

Press Information

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present

HEADSMAN

A Simon Aeby film

starring: **Nikolai Coster-Waldau, Anastasia Griffith, Peter McDonald, Eddie Marsan, Steven Berkoff**
Patrick Godfrey, Lee Ingleby, John Shrapnel
and others

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CAST / CREW / TECHNICAL DATA

Director	Simon Aeby
Writer	Susanne Freund with Steve Attridge
Producer	Helmut Grasser
Co-Producer	Mike Downey Sam Taylor Peter Miskolczi Marcel Hoehn Claude Waringo Peter Rommel
Line Producer	Katharina Bogensberger
DOP	Vladimir Smutny
Editor	Karin Hartusch
Cast	Nikolai Coster-Waldau (Martin) Anastasia Griffith (Anna) Peter McDonald (George) Steven Berkoff (Inquisitor) Eddie Marsan (Fabio) Julie Cox (Margaretha) John Shrapnel (Archbishop) Lee Ingleby (Bernhard)
Costume Design	Caterina Czepek
Production Design	Christoph Kanter
Music	Matthias Weber
Sound	Colin Nicholson
OV Version	English Language
Format	35 mm, cinemascope, color, 1:2,35
YEAR	2005, Dolby Digital
Length	108 minutes, 3116 meter, 6 reels

FESTIVALS

2005

World Premiere: World Competition
The World Film Festival – Montreal 2005

Theatrical Releases:

World Premiere: Austria: January 19, 2006 (Filmladen)

Switzerland: January 19, 2006 (Columbus Film)

LOG LINE

Following in the footsteps of LUTHER, PASSION OF CHRIST and KINGDOM OF HEAVEN – **HEADSMAN** is a tale about love, courage and faith put to the test by the ruthless arm of the Church Inquisition in its drive to stamp out reformation in 16th century Europe.

SYNOPSIS

Late Middle Ages (16th Century) – the time of Martin Luther...

The two orphans MARTIN and GEORGE are growing up under the protection of monks at a monastery. MARTIN becomes a soldier and fights for his country, while GEORGE dedicates his life to the church.

Returning to the monastery after years of fighting senseless wars for the emperor, MARTIN receives a warm reception from GEORGE who is by now the Prior of the Abbey. In the Abbey, GEORGE faces the growing interest of people in the sermons of the Anabaptists and the reform movement.

MARTIN falls in love with the town headsman's daughter, a relationship that turns him into an outcast. As GEORGE rejects this relationship, MARTIN turns to the Anabaptist priest to get married.

When the Archbishop concludes that GEORGE is no longer in charge of his congregation or the town, there is no stopping the Holy Inquisition from taking control of the events. Everybody is a potential victim of the unpredictability of the inquisition acting in the name of the church. The Spanish inquisition soldiers cannot be stopped from hunting down the Anabaptists, Scientists and Healers.

MARTIN finds GEORGE in the Abbey and tries to convince him to help the persecuted people, but when his wife ANNA is accused to be a witch, he starts to fight back. In these violent times, MARTIN must fight for the life of his wife and son against his best friend and the intrigues of a corrupt church.

The HEADSMAN is a film about friendship, courage and faith, set in the violent, tumultuous times of Luther's reformation and the persecution by the inquisition of the Catholic Church.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND

„Headsman“ of Simon Aeby is set in the turbulent times of the 16th century. A century marked by religious, political and social conflicts.

In 1517, Martin Luther (1483 – 1546), the spiritual founder of the protestant reformation, publicly demands a radical reform of the Catholic Church. He breaks with the church in 1520 after realizing that his ideas are being rejected in Rome.

As a result of the invention of the printing press, Luther's ideas spread widely and relatively fast in the German speaking parts of Europe. In addition, he finds political support from the German imperial princes who hope to increase independence from the German emperor and gain church property.

