berlin they are a more open about these kind of things. You can get five cinemas easily in Berlin. The press has some receptive people, very keen to report about this festival.

HW Mueller: Yes, the cities are very different. Hamburg is very, very hard. Very difficult.

Sylvie Bantle: Why? The people are sophisticated?

HW Mueller: In Hamburg you can only sell fish but not films! Very hard. (Laughs)

Sylvie Bantle: But do you have a cinema there?

HW Mueller: Yes. Last year for the first time, we had a very big cinema, very nice, but it closed. Last year it was very small and this year perhaps another one which is still in programming. I know the cities. Leipzig and Frankfurt are very different. And I don't show all the films in Leipzig, only specials.

Sylvie Bantle: Oh, you have to choose for that then.

HW Mueller: Yes. That is my influence to the festival. I know that certain films do not work in certain cities. I have to do the selection. For example Frankfurt has a special audience, very special people — more from the upper middle class. The cinema there is very fashionable with a very good restaurant. In Leipzig the situation is just the opposite. They have a very old, shabby cinema.

Sylvie Bantle: A bit like The Maxim?



"Not the worst movie! Not the best movie! Rather, the one which has developed the most dynamic" according to HW Mueller, founder of Festival of Failed Films would deserve an entry and a honorary mention. "Failed movies have nothing to do with poor quality," he tells the filmmakers. (Photo: Sethu Das)

HW Mueller: Worse! Leipzig is special. It is a very old cinema, built in 1900. They have music performances, they do theatre... If you want to hold a performance, Leipzig is a very good place. And I do something special I conduct interviews with the directors in the cities and show. That makes it is very interesting for the people. And Berlin is also special — I cannot show every film in Berlin.

Sylvie Bantle: So you select for each city, according to your knowledge about the audience tastes.

HW Mueller: Sometimes I make mistakes. In the small cities, the owner decides. Sometimes I send a small film collection to gauge what the cinema is about, and the owners make the program by themselves.

Sethu Das: In India we also have similar initiatives for rejected films. For example when we gave a set of documentaries on Tibet to the Asian Film Foundation, the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi told the organisers: "If you screen films on Tibet, we will withdraw all Chinese films we've provided you with." The organisers had to choose between the Chinese Embassy and our organisation. And finally they decided to drop us. Because we were threatened and dumped by the Asian Film Foundation, we were approached by educational institutions and film clubs that screen rejected films. So we have similar kind of initiatives in India — not for unsuccessful, but rejected films.

Sylvie Bantle: These are the only hopes. Because that keeps the questioning spirit alive.

HW Mueller: That is my task — to ensure that some directors do not stop filming, that they carry on. Because they have seen, oh, my film is shown in the cinema and I have an opinion of the people.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, that is my experience too, when I show my films to a small audience of 15 or 20 people. But afterwards quite a few from the audience stay back to discuss and sometimes they have very contrary discussions. And I am very happy, if there are two groups discussing or may be fighting or arguing. For example "Morning Paper and Tea", my 20-minute short film which was screened in HW's Festival in 2009, I had some really tough discussions. Sometimes very aggressive, because in the small synopsis I mentioned in the last sentence, that the woman in the film, who is able to see like in a film the drama of the story, which is narrated from the OFF, and then will identify with the misery of the woman protagonist of the story and will also understand the misery of the man protagonist of the story who finally kills her!

HW Mueller: Yes, that is indeed an old theme.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes. But these people who attacked me and accused me were feminists, I think. They see things as black or white. So to them it meant that a bad man was beating and torturing a poor woman. But I don't see things like that. And in this film the question for me — also seen by the people — was that the woman was also a part of it. She could have escaped — she had the chances, and not die. She could have decided to live (and to leave). That according to me is the film's main message. But these people still have a very black and white attitude, that the woman is completely innocent. This created really difficult discussions.

HW Mueller: The visitors are not all our friends! Often, when somebody makes a film, there is some personal circle in the audience. And in this festival one has the chance to meet strangers — that is completely different.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but even the discussions I had in my friend's circle — they all did not say: Yes, great!

HW Mueller: Yes, but it is very important to have visitors outside the circle.

