

February 13-19, 2004

Roland Reber on movies & censorship

Director, producer, writer, cinematographer and actor; Roland Reber is definitely one of a kind in his own field. He wrote and directed the feature "The Room - Das Zimmer". This movie won the President's Award at the International Film festival Cine 2000 in Mexico, and the 2001 Emerging Filmmaker Award at the International AngelCiti Film Festival, Hollywood. In Chicago "The Room - Das Zimmer" won the Jury Award for Best Foreign Movie and the Best Feature Award in Thessaloniki, Greece. He directed the short-films "Compulsion" (2000), "Der Koffer - The Suitcase" (1999), "Manuel" (1998), "Der Fernsehauftritt" (1998). In Mira Gittner's "Call It Love" Roland played the leading male role. For years, Roland Reber was hired as a director and leading actor in famous German theatres e.g. Bochum, Duesseldorf and Hamburg. Afterwards, he founded the World Theatre Project of the United Nations and worked there as director, writer and coordinator, together with actors and actresses from Jamaica, Russia, India, the Caribbean and Germany. Roland won the well known "Season of Excellence" Award twice, as best director and best writer for "Stranger than the Moon" and "Beyond the Horizon". He came to the recent film festival as one of the jury members; a retrospective of his films was also held during the festival. **Rafi Hossain** talked to him recently about his movies, and the curse of censorship that is ripe in Bangladesh.

Rafi Hossain: With "Das Zimmer" you've won a spate of awards. How did it change things for you?

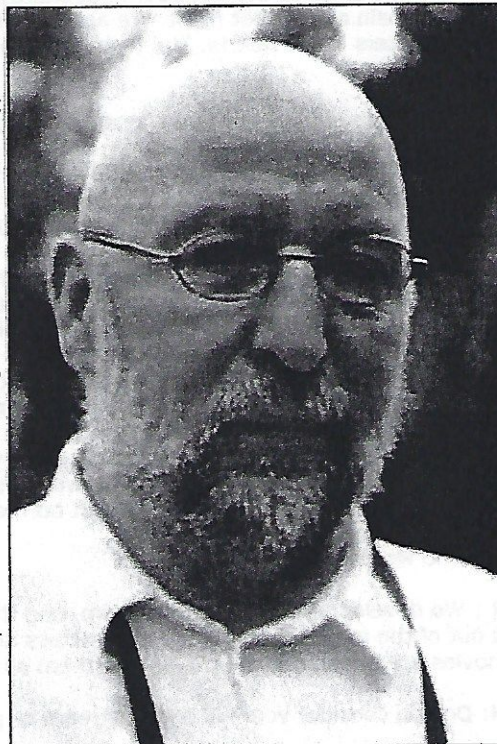
Roland Reber: That was great because a lot of people there didn't believe in us.

R H: How did you go from Bavaria into the international film business?

R R: Because of Mira Gittner. After the Bavaria success she sent out copies of "das Zimmer" all around the world. As soon as I found out, I started to make fun of her and told her that it was useless and nobody would even answer us. And then suddenly invitations came flying into the door and everybody called us the surprise moviemakers. We travelled from Hungary to Spain and it was fun.

R H: When did it get serious?

R R: When we needed a lobbyist. We already had an invitation to go to the film festival in Mexico and we needed someone who loved public appearances and who would speak for us: Marina Anna Eich. She loved it. Mira, on the other hand, is shy but extremely talented. ...and we won! We were astounded. Just for fun we thought about what we would say if we win but I knew this would never happen. And then they announced: "The President's Award for the best feature film: Das Zimmer." It took a while until we knew that they meant us.



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R H: How did you feel at that moment?

R R: Mira the actress of my film didn't want to go to Hollywood beyond the film festival. Gordon Weaver from Paramount who is part of the Oscar committee told us: You will go to Hollywood; I'll work it out for you. We flew out here two weeks early without Mira. Everything had changed in Bavaria. Now we were well liked and Mira even became producer of the year with a Bavaria documentary.

R H: What did you put in your suitcase on the way to Hollywood?

R R: Our movie "Das Zimmer" and a copy of the short film we finished in a couple of days. Marina and I wrote the screenplay in two hours and played the main roles while Mira directed it. This production was so popular in Hollywood as if we had invested \$20 million. We used it to convince the president of Raleigh-Studios, who then offered us an office.

R H: And then came Hollywood and the Angel Citi Festival...

R R: There we really thought that we had no chance. This was too big, nobody knew us. There were only Americans who won and during the ceremony I had to go to the bathroom but waited to be polite. However, we won the main award that night. We are not interested in money. We are moviemakers in our hearts. The festival in Chicago lies ahead of us and then we'll see.

R H: What type of films are you concentrating on now?

R R: I work mainly with dramas and full length features, which deal with psychological matters. I try to find out what is beyond the surface; what is the meaning of life. We just finished our trilogy about this quest. The first one, 'The Room' received several awards all over the world, from New York to Melbourne; this was a type of thriller. The second was called 'Dark Comedy'; it is about five young women who try to solve all their problems by means of black magic. The final one is called 'The Dark Side of Our Inner Space'; it is a provocative drama about a group of young people who try to create a world without any rules inside an old army barrack. After that, the next of my films is sure to be a very controversial one; it is called 'Osama my love'. In my opinion, the entire September 11 saga was the biggest fake in history. This film focuses on the story from a different point of view; it will be shot in America, India and an Arab country from the viewpoints of normal people.

R H: Who writes your scripts?

R R: We develop all our ideas as a team, and then I write the final script out of the minds of all the involved actors and actresses. And then the movies are made, and we travel with them all over the world.