The Anabaptists were the left wing of the new reformation movement. They originate in Zurich as a spin-off of Ulrich Zwingli's doctrines (1484 - 1531), a Swiss "equivalent" of Luther's. Due to their eviction from Zurich in 1527, the Anabaptists spread to the Alps, Northwestern Germany and the parts of today's Netherlands, where Catholics as well as Protestants persecuted them. During the time of the reformation, several Diets were held in the Diocese of Speyer (Germany). One of the actions taken during the second Diet of Speyer in 1529 was to impose death penalty on members of the Anabaptists.

Feared since its beginnings in the 13th Century, the Inquisition of the Catholic Church takes charge in persecuting the Anabaptists.

Though persecuted in almost every part of Germany, the city of Muenster was the setting for one of the most extraordinary periods in the history of the Anabaptists. During the years 1533-34 Muenster was to become the „New Jerusalem“ under the lead of the Anabaptists. With Anabaptist John of Lyden as proclaimed King of the „New Zion“, community of goods and polygamy were introduced to Muenster. A long siege and the capture of the city by its Bishop Francis of Waldeck brought a violent and bloody end to the period of the Anabaptists in Muenster

TIMEFRAME:

Around 1450: Johannes Gutenberg invents the printing press in Mainz (Germany)

1453: The Ottoman Turks conquer Constantinople

1492: Columbus discovers America

1517: Luther publishes his 95 Theses against indulgences. Begin of the reform movement. End of late middle ages beginning of modern times.

1524 – 1526: German Peasants' War – End of Peasants' War in Tyrol in 1526.

1526: Battle of Mohacs – Ottoman Hungary

1527: Eviction of the Anabaptists from Zurich

1529: First Siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Turks

1529: Second Diet of Speyer. 19 Protestant Imperial States were granted religious freedom. Death penalty was imposed on members of the Anabaptists.

1533: King Henry VIII of England breaks with the Catholic Church and places all clergy under his control. Founding of the Anglican Church.

1582: Introduction of the Gregorian calendar in many Catholic countries

1826: Last death penalty of the Spanish Inquisition

1834: Abolition of the Spanish Inquisition

DIRECTOR'S INTENTION



THE SWISS DIRECTOR SIMON AEBY ON THE FILM „THE HEADSMAN“:

“One would think that the title “The Headsman” expresses the film’s story line. However, the subject of the film is about power and its abuse by the Catholic Church in the 16th century.

The lives of the protagonists in the film portray the politics and zeitgeist during the Age of Enlightenment. The story has several references to the present. With Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in the middle of the 15th century, resources to knowledge became accessible to the public. Nowadays, you have the Internet, which the use of it is still prohibited in certain countries. Another parallel is the current up rise of Christian fundamentalism, with the main goal to eliminate civil rights. In addition, the often-conjured fight against terrorism can also harbor a danger of abuse of power.

The relationship between the headman Martin and prior George is about loyalty, friendship and authoritarianism. Whereas George allows power abuse by the church, Martin fights against arbitrariness and brutality. “The Headman” tells European history by means of individual lives and succeeds to portrait deep human feelings. Shooting the film was a highly inspiring time for me.”

BIOGRAPHIES – THE FILMMAKERS

SIMON AEBY (Director)

Simon Aeby, born in Bern – Switzerland, studied in Basel before he started to work for Condor Film in Zurich as a Producer and Director. In 1982 he was one of the founders of Glass Film Zurich, where he was responsible for the development of numerous highly acclaimed commercials.

In 1992 he filmed his award-winning short film A SLICE OF PIZZA in the USA and founded the New York based company Sidewalk Pictures in 1993 as part of Robert de Niro's Tribeca Film Center.

In 1998 Aeby wrote and directed his first feature film THREE BELOW ZERO with Wes Bentley (AMERICAN BEAUTY) in the leading role. THREE BELOW ZERO won the German Max Ophüls Prize for Best Picture in 1999.

Back in Switzerland, Simon Aeby directed and co-wrote THE REBEL. The first Swiss film to be invited to prestigious Tokyo Film Festival and the most successful Swiss film at the Swiss Box Office.

Aeby is a member of the DIRECTORS GUILD OF AMERICA since 1998. He lives and works in Spain and Bern, Switzerland.

