

TRIBECA 2022

Review: *Breaking the Ice*by [DAVID KATZ](#)

13/06/2022 - Growing up is hard to do on the professional ice rinks of Vienna, in Clara Stern's first feature

Alina Schaller and Judith Altenberger in *Breaking the Ice*

Two instances make something of a pattern: in Lukas Dhont's [Close](#) [+], which won the Grand Prix at Cannes last month, as in this film, the sport of ice hockey is inserted suggestively into a queer coming-of-age story, although both filmmakers wisely shy away from generalising exactly what the connection between them is. But we can be sure it has something to do with externalising one's anger and aggression, the spirit of teamwork, and maybe the balletic grace needed to excel in the sport.

Dovetailing interestingly with the rising popularity of women's football, **Clara Stern** has chosen to set her debut feature, *Breaking the Ice*, which has premiered in [Tribeca's](#) Viewpoints programme, largely in the world of

competitive women's ice hockey, where the film's protagonist, Mira (**Alina Schaller**), bullishly captains the Dragons, who, whilst playing in the top tier of the country's league, aren't popular enough for the players to make a full living off their sport. As a teammate of hers drily notes, "A cat on Instagram gets a higher audience." In a film that embraces some hoary clichés a bit too lovingly, Stern's screenplay is as invested in the Dragons' progress as it is in Mira's alternately turbulent and drab home life, and we could well be reminded of a drippy melodrama show that might play on terrestrial TV, like the US series *Friday Night Lights*. But, in developing the trans themes of her successful short *Mathias*, Stern is able to generate more productive tension, as she observes Mira in a few mid-film recreational nightlife scenes, where gender roles are tried on for size and then chucked out the window.

Working on her family's ancestral vineyard in her downtime (an odd although likely convincing detail in spite of the wintry Austria on display), Mira is caught between two key relationships, which will be fundamental to the maturation process that Stern patiently depicts. First, we have Theresa (**Judith Altenberger**), a more talented wide forward drafted in from a team in Salzburg, who has the potential to be scouted for the US leagues (in another interesting detail, the Dragons coach, who is American, gives dressing-room pep talks in English, whilst the players answer in German). A sexual attraction tentatively blooms between the two. More pertinently, there is her estranged brother Paul (the very talented **Tobias Resch**), who flits in and out of the narrative like a fantasy figure, taking her out on the town whilst play-acting with his roguish alter-ego, Rudiger – behaviour fascinatingly incongruous with his itinerant work in shipping and, as revealed later in a bit of a sight gag, the local police force.

A crucial sequence at the film's midpoint finds Mira gazing in her bedroom mirror nude from the waist up, clenching her torso so her breasts recess in her upper body. This is followed by another cut, showing Mira in masc dress, donning a Chaplin-esque bowler hat combined with a drawn-on beard. That sequences like these are contrasted with a more pro-forma sports drama, conveyed in an almost artless way that feels like young-adult fiction, as opposed to something more subtle, is the deft split-personality effect that Stern pulls off with her film, likely inaugurating the start of a promising career.

Breaking the Ice is an Austrian production, staged by [NGF - Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion GmbH](#). Its international sales are handled by [Films Boutique](#).

more about: [Breaking the Ice](#)



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13/06/2022 | [Tribeca 2022](#)



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international title: Breaking the Ice

original title: Breaking the Ice

country: [Austria](#)

sales agent: [Films Boutique](#)

year: 2022

directed by: [Clara Stern](#)

screenplay: [Clara Stern](#)

cast: [Alina Schaller](#), [Judith Altenberger](#), [Tobias Resch](#), [Pia Hierzegger](#), [Wolfgang Böck](#)

main awards/selection

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