

Le Prince

Press Kit





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Logline

When curator Monika gets mixed up in a raid in Frankfurt's seedy Bahnhofsviertel district, she meets the Congolese businessman Joseph. This chance encounter turns into an intense love affair. But despite their love, mutual distrust grows, the consequences of which end up spiraling out of control.



Synopsis

Two people whose lives could hardly be more disparate meet in Frankfurt's seedy *Bahnhofsviertel* district. Monika (mid-40s) is a curator in the city's art and culture scene. When accidentally caught up in a raid, she meets Joseph, a Congolese businessman keeping himself afloat with import-export deals while searching for investors in a diamond mine in the Congo. An intense love

affair grows from their unusual encounter. Although they both believe they can prevail in the face of external pressure and prejudice, distrust gradually seeps into their relationship. Inexorably, their lives become the stage of postcolonial conflicts. Is it even possible for Monika and Joseph to love each other on equal terms?



Crew

Producers

Jonas Dornbach, Janine Jackowski,
and Maren Ade

Commissioning Editors

Claudia Tronnier – ZDF – Das kleine Fernsehspiel

Line Producer

Ben von Döbeneck

Production Manager

Valeska Bochow

Cinematography

Jenny Lou Ziegel

Editing

Bettina Böhler

Production Design

Marie-Luise Balzer

Costume Design

Sandra Ernst

Hair and Make-up

Dörte Dobkowitz

Original Sound

Johannes Schmelzer-Ziringer

Sound Design & Re-recording

Kai Tebbel

Casting

Ulrike Müller, Katrin Vorderwülbecke

Screenplay

Hannes Held, Lisa Bierwirth

Director

Lisa Bierwirth

Cast

Ursula Strauss

Passi Balende

Nsumbo Tango Samuel

Victoria Trauttmansdorff

Alex Brendemühl

Hanns Zischler

and **Douglas Gordon**

Technical Specs

2021

DCP

1:1,85

5.1. Mix

125 Min



Interview with Lisa Bierwirth

How did the story of Monica and Joseph begin?

The starting point was my mother Susanne's relationship with her then-husband Erick, who's from Kinshasa, Congo. Despite all the problems, they were a great, dazzling couple – not only in their differences, but also in their resilience, humor and interpersonal dynamics. They had the impulse and self-confidence to narrate such a relationship in the first place.

I must admit that, at the beginning of their relationship, I too was skeptical and wondered if this could end well or whether their “differences” weren't too much to handle. But I gradually understood the strength and courage it takes to live out a love that isn't granted the same chances, that's eyed with suspicion while still maintaining its closeness and intimacy.

From there, I started intense research and held a lot of conversations to find out what

exactly, and more particularly how, one might narrate the challenges of such a partnership. Especially because I was intent on not telling my mother's story.

Where did your research take you?

I considered at the outset the obvious struggles and multi-faceted external pressures that weighed on their relationship – the need to comply with official requirements, the ever-present threat of police checks, and with them the fear of deportation.

At the same time, I felt that my focus was something other than the horror of how difficult it is to get a foothold as an asylum seeker in Germany, or of describing which forms of structural racism are all-pervasive. I was much more interested in the personal struggle between Susanne and Erick. It seemed incredibly complex and challenging. By degrees, I understood that it wasn't



solely rooted in their divergent cultural backgrounds, social environments or origins.

My co-author Hannes Held and I then considered the interplay and internal pressure within such a relationship: A woman from the “prosperous welfare state of Germany” meets a Congolese man, whose previous experience doesn’t include a “functioning state,” who has a completely different paradigm of what it takes to survive. And whose parameters of right and wrong, what’s punishable and what’s not, differ from Monika’s concept of a law-governed state.

While developing the script, we above all tried to understand whether – and if so, then how and where – social and political conditions, and therefore postcolonial structures and conflicts, in particular, are also reflected in the private sphere; to what extent the unequal and unresolved relationships between the so-called First and Third Worlds, of Europe to Africa and vice

versa, are reflected; which perpetrator-victim assignations are concomitant with this and what mistrust can result from it; also the question of how such mistrust becomes antagonistic to a loving relationship.

