

«**This love has the character of a dream.**»

Ruth Beckermann discusses her latest project **The Dreamed Ones**, based on the correspondence between Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, which marks a departure for her by venturing into feature film territory.

Our conversation about your last film, *Those Who Go Those Who Stay*, ended with the following sentences: "It is necessary to make the "hors-champ" much more powerfully visible. Maybe it would be a good idea to make a film about everything that you can't film." Is it possible that using a literary text, with voices and listening – different sensory perceptions, different artistic forms of expression – has opened a window that permits *The Dreamed Ones* to venture into new film territory?

RUTH BECKERMANN: This new film certainly does explore new territory. In **The Dreamed Ones** I not only worked with actors for the first time but also adopted a completely different approach; at the beginning I didn't know precisely how far I would move away from the essay film. The idea of using a literary text as the basis developed from a meeting with the literary critic Ina Hartwig, and over the course of a year I developed the screenplay for the film together with her. It went through a large number of versions, about 25. We met when we were both on the jury of the Wartholz Literature Prize. As we were driving from Vienna Airport to Reichenau/Rax we got talking about the exchange of letters between Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, which had been published a few years earlier under the title *Herzzeit (Heart's Time)*. Ina was working on a book about Ingeborg Bachmann. That's how our collaboration began, and we very quickly submitted an exposé.

Both Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan are very linguistically intense voices in post-war German-language poetry. How do you find a film language that corresponds to this linguistic concentration? How did you approach the scenic writing involved?

RUTH BECKERMANN: The idea that two people (not necessarily actors) should play voice artists recording the letters in a sound studio for an audio book or radio show was there from the very start. But originally it was only going to be part of the film. The plan was that the voices would shift OFF and I would then film at the places where Bachmann and Celan lived – not documentary style, in their homes, but in a very associative, free, modern sense. In Paris, Munich, Zurich and Rome. At the beginning I was thinking in a more essayist direction, and I'd already filmed some sequences and recorded sound at a number of places. Before we did the filming with the actors I arranged a run-through with friends to establish whether the script was powerful enough for such a radical reduction. I think by then I was secretly hoping it would turn into a sort of *Kammerspiel*, an intimate psychological study. When we started filming the two actors, Anja Plaschg and Laurence Rupp, were so powerful that the condensed version worked fine. After the first few scenes my editor Dieter Pichler and I looked at each other and said: "That's it – we stay in the room".

Does the density of the language make it necessary to condense it drastically in this way?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Definitely. But the subject was in the foreground. A love story that is so romantic and tragic is very powerful in itself. The language the two of them use is incredible. Under those conditions you can condense the material a great deal. I like doing that anyway. But initially I was interested in something completely different: how would young people today respond to these letters and the language they use? It was an experiment. I wanted to see what young people today would make of the letters. Bachmann and Celan were very young when they met, after all: she was

22, and he was 27. I wanted to use young actors, and I wanted to be able to imagine the words triggering something inside them – both individually and in their relationship to one another.

The casting was very surprising in that you placed a member of the Burgtheater ensemble, Laurence Rupp, together with Anja Plaschg, one of the great protagonists of the young Austrian music scene. Why did you choose these two?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I knew I wanted Anja Plaschg at a very early stage. I did look at other actresses, though, because I was aware that the role would place very high demands on someone who wasn't a professional actress. But I kept on coming back to her, because as well as being a very strong personality she is exactly the right personality for Bachmann's words. It was difficult to find an interesting man. Actors from Germany were out of the question, because both of these poets were from our "Austrian home". That restricted the field a lot, since he also had to embody a counterpoint to Anja. Laurence Rupp is very adaptable. You can see him becoming more mature, growing older during the course of the film.

