

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Das Experiment - 2001

CREDITS

Director: Oliver Hirschbiegel
Screenplay: Don Bohlinger, Cristoph Darnstaedt, Mario Giordano
Running Time: 120 min.
Based on the novel *Black Box* by Mario Giordano

CAST

Tarek Fahd: Moritz Bleibtreu
Dora: Christian Berkel
Berus: Justus von Dohnanyi

DIRECTOR

Oliver Hirschbiegel was born in 1957 in Hamburg, Germany. He began a career in television directing and writing in 1986 and has since made many accomplished and acclaimed works. *Das Experiment* (2001) is his feature debut in film followed by *My Last Film* (2002).

PRÉCIS – Brian Conboy

History is replete with examples of atrocities and bestial acts committed not by criminals or depraved and degenerate individuals, but by “ordinary men”, men from our own communities and families, our own fathers, sons and brothers. *Das Experiment* presents a tale that examines this phenomenon with great style and depth and does so in the framework of a skillfully crafted thriller. The film is based on the novel, *Black Box*, by Mario Giordano and both film and book are based on the Stanford Prison Experiment, a real life psychological experiment conducted at Stanford University in California in 1971.

Tarek Fahd (Moritz Bleibtreu of *Run Lola Run* and *In July*) volunteers along with 19 other men to be a subject in a mock prison experiment conducted by a team of psychologists. Twelve men must play the role of prisoner while dressed only in flimsy white smocks and sandals. Eight other men are assigned the task of jailers dressed in uniforms with boots, clubs and handcuffs. Violence is strictly prohibited on both sides. At first the men take the experiment lightly with raucous laughter and vulgar jokes. But within a very short time tempers flair, egos are damaged and the easy-going jocularly is replaced by verbal abuse, bullying, terror on the part of the prisoners and rage and arrogance on the part of the guards. Finally the experiment descends into gross and abhorrent brutality.

We are told early in the story that the test subjects are ordinary men and they describe themselves as such. Most have wives or girlfriends, none are criminals and none have ever been in prison. Few are particularly sophisticated or intellectual and all claim to have

volunteered primarily for the money. This ordinariness of the men combined with their easy descent into depravity leads to the film's basic theme: our capacity for decency and humanity is a thin veil concealing the inner beast. If the brutal perpetrators are from among us and are very much like us then the capacity for such horror resides in all of us. It is only the sudden and radical change in their environment and culture that has unleashed the darker, bestial "other".

There are many common threads that run through the histories of "organized" inhumanity and *Das Experiment* insightfully examines several of the most important. Instigators and leaders quickly emerge among both guards and prisoners to facilitate and organize the movement toward power-struggle and violence. Tarek is secretly in the pay of a popular magazine and instigates quarrels with one of the guards, Berus, to create more excitement and action for his article. Tarek's actions here suggest a far more active role on the part of the media in crime and brutality than the passive and neutral image of the reporter served up to us by the media.

Berus in turn quickly emerges as the leader and driving force behind the guards' ever-increasing use of brutality to gain control. He quickly realizes that humiliation of the prisoners is the most effective means of control and subsequently applies prodigious amounts of it. Yet it is he who stops a sexual assault by another guard on a female psychologist, illustrating the paradox that often the most fanatical and dedicated oppressors also adhere to a rigid albeit distorted code of honor and morality. The role of bystanders of crime and violence is embodied in the team of psychologists who observe nearly all of the shocking abuses of the guards yet look on with curiosity and emotional detachment. Ambition plays a major role in the negligence and insensitivity of the head psychologist Dr. Thon. He emerges as the quintessential corrupt scientist, albeit an erudite cosmopolitan as opposed to the mad scientist stereotype of countless sci fi films.

Early in the story Terek meets a young woman. They tryst for a single night and, although she departs before Tarek awakens in the morning, an enduring bond is

formed. At first this love interest seems awkwardly imposed on the story in order to, as is almost always the case, please us. Yet as the narrative progresses and our characters descend into the maelstrom of brutality, Tarek repeatedly dreams of those precious moments of tenderness and intimacy. In a film that's intensely and increasingly disturbing, that does little to please us, this relationship is thrown into stark relief as the nobler side of our soul, existing simultaneously and in tension with the evil side. Both are real, both are essential components of human nature.

Das Experiment holds up a mirror to humanity and reflects a dichotomy of darkness and light, beast and angel. The result of our gaze is a function of our focus, deriving despair from the former and hope from the latter.