Monika believes she’s different from her friends and everyone else. She believes she doesn’t share their mistrust. But she’s then forced to conclude that she isn’t free of it either, as a child of her generation and this society. Via Joseph, she’s confronted with something she knows in theory and has reflected upon. In the reality of daily life, this relationship places entirely different demands on her and forces her to examine herself time and again. Which brings her to the limits of her love, too.

Joseph brings this mistrust to the relationship from the offset; to him, it’s a kind of survival strategy based on experience. He’s absolutely determined not to let himself be controlled by anything or anyone. This includes not revealing



everything about himself and showing little vulnerability – which is one reason he’s sometimes unforthcoming. When he says, “My father was colonized, I am not,” it reflects his need for respect and self-determination. Yet sometimes this need also prevents him from having an unbiased and open view. From one moment to the next, Monika ceases to be his partner and turns into “a European,” the enemy personified.

When did the love story become a melodrama?

We favored melodrama as an exaggerated emotional narrative in order to keep the film from getting bogged down in social realism. It allowed us to narrate how the “loving couple” falls victim to conditions that are beyond their control and bigger than they are. Our script consultant Petra Lüschoew put it beautifully: Monika and Joseph are two royal children who can’t be together because the waters are too deep. The film clearly questions the romantic notion that love can conquer all boundaries and invalidate social conventions. One might instead ask whether being able to live out one’s love isn’t a luxury. Or even whether one even means the same thing when one talks about love.

We never questioned that Monika and Joseph really do love each other – that was the basic premise. They experience something like love at first sight, albeit



behind a garbage can, to no fanfare, and without the Titanic orchestra in the background. I was often asked during the writing phase why they fall in love at all, and if Monika doesn't need a reason to fall in love with this "shifty, inscrutable Congolese guy." It's fascinating how we naturally accept Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant falling in love after a raid, but the same doesn't go for Monika and Joseph.

Now I'm curious to see how the film is received internationally. I'd imagine that in Germany this relationship model will meet with very different reactions or pushback than it will in France, the US or other countries with more African diaspora.

Joseph and Monika both want a chance, neither wants to be "Mr. or Mrs. so-and-so" in their lives. Why must they still fail?

I wouldn't say they fail per se. To me, they're heroes because they're audacious, be it in their private or professional lives, while their respective environments are much more rigid and inflexible. Monika and Joseph really get things swinging. But yes, you could claim that, in the classical sense, they fail. He ends up in construction despite his every wish to the contrary, and she doesn't get the job. And over and above that, their relationship doesn't survive.

It's important to ask what conditions and mechanisms are at play here. Why, for example, doesn't Monika get the job, and what is it about Peter that allows him to have a career? What's the reason for their relationship failing to survive? And what does that in turn tell us about the society in which we live?

I always viewed Monika and Joseph as "lonely wolves," a condition or feeling that unites them. He may be an asylum seeker, but he won't accept the claustrophobic space assigned him in Germany. Joseph is evidently stigmatized and marginalized, with nothing left but to go it alone. And Monika, too, recognizes that things are getting tight and lonely in the field society affords her as a childless woman in her mid-40s without a spectacular career – she indeed gets sympathy for this. She herself suddenly has the sensation of vanishing.

The great thing is that the two of them don't let it get them down, even if they do shed some feathers. In the end they can embrace and meet as equals in all their fragility and sincere mutual care, their eyes unaverted, then they're somehow victorious!



Monika bears zeitgeist, will and humor with strength and nonchalance; she's a true-to-life heroine. Can you describe the development of her character?

I find it hard to retrace how Monika became who she is now. It's an amalgamation of many elements, a long process from the first notes to the final cut in which her character continued to emerge and detach itself from my mother.

