



Venice 2024 review: Peacock (Bernhard Wenger)

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Who are we, really? Who is the ‘real’ us? Examining identity has increasingly become a topic in art, no doubt influenced by the last two decades in which social media has become a bigger part of our lives. Just as in any social interaction in real life, whenever we post online we play a role, and the relative anonymity of those interactions heightens the artifice. We modulate our behavior depending on the social situation, and only in our own thoughts are we truly ourselves. In his debut feature *Peacock*, Austrian director Bernhard Wenger plays with this idea, especially once you take it too far and your adopted identity overtakes your own. A poignant satire about the difficulty of being ourselves, *Peacock* should play well to audiences who like their humor awkward, and is a strong showcase for the comedic talent of lead actor Albrecht Schuch.

Matthias (Albrecht Schuch) can be anything you want him to be. You need someone to prop you up as a hero? A boyfriend to impress your cultured friends? A gay partner to go apartment hunting with? These are all services that Matthias can provide, with utmost discretion and impeccable preparation. But like so many of us, Matthias takes his work home with him, where the roles he plays start to blend into his life outside his job to the point where Matthias’ own personality has faded so much that it becomes non-existent if there isn’t some scenario to give him context. His girlfriend (Julia Franz Richter) tells him he’s not real anymore, right before she leaves, dropping Matthias into an identity crisis. His business partner David (Anton Noori) advises him to follow some courses at an upscale retreat in order to find himself, and that is where he meets Ina (Theresa Frostad Eggesbø), who he met before during one of his assignments. With Ina he can be himself a bit, and he clings onto that for dear life. He is also still on two long-term assignments though: one in which he role-plays with an older woman so she can better argue with her husband, which leads to a divorce and a disgruntled old man chasing Matthias around; the other playing the son of an arrogant upper-class man who expects a glowing speech at his big bash birthday party. The pressure of his job and Ina’s rejection of him as a one-night stand send Matthias on a path to self-destruction and an explosive moment of breaking character.

Peacock’s premise sounds like something that could have come from the brain of Ruben Östlund, and both in tone and style his recent films are certainly a good reference point for Wenger’s debut; in particular *The Square*, with its final scene being similar to *Peacock*’s, touches upon the fine line between artifice and the real. Like Östlund, Wenger frequently

uses smash cuts either away from or leading into odd tableaux for comedic effect, visual non-sequiturs that jolt the audience into laughter through their absurdity (another recent  example is Yorgos Lanthimos' quick cut to a wild foursome in *Kinds of Kindness*). This keeps *Peacock* lively, something it needs because the premise, while original and fodder for philosophical discussions post-screening, on its own would soon run its course. Wenger cleverly weaves together several plot threads – from his assignments to Ina to a Pomeranian rent-a-dog confronting Matthias with his lack of personality – that could in essence be self-contained short stories, to track Matthias' unravelling and his increasing paranoia about the realness of the people around him, as if existing in his own personal *Truman Show*.

A film like this doesn't work without an actor who understands the assignment, and Schuch, probably best known for his role in Edward Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, slips into the role of Matthias like a chameleon, or perhaps the titular peacock. Between the measured and friendly demeanor of the eager-to-please Matthias at 'work' and the mixture of expressions of embarrassment, confusion, and being on the verge of tears when he has to be himself, Schuch creates a richly textured character that on the surface is, by design, a blank space. His comedic timing is exemplary, no doubt helped by Wenger's pitch-perfect editing, and the final scene, in which his pliability goes out the window in a moment of sincerity that is ironically misunderstood as performance art, is an act of bravery on Schuch's part. His performance elevates a film that is already rich with ideas; a film that no doubt will be compared to Wenger's aforementioned and more celebrated contemporaries, but that can stand on its own through its sharp writing, tight direction, and an actor who delivers one of the year's strongest comedic performances.

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