**VARIETY**

**San Sebastian Film Review: ‘Mademoiselle Paradis’**

**A sightless pianist's recovery reveals society's more glaring blind spots in Barbara Albert's sensual, sensitive historical drama.**

By Guy Lodge

It’s the kind of teasing what-if with which we begin torturing ourselves as children: If you had to choose one, would you rather be deaf or blind? Would you rather have the gift of sight for a brief time only to have it taken away, or never know exactly what you’re missing? And if regaining your vision meant losing your most unique talent, would you take that trade? For blind Austrian pianist Maria Theresia “Resi” Paradis, the latter wasn’t a hypothesis or a choice, but a perverse quandary into which her body threw her — not that the draconian patriarchy of the late 18th century would have permitted her much say either way. A fresh, inquisitive portrait of her pivotal teenage years from director [Barbara Albert](http://variety.com/tag/barbara-albert/), “[Mademoiselle Paradis](http://variety.com/tag/mademoiselle-paradis/)” is less interested in its subject’s potted biography than in how her era’s vicious politics of class and gender affected her plight. The engrossing result feels entirely modern, despite more spectacular, candy-colored ruffles than you can shake a bustle at.

Kicking off what looks to be a high-profile festival run with competition berths in San Sebastian and Toronto’s Platform program, “[Mademoiselle Paradis](http://variety.com/2017/film/markets-festivals/exclusive-clip-film-distribution-mademoiselle-paradis-1202542632/)” should have little trouble securing distribution in multiple European regions — its profile assisted by the rising star of Romanian leading lady Maria-Victoria Dragus, who doubles down on the strong impressions she made in Cristian Mungiu’s “Graduation” and Michael Haneke’s “The White Ribbon.” English-language territories could be slower to catch on, though there’s plenty here for the kind of refined distributor (and audience) who has previously grooved not only to Albert’s previous work, but that of her compatriot Jessica Hausner. There are echoes here of Hausner’s “Amour Fou” with its lightly tongue-in-cheek period stateliness — it comes as no surprise that the films share a brilliant production designer in Katharina Wöppermann, whose hyper-ornate furnishings and finishes here evoke the false, stifling politesse of Rococo Vienna.

It’s 1777, and the 18-year-old Resi may be a prodigious talent at the ivory keyboard, but otherwise commands little respect in the social circles she moves in — or, for that matter, from her parents Joseph (Lukas Miko) and Maria Rosalina (Katja Kolm), who view their daughter’s disability as a burden to them as much as her. Resi’s musical talent is seen as her only shot at a respectable future given her limited marriage prospects; it’s little more than an asset to her parents, exhaustively paraded and demonstrated before high society. But to their daughter, who is constantly scrutinized and criticized as if she both deaf and blind, music is a gift in all senses — a lifeline in the darkness that has surrounded her from the age of three, and from which no amount of grueling, scalp-searing treatments and therapies have managed to retrieve her.

Enter Dr. Franz Mesmer (Devid Striesow), a dandyish “miracle” healer whose innovative theories of animal magnetism are viewed with skepticism by the medical establishment, but have supposedly yielded positive results with a variety of disabled live-in patients. Under his care, finally free from the oppressive guardianship of her parents, Resi does indeed begin to tentatively regain her sight. Whether that’s down to Mesmer’s unorthodox, scientifically unproven practices or her sense of physical and psychological release is one of many intriguing questions left open by Kathrin Resetarits’ layered, irony-laced script, drawn from Alissa Walser’s book “Mesmerized.” Whatever the answer, no one is willing to let the teenager’s personal victory stand. She’s required repeatedly to prove her newfound vision before a host of medical and societal bigwigs at various demonstrations — a human show-and-tell routine no less humiliating than the pressurized musical showcases arranged by her parents.

A rueful streak of feminist satire thus emerges in “Mademoiselle Paradis,” as it becomes clear the young woman’s wellbeing is but a secondary concern in what finally amounts to masculine scientific pissing contest: If an improvement in her condition means a validation of Mesmer’s controversial methods, frankly, other doctors would rather see her blind. As deftly played by Striesow, Mesmer remains an ambiguous figure to the last: Kindly but evidently ego-driven, he seems motivated in equal measure by her growing progress and his growing celebrity. (Costume designer Veronika Albert’s creations are glorious across the board, but it’s perhaps telling that Mesmer, resplendent in violet velvet, gets her most flamboyantly embellished threads.) The cruelest kicker of all, however, is that the better Resi’s sight gets, the more her once-immaculate piano skills flounder — opening up the question of whether her treasured artistry was dependent on sensory deprivation, and if so, how much better off she really is.

That’s a lot of personal and symbolic strain to place on a single character, but Dragus’ superb performance can carry it. Beneath the public facade of a martyred innocent, she suggests a noisy internal cacophony of clashing impulses and desires — from frustrated musical passion to conflicted devotion to her healer — that occasionally emerge as a cathartic primal howl. Even in more peaceful moments, Dragus conveys the sense of a woman genuinely overwhelmed by her own senses. That awareness is elegantly carried over into Albert’s filmmaking: in the subtle distortions of the sound design, or the fine intrusions of sunlight and shadow on Christine A. Meier’s rigorously composed widescreen lensing. (Not for nothing, the film’s original title translates simply as “Light.”) In the best moments of “Mademoiselle Paradis,” the sensual world comes across as a work in tingling progress.

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Reviewed at San Sebastian Film Festival (Official Selection), Sept. 25, 2017. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Platform.) Running time: **97 MIN.**(Original title: "Licht")

**Production**: (Austria-Germany) An NGF Geyrhalterfilm, Looks Filmproduktionen presentation. (International sales: Playtime, Paris.) Producers: Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer, Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Markus Glaser, Martina Haubrich, Gunnar Dedio. Co-producers: Ursula Wolschlager, Robert Buchschwenter.

**Crew**: Director: Barbara Albert. Screenplay: Kathrin Resetarits, adapted from the novel “Mesmerized” by Alissa Walser. Camera (color, widescreen): Christine A. Meier. Editor: Niki Mossböck.

**With**: Maria Dragus, Devid Striesow, Lukas Miko, Katja Kolm, Maresi Riegner, Johanna Orsini-Rosenberg, Stefanie Reinsperger, Susanne Wuest, Christoph Luser. (German, French dialogue)