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'Peacock' Review: A Zingy Austrian Comedy Follows a Friend-For-Hire In Desperate Need of a Real Connection

'All Quiet on the Western Front' standout Albrecht Schuch gives an irresistible star turn in Bernhard Wenger's tart, funny, slightly heartbreaking debut feature.

By [Guy Lodge](#) ▾



Courtesy of Venice Critics' Week

Considerate, cultured, polite, patient, a good listener, easy on the eye: Matthias is

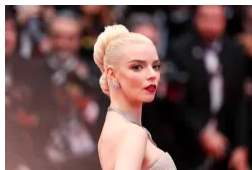
glad to be company to almost anyone, a middle-aged singleton seeking a date to a classical concert, an elderly married woman who can't talk to her husband, a man his age who needs a fake boyfriend to secure an apartment lease. Just because he's getting paid for his companionship in all these situations doesn't mean he treats them with less care than he would any of his own, uncommissioned relationships — which might be a problem, he realizes, by the time his girlfriend walks out on him, exasperatedly saying that he “doesn't seem real anymore.” That pithy remark sends Matthias into a tailspin, a crisis of selfhood, that gives [Bernhard Wenger](#)'s superb black comedy “[Peacock](#)” its unpredictable arc.

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An auspiciously polished and snappy debut from its Austrian writer-director, this Venice Critics' Week highlight has already racked up robust sales in major territories on the strength of its sparkling, readily translatable satire and quicksilver leading turn by Albrecht Schuch — the German star who made an international impression with his BAFTA-nominated performance in “All Quiet on the Western Front.”

With its seemingly absurd premise actually inspired by a real-life boom in rent-a-friend agencies in Japan, this reflection on Insta-lifestyle micro-management and faltering human connection in an age of social-network overload is

work of Ingmar Bergman and particularly Ruben Östlund. Peacock is a degree or two warmer than either, with Matthias' forlorn search for the personality he shed somewhere along the way making him a decidedly endearing antihero. There's still a whisper of formalist Austrian chill in its quizzical, hands-off perspective and immaculately composed mise-en-scène: Albin Wildner's lensing is crisp and bright and still, a restrained canvas for stark sight gags.

It opens on an arrestingly cryptic note, with an eerie composition of a golf cart ablaze on a manicured green, eventually doused by a man and woman who dash nimbly into the frame with extinguishers, before congratulating each other on their heroism. The man is Matthias: With no context for this scene forthcoming, we're left to assume that amateur firefighting on a golf course is simply another day at the office for a man who prides himself on his composure and helpfulness in all situations. Forever dashingly dressed and groomed, with nary a hair out of place in either his neat mustache or his moussed blond quiff, he's both the CEO and very sellable face of My Companion, a Vienna-based friend-rental company that disguises any potential sadness or tawdriness in the enterprise with friendly therapyspeak and a bright millennial aesthetic.

Business is clearly good, if the pristine, fashionably furnished modernist home he shares with Sophia (Julia Franz Richter) is anything to go by. Yet between his many, varied work appointments and the homework he does for each of them (brushing up on aviation to pose as a child's pilot father for a school careers day, preparing a speech for his pretend father's lavish 60th birthday celebrations), there's less and less time in the day for Matthias to be Matthias.

When Sophia dumps him, he finds he has no remaining connection to himself, while everything he tries to rediscover his center — from expensive yoga retreats to a casual flirtation with a passing acquaintance (Theresa Frostad Eggesbø) that

social rhythms. Even his house feels like a show home that isn't really his, with its incomprehensible plumbing issues, alienatingly perfect decor (all credit to Katharina Haring's witty production design) and scuttling, toy-like Pomeranian puppy that he, too, hires from an agency. ("Thanks for calling Rent-a-Dog — good boys only.") It'll take a drastic break in his routine to find himself, and a selfishness that can't be great for business.

