

MADemoiselle PARADIS

An interview with
BARBARA ALBERT

«She finally comes to the realization that she has the right to her eyesight, but that in the society where she lives, being able to see would not bring her more freedom – it would actually bring her less.»

Mademoiselle Paradis takes us to Rococo Vienna and the remarkably talented blind pianist Maria Theresia Paradis, who is torn between her extraordinary musical talent and her desire to live the life of an ordinary young woman within the rules of a rigid society.

Today Maria Theresia Paradis has virtually sunk into oblivion, although as a contemporary of Gluck and Haydn, a child prodigy on the piano when she was almost exactly the same age as Mozart, she was at one time a major figure on the European music scene. Who was this Ms Paradis?

BARBARA ALBERT: Maria Theresia Paradis was a blind composer and pianist who enjoyed considerable success in her day. She was a confident woman who became very well-known despite – or perhaps because of – her blindness, and she travelled all around Europe, partly in order to give concerts but also so she could exchange views with other composers, and with famous people and contemporaries who were also blind. Her pedagogical skills must have been considerable, culminating in the founding of a piano school for the blind. Unfortunately the vast majority of her work has been lost; the most famous composition which remains is her Sicilienne for violin and piano, although in fact her authorship of this piece is still surrounded by controversy.

Your **MADemoiselle PARADIS** is inspired by Alissa Walser's novel *Mesmerized*, which is also – I assume – the source of the encounter between the two protagonists. Which aspects of her life story does the novel focus on, making Maria Theresia Paradis an appealing character for a film?

BARBARA ALBERT: Like the film, the novel concentrates solely on the three months when Maria Theresia Paradis underwent a course of treatment at the palace of Franz Anton Mesmer (in fact the property of his wife, the wealthy widow Maria Anna von Posch), so it focuses on the encounter between these two impressive personalities. In my view they could both be described as highly talented and ahead of their time: two underrated individuals who met briefly on that "island" and may well have influenced each other.

Until now you have always worked as a classic auteur filmmaker, writing the scripts for your films yourself. But Kathrin Resetarits is responsible for the screenplay of MADEMOISELLE PARADIS. What changes did this impose on your work as a director?

BARBARA ALBERT: It was very stimulating and exhilarating. I felt as though I could work more freely, because the story – and also the script itself – wasn't derived primarily from my own experiences and images; instead, it was secondary... in the best sense of the word. That meant I had more freedom in my approach to the material, I could go out and search for locations at an earlier stage together with the camerawoman Christine A. Maier, who had also handled the camera work for *Northern Skirts*; I could develop more during the rehearsal period, and overall I was able to be more flexible.

The first shots in MADEMOISELLE PARADIS are blurred, black & white images of shadows and reflections on water, which appear briefly on the screen and leave the viewer puzzled for a moment: "What am I looking at?" Were you raising the issue of perception here as something like a musical overture, a prelude to establish a particular tone?

BARBARA ALBERT: Yes, definitely. And the question of perception, about how differently and subjectively we perceive the outside world, also runs through the novel. The uncertainty which underpins our perception fascinates me; the question of how real images are. In the novel there is an impressive account of the new three-dimensional understanding that Maria Theresia Paradis gains when she sees objects for the first time. I remember reading the works of Oliver Sacks with great interest and enthusiasm; he has also written a lot about music and the human brain. He was another source of inspiration for **Mademoiselle Paradis**.

Maria Theresia Paradis is a virtuoso on the piano. As she herself said: "At the piano I feel like a general". She became like an instrument of those around her, with everyone wanting to play her for his own purposes: her parents hoped to gain prestige and (financial) success from their daughter's talent, medical circles in Vienna proceeded ruthlessly with their yearning for experimentation, and Mesmer himself aspired to university-level recognition and thought this striking example of successful

treatment would help. Do you see this as the core drama of your protagonist?

BARBARA ALBERT: Yes. While the novel creates a very impressive depiction of the drama relating to Franz Anton Mesmer – who can't change his fundamental nature and makes little progress against the envy and ambitions of others – for us the drama of the blind woman comes to the forefront; she knows that she is only extraordinary because of her blindness, but at the same time she yearns to have her sight restored. She develops from a passive being, almost like an object, into a strong woman with her own will. She finally comes to the realization that she has the right to her eyesight, but that in the society where she lives, being able to see would not bring her more freedom – it would actually bring her less. As a seeing woman she would have to marry, otherwise she would not be worth much, and without this special status she could also no longer exist as a female composer. The fate of one of Paradis's contemporaries, Maria Anna ("Nannerl") Mozart, shows that quite clearly.

Which facets of Mesmer's character did you want to emphasize?

