

'The Devil's Bath': Berlin Review

BY **WENDY IDE** | 21 FEBRUARY 2024

A depressed woman turns to desperate measures in 18th century rural Austria



**SOURCE: BERLIN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
'THE DEVIL'S BATH'**

Dir/scr: Veronika Franz, Severin Fiala. Austria/Germany. 2024. 121mins

The honeymoon period for any new marriage in rural Austria, 1750, tends to be brief, with the daily grind of toil soon extinguishing any spark of hope. But even by the dispiriting standards of the era, the union between Agnes (Anja Plaschg) and Wolf (David Scheid) is doomed almost as soon as it starts, leaving fragile Agnes sinking into paralysing depression and contemplating an escape from her suffering. Suicide, with its guarantee of eternal damnation, is not an option for a devout God-fearing Catholic like Agnes. But there are other, even more desperate means available in this assured, grimly compelling drama from Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala.

Assured, grimly compelling drama

This is not the first time that co-writers and directors Franz and Fiala have dealt with the unhealthy power of Catholicism. Religious indoctrination also plays a key role in *The Lodge*, the pair's 2019 English-language horror. Their other collaborations include *Goodnight Mommy* (2014), which premiered in Venice and went on to claim multiple festival prizes including at Thessaloniki and Sitge; in addition, Franz is a long-term screenwriting collaborator of Ulrich Seidl, to whom she is married, and who acts as producer here.

This latest film is less overtly a horror genre picture than these previous works, although it is truly horrifying at times, with a deft slow-build of tension and several genuinely shocking moments. The picture already caught the eye of Shudder, which has acquired the rights for North America, the UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand; several other territories have also been sold. It's a powerful movie, certainly but, with its gut-punch depictions of infanticide, it may be a tough sell.

Agnes, as the recurring motif of a butterfly suggests, is a delicate soul; devout and desperate to be a good wife and – above all – a mother. Hers is the kind of spirit easily crushed by the realities of her new life. And it is a life that comes with challenges. Wolf has taken it upon himself to surprise his new bride with a house; a moss-covered shack in the dampest, darkest corner of the forest.

Agnes tries to put on a brave face, but there is also the issue of the work that she is expected to undertake – hauling recalcitrant carp out of a treacherous, mud-filled lake. And her new mother-in-law Ganglin (Maria Hofstätter) makes it emphatically clear that Agnes can do nothing right. But what really hurts is the fact that the longed-for baby is unlikely ever to arrive, given that Wolf, whose sexual tastes lie elsewhere, can barely bring himself to touch or even look at her.

Plaschg is a magnetic presence, and while Agnes' life does not, on paper, seem to be extreme enough to drive someone to contemplate unimaginable options in order to sidestep the fires of hell, Plaschg captures the physicality of deep, drowning depression (known, in 18th century vernacular, as being in 'the devil's bath'). Plaschg also, under the name Soap&Skin, wrote the raw, primal Mica Levi-esque score – a considerable asset in crafting the film's harsh and unforgiving ambience.

Also key in creating the atmosphere is the evocative cinematography. There's a striking beauty to the forest country in which Agnes and Wolf make their home. But there's also something slightly
gloomy about the light that filters through the tree canopy – it's a colour palette that speaks
increasingly of sickness and despair, of rotten teeth and sweat-stained garments, of the stench of

decay.

Ultimately much of the picture's impact comes from the fact that, while the story is drawn from historical facts and is specific to its period, there are few films, contemporary or otherwise, that capture so unflinchingly the distorting, debilitating symptoms of depression as a disease.

Production company: Ulrich Seidl Filmproduktion

International sales: Playtime info@playtime.group

Producer: Ulrich Seidl

Cinematography: Martin Gschlacht

Editing: Michael Palm

Production design: Andreas Donhauser, Renate Martin

Music: Soap&Skin

Main cast: Anja Plaschg, David Scheid, Maria Hofstätter, Natalija Baranova

