

**SCREEN**DAILY

## 'Eismayer': Venice Review

BY ALLAN HUNTER | 5 SEPTEMBER 2022

Gerhard Liebmann gives a full-throttle performance in this true-life drama about a closeted military man



**SOURCE: GOLDEN GIRLS FILMS  
'EISMAYER'**

*Dir/scr: David Wagner. Austria. 2022. 86 mins.*

Charles Eismayer is a walking cliché. A granite-hard military martinet, he barks orders, punishes insubordination and believes that he is transforming boys into men. A carapace of hyper-masculinity has grown around the anxieties of this closeted gay man. David Wagner's spare, understated debut

feature is based on true events and reveals what it takes for Eismayer to accept himself. What follows is a lump-in-the-throat love story that should appeal to LGBTQ+ audiences, festivals and niche distributors.

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Gerhard Liebmann gives a full-throttle performance as Eismayer, a sergeant-major in the Austrian army responsible for training new recruits. His gimlet eye misses nothing, and constant bouts of rage leave him foaming at the mouth. His reputation precedes him. Wagner plays up the anticipation of Eismayer's first appearance, focusing on the legends shared by nervous recruits and the echo of his steps as he approaches along a shadowy corridor. A sea of bobbing Adam's apples reflect the collective fear.

The only place Eismayer unwinds is at home with his young son Dominik (Lion Tatzber) and wife Christina (Julia Koschitz), who worries about his unexplained absences and distant manner. The one new recruit who isn't intimidated by Eismayer is Mario Falak (Luka Dimic). Unashamedly gay and constantly defiant, he becomes the catalyst for change. The initial battle of wills between the two men carries a sexual tension that slowly bubbles to the surface.

The theme of closeted serving soldiers and the world in which they live runs through *The Sergeant* (1968) to *Moffie* (2019) and beyond. Wagner acknowledges the casual homophobia and racism of the army, partly explaining why Eismayer and his generation put so much effort into concealing their true selves. This is in contrast with how Falak acts and is treated: Falak makes no secret of his sexuality, trades banter with his fellow recruits and finds acceptance. When the two men start a relationship, it's imperilled by the tension between Eismayer's reluctance to see the possibility of a future together and Falak's belief that anything is possible in a modern world. The unexpected obstacles they face deepen their story and the film's emotional impact.

Wagner takes a reserved approach to potentially heart-tugging developments. There is an air of confidence and composure in the film. Cinematographer Serafin Spitzer's background in documentaries serves Wagner's storytelling vision with crisp, clear, unshowy imagery. Melancholy shots of a ruined, crumbling building covered by floating snowflakes quietly reflect the person Eismayer has left behind.

Two key scenes in which Eismayer confronts his wife and chats with his wiser-than-his-years son are matter-of-fact and beautifully underplayed, removing the sting of melodrama and all the more moving

for it. Tatzber's natural, unaffected performance makes Dominik a little heartbreaker, but Wagner shows skill and sympathy with all his actors. Liebmann's implacable, square-jawed Eismayer displays a powerful need for control and certainty. His search for happiness is expertly conveyed in small steps, dawning realisations and quiet breakthroughs. Dimic is equally convincing in a different register, making Falak a fearless figure with a brazen belief that boundaries are there to be broken.

Wagner seems so intent on keeping everything tightly focused that he almost cuts the story to the bone. Significant events pass with such modest screen time that you are left wanting to know more or to spend additional time with Eismayer and Falak. A photo of the real Eismayer and Falak adds a sweet finishing touch to an uplifting story.

Production companies: Golden Girls Filmproduktion, Filmservices GmbH

International sales: Golden Girls Filmproduktion, [office@goldengirls.at](mailto:office@goldengirls.at)

Producers: Arash T Riahi, Sabine Gruber

Cinematography: Serafin Spitzer

Production design: Thiare Galleguillos, Raphael Caric

Editing: Stephen Bechinger

Music: LYLIT

Main cast: Gerhard Liebmann, Luka Dimic, Julia Koschitz, Anton Noori