Wenger's script is a sly, finely balanced thing, pointedly and often hilariously poking fun at corporate and capitalistic ideals of self-improvement and social coordination, without ridiculing the individuals who feel beholden to those standards. That is felt in its perceptive quick-sketch character studies of Matthias's clients, who don't always want company as much as they want others to think they have it, or in its wry but compassionate treatment of Matthias himself — a sort of human cypher, perhaps, but one who has all the makings of a stand-up guy if he would just, well, stand up.

In a tremendous comic performance of great physical ingenuity and pent-up emotional desperation, Schuch initially essays the blank, pleasant compliance of all the character's professional personae with an ease that feels duly put-on. It's as the anxious tells ramp up, his rehearsed expressions and body language twitchily disrupted like TV static, that he becomes less poised, less perfect, much easier to love. "Good service is its own reward," a client tells Matthias early on, refusing to tip him for his very convincing semblance of devotion. It's a stingy dodge, perhaps, but an instructive one: "Peacock" serves as a cruel reminder, then a strangely sweet one, that true social contracts are always thankless.

Read More About: Bernhard Wenger, Peacock, Venice Film Festival

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a Near Connection

Reviewed at Soho Screening Rooms, London, Aug. 6, 2024. In Venice Film Festival — Critics' Week. Running time: 102 MIN.

Production: (Austria-Germany) An NGF Geyrhalterfilm, CALA Filmproduktion production. (World sales: MK2 Films, Paris.) Producers: Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer, Markus Glaser, Nikolaus Geyrhalter. Executive producer: Michael Kitzberger, Bogdan Büchner. Co-producer: Martina Haubrich.

Crew: Director, screenplay: Bernhard Wenger. Camera: Albin Wildner. Editor: Rupert Höller. Music: Lorenz Dangel.

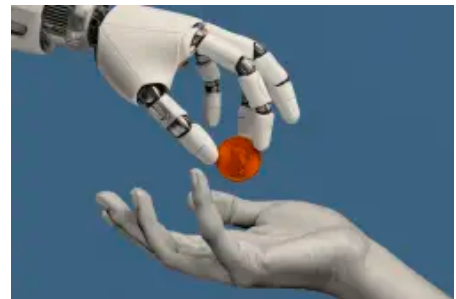
With: Albrecht Schuch, Julia Franz Richter, Anton Noori, Theresa Frostad Eggesbø, Salka Weber, Maria Hofstätter, Branko Samarovski, Tilo Nest, Christopher Schärf, Marlene Hauser. (German, English dialogue)

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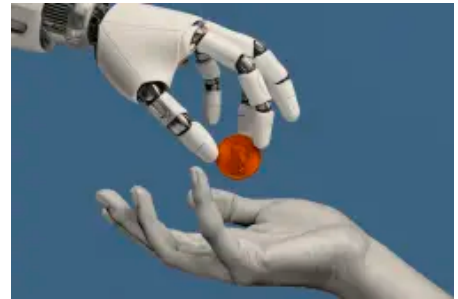
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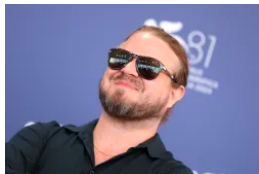
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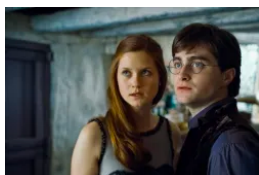
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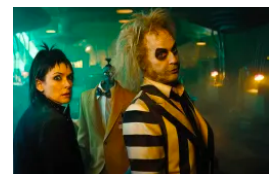


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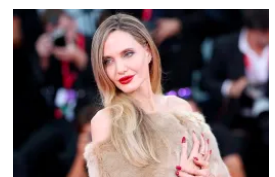
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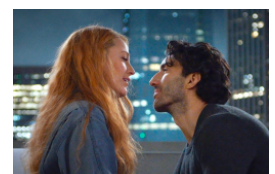
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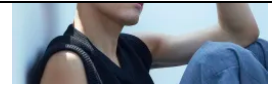
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