BARBARA ALBERT: Mesmer was certainly an extremely sensitive and empathetic person: otherwise he wouldn't have been able to treat the sick so well, in my view. He understood intuitively some things which are obvious to us today, such as the fact that touch can have a healing effect, and that the absence of touch, and constricting the organs and the breathing, can lead to sickness and neurosis. However, I also found Mesmer's ambition interesting: that burning desire to be recognized by a society he never really belonged to, to be accepted, even admired. In the final analysis he never succeeds in stepping outside himself and going beyond his social class to gain acceptance at court. That causes him deep anguish. When he moves to Paris later, incidentally, things don't get any better; on the contrary, for the revolutionaries there he isn't visionary enough. He's too old-fashioned and unscientific – so once again he is excluded and banished.

MADMOISELLE PARADIS goes beyond the individual destiny of Maria Theresia Paradis to create a portrait of 18th-century Viennese society as well. A society which is characterized by servility to those further up the social hierarchy and a domineering attitude to those lower down. At both ends of the ladder a struggle for survival takes place: at the bottom it is literally a matter of avoiding starvation, while at the top what's at stake is belonging to the upper echelon. You depict this class structure in a very condensed, pointed fashion by means of language. What considerations did you apply with respect to the portrayal of society?

BARBARA ALBERT: To a great extent I have to thank the scriptwriter Kathrin Resetarits for this detailed

portrayal of the class situation, and for the absolute precision of the dialogue. It was based on a huge amount of research and a fine feeling for the language. Incidentally, our historical consultant, Martin Scheutz from the Institute for Austrian Historical Research, stressed that although the dialogue appears modern, it is historically entirely consistent. That gave me a certain feeling of security when we were shooting the film. In a sense the dialogue as it was written was "mandatory", which is to say that during rehearsal I realized improvisation wouldn't be appropriate here: precision and historical accuracy were of huge importance for me.

The story of Maria Theresia Paradis depicts the destiny of an extremely talented woman and artist. Today very little has remained of her compositions. How could that have happened? Here, by means of your artistic work, a belated tribute has been paid to a fellow artist. Does the film also feature her music? How was the choice of film music made?

BARBARA ALBERT: For me, the film comes alive by virtue of the music it features, from a wide variety of composers of the day (C.P.E. Bach, Haydn, Galuppi, Vanhal, Kirnberger) which was assembled by our film musician Lorenz Dangel together with the harpsichordist Gerd Amelung. Lorenz then played the pieces that were potential candidates on the piano for me, and we decided together which sections would be appropriate to which scenes in the film. I should mention that for me, the emotional high point is a piece of music that Maria Theresia Paradis composed herself, though admittedly not until the end of her life. It has such depths and is so emotional, it provides a powerful testimony of Maria Theresia Paradis's emotional world and her inner development. For a long time I thought I would need an additional film score, but the film musician was minimalist and precise enough to realize before I did that there's no real space for it. I'm grateful to him for that: this compression seems to me highly appropriate, and anything more would have come across as distracting or simply too much.

Maria Dragus produces a fantastic dramatic performance. What were the main challenges facing her? How did you help her prepare for this role?

BARBARA ALBERT: About nine months before we started shooting Maria Dragus began to prepare for the role of Maria Theresia Paradis. She accompanied a blind woman as she went about her everyday life, she met a number of blind people and she read a great deal of historical and scientific material. When we rehearsed Maria was able to develop a physical feeling for the role, predominantly by means of body exercises but also with the help of special glasses which reproduced the sensation of blindness. At the same time she had to work on the intonation of Austrian German, which she seemed to manage without too much

difficulty, perhaps due to her musicality. Playing the piano herself on the set represented another challenge for her. But Maria did a fantastic job, with the support of our musician Lorenz Dangel. Despite her relative youth, she is a very experienced and highly professional actor, and she is able to work intuitively. I always find it impressive how important the factor of time is in the preparation an actor undertakes. Insights into the character have to be internalized on a physical as well as an intellectual level, and sometimes you just can't force that; it simply takes time.

"Anyone who cannot see will not be seen. Anyone who is not seen will not be heard either. That person is not alive." This must be one of the key lines spoken by Maria Theresia Paradis in the film. Do you also perceive a powerful relationship to current events here?

BARBARA ALBERT: Unfortunately, those words have universal validity. The people who are standing in the light write history – and they have power. And of course today, in a period which lives to such a great extent from images, from the media, from selective narrative, it's still exactly the same. The choice of individuals and stories that we illuminate in our day and therefore focus upon really does only make a limited statement about mankind, unfortunately – or perhaps I should say hopefully.

Interview: Karin Schiefer

August 2017

Translation: Charles Osborne