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## Eismayer (Venice Review): Love, Truth, & Masculinity



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Revolving around a sergeant who falls in love with an openly gay recruit, David Wagner's *Eismayer* tells the true story of a man who learns that there's nothing wrong with being who he is.

★★★★☆

David Wagner's *Eismayer* begins with a series of new recruits in a line, introducing themselves to their superior on their first day at the **Austrian Armed Forces**. When the time comes for the confident Mario Falak ([Luka Dimić](https://loudandclearreviews.com/tag/luka-dimic/)), of *Zima* to speak, one of the officers notices that he's older than most of the other recruits. "Mum didn't want to let me go," Falak boldly replies, provoking him, and the man is not impressed. "A typical case for Eismayer, isn't he?," he gloats to a fellow soldier, knowing something that Falak still ignores.

That something is Sergeant Major Charles Eismayer ([Gerhard Liebmann](https://loudandclearreviews.com/tag/gerhard-liebmann/)), of *Murder: Anatomy of a Trial*, the **most severe and feared instructor in the Forces**, who's about to become the recruits' worst nightmare. It's not long till he makes an appearance, and we are introduced to a man who shouts a whole lot, constantly insulting, belittling and punishing the young men he's supposed to train, and spending his days reaffirming his authority on them over and over again. But there's also **another side to Eismayer**, and that is the man he is in private, when he comes home to his wife (Julia Koschitz's Christina) and son (Lion Tatzber's Dominik), and he suddenly becomes softer but also quiet, avoiding confrontations and displays of affection and looking extremely tired, as if leading a life that isn't really his own.

In fact, Eismayer often avoids coming home until it's strictly necessary, and spends as much time as possible at work, a place where he's feared and hated (so much so that even his own superior disapproves of his methods) but where he also has a **clear role to play - that of the "man."**

But there's a story behind Eismayer's stern facade, and that becomes apparent to us when we discover that **Falak is openly gay**, and Eismayer finds himself having to put a stop to a fight between the comrades that originated from another audacious remark made by the young man. The fight in question ends with Falak having the best of Eismayer, turning the latter's attempt of a punishment into an opportunity for making a statement in the boldest, most provocative way possible. "**There's no room for fags in the army**," Eismayer's superior would later comment, while discussing the "incident" with the sergeant, and we understand just how deeply-rooted in the system certain prejudices are.



Gerhard Liebmann and Luka Dimic in Eismayer (Golden Girls Film)

(https://loudandclearreviews.com/)

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Eismayer himself is part of that mechanism, as his idea of how a "man" should behave couldn't be more wrong, and the film gives us a clever analysis of **toxic masculinity**, showing how sticking to certain retrograde ideals can have severe effects on one's identity and self-esteem, especially in a male-dominated environment such as the Army. But the movie does a lot more than that, as it also gives us an example of a man who confidently embraces his homosexuality at all times, showing us that the other comrades are ready to accept him no matter what, and proving that the times have changed, regardless of Eismayer's methods.

But that isn't even the point of the movie. Based on a **true story**, David Wagner's movie is first and foremost about an **internal struggle** that our titular character has been dealing with his entire life, from the moment he confessed to his parents, as a young man, that he was gay, and their reaction was to first tell him that that phase would pass and then send him to the army to learn how to "become a man". Since then, Eismayer has been hiding in plain sight, burying his own **identity** deep within him and projecting to the world an image of himself that is pretty much the opposite of who he really is. It takes falling in love with Falak for these dynamics to begin to crumble, but Eismayer's journey is not as easy as it sounds, as, in order to be able to love someone else, he must first learn to love and accept yourself.

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*Eismayer* is **quite simply a brilliant film**, combining an unbelievable, important true story that feels like a modern fairytale with the complex character study of a man who only discovers that it's ok to be who he is when he sees himself in the eyes of the people around him, from the larger-than-life Falak to the disarming Dominik, his own son. It's an incredibly moving story, but it's also filled with **irony**, and you'll find yourself giggling several times. It's also a highly enjoyable, effortless watch that's both **beautifully intimate and fiercely potent**, led by superb performances from Gerhard Liebmann and Luka Dimić and impressive talent behind the camera.

If you only watch one film at the 2022 Venice Film Festival, let it be David Wagner's *Eismayer*. This poignant story of acceptance is a highly enjoyable, meaningful watch, and you won't be able to stop thinking about it.

