

The Bottom Line **Stark, shocking and beautiful.**

‘Great Freedom’ (‘Grosse Freiheit’): Film Review | Cannes 2021

Rising star Franz Rogowski plays a gay German repeatedly arrested for "deviant practices" in the decades following World War II in Sebastian Meise's intense prison drama.

David Rooney, THR

Anyone familiar with Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's powerful 2000 documentary feature, *Paragraph 175*, will recognize that title as the provision of the German penal code that sanctioned horrific Nazi persecution of homosexuals, a law dating back to 1871. What's more startling is that criminal prosecution continued in West Germany up until the late 1960s, destroying the lives of thousands of men, and that full decriminalization did not come until 1994. Sebastian Meise's intricately structured drama explores the life of one man put through that dehumanizing system on a loop in the decades following World War II.

Chronicling an ignominious chapter in queer history, *Great Freedom* is also a contemplative psychological study of the effects of incarceration, and beyond that, **an unconventional love story, tender but unsentimental.** Built around a moving characterization of defiant resilience conveyed with great restraint by Franz Rogowski, who continues to impress after Victoria his work with Christian Petzold in *Transit* and *Undine*, Meise's film should elevate the stock of both the actor and the Austrian director.

The opening is an instant attention-grabber, showing men cruising a public restroom for sex — “cottaging,” in gay parlance — as a hidden camera captures their furtive encounters. The flickering of a projector makes it clear we are not witnessing them being filmed but rather watching edited footage of them being played back. This happens at the trial of one of the men seen on several occasions, Hans Hoffmann (Rogowski), who is sentenced to 24 months for “deviant practices” with no possibility of probation. The year is 1968, and Hans' silent acceptance, along with his evident familiarity with the procedures of prison admission, indicate this is not his first conviction.

While he's stitching sheets in the prison workshop, he catches the eye of an older inmate, Viktor (Georg Friedrich), and it swiftly emerges that the two have a history, going back to their time as cellmates in 1945. Using visual clues planted in the production design as well as subtle changes rendered with hair and makeup, the film moves gracefully between those two time periods with additional interludes in 1957. Meise and editor Joana Scrinzi demonstrate unerring control in navigating the non-chronological shifts as they track the ways in which Hans' ability to adapt to freedom is broken down. **It's a harsh story of inhumane violation as punishment for a victimless crime, but the drama also shimmers with desolate beauty.**

Hans is immediately identifiable as a “175-er” by the number posted under his name outside his cell door. That makes homophobic Viktor initially hostile in 1945, kicking Hans out and demanding that the guards place him elsewhere. When that request is denied, Viktor tells him, “Touch me and you’re dead.”

The serial number on Hans’ arm indicates that he was transferred from a concentration camp to serve out the rest of his sentence after the Allied Forces victory, following an unsuccessful escape attempt. Shots of Hans in the workshop removing insignias and repurposing Nazi uniforms show life going on, in a sense normalizing the crimes of the past.

Without slipping into *Kiss of the Spider Woman*-type moments of melodrama, the film observes Viktor’s attitude toward Hans soften as he learns of his history. Viktor offers to tattoo something over the serial number using crude tools swiped during his kitchen duties, and while taciturn Hans is wary at first, he eventually agrees, establishing the beginnings of a tentative trust between them that grows in fits and starts into companionship and closeness.

Meanwhile, Meise and co-writer Thomas Reider weave other plot threads through the 1957 and 1968 sections, each of which reflects back on the immediate postwar period and on events of 1969, when Paragraph 175 was abolished. These involve Leo (Anton von Lucke), a schoolteacher caught in the same cottage sting as Hans; and Oskar (Thomas Prenn), who was perhaps the closest Hans ever got to experiencing romantic love. Sensual scenes from Hans’ home movie of their idyllic day at a lake before their arrest play in sharp contrast to Oskar’s distance in the prison yard, where he fears any contact between them will bring repercussions. There’s bitter irony in Hans’ idea that they should flee after their release to East Germany, where unlike the supposedly democratic West, gay men are not locked up for consensual sex.

While all the performances are strong, Rogowski is the smoldering center of the drama. Even if Hans spends much time curled up half-naked in a fetal position in solitary, his refusal to deny his identity makes the character “fearless,” as Oskar describes him with admiration. The actor’s wiry physique and haunted gaze would seem to suggest a man easily intimidated in such a brutal environment. But his purposeful gait and the recklessness with which he seizes opportunities for sex and love instead point to a man who knows he has nothing to apologize for.

One touching scene involves Hans sending a message of love, coded in pinpricks on the delicate pages of a bible, to Oskar on a different floor of the prison. Viktor, a murderer with a heroin habit, agrees to make that delivery in exchange for Hans “helping him out.” That first transactional instance of sex between them happens through a food-service hatch in a cell door, and could hardly be more impersonal. They become more intimate over time, and the connection between them evolves into a kind of love, but one rooted more in the mutual longing for comfort than in physical attraction.

French cinematographer Crystel Fournier, who shot the early films of Céline Sciamma, brings a striking sense of composition to the prison scenes. This seems a subliminal reminder of the rigid rules of the environment and the unlikelihood of a meaningful relationship being allowed to grow there, except in darkness and secrecy.

But Viktor offers a cracked version of stability for Hans, and that fragile stability clearly is reciprocal. The way that each of them reacts to the prospect of freedom — or in Hans' case the reality, explored in the labyrinthine underground sex chambers of a gay jazz club — is quietly affecting. What resonates more, however, is the way that systemic oppression has crushed the urge to live freely in Hans, leaving love in confinement as the only love he understands.

Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard)

Cast: Franz Rogowski, Georg Friedrich, Anton von Lucke, Thomas Prenn

Production companies: FreibeuterFilm, Rohfilm Productions

Director: Sebastian Meise

Screenwriters: Thomas Reider, Sebastian Meise

Producers: Sabine Moser, Oliver Neumann, Benny Drechsel

Director of photography: Crystel Fournier

Production designer: Michael Randel

Costume designers: Tanja Hausner, Andrea Hölzl

Music: Nils Petter Molvaer, Peter Brötzmann

Editor: Joana Scrinzi

Sound designers: Jörg Theil, Atanas Tcholakov, Manuel Meichsner

Casting: Eva Roth, Benjamin Roth

Sales: Match Factory

1 hour 56 minutes