SUSANNE FREUND (Screenplay Author)

Award winning screenwriter Susanne Freund has written and directed numerous documentaries and feature films such as THE PRAYING MANTIS (Dir.: Paul Harather) and SILENT BELLS (Dir.: Harald Sicheritz). Freund is a valued member of many screenwriter jury committees in her home country Austria.

VLADIMÍR SMUTNÝ (Director of Photography)

Vladimír Smutný has 35 years of hands-on experience as a cameraman. Since 1969 he worked behind the camera for over 30 movies. One of them was the film KOYLA, which won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Picture in 1996. Vladimír Smutný's many awards include the Czech Lion, which he won twice: Once in 1998 for LEA and in 2002 for his work on DARK BLUE WORLD.

HELMUT GRASSER (Producer)

Helmut Grasser was born in 1961 in Klagenfurt, Austria. In 1989 he founded Allegro Film and has since produced more than 30 feature films and documentaries such as TWINNI (Dir.: Ulrike Schweiger), ICARUS (Dir.: Bernhard Weirather) and DOG DAYS (Dir.: Ulrich Seidl). Grasser is a member of the committee of the Austrian Filminstitut, the Board of Trustees of the Filmfonds Wien as well as a member of the European Film Academy. In 2005 he was elected as president of the Austrian Producers Guild (Verband österreichischer Filmproduzenten)

PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

Helmut Grasser – Allegro Film:

A vision of movie making is essential for a producer!

“In my eyes, “Headsman” is the proof that producing international films in Austria is possible. Sure, from the beginning it was obvious, that a project of this size needs additional funding. But co-producing is a good choice not only because of financial matters, but gives access to new distribution channels and makes marketing easier.

At the beginning, we planned on producing the film with German and Swiss partners. Luxemburg, Great Britain and Hungary joined in bit by bit. As the film was to be produced in English, it was especially important to me to find a very strong English-speaking partner who would not only finance but also be responsible for the casting.

At the end, we could complete the financing with 60% from Austria. Our others partners added 10% each.

“Headsman” has its own look and represents what I believe is great international filmmaking. Wonderful actors and an epic story make ‘Headsman’ a great adventure and an exciting journey into the past.

BIOGRAPHIES – THE CAST

NIKOLAI COSTER-WALDAU (Martin)

Danish born actor Nikolai Coster-Waldau began his acting career with parts in Danish feature films and TV-Movies like SLAGET PA TASKEN (Dir.: Thomas Vinterberg - 1993). In 1994 he achieved his international breakthrough with his role in Ole Bornedal's NIGHTWATCH. In 2001 Coster-Waldau acted alongside Kate Winslet in the German-British co-production ENIGMA (Dir.: Michael Apted). Since 2001 Coster-Waldau acted in BLACK HAWK DOWN (Dir: Ridley Scott), STEALING REMBRANDT (Dir. Jannik Johansen), WIMBELDON alongside Kirsten Dunst (Dir: Richard Loncraine), KINGDOM OF HEAVEN alongside Orlando Bloom (Dir: Ridley Scott) and Warner Brothers FIREWALL with Harrison Ford (Dir: Richard Loncraine) which is currently in postproduction.

PETER MCDONALD (George)

Born in 1972, Peter McDonald became one of the stars in the Irish independent film scene. He started acting during his years at the University of Dublin and founded a theatre group shortly after finishing his education. After numerous parts in theatre, TV and audio productions, he made his first screen appearance in the internationally acclaimed Irish feature film I WENT DOWN (Dir.: Paddy Breathnach). McDonald had his international breakthrough alongside Bob Hoskins in Atom Egoyan's FELICIAS JOURNEY.

ANASTASIA GRIFFITH (Anna)

Anastasia Griffith who studied acting with Simon McBurney started her career at the theatre. In addition to many TV movies and theatre parts, Griffith appeared in films such as FIRE (Dir.: Alan Goldstein) and alongside Susan Sarandon and Jude Law in the successful remake of ALFIE (Dir.: Charles Shyer).

