

A photograph of two women standing on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. The woman in the foreground is wearing a light pink blouse with a large bow at the neck. The woman in the background is wearing a red top and a red headband. The sky is blue with white clouds. The text 'SISI & I' is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font.

SISI & I

SYNOPSIS

Austria, late 19th Century. Countess Irma Sztáray (Sandra Hüller) leaves her home in Hungary to become the lady-in-waiting for Empress Elisabeth of Austria, known to those close to her as Sisi (Susanne Wolff). Irma falls under the spell of the rebellious Empress Sisi, and the two form a strong bond during a summer retreat in Greece. However, once home in Vienna, their lives take dramatic and irrevocable turns.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Frauke Finsterwalder was born in Hamburg in 1975. After studying Literature and History in Berlin, she worked at various theatres including the Volksbühne on Rosa Luxemburg Platz and later as a journalist. She then studied Film Directing at HFF Munich. Finsterwalder has also lived in Kenya, Italy, California, India and Switzerland. Her debut feature film *Finsterworld* received numerous international awards.

Selected director's filmography:

2023 *Sisi & I (Sisi & Ich)*

2013 *Finsterworld*

2010 *Die Große Pyramide (Doc)*

2007 *Weil der Mensch ein Mensch ist (Doc)*

2006 *0.003 km (Short)*





DIRECTOR COMMENTS

Sisi as a film character

I knew from the beginning that I would not make the tenth film about Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary. I wanted to find something in these figures who lived in the 19th century that does something to me now, in the present. To tell a story about the age-old, Aristotelian question: What is friendship? And why are friendships made? Out of sympathy? Out of love? Out of calculation? And what happens when the balance of power can never be equal?

Sisi's mental state

My empress is driven by restlessness and a desire to avoid a quiet life. Her mood sometimes changes in a matter of seconds, and she is constantly on the move, both mentally and physically. That makes Sisi interesting for Irma. There is never a dull moment with her.

The psyche

Historically, Empress Elisabeth has liked to be described as depressive and "borderline". A woman who is difficult must of course - according to these depictions - be ill. This is a boring and masculine view. In my film, Sisi is engaging, but also manipulative, ruthless, and very quick-witted. That is sometimes terrible, and often funny and sympathetic to me.

Irma

When I started thinking about Sisi as a character, I was living in America and it was very much about the issue of abuse and the notion of grooming during that time. The Neverland documentary about Michael Jackson had just come out. My film tells the fictional story of Countess Irma, who is allowed to get close to the biggest pop star of her time. She gradually gets caught up in the Empress' maelstrom; Sisi sometimes allows her to get close and then brutally pushes her away again. Irma develops a fateful obsession.

Friendship or love

There are unequal power relations between Sisi and Irma: One is the most powerful woman of her time and the other her lady-in-waiting. A closeness develops which, although it benefits both women in different ways, must inevitably to tragedy.

Good and Evil

We meet Irma at the very beginning as a middle-aged woman who is beaten by her mother. This violent relationship is also revealed on a verbal level as the film progresses. Irma meets Sisi, who, as we learn much later, is physically assaulted several times by her husband, Emperor Franz Joseph, and also humiliated and bullied by her mother. Sisi, in turn, torments Irma, but also other people subordinate to her. What does all this have to do with love? I agree with Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki when he says that supposedly good characters have dark sides and supposedly evil characters are allowed to be good. I don't like German fairy tales, which assume that there is only good and evil. But that doesn't get you very far when you're talking about abuse.

Casting

The role of Irma was written for Sandra Hüller from the start. She is an actress who, like no other in her generation, can combine horror and sadness with humor and play with incredible self-irony. Besides that, only an actress like Susanne Wolff could be considered for the Empress. She has an intangible presence that is immediately palpable when she enters the room. Moreover, films with two women as main characters often cast similar types of women. Sandra and Susanne are like night and day. One has to decide where one would rather look. The eye cannot rest.

Fashion

When I see women in frilly, wide ruffled skirts, I can't take them seriously. Together with costume designer Tanja Hausner, we developed dresses that tell the story of modern women. No Victorian, room-filling, huge gowns. No corsets. Pants. Dresses in which you can move, be restless, or sit down without problems. For example, as it often happens in my film, on the floor. In which you can ride and wander without any worries, and which are more oriented towards the 1960s and 1970s of the last century. Historical realism was not important to me.

Music in film

Each of my films so far have started at some point with me hearing a song and from that I know exactly what the film will be like; seeing images, scenes in front of me. But, in my last films I didn't use those songs in the film itself, I just listened to them with headphones during the shoot. With SISI & I, we wrote the songs into the script, hoping that - despite the time in which the film is set - it would work in conjunction with the rather modern costumes and the rough 16mm film look, to actually use them.

So when the editor laid out "Glory Box" by Portishead to go with the images from the first scenes in the film, I knew it had to be just that. Oddly enough, "Glory Box" was also the first track that stuck when I was writing it. Strange because when the song came out in the '90s, I thought Portishead was stupid, too commercial, we called it commercial music back then. When I was just starting to think about the Sisi idea, I happened to hear it on the radio and immediately saw Irma, the relationship with her mother and with Sisi, the first scene in front of me, Irma's development in the film. Other songs come from the É! label, which I love. I actually always wanted to do a musical with this music, from the Would-Be-Goods, for example. And then I wanted to use something from my Berlin days in the '90s, bands you might have forgotten, like the "Poptarts," in addition to well-known pieces. And the Japanese girl punk band "Seagull Screaming Kiss Her Kiss Her".