Sylvie Bantle: That is important of course, also with my books. Strangers who do not know me are reading and appreciating my books. That is more important to me than appreciation from the people who know me. Because the people who know me will appreciate me any way — whether I'm good or bad.

HW Mueller: That's exactly what I am saying. Even if there are only two people are the audience — and they are strangers, that is more precious than my uncle and my aunt as audience. That's why for me each visitor is a success. And when I have a sold out show, it is like ecstasy for me. And this point is very important for filmmakers. Filmmakers

sometimes get very upset after hearing such comments, which they will never hear from their friends. They should remember that criticism is important for their progress.

Sethu Das: What are the drawbacks of these films? Why are these films unsuccessful in the so-called market?

HW Mueller: What is successful?

Sylvie Bantle: I only remember your introduction, where you were questioning, what is success, what is not.

HW Mueller: Ten years ago I saw a film called "Braveheart". I have heard this film has won six Oscars! I don't believe it. I said, is that acceptable? I don't know. This "Braveheart" with Mel Gibson is terrible.

Sylvie Bantle: I never saw.

Sethu Das: It's about William Wallace, the freedom fighter?

HW Mueller: Yes, yes.

Sethu Das: And your festival has the logo of two bananas!

HW Mueller: Yes! That is for the parts! (Laughs)

Sethu Das: But are you happy with what you are doing?

HW Mueller: No, it is not a question about being happy. I say, I have to do it. Every year I say this is it, I want to stop! And then I get films, and I can't believe it! It always happens. Otherwise I would have quit a long time ago. Because I only work without pay. And then sometimes there are negative reactions. Because you have to transform these false expectations somehow. When people project their negativity on me — which I can't stand. When people say: There comes the loser again! That is really heavy.

Sylvie Bantle: Oh, then you get labeled 'The Loser'.

HW Mueller: Yes. Their intention is to be malicious. And I've managed quite well in the past by convincing the journalists that their derision does not matter to my project. Many turn it into a joke. But I have to tell you the state I was in the last few years. I wished somebody would take over. It is my vision that young people should continue with this festival. I am involved in my own projects too; I don't get enough time for that. To make my own films and my theatre projects. If you want, you could make more money with this festival. I cannot! Who knows, you could be better at it!

Sylvie Bantle: But you're joking away the possibilities of making money.

HW Mueller: I don't know! I don't know! I just can't do that the money earning bit. I'm just grateful I've learnt so much about films, incredible stuff that I have to mention.

Sethu Das: Back in India in 2004 "Films For Freedom", a festival of rejected or suppressed documentary films was started in Mumbai. This festival is usually run parallel to the state-sponsored International Film Festival. Though the festival does not get much public support, it is considered to be a very serious platform for people like you, for example. And for many filmmakers it is the only platform.

HW Mueller: Yes, but in India the repressive measures are different. In India you have a different situation. We are very liberal.

Sylvie Bantle: Supposedly!

HW Mueller: Yes, you can make whatever film you want. And we have so many people who make films, but there is no community. Everybody works for himself. Unfortunately I experience this sometimes at festivals too — the ignorance among directors about how to handle my festivals. For me this is hard stuff to swallow. They have an attitude and don't want to be bothered with details — they think it is below them. In some extreme cases, directors send me 20 films and tell me: "Select one!" I'm expected not to work like that! In Berlin once I had the big hall in the 'Babylon Cinema' with 450 seats, and I think 200 people showed up for the screening. But the two main directors from Berlin did not attend. It was very embarrassing for me as I had printed their name on a publicity material. And it was covered on prime time. Very disappointing!

HW Mueller: On the one hand they behave with a lot of seriousness and on the other, they behave badly. I know I am talking negatively. The support is really great, and it's from the audience. But in Germany failure is a bad word.

Sylvie Bantle: Not just in Germany, everywhere in the modern world.

HW Mueller: No! In the US, if you want to get a job as a manager and you have failed, you have a better chance. There they say, if you have experienced failure already, then you have experience. Their whole science is built on failures. So I was very disappointed about Werner Herzog's refusal once. Because people like Herzog or Wim Wenders stand on the top of the pyramid — on shoulders of so many other people. I pity him because his success was due to the shoulders of many in the film community. And these people simply do not understand that someone who made a failed film is also an important part of the whole community. And this is the way I treat my students, for example — of course you are not an actor, but the fact that I work with you, is a great service to the theatrical world. The person who is exposed to theatre, in future he will go and buy a ticket for 8 Euros, from which even the actors get something. But this is a point my colleagues do not understand at all, they always talk so disparagingly about this work. They do not understand that this person, who works with me for one week — and I have had hundreds of students — if only 1% of those exposed to theatre or drama, are the audience for tomorrow. It is sensational work, I think. You cannot dismiss these actors as unsuccessful — this thinking is absolutely wrong.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but I mean when you look at the whole system, globally who gets immense honors and Oscars?

HW Mueller: But that's important, really important, these prizes are very important in life. Everybody needs the limelight.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but the winners somehow forget about the other actors — who may made a better effort but did not get the Oscar. This is also important. That is why most of the people plan it.

HW Mueller: Yes, that is my opinion too.

Sylvie Bantle: So they don't look to others anymore, only to the Academy award winners.

HW Mueller: Yes, but many people see this as a very important thing. Sometimes I wish to say yes, it is very important what you are doing. But please come to the audience! This connection is equally important.

Sethu Das: Back in our state, one film director who has done similar things in the past was John Abraham. He made 'unsuccessful' films for the public by collecting money from the public to be shown to the same people around. It is your film and I give you the credit. May be you are doing what he did in the past. You are doing this today not as a filmmaker but as an art teacher.

HW Mueller: That's my job, yes.

Sethu Das: You are also a musician.

HW Mueller: For 30 years I have been playing trumpet for supporting the breathing. I don't play music, I play sounds.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but then you also doing your own films sometimes...



HW Mueller plays his trumpet / Conversation (Audio in German and English)

HW Mueller: Yes, 10 years ago I performed in a theatre for a month. After that I felt I had nothing would remain more to do. So I bought a camera. I thought I would make theatre in a film. That was my original idea. Yes, then I tried to make films, but I was unable to make films. I have to admit humbly that others can do it better. I said to my students: "As actors you are not important, the audience is more important because everything you do could be done by the audience, or has already happened to them. They are the real actors."

Sylvie Bantle: Imaginations.

HW Mueller: Yes. And when I see a film, when I love the film — Tarkovsky for example, I say I am Tarkovsky. You know what I mean, there is no difference.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, then you melt into his storyline.

HW Mueller: Yes and when people want to make films, I am very happy about it. That's why I find the discussions about copyrights of the texts very silly. Who has a copyright on text? Who has rights on content? They belong to all of us. And there are people who have the potential to realise it. For that we have to pay entrance fee. When I understand a thought of Tarkovsky, there are my thought too that complement his thinking. Can Tarkovsky say he wants to have 50 cents for my thoughts? This is my opinion. And if there are people who can realise it, that's great. Why not?

HW Mueller: It's very difficult, with this music, I only can do in trance, I can't just perform. This is meditation. I have no contact with the trumpet and this one.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, when I write I usually need to close the door... it's really difficult, when Alexander is beside. That's why I often sit in the bedroom, because there I can close the door. He paints in this corner and keeps the door open to look. Sometimes he comes into the kitchen to make tea... I always describe this as a web.

HW Mueller: Yes really.

Sylvie Bantle: ...and even when after one hour he'll asks me a question, and my concentration just comes apart... that's why I need to feel like I am all alone in this world and nobody can disturb me.

HW Mueller: On 11th October, I will perform in a church here in Nymphenburg. My first performance with trumpet — alone — just me and my instrument. I will try it.

Sylvie Bantle: Where?

HW Mueller: In 'Leiden Christi' in Blutenburg. I want to play while people are listening. But these people will be in a mood of contemplation, in meditation. When I am playing... it is something else, but when I go into the sound I feel so happy, I am so free, that is not me. Today on the bridge I didn't feel time. I was in the sound. It speaks to me, it's so great and makes me so happy. It's not for you, not for the people, it is a dialogue. And now I want to try it in a church.

Sylvie Bantle: How long you will play there?