How did you confront the two actors with the text?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Naturally they all read from the letters during the auditions, although that was only of limited use. The voices of the two actors were important, as well as something quite old-fashioned: whether they had "depth". We didn't rehearse at all. Our deal was: "We start filming right away, and we film everything". The interaction that led them back to everyday life was all planned: whether it took place in the canteen, in the concert hall, during cigarette breaks. However, it was planned in a way that left a lot open. I didn't know what was being rehearsed in the concert hall, for example. The fact that it was a piece by Wolfgang Rihm which perfectly suited the mood of the film is what I'd call the luck of documentary films.

Both the relationship and the correspondence between the two of them is characterised by an intense interplay of closeness and distance (on numerous levels). Was this search for a balance between closeness and distance something like a guiding principle in making the film?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Johannes Hammel, the cameraman, did an outstanding job of expressing that in the positioning of the camera. He always adopts the right distance. We used hand-held cameras for everything, including the long shots, because I was determined not to create an academic, theatrical psychological drama. I wanted the images to be alive. To vibrate and to include constantly the possibility of reaction.

An exchange of letters is a literary form that has a clear documentary aspect, both in a biographical and socio-historical sense, but also something very subjective and – considering the time lapse dictated by the delivery of the letters and the huge amount that remains unsaid between two people who know each other very well – something highly fictitious which the reader himself fills in. Did this literary genre appeal to you as a format that encompasses the transition between the documentary and the fictional?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Definitely. The correspondence between the two of them has a strong fictitious element in any case. Sometimes it actually reminded me of troubadour songs. Bachmann and Celan also had a literary relationship with one another. In fact their physical relationship was very short. Two months in the spring of 1948 and then, almost 10 years later, perhaps one more

month. But they conducted a literary dialogue throughout their entire lives. I wouldn't describe these letters as purely documentary. They also have a soaring quality. There is so much in them. The real love story of course, but also so much about concepts of love, and about life itself. And the subject of the Holocaust and the post-war period. The idea that a young Jew from Cernowitz and a young woman from Carinthia should meet in Vienna in 1948 and fall head over heels in love is fascinating and very romantic. One of our basic questions was: "What were the subjects the two of them wrote about? What do these texts mean today?" For example, today you might be able to imagine a love story in Israel, or another country marked by a major conflicts, between two people from hostile camps, even though that wouldn't have the same tragic quality as after the Holocaust, when one side had been intent on exterminating the other. This aspect – that two people from completely opposing groups should meet up – was very important to us as well. It creates more intensity and makes their love even more powerful.

A love that had so many facets... How would you analyse this complex relationship between the two of them?

RUTH BECKERMANN: If I think about my own response as a reader, at the beginning I was much more on the side of Celan, but the more I became involved with the relationship, the better able I was to understand Ingeborg Bachmann. All through her life she tried to help him, to hold him, to carry him. He kept on pushing her away. On the other hand, I do understand that it was difficult for him to accept her attempts to write almost from the side of the victim. Throughout her whole life she never talked about her father, who had been a member of the Nazi party. And I can imagine that it was all too much for him. As time went by he became more and more paranoid, although right from the start he was easily offended, unfair, jealous of her success and generally a macho. In the end she writes to him: "You want to be the victim". Based on his role as victim, he made her into a victim, but she wouldn't permit it. She becomes stronger and stronger, more confident. She was beautiful and had an incredible erotic attraction, she was very open to relationships and extremely gifted socially. She had the talent of being able to market herself well, and she was what you would call today a networker. Celan wasn't like that at all. It's all very complex, and perhaps I'm oversimplifying it. There is so much in the letters, and in the film too I hope, on the level of what is possible in love, about proximity, understanding and not understanding. That's not limited to their period. Can a man and woman understand each other at all? And to what extent? The two of them are relatively successful, I'd say.

The correspondence describes a love that was lived but at the same time, to a much greater extent, a love that wasn't lived. Did that influence your choice of title, *The Dreamed Ones*, which is taken from one of Bachmann's letters?

RUTH BECKERMANN: This love has the character of a dream.

Interview: Karin Schiefer
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