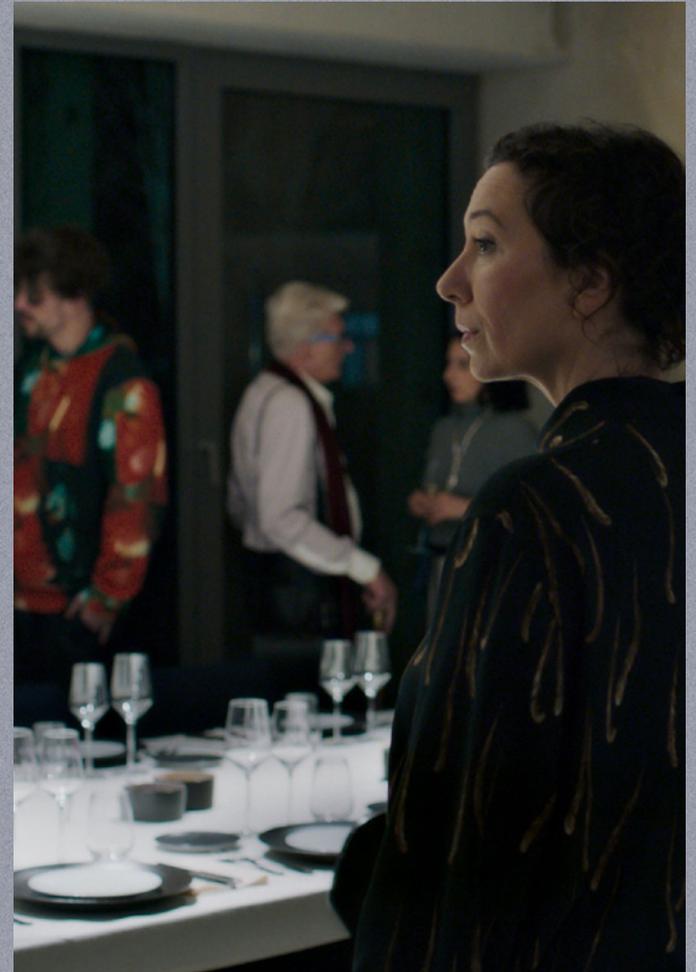
Naturally, this included a sociological study of Monika, her origins and goals. Her complexity grows from the character traits that stand in her way and from the female role models I know and admire, as well as from situations and encounters that we wanted to relate. So there's certainly a little of Hannes and me in Monika, too. Choosing the milieu of the art world was a way to broach the narrative with a terrain that's familiar to me personally before venturing from there onto an unfamiliar field of play, that of the Congolese diaspora.

There was nevertheless a lot of research involved in scripting Monika's profession. To recreate an authentic guided art tour, for example, we needed input from experienced curators and exhibition organizers.

It was important to us for Monika to be a woman from the "normal" art business, the kind people like to portray as all champagne, cocaine and jet-set. That's an oversimplification that really misses the point.

Another reason for placing Monika in the art scene was because the intellectual debate conducted there considers itself elevated above accusations of injustice. We sought the challenge to look for everyday racism precisely where one doesn't immediately suspect or expect it – i.e., beyond the common clichés.

We did, however, have to look in the mirror at times while writing.



Of course it was Ursula Strauss who brought Monika to life and who brought such authenticity to the character.

