

Männer Wie Wir By Sharan Knoell

Director: Sherry Horman
Music: Martin Todsharow
Writer: Benedikt Gollhardt
Release: 2004, 106 minutes
Stars: Maximilian Brückner (Ecki), David Rott (Sven), Christian Berkel (Rudolph), Lisa Potthoff (Susanne)

By American standards, in one form or another, we've all seen this film before: the lovable tale of the great athlete who is cast off but through his magical powers of motivation ends up transforming a group of misfits into a victorious team. In this formula, every sport has been covered...from hockey in "The Mighty Ducks" to basketball in "Hoosiers" to baseball in "Major League" to football in "The Longest Yard" to even professional wrestling in "Ready to Rumble".

When "Guys and Balls" (as it was ineptly titled in English*) was released, it won international acclaim on the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender) film circuit for being a well-made gay sports movie.

However, in American reviews of the film, phrases are used such as "by the book", "loopy and predictable", "inventory of clichés", and "cheerfully unsubtle". It failed to impress American audiences because we have seen this formulaic plot done over and over again – regardless of the circumstances or geographical location. For American viewers, "Guys and Balls" merely represented two new themes: soccer (not a thriving national pastime of the US) and sexuality (a taboo topic in widespread American culture).

In Europe, the reaction was a bit different. Homophobia runs rampant in German professional sports and among sports fans. Thus, the idea that someone would be cast off a sports team and forced to start his own group of similarly-oriented individuals is not nearly as absurd in German reality as it may seem in the film.

When our leading *Fussballer* Ecki (Maximilian Brückner) is ousted from his soccer team for being gay, he heads to Dortmund, an industrial town in the Ruhr area of North Rhine-Westphalia to form his own team.

Strangely enough, "Guys and Balls" at the time of its release was officially endorsed by the Borussia Dortmund soccer club. Individual pro-soccer players, on the other hand, have chosen to remain relatively silent with their reactions to the film.

Comparatively, the sports film genre is much more popular in the US, often endorsed by affiliated companies...ESPN, Nike, Adidas, Puma, as well as the NFL, MLB, NHL, and other sports associations themselves. To the rest of the world, Americans love their feel-good movies with lots of action, a few laughs, and the underdogs triumphing in the end.

In German cinema, these movies are relatively rare. The blend between the German and American cultures is much less surprising when one realizes that the director, Sherry Hormann, was American born (Kingston, NY in 1960).

When asked what attracted her to the project, Hormann responded, "It's a story about the courage to be different. Ecki, despite being ignorantly ostracized by his town, his buddies, and his family, believes in himself. A comedy that explains about being different is courageous in our conformist time".

Perhaps the most comical fact about heterosexual and non-athletic Hormann herself is that prior to filming, she admits to knowing relatively nothing about soccer or homosexuality. "Recherchieren und lernen, lernen und recherchieren" (research and learn, learn and research) was her response.

In her research, she cites a visit to the Dark Room in Cologne – a night club catering specifically to gay men. When she approached the proprietor about entering to do research for her film, the gentleman was so excited he granted her a one-time invitation...with the stipulation that "Du verkleidest dich als Mann" (you dress like a man).

Without understanding the cultural context of this film, one might be quick to dismiss its use of clichés and stereotypes, but in a country that lacks hundreds of TV channels devoted to sports, athletic goods stores in every mall, and billion dollar signing bonuses, the outward exploitation of these archetypes is rather remarkable.

*The German title translates literally into "Guys Like Us".