HW Mueller: I don't know. I think I need half an hour? I want to try it on 11th of October, though this is a very bad date, at five in the evening. There is a small room for Taufe (Baptism). I have played in Taj Mahal six years ago. I played and I heard that big sound is not allowed! And the security said to me: "Come later! After official hours." When I was all alone in Taj Mahal, it sounded so great. I am not doing it for any special reason. I only want to have an experience. I know a soprano; we've worked together long time. With her I can do that. With her I can just play. She then sings her 'Koloraturen' and I accompany her with my trumpet. It is a bit like being in trance. But when you hear it from outside it sounds so boring. And somebody listening will say: "It is always the same tone!" But to be inside this vibration... is something else altogether.

Sylvie Bantle: I think this getting into a trance happens in lengthy films or in lengthy performances. It requires space and time. Space for getting into a trance. I have seen dance performances where it happens. I have a friend who runs a dance school in Schwabing, where the artist lives and taught old Egyptian dance of the women. I did a big performance with them in 2005. I have seen her a year before when she did a performance with her group. And there were some dance sequences in this performance, which had ten minutes of just circling...

HW Mueller: Like Sufi?

Sylvie Bantle: No, no! Not like that, it was different, but also monotonous. It had length, nothing different happened and I realised how it took me into a trance. It can't happen if you see the same movements done at a variable speed — it has to be the same. I really had this experience; it took me into a state of trance. Through these long same movements, may be of 5 minutes or more, I don't know, I only watched. I liked it very much.

HW Mueller: As a viewer?

Sylvie Bantle: I was a viewer.

HW Mueller: That's exactly the point where you ask — is there a defining border between the performers and the viewers?

Sylvie Bantle: I was in the audience and it was so impressive. I felt really special when I went home and fell asleep with this feeling still inside me. The next morning when I woke up, the first thought was this experience, I felt really good.

HW Mueller: Ah yeah.

Sylvie Bantle: You know, so when you say, may be for the audience it is always the same... but I believe that if you really put all your heart into the flow of the performance, then it so happens that the audience also joins into the flow... and it only can happen when there is a certain length, space...

HW Mueller: I am not so far. I experience viewers as a loss. That might sound very strange, I know. When somebody is listening to me, I am losing myself. When I am an actor on the stage with many people in a big theatre, then that is my job. I can do that, I can get to the stage, I am here, hey! And all are very still and hear me, I can do that. But with music it is a different thing. I am with myself and I do not know. When people hear me, I'm lost. May sound strange, but this is my feeling.

Sylvie Bantle: May be another media which helps you to lose the control and get into the flow?

HW Mueller: No! It's got nothing to do with the media. When I am on stage, I play a role — Hamlet? Sure! And everybody believes me to be Hamlet. But it is not 'me'. I think the greatest theatre would be when I am just sitting like Buddha, doing nothing and everybody looks and says: "Aah! Wow!" But that is not the function of theatre. Theatre is temptation. What I plan to do with the music is something completely different. It is something to go inside, and it is not Art. I can do it for meditation, I can do it. I think so.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes but you also like to share it with others. Otherwise you wouldn't go the church and try to perform.

HW Mueller: Yes!

Sylvie Bantle: Because, I feel I experienced this a few times, like dancing with others, like in a dance class or in a performance... that's when we all are really into it, we are no longer thinking: Oh, we are superstars performing! It happens when we share our deepest feelings. We become very big through others. Or become like one, the whole group is very exiting; dynamic... suddenly you are ten!

HW Mueller: Yes. I know! But I meant something else. The thing is to be alone and to sustain it.

Sylvie Bantle: You mean to be alone?

HW Mueller: Yes, to be alone. On the stage... the most difficult thing to do on the stage as an actor is to do nothing. But to do nothing is very difficult. Because you want to be loved... admired... it is only human nature to crave this. What I mean is when the music is outside of them, is not me, when I play — I feel! Sometimes I play "doudledoudle".

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but this is how it is in the Indian concept. I experienced while dancing in a Kathakali class with an old Guru in India, about 30 years ago. There they believe you are the medium, the body for the God spirit to dance within. So it is no more you dancing. That's also why after a serious dance performance nobody claps.

HW Mueller: Perhaps, I don't know.

Sylvie Bantle: Because it was not me, this is just my body.

HW Mueller: I don't know. I am a beginner. I understand the sentence in the church "Dein Wille geschehe" (thy will be done) — that first time I understood, what it means "Dein Wille geschehe".