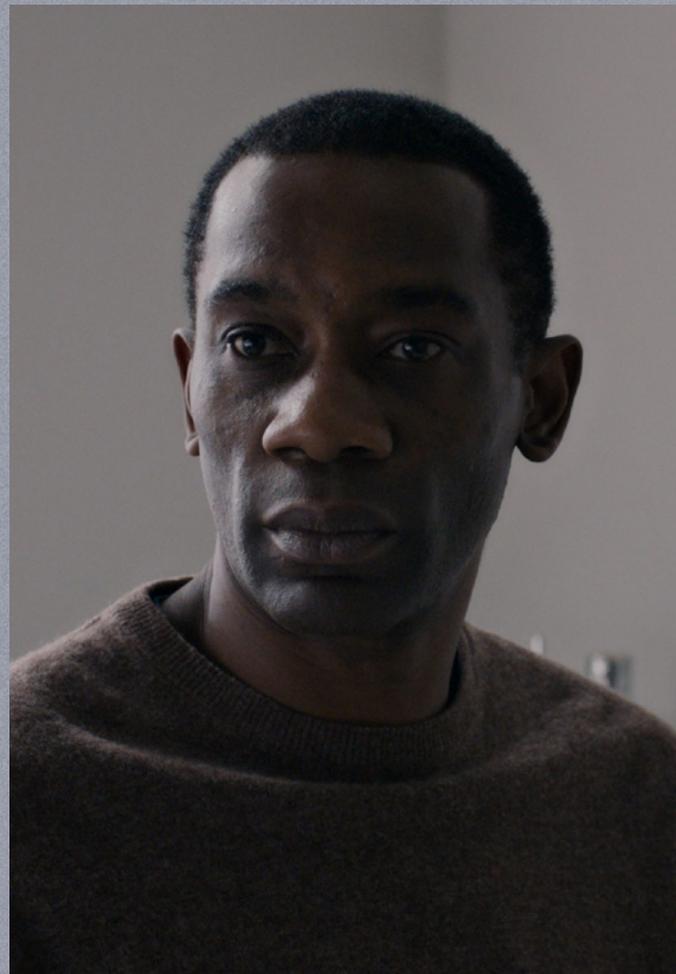
I had her in mind from very early on. Though I did go through a few rounds of casting with other actors, it quickly became clear that it had to be her. Ursula has this incredible way of showing vulnerability without losing her strength, without betraying herself. I was very touched by this permeability. We rehearsed a lot and Ursula truly put all her energy, passion and experience into this film. A wonderful collaboration for which I'm very grateful.

Joseph is constantly on the move and onto some enterprise. He demands respect, a chance. Can you describe the character development of Joseph?

Joseph's character was clearly shaped by Erick – by his wit, resilience, dignity, and pride in not letting things get to him. But also by his mistrust and aggression.

Erick was on board immediately when I told him about the idea and he agreed to do all the interviews. So the character of Joseph had a clear model, yet at the same time required profound research for more details. Time and again, we ran into situations, behavior and questions that we couldn't decrypt, but which at the same time – or indeed because of that – interested us as they opened a vista on the aforementioned questions regarding the relationship between Africa and Europe.

The biggest challenge was to narrate a perspective that isn't and cannot become



mine. With his character, I entered very unfamiliar territory. The question as to whether I could do the perspective justice at all gave me the odd sleepless night. I interviewed a lot of people from the African diaspora, especially Congolese and Angolans, read a lot and constantly cross-referenced fiction with reality. Basically, we tried to research far enough for his character to become accessible.

But despite all the information and knowledge, we decided to write Joseph as a character who cannot be deciphered because he has a strong individual identity. He goes to another country and suddenly no one believes what he says because he can't show ID, because he hasn't had a linear life and is without a recognized high school diploma or university degree – his life has been a series of so-called detours. We don't know where Joseph comes from, who his family is, whether his business is criminal or not, or whether he's really a prince or not. It's all possible. He knows such disparate

people as Donna Angela, who's part of Angola's up-and-coming business elite, but also characters like the unfathomable Ambara.

This is all part of the mistrust construct and will hopefully challenge the viewer as much as it does Monika. What can one rely on if not conventional key data? Can I let my partner be as is and love without understanding everything? Ultimately, it's a matter of intuition.

I held casting calls for a very long time in several countries because I really wanted to cast a Congolese man. After all, we wrote the role for one, we were very specific about the country. Passi Balende was an extraordinary discovery. For so long, I couldn't find anyone who might bear the title of "Le Prince" with such dignity, delicacy, and vulnerability.

Which production phase was particularly important for you?