R H: Do you consider yourself a mainstream or parallel film maker?

R R: I have nothing to do with the German film market. Our films are sold in over 50 countries; they are all in German, but are dubbed for the international market I would not make the definition of being a German film maker; I have been out of Germany too long. The current situation there is that most of our film makers have died, and the younger generation are leaning towards becoming Hollywood film makers. We have often been compared to theatre groups because it is in that style that we operate.

R H: So you all work as a team?

R R: We have a small permanent team, and a huge crew. It all depends on the nature of the movie that we are making.

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R H: How many films have you made in total?

R R : Six full length features, and I don't know how many shorts. This year alone, we are working on two full length movies; we are also planning for two more movies next year. So we are booked up for quite some time.

R H: Who finances and produces your movies?

R R : All the financing is done by us. We also use our own equipment and do our own editing. In short, we are a fully independent unit. When I started to make films I promised myself that I would never (and I have kept this promise) rent the cameras or rent the sound systems etc. We have our own studio, our own cameras and everything. Our offices are in Germany and Hollywood. Our reputation has brought in many offers of financing or joint productions, but we are always given full authority over what we make.

RH: Does financing play a crucial part in the making of a film?

RR: I saw this movie at a film festival in Mexico that had been made by an American with only five thousand dollars. Despite its budget, the movie was excellent. So money is not always required for a good film.

R H: What is your opinion of film in Bangladesh?

R R : In Germany, the picture we get of Bangladesh is that it is teeming with tropical diseases, censorship of the press and of course the tale of Taslima Nasreen. Personally, I object on commenting on a country that I've never been to. Our world is dominated by fakes, which call themselves news services, so I prefer to build my own opinions. After coming to Bangladesh for the festival, I found the people to be very hardworking and enthusiastic; but I also notice the problems. The biggest problem in this festival was the censorship. A film festival is a type of promotion for a country that can bypass the common notions that exist throughout the world. Personalities that are well known in their own countries visit Bangladesh, and the government should try their best to make a good impression on them that the can take back to their people. Kolkata is a good example; I know of many people who had their opinions of the reportedly grimy and polluted city changed overnight after coming to the film festival. In India, there is censorship, but there are also exemptions for the international film festivals; this is the way it should be.

R H: Are your films morbid or explicit in any way?

R R : In a way yes, you can see more than in any Bangladeshi films. Most countries allow the screening of extremely graphic violence, but if a film shows a naked woman, it is promptly banned. A question can be asked of what exactly is more damaging to society, death or a naked body. The entire concept is flawed and illogical. If anybody is offended at a movie, it is up to him or her to leave the cinema hall. Audiences taking part in the festival are taking part in a dialogue between two countries. If this involves the mention of a human being's most powerful elements, his sexuality, there should not be so much bad hype. If you rule the sexuality of a society, then you rule the society; make them free in their sexuality and you liberate society; there is no need to protect someone from their own body.

R H: Are you influenced by other directors?

R R : No, there are many that I like, but none that have affected my work in any way. That is a problem with many German directors; they try to imitate Hollywood directors. We have no such influences.

R H: Over how many years have you made the six feature films?

The first one was in 1977, after which I became involved in theatre and politics. I came back to film making in 1998.

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R H: What type of politics were you involved in?

R R :I worked together with UNESCO, I was given special cultural dialogue matters; my job took me all over the world, but it is a period of my life that I would like to forget. International politics is a very dirty business.

R H: What is your opinion on the Iraq war?

R R :The war is a crime. I thought that after the time of Hitler this would never come, that a single man like Bush could be allowed to reign free. It was seen by his acts in America after the September 11 attacks that there were no civil rights. It was just like Hitler had done decades ago. America wanted their pipeline from Uzbekistan to the Black Sea; thus they need Afghanistan. In the time of the Taliban, this was impossible, so the Americans deposed them. The excuse: Al Qaeda. Then the US decided that they needed Iraq's oil, and hence the next war was born. I still remember when Rumsfeld hugged and kissed the Iraqi premier, as they and their countries were very close. Once again, an excuse was created: WMDs. The entire world has the right to question this matter. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a new enemy was required. It came in the form of Osama Bin Laden, Yasir Arafat, Saddam Hussein etc.

RH: Why is censorship dangerous for a festival such as this one?

R R : With all this censorship, people may lose interest in these movies. And that is a big problem for the Bangladeshi film makers. If a critical movie were to be done on Bangladesh, I would act as a great promotion of the country. The international community will realise that the country recognises its problems and they allow the description of those problems. But seeing a woman dancing around a tree, singing songs seems to be a fully local thing. If I were to approach a fellow director on the prospects of a co-production in an international film, there would most likely be interest. Mentioning that it would be in a people like, let's say, Australia, there is a good chance that the other will agree because of the favourable situation and scope in the country. But if I were to say Bangladesh, their first question would be "Is shooting free?", or "Are there any restrictions?" An answer in the affirmative would all but nullify the proposal. So the first thing for international cooperation is that a country must make sure that art can exist freely without any hindrance. If a film were made about the country, surely it would be promoted; it may even win some awards. All this would help improve Bangladesh's image abroad.

RH: How can foreign examples help the local scene?

RR: Instead of just coming to the country and simply lecturing, visiting film makers should stay for longer periods and really share ideas and expressions with the populace and their local counterparts. Sharing can achieve far more than just teaching. In my opinion, movies should always be a voice for those who cannot speak out for themselves. Many film makers today simply want fame, and are willing to sidestep their ethics.

RH: Thank you for your time

RR: Thank You