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San Sebastián Film Review: 'Angelo'

The life story of African slave integrated into 18th-century Viennese aristocracy, Markus Schleinzer's second feature is formally stunning and politically seething.

By [GUY LODGE](#) 



CREDIT: SAN SEBASTIAN FILM FESTIVAL

Director: Markus Schleinzer

With: Makita Samba, Alba Rohrwacher, Larisa Faber

1 hour 51 minutes

Markus Schleinzer is a filmmaker who knows how to wait for a payoff: Take the dry in-joke, for example, of waiting seven years to follow his 2011 debut “Michael” with a film called “Angelo.” His tartly brilliant second feature is awash with slow-building irony, though as with his first, there’s precious little mirth in its devastating kicker. An interpretive biopic of Angelo Soliman — an African man kidnapped into slavery as a child, who subsequently rose and fell through the ranks of 18th-century Viennese high society — Schleinzer’s film takes a chillingly but aptly clinical view of a life treated as an amusing human experiment by all but the man living it. Behavior is painstakingly observed and notes are extensively taken, before “Angelo” tersely delivers its own findings on the toxicity of the culture that colonized its title character.

Lest the “Michael”/“Angelo” segue lead viewers to expect a clear partner piece to Schleinzer’s debut, however, the stylistic evolution that has taken place between the two is both drastic and thrilling. In its cut-to-the-bone study of a Wolfgang Priklopil-inspired child abductor, “Michael” wore its ultra-sparse Michael Haneke allusions skilfully but nakedly on its sleeve — no surprise there, given Schleinzer’s background as Haneke’s own casting director. While no less rigorous in its formalism, “Angelo” is an altogether more radical affair, experimenting with burlesque, pantomime and blunt anachronism in its version of events that have been repeatedly and disparately told by Austrian historians. Its highly geometric patchwork of approaches may allude to the various ways in which Angelo’s story has been assimilated into his adoptive culture, though its (literally) incendiary conclusion feels both defiant and definitive.

Cinematically, too, “Angelo” is a curated buffet of reference points: Kubrick’s “Barry Lyndon” seems the most obvious influence on Schleizer’s arch, acidly proprietous manner of historical portraiture, though current arthouse viewers may spy reflections of Pedro Costa, Lucrecia Martel and the director’s compatriot Jessica Hausner in its pristine surfaces. Which is not to say its point of view is anything but singular. From the opening shot, observing from a cool, high distance as a shipment of stolen African slaves is offloaded on the shores of Europe, Schleizer and d.p. Gerald Kercketz place their camera in ways that knowingly straddle the line between respectful remove and cold, scientific scrutiny.

Angelo, first played as a child by Kenny Nzogang, is among the new arrivals; he’s subsequently taken for inspection and auction in a distinctly contemporary white warehouse, all steel I-beams and fluorescent strip lights. It’s the first and most obvious of Schleizer’s breaks with period-piece decorum, but it’s no empty gimmick in a scene that sees black men sized up as industrial products. The strictures of the film’s chosen Academy ratio, however, impose another dimension on the space: that of the modernist white-cube art gallery. From the outset, Angelo is presented as something of a museum piece for well-to-do Europeans to ponder, touching on similar themes of racially enforced exhibitionism to those raised in Abdellatif Kechiche’s more traditionally mounted Saartjie Baartman biopic “Black Venus.” It’s a provocative metaphor that grows ever more grotesquely literal through the film’s sharply spliced chapter structure.

For Angelo gets “lucky”: He’s bought not as a slave, but as a manner of substitute son by a wealthy Austrian countess (Alba Rohrwacher) following the death of her own progeny, after whom she names the black child. Yet while he’s dressed, educated and cultivated in the mold of his white benefactors, he’s never treated precisely as family. Rather, he’s a graciously humored pet, pampered by the countess more for her distraction than his benefit. It cruelly follows, then, that the adult Angelo (Makita Samba) grows into an extravagantly attired court jester, owned first by a noble duke before catching the eye of a Habsburg prince. Aristocrats are invited to marvel at the supposed contrast between his exotic appearance and his refined demeanor, though most stop short of actually speaking to him; when he secretly marries a white woman (Larisa Faber) and is promptly banished from the court for his transgression, the black man’s true place in the order of things is made clear.

Right down to the daintily stylized blackface that Vienna’s finest tauntingly adopt at one centerpiece ball, Schleizer fashions the world that claims Angelo as a kind of flimsy, facade-fixated diorama, a surface vision of white privilege that won’t permit our protagonist any deeper access. The inspired work of production designers Andreas Sobotka and Martin Reiter, and costume designer Tanja Hausner, offers an essential assist in this regard: working in exaggeratedly minimalist and maximalist modes, respectively, their aesthetics work in such effectively jarring conflict with each other as to eventually leave the spurned Angelo, in all senses of the term, all dressed up with nowhere to go.

The African continent, meanwhile, is present only in ornamentally painted backdrops and taxidermied friezes, imagined with patronizing inaccuracy by European curators. That the film’s audaciously deadpan finale sees the elderly Angelo (Jean-Baptiste Tiémélé) integrated into this Austro-Epcot vision of his homeland (a detail Schleizer claims has been omitted by some past biographers) is what will likely prompt the most heated viewer debates over the film’s artfully remote perspective, factual accuracy notwithstanding. “Angelo” is not embalming history, however. From those unforgiving fluorescent lights to the chasms of scoreless silence that separate its brief, mocking twirls of baroque harpsichord, even the iciest modernist flourishes of this extraordinary film serve to enliven its narrative, to place it in a 21st-century context — where, finally and most cuttingly, Angelo’s treatment doesn’t look all that unfamiliar.

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Reviewed at San Sebastián Film Festival (competing), Sept. 25, 2018. (Also in Toronto Film Festival – Platform.) Running time: 111 MIN.

PRODUCTION: (Austria-Luxembourg) A Novotny & Novotny Filmproduktion, Amour Fou Luxembourg presentation. (International sales: Playtime, Paris.) Producers: Alexander Glehr, Franz Novotny, Bady Minck, Alexander Dumreicher-Ivanceanu, Markus Schleinzner. Executive producer: Johanna Scherz.

CREW: Director: Markus Schleinzner. Screenplay: Schleinzner, Alexander Brom. Camera (color): Gerald Kerkletz. Editor: Pia Dumont.

WITH: Makita Samba, Alba Rohrwacher, Larisa Faber, Kenny Nzogang, Lukas Miko, Michael Rotschopf, Gerti Drassl, Jean-Baptiste Tiémélé, Nancy Mensah-Offei. (German, French dialogue)


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ANGELO

MARKUS SCHLEINZER

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