Once the long script process was finished, casting naturally became salient. The challenge was not only that of finding Monika and Joseph, but also that of finding an international ensemble.

For Ambara, we went through about two hundred amateurs. How Nsumbo Tango Samuel acts, and what he brings to bear on his role, defies description. Katrin Vorderwülbecke, who was responsible for amateur casting, discovered him. But it took us half a year to convince him to participate. When he finally did agree, it turned out he's the cousin of the person the character is based on – crazy!

Almost all the Africans are amateurs, except for Denis Mpunga, who plays Vladimir. This mélange of actors and amateurs creates mutual influences, which is a lot of fun. It's important to synchronize them while



preparing the shoot. This involves rehearsing a lot and spending time together to establish the necessary trust that's prerequisite for good cooperation.

In casting and working with the amateur actors, I benefited from the experience I gained in my many years working with Valeska Grisebach. It was very helpful to have a feeling for how time-consuming such a search can be, but also to absolutely trust that it's not only professional actors who can slip into a character.

I think there's often a big misconception that amateurs basically only ever play themselves. The woman playing Donna Angela is a development worker, Nsumbo Tango Samuel a car mechanic, and Passi Balende a rapper.

What I found important throughout the process was being able to keep an open eye for encounters and eventualities rather than just clinging to the script. There are

some scenes that weren't written that way or became extended. Others, Hannes Held and I wrote during the shoot. At times, I just let the camera keep rolling and threw in impulses – some fortuitous moments came about and were captured that way.

Le Prince is a political film, too. How do you feel about that term, or rather, do you mean to make political films?

Once the long script process was finished, The political is unavoidable with Le Prince, but I don't want to make political films per se. In fact, I reject the label of a political film because it intellectually handcuffs me. Le Prince is a melodrama, a love film. We tried not to make Monika and Joseph into cipher-like representatives of postcolonial discourse. If in the end you don't think about "black" and "white," but of a woman and a man, then I'll be very happy. Ultimately, filmmaking for me is an examination of social issues and these are

always political. Of course, you have to ask yourself: What story am I telling and why? What social relevance or dimension might it have? That's important to me personally, otherwise the impetus is lacking.

In Le Prince, I negotiate themes I've already dealt with in my short films: power relations, class, and origin, and how these factors influence and burden relationships.

How was the process of image composition with cinematographer Jenny Lou Ziegel?

Jenny Lou Ziegel and I have been friends for a long time and spoke about the film long before the actual preparation. We looked at images, watched films together and talked a lot about light and subtext in the scenes. There are key locations, like the African bar and Monika's apartment, which we knew long before shooting and where we spent a lot of time. The bar was pretty

unsuitable in terms of shooting conditions, but nevertheless there's an emotional connection we have to this place because we met a lot of people there and I've known it for almost fifteen years – so it had to be there. And I think that also affects the picture and its authenticity.

For some scenes, we had meticulous shot lists that we then discarded while shooting. The scene in which the containers are loaded, for example, was created on set. For others, like the scene at the dinner table, we did a lot of shots so that the scene could be edited well. I often did long takes, letting the whole scene play out – Jenny Lou then found ways to deal with that.

With Le Prince, it was clear that this wouldn't be a formal aesthetic experiment, but that the film would be carried by the characters, the actors. So we tried to give them as much space as possible. For improvisation, too. Jenny Lou was at the casting calls and some of the rehearsals to

get a feeling for the actors and, above all, to establish a trusting relationship with them at an early stage.

At the same time, this wasn't a documentary. The images were to be simple and unobtrusive, yet at the same time sure-footed. I like the steady handheld camera Jenny Lou masters so wonderfully, as well as the respect in how she looks at people from a befitting distance. It's important to me that all the characters retain their dignity no matter what they do. Could the location of Frankfurt be described as an extra character in the film?

