

## **Days of His Lives:**

### ***The Lives of Others'* Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck**

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By Jenelle Riley

With Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's heartbreaking look at how strangers can save one another hitting DVD this week, *CS Weekly* spoke with the filmmaker about his Academy Award-winning film.

Though Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's acclaimed feature debut *The Lives of Others* is set in 1984 East Berlin, the writer-director has found himself surprised by the universal reach of the story. The plot centers on a lonely but loyal agent (Ulrich Mühe, who passed away last month) for the Stasi (the government's secret police, which disbanded after the fall of the Berlin Wall) who begins spying on a playwright (Sebastian Koch) and his actress girlfriend (Martina Gedeck) and finds himself compelled to protect the couple. "The fact that people are somehow getting this movie all over the world means that everybody knows the Stasi," Donnersmarck notes. "Everybody knows what it feels like when your privacy is invaded, it's one of those things that has happened to everybody in some way or another. Maybe we can no longer call it one organization like the Stasi, but it's certainly everywhere." The film was the unexpected winner (over *Pan's Labyrinth*) for Best Foreign Film at this year's Oscars, and an American remake is already in the works.

Donnersmarck made several well-received short films before making the leap with his first feature, and *The Lives of Others* is a wonderfully confident debut that deals literally and figuratively in shades of grey. It helps that his script is lean and taut, without a wasted line of dialogue. It's interesting to note that Donnersmarck is related to Peter Morgan (*The Queen, The Last King of Scotland*), another screenwriter who enjoyed a terrific year -- Morgan is married to his cousin -- and Donnersmarck says the two have a healthy competition.

#### **Are you asked more about directing the film or writing the script?**

Definitely directing. I'm always so glad when I can speak about the screenwriting. Although I'm the writer and director, when I go places they usually say, "Welcome the director of *The Lives of Others*." I always say, "Hey, wait a minute, I'm also the screenwriter! And it was more work writing the screenplay than directing the film, so please, the screenwriter in me is deeply offended!" I don't quite understand that. I think it has something to do with the fact that many screenwriters are all too polite and self-effacing. I'm always glad when a screenwriter gets the kind of

recognition a director gets. Sometimes a screenwriter emerges and people recognize how great he is and how it is the most essential part of a film.

**How much, if at all, were you influenced by Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*?**

I didn't actually know *The Conversation* until I wrote the second or third draft, and then one of the producers -- who actually left the project -- said I should watch *The Conversation*. I looked for it in German video stores and it wasn't available anywhere. So, I had to wait about a month and a half until it appeared in the Berlin Film Museum. I watched it then, and I liked it. I especially liked the visual world of it. Something I generally admire with Coppola is the way he always tackles big moral questions. I think that's one of the most interesting things in film, you can really get to the essence of a moral question. I've watched it a few times since then. One thing I find very frustrating is the end. To me, the end of a film is the most important thing. If someone calls me and says, "We have this really great screenplay, do you want to take a look?" I'll say, "How do the last 15 minutes compare to the rest of the film?" If they say, "The last reel would need work," I say, "I don't want to read it." Because I know if you get that right, the essence of the screenplay is right.

**Have endings always been important to you?**

Even in my early short films, if I didn't have a really powerful end in mind that was a little bit stronger than the rest of the film, or at least as strong, I would never go about doing a project. The end does not take care of itself, it really doesn't. At the end of the day, it's the end that will allow you to go out of a film with the feeling that this film has helped you in your life. Which is, in some way, what I think we screenwriters and filmmakers should attempt to do. If the end isn't right, then you're just telling a story. And, in a way, not as powerful a story as you could be telling. A story is not just there for entertainment, I think it's there to in some way help you in life. As a storyteller, especially in films, you get to be something like a therapist for two hours. If the end isn't right, it feels like if at the end of a therapy session your therapist said, "Oh, yeah, okay, that's an interesting point, but I have another appointment. See you next week." You go out there thinking, "Is this guy in any way interested in me or does he just want the money?" That's the feeling I sometimes get from films where the end just isn't right. I can assure you that won't happen to me. I won't ever be tempted into going into a film thinking, "Well, I'll find a good end." I actually have one screenplay I worked on, and I think the first 80 minutes are fantastic, but the end is just not there. I searched for it for about a year and still can't find it. I think I'm going to just throw it away because it's not there. The end is like the backbone of the film.

**Is it true the screenplay came about from a single image you imagined one day?**

I had this image of a guy sitting in this depressing room with earphones on his head, and from that I developed the screenplay. I had the idea back in '97. This was my first year at film school, and our film professor had this creativity exercise he did with us. He said creative imagination was like a muscle that you have to work out like Arnold Schwarzenegger works out his pectorals. But you have to go for complete overload, not gradually increase the weight load. So he set out this assignment that in the first eight weeks we had to write 14 fully-fledged treatments for new film stories. At the end, I found out he never actually read these treatments, just threw them into the wastebasket. I never felt so much pressure in my life because I wanted to get them just right, and it's hard to invent something on command.

I think *The Lives of Others* was treatment 13, and I was completely dried up. I had a little tape recorder and was listening to some piano sonatas from Beethoven and was really depressed, thinking maybe I should have become an investment banker or something. I started listening to the music and not thinking about the treatment, and suddenly I remembered this quote from Lenin where he said to Maxim Gorky, the Russian writer, "The appassionato is my favorite piece of music but I'm not going to listen to it anymore, because if I listen to it, it makes me want to stroke people's heads and tell them sweet, kind things. But I shouldn't be stroking heads, I have to bash in heads without mercy in order to finish my revolution." I always thought that was such a clear-cut case of someone being at war with his own humanity. And maybe there was a story there: What if I could somehow force Lenin to listen to the appassionato? It was one of those "flow" moments where I knew there was a story there and it just came in a rush. I had this image of a man listening to music he didn't want to, because he was trying to listen to something else. Within an hour I had the whole story for the film. Within another hour, I had written a two-page treatment for it. Then I was thrown into a fit of despair over treatment number 14.

**What was it about this treatment that made you want to make the film your feature debut?**

When I was in my last year of film school and my short films had done really well, I remembered the idea and took it out and still liked the story. So I started researching. I researched for about one and a half years to get the whole environment right and just started writing it. At one point, I researched so much I felt I could go on for my entire life just researching. I knew so much about it, I was starting to correct the officers and victims on their own memories, saying, "No, the archive room wasn't there." They'd say, "Are you sure you weren't with the Stasi, too?" At some point I knew I just had to get the script out of my head, at least a first draft.

**And you needed solitude for that first draft?**

I knew it would be hard to do in my own environment. I remembered reading about James Cameron, where he said when he writes a screenplay he just locks himself in the house with cans of food for a month and unplugs the phone and doorbell and the only thing that would get him out was if the house actually caught fire. I thought that's the way to do it, but I knew I couldn't because I don't like eating from cans. So I thought, who's the person who gets the most done in my family? It's actually my uncle, my father's brother, who is a monk. He lives in this monastery in the woods in Austria near Vienna. All they do all day is work and pray and Gregorian chant. So I wrote him and said, "I know your life consists just of work and prayer, and I wouldn't be joining you on the prayer, but at least I could work with you, so could you give me a monk's cell for a month?" He said okay and gave me a real monk's cell and completely closed quarters, and it was such a perfect working environment that I got almost the entire first draft done there in one month. I got more done there in a month than I would have in a year outside. Then it took me another year after that to get to the fifth draft, which I felt was right to shoot. The differences between the first and fifth draft weren't that big. I'm really just a perfectionist, and it's important to get the details right.

**Does that apply to every facet of your filmmaking?**

Yes. For example, in the subtitles we had here, in English -- the first version sent to me by a translator I thought was pretty terrible because it works on the principle that subtitles should just transport the content of what is being said, and it doesn't matter if not every nuance of the dialogue is in the subtitles. Well, I think that's completely wrong. I don't think it works that way, that you look at a short subtitle then look up to the image uninterrupted. When you're seeing a subtitled film, your focus stays with the subtitle and you see the image out of the corner of your eye. So I reworked the entire subtitles to transport most of the nuances of the actual dialogue, which is really going against the tradition and convention of subtitles, but I think it was really important.

**In a way, is it like rewriting the screenplay?**

At least a little bit, so that at least the English words would transport some of the essence of the German original. In writing the screenplay, these little things really matter. If you read draft one and five, the differences wouldn't seem that big. But I think that's where quality begins, when you go beyond the necessary. When people put that care into it, I feel differently as audience member, I feel taken care of.

**How did you prepare to write your first feature script?**

I thought a lot about dramatic structure; it's one of the things I've thought most about in life. I'd read Aristotle, which I didn't think was so useful, by

the way. The book I thought was much better and an important manual for me in screenwriting is called *The Hamburg Dramaturgy* by Lessing, who was a German god of dramatic structure from the 18th century. I read pretty much every serious book that has been written on screenwriting, only to convince myself that I think they're wrong. Maybe I took some little insight from every one of them that really did help me.

I also thought *Stein on Writing* was very useful for any kind of writing. That's Saul Stein, a New York-based editor I found out about through Elia Kazan's autobiography. He taught me things, something as simple as saying, "Good dialogue is never realistic." That's contrary to what many people say. And that people should never directly answer each other's questions. Like, if someone says, "How are you?" and they say, "Oh, I'm well," basically you're already boring the audience to death and you should be cutting that. I scrapped pretty much all greetings from my film. People don't say hi and goodbye, which always bores me to death in films. It's just a few wasted seconds, but add it all together and you're making the film much leaner. And it will afford you to be a little longer in places where people would normally go for something shorter.

He gives a great example where he says, let's say you have a scene where someone rings the buzzer in an apartment building and a voice comes on and says, "Who is it?" and a voice says, "It's Frank," and he says, "Yeah, come on up." That's something a good editor would cut out the second it was shot. The only justification you could have for shooting such a scene is to totally break people's expectations on the exchange of that dialogue. So you have a person ring the buzzer and the voice on the intercom says, "Fuck off, I hate you." Then you have the beginning of a scene.

**Was it always your intention to both write and direct?**

Yes, it was my intention to do both. If you're not a pathologically shy person or someone who can really not get himself to be forceful, then there's no reason why you shouldn't direct your own stuff. If you're good enough to write a screenplay that would serve as the basis for a great film, then you have seen the entire film before your eyes and you will be in a better position than anyone else to make it into a great film. If I had written the screenplay and given it to someone else, it would kill me. I would just be considered a department head. I don't think it's about vanity, it's about justice.

**Any advice you would want to offer to writers starting out?**

One thing writers worry about so much is making sure their film is personal. They're scared if they write genre or something that feels popular in appeal, that somehow they're selling out. I think that's a completely unjustified worry. If you write a screenplay based on an idea

you had and you just make sure that to you it's not boring or pretentious or confusing, using yourself as a measure, then the screenplay will be personal by definition. You can make an action film incredibly personal by using yourself as a measure.