EDDIE MARSAN (Fabio)

21 GRAMS (Dir.: Alejandro Gonzalez-Innaritu), VERA DRAKE (Dir.: Mike Leigh) and Martin Scorsese's GANGS OF NEW YORK are just some of the films in Eddie Marsan's filmography. He played alongside actors like Leonardo di Caprio, Daniel Day-Lewis, Brad Pitt and Benicio del Torro. Eddie Marsan appeared in over 30 TV and film productions and periodically returns to his roots at the theatre.

STEVEN BERKOFF (Inquisitor)

Steven Berkoff (born 1936) is what one would call a creative multi talent. Since 1967 he appeared in more than 50 feature films. He played in films such as Stanley Kubricks CLOCKWORK ORANGE and BARRY LYNDON, in RAMBO with Sylvester Stallone,

ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS with David Bowie, BEVERLY HILLS COP with Eddie Murphy and UNDER THE CHERRY MOON with Prince. Berkoff, who studied acting and pantomime, is known for his theatre appearances as Richard II, Hamlet and Macbeth. He stages plays that are performed on theatres around the world. In addition, Berkoff publishes poems and books about theatre and film. One of his latest books is a collection of anecdotes about his work with Kubrick, Roman Polanski, Joan Collins and many more.

JOHN SHRAPNEL (Archbishop)

John Shrapnel's filmography includes over 50 international feature films and TV movies. Shrapnel who is also a well known narrator for audio productions worked with actors such as Russel Crowe in GLADIATOR (Dir. Ridley Scott), Brad Pitt in TROY (Dir.: Wolfgang Petersen) and Kathryn Bigelow and Harrison Ford in K19: THE WIDOW MAKER.

PATRICK GODFREY (Bertram)

Patrick Godfrey's long and distinguished career began in 1966 playing Dr. Hobbs in DIXON OF DOCK GREEN. Several television guest appearances on shows such as DR. WHO (1966, 1971), and Z CARS (1970) lead to a role in the mini series THE SIX OF WIVES OF HENRY VIII (1970). Further television parts included Dr. Forbes in ENEMY AT THE DOOR (1978), Helicanus in PERICLES, PRINCE OF TYRE (1984), Reverend Eager in David Lean's A ROOM WITH A VIEW (1985) Geoffrey Alderney in DO NOT DISTURB (1991), and most recently Rt Hon Michael Foot MP in THE FALKLANDS PLAY (2002). His film career is no less impressive, starting with MISS JULIE (1972) starring Helen Mirren, the Headmaster in John Cleese's CLOCKWISE (1986), and alongside Anthony Hopkins in REMAINS OF THE DAY (1993). More recently Patrick portrayed Leonardo Da Vinci in EVER AFTER (1998), appeared in THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO (2002) alongside Guy Pierce, and starred with Colin Firth in THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST (2002). Patrick is currently filming Lynda La Plante's TRAIL AND RETRIBUTION IX.

LEE INGLEBY (Bernhard)

Lee Ingleby studied for three years at LAMDA. Before graduating, he secured his first role in SOLDIER SOLDIER. Numerous television roles followed including the lead role in NATURE BOY directed by Joe Wright for BBC2 and Smike in Matyn Hesford's adaption of NICHOLAS NICKLEBY. It was only a matter of time before Lee made the transition to the big screen; it first came in the Cinderella remake EVER AFTER (1998), starring Drew Barrymore. BORSTAL BOY (2000) was followed by the role of Hollom in the Russell Crowe blockbuster MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD (2003). The part of Stan Shunpike in HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN (2004) raised his profile even further. In 2004 Lee starred alongside Orlando Bloom in HAVEN. Earlier this year Lee starred in the National Theatre's tour of the award winning PILLOWMAN.

INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH SIMON AEBY (Director)

When have you been approached with the project "Headsman" for the first time?

I met Susanne Freund, the writer, when we were both in the jury of the German Max Ophüls Festival. She told me about her project and weeks later I read the first draft of her complex, but compelling medieval story. The middle age has always inspired my imagination. But Susannes intent to portray her protagonist, the executioner, as a character you sympathize with, was certainly a great challenge. It then took more than a dozen screenplay versions and four years to get the story and structure right.

And with the unique screenplay, the cast was falling right into place?