Frankfurt am Main is great as the location, because opposites collide here in all their relentlessness. Frankfurt is home to the European Central Bank, one of the largest stock exchanges in the world, and innumerable international corporations. It's a city where global makers and shakers meet, and it's a part of Joseph's imagination. The money is palpable and at the same

time exudes exclusion. The banking district borders on the Bahnhofsviertel, or train station district where sex workers, artists, drug addicts, tourists, businesspeople, and a multitude of folks from around the world meet every day. It seems to follow its own rules and codes and is like a super small-scale New York. The shadow economy is tangible and there are regular raids for narcotics, weapons and illegal immigrants – while not far away the solid suburbs and semi-detached houses with geraniums reside. This collision of winners and losers, cosmopolitan city and German bourgeoisie, of poverty and wealth, was a most fitting and inspiring court for the film to play in.

Lisa Bierwirth

Director / Screenwriter

Lisa Bierwirth is a German filmmaker, born 1983 in Hessisch Lichtenau. From 2000 to 2001 she spent a year abroad in New York City and worked there at various off-theaters. In 2001 she moved to Berlin. After graduating high school and various internships, she studied directing at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin (dffb) from 2006 to 2016. There she realized several short and medium-length films. Before and during her studies she worked in the areas of production, editing, casting and assistant directing, among others for the directors Sonja Heiss and Henner Winckler, and for companies like Zero Film and Komplizen Film. From 2013 to 2016 she was the artistic assistant and dramaturgical advisor to Valeska Grisebach. She accompanied the director's project "WESTERN" (Cannes Un Certain Regard 2017) during script development, research, casting and shooting in Bulgaria.

Le Prince is her debut film and was nominated for the German Screenplay Prize "Best Unfilmed Screenplay" by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

Filmography (as director)

- 2021** **LE PRINCE** (Feature film, Komplizen Film, 2K, 125min, DoP: Jenny Lou Ziegel)
- 2015** **PORTOPALO** (Documentary Essay, Goethe Institut Israel, HD, 6min, DoP: Jenny Lou Ziegel)
- 2013** **TEUFEL** (Short film, dffb, Alexa, 30min, DoP: Markus Koob)
- Festivals (Selection): 47. Internationale Hofer Filmtage, 38. Montreal World Film Festival, 10. Achtung Berlin, 43. Sehnsüchte Internationales Studentenfilmfestival 2014, 6. Prishtina International Film Festival, 16. Maryland Film Festival, 16th FestCurtas Belo Horizonte
- 2011** **SWEETNESS** (Short film, dffb/RBB, S16mm, 32 min, DoP: Philipp Kaminiak)
- Festivals (Selection): Festivals u.a. Interfilm Festival Berlin, Festival du Cinéma de Brive, LICHTER Filmfest Frankfurt, Festival Tous Courts Aix-en-Provence
- 2009** **FRACHT** (Short film, dffb/ARTE, XDCAM HD, 7 min, DoP: Philipp Kaminiak)





Hannes Held

Co-screenwriter

Hannes Held, co-screenwriter of *Le Prince*, was born in Gelsenkirchen in 1979. He studied dramatic writing at the Berlin University of the Arts and then screenwriting at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin. During his studies, he co-wrote several short films, including *The Girl with the Golden Stockings* (2008), which won the German Short Film Award in Gold.

His first feature film *Casting* (2017) screened at numerous international festivals and was nominated for the 2018 German Film Award in the Best Screenplay category. As a script consultant, Hannes Held has overseen numerous feature films, including Valeska Grisebach's *Western* (2017), which won the German Film Award in Bronze. Hannes Held accompanied the shooting of *Casting* and *Le Prince* as on-set script consultant.

He collaborated with director Lisa Bierwirth as a screenwriter on her short films *Sweetness* (2011), *Teufel* (2013) and *Die Gelegenheit* (2016).

Ursula Strauss as **Monika**

Ursula Strauss, who plays the leading role of Frankfurt curator Monika in *Le Prince*, was born in 1974 in Melk, Lower Austria, and is one of the most renowned theater and film actresses of the German-speaking world.

