

**In Conversation with Jan Ole Gerster, writer/director of *A Coffee in Berlin* (formerly titled *Oh Boy*), at AFI Fest 2012**

I had the chance to sit down with German filmmaker Jan Ole Gerster to discuss his debut feature *Oh Boy*, which had its North American premiere at AFI Fest 2012.

**Kim Luperi:** *Oh Boy* is featured in the Breakthrough section of AFI Fest. Can you tell me how the film was selected to be included?

**Jan Ole Gerster:** We sat down, looked at the festivals we loved, submitted it, and it was accepted. It's hard to believe, because there are so many great filmmakers applying here, and it's a great honor to be here.

**KL:** What was it about this idea that interested you? Was any of it based on your personal experiences?

**JG:** I went through the same phase as my main character when I came to Berlin in my early 20s, and, at one point, I noticed a lot of my friends went through a similar period. This is the time when a lot of people start to question their decisions when they get older - like am I on the right track, will this be what I do for the rest of my life, does it make me happy? So I thought one or two people may relate to that story.

**KL:** *Oh Boy* is your feature debut, and you are credited as the writer and director. What was the writing process like?

**JG:** First of all, without thinking about shooting the script or going out with it right away, I wrote it because I had to; it all came out of intuition. I wrote scripts before but in a very analytic way - how to write a script, how to create a character, how to build dramatic conflict - all these things they teach you in school, and I was a little unsatisfied with these scripts, because I felt like I was a hypocrite, and I didn't know what I was talking about. At that point, I thought it was worth having a closer look at my personal life. They also taught that in film school - stories have to be personal but not necessarily private. It's easy to say but hard to do.

**KL:** Tom Schilling does an amazing job in this film, as do the supporting actors. Can you tell me what the casting process was like? Was Tom your first choice for the role of Niko?

**JG:** Tom Schilling is a good friend of mine; we've known each other for 11 years now. Even though I'm a big fan of his work, I didn't have him in mind when I was writing, and the only reason for that was when I wrote the first draft of the script a couple of years ago, Tom

looked very young. I thought he felt too young to go through these conflicts people go through in their late 20s. Luckily, financing took so long, and Tom aged a bit as well.

Another thing they taught us in film school is that casting is 50% of directing actors. If you have the right people, you just have to sit back and watch them do it. After I got Tom, I could think about the other characters. Many of the supporting actors are famous in German cinema. A few of them I knew from work before, but I was a fan of most of the others. I sent them the script, and the feedback was very positive; almost all of them agreed to be part of the project.

**KL: The black and white cinematography is beautiful, but it is hardly used anymore in film. Why did you decide to shoot this way?**

**JG:** I thought it felt right to explore the city in a new way, because everything in my neighborhood seemed so familiar. This film is about everyday life, and I like to put this life under some kind of visual microscope. To me, things in black and white appear more clearly than in color, and it was necessary to draw a distance from my own world and my own life. Usually, it is the other way around.

There are also many other movies that try so hard to portray the young generation that lives in Berlin in 2012, and I was a bit afraid that it could have been reduced to a generation piece, but at the same time, I wanted to give it a timeless aspect. One of the beautiful parts of this film is that it is made by close friends - not just Tom, but the cinematographer (Phillip Kirsamer) is one of my closest friends – and we had the same opinion of how to shoot the city. Ever since the wall came down, Berlin has been constantly changing, and we tried to capture the city in the way we see it and what we appreciate about it, not only in a positive way but documenting the development of the city as well.

**KL: The score - made up of mostly jazz music - was an interesting choice. What made you choose this type of music?**

**JG:** The jazz music came into the editing process very late. To be honest, I was not thinking about jazz when I wrote it. I always knew I wanted to do a movie where the music is its own character, but I originally was thinking of more singer-songwriter music. At one point, I heard this jazz song on the radio, and I thought that jazz music has this ability to put things in an ironic context. I have this ironic view of Berlin and the people that live there, and I thought jazz music fits perfectly with how I wanted to show Berlin. We had four jazz musicians from the University of Arts in Berlin score the movie in two weeks.

There's also another artist, a young pop musician from South Africa, who moved to Berlin three years ago. My friend asked her to score all the parts which represent the inside of the character. So, it's basically split into two parts. She scored Niko and the jazz musicians scored the city.

**KL:** Many describe this movie was a tragicomedy. Several small, funny things happen to Niko, but he seems to just regard these incidents as part of his everyday life, which is what I found sort of tragic. Of course, I also found it sad that Niko has this amazing city around him, but he hasn't been able to find his place in it. When you first set out to make this film, what genre did you see it falling in to?

**JG:** Most of my favorite movies you can't really tell what the genre is, especially with European movies of 60s and 70s. I was not thinking about genre, but I was thinking about this mixture of tragedy and comedy that I appreciate so much in other movies. I think it's one of the biggest challenges to combine the two, but I'm convinced it takes comedy to tell something very tragic and vice versa.

**KL:** It seems that all Niko wanted, all day, was a cup of coffee. I really liked this gag throughout the film. Can you speak any more about it?

**JG:** I was aware that he's a very passive kind of character, and even though I wanted him to be passive, I thought maybe he should have a tiny little aim that day, something that he can chase. It was also a symbol of waking up - for me, the day never starts without coffee - and I liked this little metaphor behind it.

**KL:** Was it a conscious decision to leave the ending rather open-ended?

**JG:** We discussed the ending a lot - not me, but a lot of people who read the script. The interesting part about the ending is that when I screen the movie people have thousands of opinions as to what goes on. That is something I enjoy very much, because for me the worst thing a movie can do is answer all your questions. I wanted to create an ending that starts the thinking process.

**KL:** What's next for you?

**JG:** Well, when I started this whole process, I never thought for one second I would end up here in Los Angeles. I thought we might get a small German release, but now I can't tell you how exciting it feels to go out with the experience of making my first movie and traveling the world with it. I'm touring with the movie right now, showing it, enjoying it; it makes me very happy, and I will go on doing it for a while. I am preparing a new script as well, so I'll spend next year writing something new.