Sylvie Bantle: That is from the Bible, Jesus says to God father "Dein Wille geschehe" — your wish will happen, your will is going to happen...

HW Mueller: But it's very sad. I cry then.

Sylvie Bantle: When you play alone on the bridge?

HW Mueller: Yes when I find these moments.

Sylvie Bantle: Then this is a sign, that you got in touch... because I had this also a long time ago I played the piano as a child. I started classical piano class when I was very young — but later in my twenties I started to play according to my feelings and also I composed a little bit... and sometimes I was so much into it — just playing for myself, nobody listening — I started crying. Then I understood, I was so deep into it...

HW Mueller: Yes... I want to learn to perform this way, to hit it by 100%. To feel it; I know it is inside me.

Sethu Das: Among the Karnatic musicians there is a concept called the Golden Triangle, which I heard first time from Aman Khan, musician son of Amjad Ali Khan who plays Sarod. He said when Karnatic musicians perform, they always keep the Golden Triangle in their mind. So their philosophy is that when they perform they perform for the God, not the masses. They perform for the higher purpose, which is God. But in the process of performing, the people also listen or benefit from it which forms the golden triangle between the performer, God and the masses.

HW Mueller: Yes. I think so.

Sylvie Bantle: They can share it.

HW Mueller: Yes, my problem is the doubt, I doubt myself many times.

Sylvie Bantle: Yaa, but I think that is a natural first step. Because we westerners we are so proud of our will and our control, we have difficulties to give up our will. Like this Guru taught me the meaning of Namaskar. You have to fold your hands like that because there is an empty space between the hands and that's you, the emptiness inside. We did that always before the class started. I had to dance the Namaskar, may be only one minute some steps and then finally I was standing like that. It was to teach me to be humble because I am nothing.

HW Mueller: I understand for instance, when I play on the Donnersberger Brücke (A bridge nearby), people stop and watch. And then I want to play to please... and I am not at all holy, not at all.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but you make these experiences and you are so deeply touched that you are crying.

HW Mueller: Yes, but when I make the experience, sometimes I forget to play... suddenly I am so deep inside, that I don't play anymore. I have the feeling that I am no more playing. I mean, I can't check if I'm continuing to play or not. For me this is quite a new experience. I don't consider this very special... but this deep sadness — not in the meaning of being depressed, more in the meaning of being poignant.

Sylvie Bantle: I've heard stories from some people. One I remember is of a young man in India. He was a drinker, a bad guy, useless for anything, he was from a rich family... and then one day he joined a retreat. An Uncle or a cousin took him for a week long Christian retreat. Where a big group of people gather to pray, sing and make music... and I think on the third day, he said, suddenly it was like God came to him or a divine power or whatever, and he started crying so much, because he was so deeply touched. And that changed his life forever. Then he started 'Nava Jeevan', something similar to 'Shanthi Bhavan' started by Albin at Punnappra. He started it with two or three other people. A home for the homeless and mentally retarded people. A retreat changed him completely, he told me how he cried. The crying is a sign of being

touched deeply by something higher. A higher entity that reached out to him and touched something deep inside.

Sethu Das: Coming back to the Golden Triangle, when master musicians perform, it is very interesting to watch what goes on. Sometimes when they perform on a Sarod, the strings mostly break because of the intense performance. But they are neither embarrassed nor shy. The performance continues with the rest of the musicians. And the performer sits silently and very slowly he takes out a new string and ties to his Sarod. I believe this is no performance for the public or for the general mass, but for the God. So whenever they perform they enter a different world. The performer is not with us.

Sylvie Bantle: This kind of a performance is the best for an audience. When I see a great performance, which is not only a people's performance, but where it feels like God is present, God has been invoked, I can also be a part of it then.

HW Mueller: It is possible, we are afraid of brokenness and that is why we are unsuccessful... I think our big fear is of failure and that's why we try so hard to be perfect.

Sylvie Bantle: To be under control.

HW Mueller: Why should I challenge others to watch me fail?... You understand, it's a matter of narcissism.

Sethu Das: No, nobody sees him as a failure.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, and I also feel that, the question is what is failing and what is not.

Sethu Das: People who listen to him don't see him as failed.