I am a strong believer in a solid cast-ensemble. Any protagonist only becomes valid with a strong antagonist. Steven Berkoff, who portrays the terrifying and ruthless Spanish Inquisitor, was one of the first to commit to the project. He set the standard. ICM loved the screenplay and supported the project at an early stage. With their help, Eddie Marsan, Peter McDonald and Anastasia Griffith dedicated themselves to the project.

Epic films with a historic background like "Gladiator" and "Kingdom of Heaven" fill movie theaters all over the globe. Is "Headsman" trying to buy in on this trend?

First of all, our overall production budget was probably as high as the budget on photocopies on a Hollywood production like "Gladiator". Secondly, the first screenplay version of "Headsman" was written before "Luther", "Passion of Christ" and "Alexander" were made. The subject of a movie predates its budget. In that sense it came close to a miracle that we were even able to make this film.

How difficult is it, to make historic films. like "Headsman" with complex special effects, elaborate costumes and vast set constructions in Europe?

We travelled from Luxemburg to Lithuania, from Germany to Rumania to find the perfect medieval setting. Finally, the ancient Austrian town of "Hall" was built entirely on a large studio-lot outside of Budapest. The executioners home, an authentic 1500 farm house, was set in a deserted Austrian mountain valley in the Steiermark. In order to guarantee editing continuity, all horses, carriages, extras and props had to be shipped more than 1500 kilometers from Hungary to Austria. All costumes were fabricated according to specifications from my costume designer and were custom made in Madrid.

How about the crew, this sounds like a possible language barrier?

Hungary provided an excellent crew of builders, set constructors, scenic painters and special effects people. Many of the big Hollywood movies are shot in Hungary, so to them a big production is nothing out of the ordinary. We had crew-members from six

different countries, but the language on the set was English. Only problem for me was to communicate with the older generation of the Hungarian extras. They don't speak any English and everything had to be repeated in Hungarian by a translator - which to me often sounded like he spoke five times as many words as I used.

Compared to other epic historic movies, what makes "The Headsman" unique?

It was my goal to tell a compelling, medieval story as realistic and authentic as possible - like jumping back in time. I looked at every historic movie I could get my hands on, studied paintings from Bosch, Breugel and Van Eyck in order to get the right visual "feel". In that regard Johan Huizinga's book "Herbst des Mittelalters" was a great source of inspiration. "Headsman" tells a dramatic and romantic story of ordinary people trapped in a time of radical change. We witness a turbulent period of human history, a period of hope and despair, love, passion, ambition and betrayal. Very contemporary themes. What more can you ask for in a great film?

INTERVIEW SUSANNE FREUND (Screenplay Author)

Four years ago the Austrian writer Susanne Freund wrote the first version of the screenplay for "The Headsman".

Susanne Freund, what was so fascinating about a headsman?

On one hand I asked myself – what kind of people were these headsmen and how did the profession come into being? On the other hand it was my fascination with the 16th century. This was the beginning of the modern times, a century of inventions and science. At the same time the 16th century is the prelude to one of the darkest periods of mankind, comparable to the 20th century. The character of the Headsman intensifies the modern and the medieval. In contrast with the church, Martin stands for Christian values, at the same time he is also a man, who kills by order and executes judgments

On the set of „The Headsman“ you can see the characters, you created four years ago come alive. How do you feel as an author in such a moment?

I was standing, pondering, for a long time. They were shooting the opening scene. John Shrapnel who plays the archbishop was sitting on a long table. I almost couldn't believe that an actor, who I've just seen in „Gladiator“, is speaking the lines, I had written! I was deeply impressed.

INTERVIEW NIKOLAI COSTER-WALDAU (Martin)

Nikolai Coster-Waldau you play the role of Martin. What kind of a person is he?

Martin is a simple, innocent man who gets caught up in a political world he doesn't understand. It's also the story of a man meeting the love of his life and not being able to live his life in peace because of other people's choices and decisions.

What attracted you in the part of Martin?

