



Venice 2022 review: Eismayer (David Wagner)

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Sometimes life reads like a movie script. Austrian director David Wagner’s gay drama *Eismayer* is based on a real story that is almost too good to be true when it comes to the dramatic ups and downs, but this tale of love between a tough-as-nails drill sergeant and one of his recruits should win most audiences over. Add in Wagner’s film being well-paced and handsomely shot, and *Eismayer* shapes up as quite an impressive debut on the back of two strong central performances.

Sergeant Major Charles Eismayer (Gerhard Liebmann) is feared. The tough instructor in the Austrian Armed Forces has a reputation for breaking recruits, the kind of man for whom you fear his veins may pop any minute when he gets angry at his recruits. And he gets angry quite often, as he drills discipline into the troops. He harbours a secret though, one that he hides from both his men and his family: he is actually gay. He makes up excuses to his wife (Julia Koschitz) to engage in anonymous trysts with men, but manages to keep it separate from his work. When recruit Mario Falak (Luka Dimic) joins the ranks though, the openly gay young man catches Eismayer off guard, throwing his beliefs that the army and life as a gay man cannot coexist into disarray. When his wife finds out about his sexuality she leaves him, and Eismayer reaches a low when he is diagnosed with lung cancer. It is Mario who takes care of him through his darkest period, but will Eismayer give in and openly declare his love for Mario?

As the credit scenes show, sometimes life is indeed like a movie. To be fair, that the story ends up there is not a surprise. *Eismayer* is more about the melodramatic, if true, path to get to that point. Eismayer and Falak’s story is too good to do a lot more with it, and Wagner wisely lets his main actors take centre stage, where in particular Liebmann, probably more of a lead character than Dimic, is outstanding. Liebmann embodies the struggle his character is going through, and when he finally comes out to his wife, who has already left him by then on the suspicion he is having an extra-marital affair, the actor’s quiet performance is heartbreaking. Dimic has the somewhat easier role as the openly gay and extroverted Falak, but he matches Liebmann in the understated moments.

In terms of artistic merit Serafin Spitzer’s cinematography has to be singled out. His clever use of light and shadow in particular makes the intimate scenes lusciously erotic, and the visual language around both lead characters as they gradually become closer encapsulates

their tentative dancing around each other. Wagner mostly just lets the story tell itself, only punctuating developments with metaphorical imagery that symbolizes his protagonist's way  out of the closet (or in this case, the ruins of a building in the woods). *Eismayer* is an uplifting tale, although the eventual happy ending (Eismayer and Falak married in 2014, after a decade of hiding) shows how difficult it was even a short time ago to be openly gay in the Austrian, and likely any, military. The film skips over this period of covert encounters relatively quickly, taking its time building up to the moment Eismayer finally declares his love to Falak. Still, with this debut Wagner shows a talent for gradually letting a story unfold, making *Eismayer* an engaging and quite simply damn romantic film.

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