HW Mueller: Yes, that is what I tell my students. I had so many experiences. What do I have to do on the stage? I don't know. And when I make a mistake, the people don't see it as that, they think that it is a part of my directing. They think it is supposed to be like that. My students are so thankful when they forget the text, I say, take a book and recite from it. If you do this convincingly, then everybody thinks it is a directed role. In music I can't manage like this at all. I am terribly nervous.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, before the taping, when you just tried, it was there.

HW Mueller: Yes, it was there. It is always a very interesting journey.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, but it is interesting.

HW Mueller: It is the same situation for a director in the film — when can I release. And for me it is so difficult, you have many techniques.

Sylvie Bantle: That's why I like to do films on a very low budget, I have a camera, I do my own cutting and I don't run anymore after big equipment.

HW Mueller: Oh now you can have a good light, a good atmosphere, a good speaker, you have a good scene and you have a good sound... easy in a big production, this is great. You know, what I mean, not to go with a camera, no, but to make a really big film of 20 million dollars and to be in the situation like Hariprasad Chaurasia. That would be very great.

(Everybody laughs)



Born in Karlsruhe in Germany, Sylvie Bantle is a writer and filmmaker. She travelled widely in Asia and learnt Kathakali, a classical-Indian dance art form under the guidance of Guru Gopinath. While her writings based on diary notes were put together in the format of a public performance titled "Filmreadings", the latest "Das Brandloch" performance is a combination of reading, dance and music. "Das Brandloch" was performed in front of the Maxim in Munich on May 10, 2011 to coincide with the 1933 burning of the "un-German" books by the students. Many creative professionals and artists like Sylvie take refuge in The Maxim to more reach people with their experimental art forms. (Photo: Sethu Das)

Sylvie Bantle: Of course! In my next life.

HW Mueller: OK!

Sylvie Bantle: I mean take my example of 'Shanthy Bhavan' — the House of Peace. I have the film only on Beta cam and VHS, somebody wants to make a good copy from the Beta cam on to DVD. This is a long film, about 98 minutes and it's about this madhouse in Punnappra village — where Alexander comes from. It was our second film. Alexander had to translate it as people do not speak English. I had no concept and Alexander got so mad with me, you know, because I just went there with the camera like a tourist. I was there for one year before and saw everything, also started shooting, but I didn't like it. Then the next year we started afresh. I put away all the concepts and I just walked inside like I was seeing it for the first time and slowly getting to know everybody. It has many long silent scenes — because these are mad people, I mean I can't talk with them, I can just stand and watch. And there were some dialogues without speech. Between us or between interviews with Albin, the founder of this institution. He was a murderer once, prison changed his life. He opened that house. We went there everyday for shooting and to see this situation, also from the hygienic side. These mad people would come and touch. This troubled Alexander too. It is not what you get to see all the time. And then we came home, after this experience, which troubles you a bit, we had so many discussions and Alexander said, what is this, we were shooting for four days. When we showed the finished film to some close friends in Punnappra, this one friend said: "Oh, it felt like God was directing this film." He saw these little things which just happened. Because we didn't add any extra sounds on that, these little things, great moments that happened, but very spectacular. So that was a great experience just to be in the flow while doing this film. But I never showed it at a festival, nobody was interested in it. I only showed it to a small audience in small cinemas. People liked the film very much.

HW Mueller: This is my experience with actors, they play a part and feel they are so good, and I say, what is that? This is different. Because I am inside my music or in my role and I feel myself, that is a different view for the other people. You know what I mean...

Sylvie Bantle: Yes.

HW Mueller: And to bring this together is very difficult.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, I understand what you mean. But like this film 'Shanthy Bhavan' I accept that the TV channels didn't take it. We had in Mainz, ZDF (one of the two state channels) one woman, Mrs. Bortnik, she is also connected to the 3sat and she saw one of our films on the documentary film festival here in Munich, I think it was 'Chakara', and 'Mortuary Joseph'. And then she called us and was very interested in our films, so I sent her all three films she liked them very much. She could take it. There are a few people who have sensibilities for that. She had been trying for years, but she was not the main chief in this TV office. We would keep in touch via phone and one day she said to me: you know, I'll tell you something, I don't watch TV any more, it's stupid bullshit, it's just too bad, the money gets lesser, and many people are kicked out to save on money, we are buying fewer and fewer new films and the latest decision was, to take films from the archive and repeat and repeat and repeat. This change I saw for myself in the last three years in TV. Because we are interested in certain films and documentaries, we often switch on the TV when they are being shown. While watching we realise we have seen this film already — they've aired it on the ZDF, on the ARD, on 3sat and then it comes in the Arte, so it just circles around and for a month you can see the same film on other channels.