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Eismayer: Trailer (Golden Girls Film)

*Eismayer* premiered at the 2022 Venice Film Festival on **September 4, 2022**, as part of [the](#)

International Critics Week (https://www.sicvenezia.it/en/films/eismayer/).

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## Servants (Film Review). Blurring the line of church and state

(https://loudandclearreviews.com/servants-film-review-2020-church-state/)



ETHAN HILL (https://loudandclearreviews.com/author/ethan/) SEPTEMBER 3, 2022



Servants (Film Movement)

*Servants* is an unforgettably chilling art thriller with some of the most striking images in recent cinema history.

★★★★★

It is not easy to be a good person living in the world: often, the morally right choices require the greatest sacrifice, while compliance is tantalizingly simple. The quest for individual purity is a theme that has existed for as long as stories have been around. In *Ivan Ostrochovský's* second feature film *Servants* (now streaming on Kanopy in the United States) this struggle is brought front and center, telling the sparse but harrowing story of two boys attending a Catholic seminary in Czechoslovakia during the cold war, and the moral dilemma they have when the secret police penetrate the church and the priests they trusted with their physical and spiritual well-being begin to fail them.

Menace permeates the mood of *Servants* before we even see the first shoot. Over a simple black and white opening credits sequence comes a staticky radio message, someone codenamed "Three" has turned off their radio and the person on the other end of the line needs to contact them. "Three", it turns out, is a Catholic Priest and Doctor who are hauling a corpse in the back of their car. It's a chilly opening, shot in crisp black and white by cinematographer Juraj Chlpik, and the duo hauls the body out under a bridge. Overhead, a train barrels by, transporting tanks and other warfare materials and drowning out the sound of their movements. It's a chilly juxtaposition, highlighting both the mammoth logistical elements of war while shadier activities happen just under the surface.

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Then we are thrown back **143 days earlier**, to the chronological beginning of the story. **Prospective seminarians** Michal (Samuel Polakovic) and Juraj (Samuel Skyva) arrive at their new seminary. Like most buildings in the Eastern Bloc, it is large, ancient, and lacking in materials. Chipik makes ample use of the impressive space with a series of establishing shots that highlight the gothic nature of the building, most notably an underground sanctuary where the only light casts a ghastly shadow of the crucified Jesus on the wall behind it. Both boys are eager to develop spiritually far from the creeping hand of totalitarianism that grabs the country, but their first day has only just ended when the film cuts to its only scene outside of the seminary and without any of the major characters. The shot, a sea of interchangeable older men all raising their hands in unanimous agreement, hints at **something darker** only just being enacted that we will gradually become privy to.



Servants (Film Movement)

What those men were voting on, it seems, is allowing the secret police to begin undercover work within the seminary, and it is this struggle that *Servants* spends the rest of the time exploring. Pamphlets begin appearing, typed by the students and urging political resistance. There are interrogations and disappearances, it is clear that **the house of good is under siege by evil**. These scenes take minimalism to the extreme, dialogue is rare and the shots are often voyeuristically wide, leaving us to interpret the story based on the actor's body language, or so tight on the subject's face that it feels like you're trespassing on a private moment. This brilliant whiplash in framing helps further one of the central ideas of the film, that of personal resistance in a vast and often malevolent system.

This **idea of resistance** that *Servants* posits is also fascinating. As the young men begin to awaken to the corruption of their institution their resistance is not a flashy chance for fame but taken as a moral imperative, something they must do. Everyone is terrified of getting caught and yet their devotion to faith is so strong that it would be unconscionable to let it continue, even going so far as to initiate a hunger strike as a last resort. "Do not fear those who wish to break the body," Says the voiceover of an anonymous student reading from a pamphlet. The idea of a martyr in the physical sense is roundly rejected by both the resisting boys and the priests under the thumb of the secret police. To kill your enemy when there is no official war underway would undermine everything that both sides are working towards. Suffering, already a hallmark of the priesthood, is brought concretely into reality through the **emotional turmoil that each character faces**, and through the physical danger that very well might come to pass.

*Servants* is **not a film for the passive watcher**. As stated before, Ostrochovský plays very coy with direct storytelling and often forces the viewer to explore the frame for the subtext that propels the story. Which makes the film's emotional resonance all the more impressive when the final credits roll. To render a story full of internal struggle visually is no small feat, and to do so while also being chocked full of stunning compositions is even more so. It's a shame that *Servants* did not receive a wider run, but hopefully, with its release on Kanopy, the film will get the wider audience and praise that it rightly deserves.

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