

'Peacock': Venice Review

BY **ALLAN HUNTER** | 31 AUGUST 2024

Albrecht Schuch headlines this assured Austrian debut as a paid companion whose facade starts to crumble



**SOURCE: VENICE FILM FESTIVAL
'PEACOCK'**

Dir/scr: Bernhard Wenger. Austria/Germany. 2024. 102 mins

Being yourself is the hardest challenge of all in *Peacock*. Writer/director Bernhard Wenger's witty debut feature follows a man whose profession demands deception, which starts to undermine any chance of him having a real life. The smart concept, social commentary and a strong central performance from Albrecht Schuch combine to create a polished, slyly entertaining work that should attract arthouse audiences following a world premiere in Venice Critics Week.

A polished, slyly entertaining work

Schuch (a 2023 BAFTA nominee for *All Quiet On The Western Front*), stars as Matthias, a key member of the Good Companion organisation. Blandly handsome, well mannered and very presentable, he is available for hire as the ideal companion for tricky social situations. He will pose as your perfect partner for the evening, as a close friend or a loyal son, and do everything to make you look good. The great pretender, he refuses any gratuity for his services and only asks for a favourable review on the company's website.

Matthias is so good at his job that it is beginning to become a problem in his private life. A people pleaser who never wants to rock the boat or cause offence, his placid manner is becoming insufferable for his girlfriend Sophia (Julia Franz Richter). Wenger and production designer Katharina Haring effectively convey the couple's affluent lifestyle through a spacious modern home with gleaming interiors and expensive artefacts, including a leather polar bear that is sure to impress any visitors. Social status seemed to be defined by the size of your wine glasses and whether your showstopper dessert elicits a gasp of admiration.

When Sophia leaves him, Matthias is plunged into an existential crisis and some intensive soul-searching. Almost like Sandra Huller's Ines in *Toni Erdmann* (2016), Matthias is someone who needs more spontaneity in his life, and Schuch's performance captures the tensions within the character. He presents himself as someone in control, attentive and alert to the needs of others, but a look of panic or alarm is never far from his eyes. He is caught in a game and just waiting to be found out. As his lonely life starts to unravel, his implacable facade crumbles and he even starts to question what is real or contrived. Is the lovely Ina (Theresa Frostad Eggesbo) being genuine with him, for example, or could a colleague have hired her to cheer him up?

As Matthias is faced with unhappy clients and chances to define his future, Wenger reveals his affinities with Yorgos Lanthimos and Ruben Ostlund in his approach to human vulnerability and social critique. *Peacock* is set in a society where status and privilege count more than compassion or honesty. There is something of Lanthimos in the birthday celebrations and naked yoga retreat that Matthias attends (complete with contemplation lawn). There are echoes of Ostlund in a class of people under the spell of pretentious art, entitlement and vanity.

Wenger's smoothly structured debut is peppered with dry comic moments designed to push Matthias towards breakdown or reinvention. His humour is also visual, evident in interruptions from a

menagerie of unwelcome animals (including a duck, a dog and the titular peacock), and a scene in which Matthias and Sophia are stopped in silence at traffic lights whilst a tram glides past full of uninhibited party animals, seeming to symbolise everything that is wrong with their relationship. Throughout, Schuch's sincere performance and comic timing ensures that Matthias remains a sympathetic presence as he navigates the horrors and opportunities of a brave new life based on honesty.

Production companies: NGF Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion, Cala Filmproduktion

International sales: mk2 Films, intlsales@mk2.com

Producers: Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Markus Glaser, Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer

Cinematography: Albin Wildner

Production design: Katharina Haring

Editing: Rupert Holler

Music: Lukas Laueremann

Main cast: Albrecht Schuch, Julia Franz Richter, Anton Noori, Maria Hofstatter