HW Mueller: Yes, they are sitting on a hot seat — the managers. Their job is to decide a program, and when they make a mistake they can lose their jobs. I have an understanding why they all function in the same manner.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes, that's the time now. The situation in the literature is also the same. For example my latest novel, which I gave to an old friend who works in the publishing field as a freelancer for some well known publishers. He read my script and liked it very much. So he gave it to some readers in the Heyne Verlag (publisher), a very big mainstream publisher. He wanted to try. After two weeks he sent me a message by email, saying: "Sorry, it is always the same song, because you are not famous and from your biography we can't make some spectacular stories. If you were the secret daughter of Gandhi, of course then we would publish your manuscript." That is the tragedy. Then I said to him: "I don't have to show my manuscript, it will be enough to just send my biodata." He answered: "Yes, you are right!"

You know, this is the situation now, and the same situation we find in the film field. This was the situation 20 years ago too. That time I had a kind agent, he gave me a lot of emotional support to continue with my writing. Now he is a publisher under the big 'Ullstein Verlage', where I published my 3rd book in 2006. 20 years ago he was an agent for big publishers. Even he liked my writing very much he couldn't do anything more than support me emotionally and give me some tips on how to apply to small publishers. At that time he told to me: you know, when I discuss a new book project with one of these big publishers, they never ask for the content, they only want to know who is the writer. What is their biodata, what is the story about the writer they can tell for selling. There is no discussion about the content of the story, there are only discussions about the writer itself and how to market this person. I have known these things long enough and now I feel tired about it as I am getting older. Now I understand I am working for higher spirits, to worship higher spirits in this universe rather than please the agents in the market.

HW Mueller: Perhaps that is the door for success... I read Kafka, there is a story about the man and the judge, he sits in front of a door and a guard says, that he's not allowed to go inside. So he is just waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting. At times he speaks with this guard about life, about anything. And he is waiting and thinking, what is inside that he is not allowed to enter. He becomes an old man and then asks the guard one question: How come nobody enters this door? The guard answers: this door is for you! You know, this is a great story. I think I need to go home, I am feeling sleepy.

Sethu Das: What is your website called?

HW Mueller: www.der-gescheiterte-film.de and when you google 'HW Mueller' you will always find me.

HW Mueller: Brokhalhaus is my business id. Brokhalhaus — doesn't mean anything to you? (to Sylvie) This label once was a Gallery here in Munich at the Prinzregenten Platz. Yes I was into art business for 20 years, near Cornelius Street. I was there for quite some time. But when the market collapsed, in the middle of the 90s, I shut the shop. Later on it recovered a bit, they say, but in Munich it is still very tough.

Sylvie Bantle: Berlin has a bit more life.

HW Mueller: A shark pool! Top or hop!

Sethu Das: But I see a lot of art galleries here in Munich.

Sylvie Bantle: Yes. We have many.

HW Mueller: But in the 90s we had much more. Munich was once the capital of Galleries. But that time is over. Okay, I have to sleep. I have a cold.

Sylvie Bantle: You have a long way to go home.

HW Mueller: (To Sethu) will you send me an email?

Sethu Das: Yes, I'll do that.

HW Mueller: Nice to meet you, it was a very interesting discussion.



(Left): A 1947 photo of a 'Wanderkino' or a touring cinema from the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany. Wanderkinos disappeared from the everyday lives of Germans with the introduction of fixed cinemas and multiplexes of modern times. (Photo: Otto Donath/Das Bundesarchiv)
(Right): Small groups of organised film viewers around a Wonderkino were replaced with large crowds with the invention of Inflatable movie airscreens in 1971. Thus entertainment became the lone purpose of such gatherings. (Photo: Christian Kremer/Creative Commons)

(Translation & Transcription: Sylvie Bantle, Editing: Bina Nayak)

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