There is a performance by the singer Nico, whom I adore, where she holds a Chanel compact in her hand on stage and sings into the mirror instead of into the audience. During the makeup scene at the end of my film, in which Sisi is seen reflected several times in different mirrors, Sisi reminded me of Nico. And that's how the piece came about.

All the songs in the film are favorites of mine. The only thing that was essential in the selection was that only women's voices should be heard in the film.

The End

When you write a screenplay, the characters in it develop their own logic. It doesn't matter whether they were once real characters or invented fictional characters. And in this film's own logic, the character of Irma in SISI & I simply had to develop in exactly this direction and end up the way she does in the film. There was no other possibility.



SANDRA HÜLLER BIOGRAPHY

Sandra Hüller studied acting at the renowned University of Dramatic Arts “Ernst Busch” in Berlin. She has received numerous awards for her roles in the theater, and she has been voted actress of the year three times (2010, 2013 and 2019) in the critics' survey of Theater heute. Since 2018, Sandra Hüller has been a member of the ensemble at the Schauspielhaus Bochum, where she is currently celebrating great successes as Hamlet and Penthesilea in the eponymous productions of Johan Simons. Sandra Hüller received numerous awards for her first film main role in Hans-Christian Schmid's feature film “Requiem”, including the Silver Bear, the German Film Prize and the Bavarian Film Prize. Also in Maren Ades cult movie “Toni Erdmann” Sandra Hüller inspired audiences and critics alike and received for their performance of Ines Conradi the European Film Awards, the Toronto Film Critics Association Award, the Malaysia Golden Global Award, the German Film Award and the Bavarian Film Prize. “Toni Erdmann” has received numerous national and international awards and in 2017 was the German Oscar candidate for Best Foreign Language Film. Most recently, Sandra Hüller starred in Justine Triet's movie “Sibyl” alongside Virginie Efira, Adèle Exarchopoulos and Gaspard Ulliel, and in Alice Winocour's astronaut drama “Proxima” starring Eva Green, Matt Dillon and Lars Eidinger.

SUSANNE WOLFF BIOGRAPHY

Susanne Wolff launched her theatre career at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg before switching to the Deutsches Theater in 2009. Here, she appeared in productions by Nicolas Stemmann, Alize Zandwijk, Rafael Sanchez, Andreas Kriegenburg and others. Wolff has an ongoing collaboration with directors Stephan Kimmig and Armin Petras. Not only has she played the great female parts “Nora”, “Penthesilea”, “Hedda Gabler” and “Mary Stuart”, she has also taken on traditionally male roles, such as “Othello” and “Macbeth”.

In 1999, Wolff was awarded the Körber Foundation’s Boy Gobert Prize and in 2003 she received the 3sat Prize for her portrayal of “Nora”. The same role brought her the Rolf Mares Prize in 2006. In 2008, her role in the film “The Stranger in Me” by Emily Atef won her a Young German Cinema Award and the award for Best Actress at the São Paulo International Film Festival. In 2013 she received a German Television Award for “Mobbing” by Nicole Weegmann. In 2017, the TV series “Tomorrow I Quit”, with Bastian Pastewka and Susanne Wolff in the leading roles, won a Golden Camera award. In 2019 Wolff was much lauded for her role in the refugee drama “Styx”, garnering a Heiner Carow Prize, a Günter Rohrbach Film Prize, a German Film Prize, and a Metropolis award as Best Actress. The film “Almost Home”, with Susanne Wolff as the female lead, recently won a 2022 Student Academy Award.



MAIN CAST

SUSANNE WOLFF
AS ELISABETH OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

SANDRA HÜLLER
AS IRMA COUNTESS OF SZTÁRAY

GEORG FRIEDRICH
AS ARCHDUKE VIKTOR OF AUSTRIA

STEFAN KURT
AS COUNT BERZEVICZY

SOPHIE HUTTER
AS FRITZI

MAIN CREW

Director: Frauke Finsterwalder
Screenplay: Frauke Finsterwalder, Christian Kracht
Director of photography: Thomas W. Kiennast
Production design: Katharina Wöppermann
Makeup & hair design: Christina Baier,
Marc Hollenstein
Costume designer: Tanja Hausner
Casting: Simone Bär, Alexandra Montag
Casting UK: Kate Ringsell, Amy-Alice Thomas
Line producer: Ole Nicolaisen, Roland Stebler,
Florian Krügel
Production manager: Peter Hermann
Postproduction supervisor: Marius Ehlayli
Editor: Andreas Menn
Production sound mixer: Marco Teufen
Sound design: Paul Rischer
Re-recording mixer: Gregor Bonse
Composer: Matteo Pagamici
Music supervisor: Martin Hossbach
VFX supervisor: Min Tesch

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Original title: SISI & ICH
International title: SISI & I
Duration: 132 min
Aspect Ratio: 1.85:1
Format: DCP
Sound: 5.1. cinemix
Year: 2023
Original languages: German, English, French
Countries of production: Germany, Switzerland,
Austria
Production Companies: Walker Worm Film GmbH
& Co. KG
Co-production Companies: C-FILMS AG, DOR
FILM, DCM Film Distribution GmbH, Bayerischer
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