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# Peacock

## Peacock



Venice Film Festival

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# **VERDICT:** A professional friend-for-hire wakes up to the existential horror of his work in Austrian writer-director Bernhard Wenger's sharp-witted, superbly acted black comedy.

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Stephen Dalton

September 5th, 2024

Imagine if you could hire somebody by the hour to role-play as your perfect friend, partner, son, father or cultured confidante. Such is the premise of Austrian writer-director Bernhard Wenger's witty and meticulously crafted debut feature *Peacock*, which sounds like an absurdist invention, but it is actually inspired by real friend-for-hire agencies in Japan. Headlined by rising German star Albert Schuch (*System Crasher*, *All Quiet in the Western Front*), this droll black comedy has been one of the stand-out sidebar premieres at the ongoing 81st Venice film festival, where it is screening as part of Critics' Week. Positive reviews, a sharp-witted script and universally relatable themes should help secure more festival bookings, plus audience and sales interest beyond German-speaking regions.

*Peacock* works as both nimble farce and broader satirical allegory, highlighting the performative fakery that underpins bourgeois good manners in all societies, and the constructed personas that many of us present in an image-driven consumerist society. At times it comes close to the withering critical tone of more acerbic directors like Ruben Östlund, but Wenger is more empathetic and merciful than that. His

intent is to gently mock his flawed characters and their superficial values, not to burn the whole rotten system to the ground. The sardonic social snapshot he presents could almost be a 21st century update of fellow Austrian Robert Musil's classic modernist novel *A Man Without Qualities*, but with better jokes, and more dogs.

Conveying a faint edge of existential panic behind his permanently bemused expression, Shuch gives a magnetic, tightly controlled, balletic performance as Matthias, the co-founder and chief asset of a Vienna-based friend-for-hire company. Well-mannered, blandly handsome and immaculately groomed, with a comically neat Ned Flanders moustache, Matthias plays a versatile range of fantasy companions for paying customers: attentive (but strictly platonic) date for older women, boyfriend of a man hoping to rent a fancy apartment available to couples only, impressive air-pilot father for a schoolboy whose real dad is absent, adoring son to an odious businessman who needs to score social leverage at his lavish 60th birthday party.

Throughout all these assignments, Matthias smiles politely, sticks to his script and makes the client look good. He's a smooth operator and earns consistently excellent reviews. Below the surface, however, all this slick fakery is taking a psychological toll on the real Matthias, assuming his true self still exists. His girlfriend Sophie (Julia Franz Richter) has begun to see him as is a hollow man, too passive and pliant, devoid of firm values or personality. When she walks out, leaving Matthias alone in their clinically beautiful modernist house, his brittle self-image starts to crack. A flirtatious encounter with a Norwegian woman, Ina (Theresa Frostad Eggesbø), seems to promise a fresh start,

but it falls apart when neither can fully trust the other's public facade. Is everybody acting? Is every friendship transactional?

Meanwhile at work, Matthias is starting to learn that even his most positive interactions can have negative real-world consequences. After one of his clients leaves her bullying husband following a paid role-playing session, the husband begins stalking Matthias, angrily demanding to know how and why he destroyed their marriage. These sequences darken the film from absurdist comedy to psychological thriller, with jump scares and threats of violence hanging in the air.

With Matthias heading for some kind of breakdown, Wenger amplifies his deepening despair with sharp visual gags and surreal twists: a duck breaks into his car, a paint-splattering performance art show disrupted by an apparent poisoning, a comically inept street mugging with a shameful twist, plus recurring jokes about plumbing problems and rented dogs. Albin Wildner's crisp, chilly, precisely composed cinematography is an asset here, its cool detachment serving the deadpan humour.

By the time its high-stakes finale looms, *Peacock* feels like it could explode in multiple directions: blistering political satire, horror movie, nightmarish psychodrama. Disappointingly, Wenger settles for a fairly traditional social farce that relies a little too heavily on the stuffy clients who have hired Matthias being priggish, pompous snobs. A perfectly sensible resolution for a light comedy, but it sidelines the film's deeper class critique, shutting down its weirder undercurrents of Kafka-esque absurdism and Kaufman-esque surrealism. It is hard to



imagine a prickly provocateur like Östlund settling for such a tastefully restrained pay-off. Even so, this rare comic gem is consistently good fun from start to finish, all dancing along on Schuch's graceful, spring-heeled performance.

*Director, screenwriter: Bernhard Wenger*

*Cast: Albrecht Schuch, Julia Franz Richter, Anton Noori, Theresa Frostad*

*Eggesbø, Salka Weber, Maria Hofstätter, Branko Samarovski, Tilo Nest,*

*Christopher Schärf, Marlene Hauser*

*Cinematography: Albin Wildner*

*Editing: Rupert Höller*

*Music: Lorenz Dangel*

*Production designer: Katharina Haring*

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

*Production companies: NGF Geyrhalterfilm (Austria), CALA Filmproduktion (Germany)*

*World sales: MK2*

*Venue: Venice Film Festival (Critics' Week)*

*In German, English*

*102 minutes*



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