It's a very untypical main character: Martin is a man who is killing people for a living but then he fights for justice and becomes some sort of a hero. I liked that conflict. And of course I also liked the whole idea of the relationship between George and Martin. Their lives are determined by pure chance, but Martin starts to fight the system when he feels he has to perform something which is unjust and against his personal conviction.

In your profession as an actor do you also fight for your professional convictions?

Martin hasn't learned the art of compromise - but that is what you have to learn in modern life and in this profession.

Does religion and spirituality play a role in your personal life?

Yes of course, how can you live in this world without faith? I live in a Christian society, I was married in church, and my children were baptized. Yes, it's very important to me.

INTERVIEW ANASTASIA GRIFFITH (Anna)

Anastasia Griffith for you personally: what is the book „The Headsman“ all about?

I guess you always take it from your characters' point of view, it's obviously based on history, it's a story of persecution – but also a story of humanity and of individuals trying to make a difference.

You play a very strong woman: Anna – what does she represent to you?

She and Martin represent the humane aspect of the story. Anna grew up in a very masculine environment and had to take on a lot of responsibility for the family at an early age. As the Headman's daughter she grew up as an outcast of society and was very isolated. As a result she was an almost modern woman. In the world she lives in, her thoughts and values represent the dawn of modernism.

When you read a script what makes you decide to accept a role?

For me it's about strong women. I can't think of anything more dull than playing the typical tipsy, unintelligent female. The part of Anna is a role of a strong, passionate but also loving and sensitive woman. These elements were very appealing to me in addition to playing in a historic film.

INTERVIEW PETER MACDONALD (George)

What is the story “The Headsman” all about?

Essentially it's about the relationship of two guys growing up in an orphanage together. It is about their personal stories and conflicts during the times of political and religious reformation and inquisition.

What kind of character is prior George?

George is someone who deeply believes in the faith of the Catholic Church. He is quite a tolerant man to start with, essentially he is a good man. His position as a prior is a position of power and authority, but he is not ruthless enough for the job. He is conscience-stricken with what he has to do in order to deal with the Anabaptist, a group that opposed the solemn authority of the church. Ultimately he finds out, that he is quite weak and that he doesn't really have the true conviction he thought he had.

You grew up in Ireland where in our days the church still plays an important role - did you have an affinity to the part of George because of your upbringing?

No, the church is not as important as it used to be. My affinity to the role is more based on the fact that George is ultimately a very humane character. He makes a lot of mistakes and he is quite a complicated character. This was appealing to me.

INTERVIEW STEVEN BERKHOFF (Inquisitor)

Steven Berkhoff for you personally: what is the book "The Headsman" all about?

It's a very unusual and complicated story of a village in middle Europe in a time of terrible religious conflict. It's a story of intolerance and of what happens when fear and terror take hold of a town, which is then controlled and brutally investigated by religious fundamentalism. For me the script "The Headsman" has similarities to Arthur Millers play "The Crucible".

Like in many other roles before you play again a very dark and powerful character - the Inquisitor. Wouldn't you like to play once a compassionate, loving, sensitive character?

No, not at all! I like to do what I am being cast to do. It is like the work of a painter. Goya for example was recognized for drawing these tremendous paintings of abuse, pain and tragedy. As an actor you have to find your way and your goal, and it didn't do any harm to actors like Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Edward. G. Robinson, they always played dark characters - in a way that becomes your function.

The script is a harsh criticism against the church - against fundamentalism? Does religion and spirituality play a role in your personal life?

Very much so. I consider myself not a religious person but most definitely a spiritual person.

I feel a strong connection to my spiritual side. My actions even in taking on a role will be influenced by the content. When it has a negative content I would be very reluctant to take the part.

You have been playing in a lot of Hollywood productions – is there a distinct difference between Hollywood versus European productions?

Not so much, techniques and methods have become universal. There could be a difference in the temperament, in the nature of it and in the concern for the esthetic value.

Six European countries co produced this film, six languages are spoken on the set, and the director is from Switzerland. Is there a problem of communication with all these nationalities and languages?

Not a bit. In fact I find it easier to communicate with people from six different European nations than to communicate with one nation in one language in Los Angeles. The variety of cultures creates a tastier stew – I like this very much.