She initially trained as a kindergarten teacher before studying acting at the Vienna Volkstheater. After numerous stage roles, she started working in film and television in 1999, appearing in such films as Barbara Albert's *Free Radicals* in 2003, Jörg Kalt's *Crash Test Dummies* in 2005, and Götz Spielmann's 2008 drama *Revanche*, which was nominated for a foreign-language Oscar. In 2011, she appeared in two features focusing on the transition from the Nazi to the postwar era: Wolfgang Murnberger's *My Best Enemy*, alongside Moritz Bleibtreu and Georg Friedrich, and *In Another Lifetime*, Elisabeth Scharang's adaptation of Silke Hassler and Peter Turrini's play. In 2012, she appeared in a second film directed by Götz Spielmann, the award-winning family drama *October November*. In 2015, she assumed two more major roles, one in *Fly Away Home*, the film adaptation of Christiane Nöstlinger's autobiographical novel directed by Mirjam Unger, and the other in Michael Ramsauer's thriller *Place of Shelter*.

Ursula Strauss' popularity in Austria is due especially to the crime series *Fast Forward*, in which since 2009 she has

a predilection to solve cases as Inspector Angelika Schnell, Head of Homicide, by way of daydreaming or while fast asleep. Her other television series include 2015's *Altes Geld* and *Wischen ist Macht*, which began screening in 2020 and in which she plays the boss of a cleaning firm. In Germany she caused a stir with Nils Willbrandt's mini-series *Mörderrisches Tal - Pregau* 2016 and the following year in Stefan Krohmer's *Meine Fremde Freundin*, for which she received the prestigious Fipa d'Or for Best Actress at the Festival International de Programmes Audiovisuels (FIPA) in Biarritz. Ursula Strauss has been awarded the Austrian Film Award, the Diagonale Acting Prize, and the Romy Audience Award on several occasions.

She's also a successful singer, releasing the 2020 album "Wüdnis" together with Ernst Molden, and has been successfully curating her own "Wachau in Echtzeit" cultural festival since 2012. Ursula Strauss is President of the Akademie des Österreichischen Films [Academy of Austrian Film]. She's also committed to combating violence against women and is patron of the UN "Orange the World" campaign.



Passi Balende as Joseph

Passi Balende, who plays Joseph Badibanga, the eponymous lead in *Le Prince*, was born in Brazzaville in the Republic of the Congo in 1972 and is one of the pioneers of French rap. In 1979, his family emigrated to the Parisian banlieue of Sarcelles. During his childhood, he was passionate about rap and hip-hop, and at the age of seventeen founded the rap group Ministère A.M.E.R. (*Action, Musique, et Rap*) with schoolmate Gilles Duarte (AKA Stomy Bugsy). He studied Agricultural Sciences before finally devoting himself to his artistic career given the success of the band.

The group's second album, "95200," was released in 1994 to critical acclaim. In 1995, the band's music was part of the soundtrack to Matthieu Kassovitz's well-received cine drama "La Haine," including the controversial track "Sacrifice de Poulets." In 1997, he began a solo career under the name Passi and produced the French summer hit of the year with the song "Je zappe et je mate." His first album, "Tentations," went gold in only three weeks and sold over half a million copies.

He continues to produce rap both solo and with his colleagues of the "Secteur Å" collective on his Issap label. Amongst others, he collaborated with the pan-African rap collective "Bisso na Bisso," co-producing their album "Racine," which is considered the start of the Afro-pop success story. To date, Passi has released five solo albums and collaborated with such international artists as Wyclef Jean, Orishas and Rita Marley.

Passi, who had already been seen in countless videos, began working as an actor in 2004. His early roles included appearances in the 2005 *Inspector Sori* series, the 2008 action film *Skate or Die*, and the series *Sous le soleil* in 2010.

He appears in *Le Prince* in his first leading role.



Credits

A Komplizen Film production in co-production with ZDF – Das kleine Fernsehspiel, supported by Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, HessenFilm und Medien, German Federal Film Board, German Federal Film Fund, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg

