

# FABIAN

GOING TO THE DOGS



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GERMANY / 2021 / 176 Minutes



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## SYNOPSIS

Berlin, 1931. Jakob Fabian works in the advertising department of a cigarette factory during the day and drifts through bars, brothels and artist studios with his wealthy friend Labude at night. When Fabian gets to know the self-confident Cornelia, he manages to shed his pessimistic attitude for a brief moment. He falls in love. But then he too falls victim to the great wave of layoffs, while Cornelia makes a career as an actress thanks to her boss and admirer. An arrangement that Fabian finds difficult to come to terms with. But it's not just his world that is falling apart...

## PRESS NOTES

With novelistic breadth and the vibrant, kinetic textures of a hedonistic age, writer-director Dominik Graf (*Die Katze*, *Beloved Sisters*) shows a society teetering on the abyss, turning his lens on the everyday people who rose and fell in the heady days before Hitler's reign. Jakob Fabian (Tom Schilling) is a 32-year-old war veteran with literary aspirations navigating trauma and uncertainty in Berlin during the four-year period between the 1929 market crash and the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933. Frequenting decadent cabarets at night and writing advertising copy by day, he falls in love with aspiring actress Cornelia Battenberg (Saskia Rosendahl), loses his job amid peak unemployment, and discovers heartbreak and tragedy in the company of wealthy best friend Stephane (Albrecht Schuch), an academic yearning for a bright future. Based on Erich Kästner's novel *Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist*, Fabian captures the angst and *weltschmerz* of the Weimar Republic through the emotions and experiences of a singular young man whose libertinism and shell-shock defined a generation — and whose slow-boil submergence into a terrifying new political system reverberates into the present day.

*Fabian* or *Going to the Dogs* is based on Erich Kästner's novel of the same name, published in the author's original version in 1931, eighty-two years after its original publication, as *Fabian, the Story of a Moralist*, in 1931. The screenplay is by director Dominik Graf (*The Beloved Sisters*, 2014; *In the Face of Crime*, 2010) and cowriter Constantin Lieb (*Asphaltgorillas*, 2018; *Eden*, 2019).

The film stars Tom Schilling (*Never Look Away*, 2018; *A Coffee in Berlin*, 2012) as Fabian, Albrecht Schuch (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 2020; *System Crasher*, 2019) as Labude, and Saskia Rosendahl (*Relativity*, 2020; *Never Look Away*, 2018) as Cornelia. Meret Becker, Michael Wittenborn, Petra Kalkutschke, Eva Medusa Gühne and Elmar Gutmann co-star. It was shot at original locations in Görlitz, Malschwitz, Bautzen, Berlin, Kleinmachnow, and at Studio Babelsberg.

*Fabian*, or *Going to the Dogs* is produced by Lupa Film GmbH in coproduction with DCM Pictures GmbH and ZDF, in collaboration with ARTE, in cooperation with Amilux Filmproduktionsgesellschaft mbH and Studio Babelsberg AG, with the support of the BKM, DFFF, MDM, MBB and FFF. DCM Film Distribution will release the film nationally in 2021.



## STORYLINE

After his graduation, Jakob Fabian is drawn into the metropolis of early 1930s Berlin. He finds a job in the advertising department of a cigarette factory during the day and drifts through pubs, brothels and artist studios with his best friend Labude at night. Unlike his wealthy and politically engaged friend, Fabian remains a somewhat distant observer. He prefers to look at current affairs with fatalism and ironic detachment. While Labude falls head over heels into excess and affairs after a tragic breakup, Fabian meets the self-confident legal trainee Cornelia Battenberg. A woman who has renounced the male world and is not looking for a new relationship. For Fabian, however, she is the ray of light in the gloomy Berlin night.

Just as he is ready to take a more positive outlook on life, Fabian too falls victim to the great wave of layoffs, just as Cornelia gives in to the advances of her boss, the film producer Makart, who corrupts her with the promise of an acting career. Heartbroken, Fabian leaves her. He is driven even more deeply into general pessimism when his friend Labude unexpectedly commits suicide. Fabian flees from Berlin to his parents in Dresden and after some time finds the courage to contact Cornelia again, whose acting career seems to be taking off, with Makart hovering in the background. Their flame is still alive, and they arrange to meet in their local pub. On his way to meet her, Fabian will be confronted with yet another challenge to prove his worth as a human being.

Based on famous German author and journalist Erich Kästner's semi-autobiographic novel, published in 1931 and later banned and burned by the National Socialists.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



*She looked at him with a serious expression. "I am no angel, sir. We live in bad times for angels. What are we to do? When we fall for a man, we give ourselves up to him. We cut ourselves off from all there was before, and we go to him. Here I am, we say, with a friendly smile. Yes, here you are, he says, and scratches the back of his head. Lord above, he thinks, now I'm lumbered with her. With a light heart, we give him all we have. And he curses. Our gifts irritate him. At first, he curses softly. Later, he curses out loud. And we're left more alone than ever before. I'm twenty-five years old, and I've been left by two men. Like an umbrella you deliberately forget somewhere. Do you mind my speaking so frankly?"*

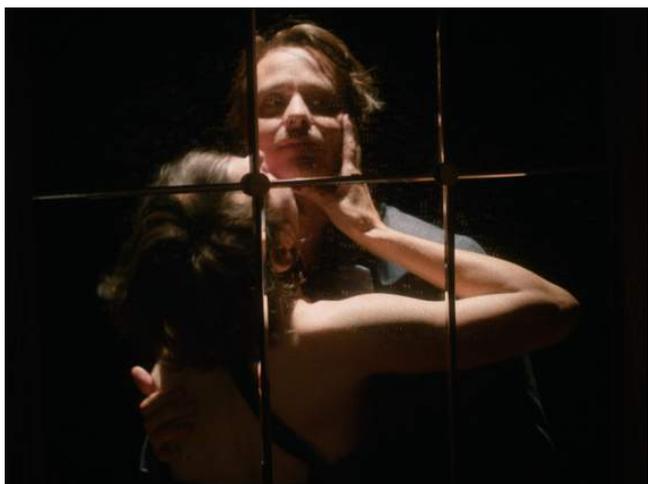


The film's subtitle, which was the original title of the novel, and now officially once more is, instead of Fabian, is *Going to the Dogs*. It may not be the most upbeat, but this is far more than a merciless situation report. Kästner paints a portrait of his Berlin in the "everyday" late twenties, 1929 or 1930: no picturesque urban grime; political tumult still halfway under control; no Fritz Lang-style underworld; definitely no expressionist artistic biographies; and no razzle-dazzle anywhere. Instead, the dreams, and maybe artistic ambitions, of the lower classes; and the existential despair of the wealthy bourgeois. Young people sit in groups or alone in apartments or cafés, drinking a lot, talking about their lovelives, or reflecting on their feelings in general.

Kästner's dialogue is, as ever, witty, charming, occasionally dark and sad, and perhaps even prescient. The locations are unspectacular. They should ring true without an expensive costume drama feel. The idea is to train the eye on the characters, and their twists and turns.

And love, which is in the air between Fabian and Cornelia, should be able to overcome all obstacles. But "want some love, need some money" as Marieluise Fleißer's lovers comment in her 1924 play *Purgatory* in Ingolstadt. This was particularly true for young people, especially in those economically catastrophic times.

Maintaining the flame of love requires going to extraordinary lengths. Lengths that exact a price in hurt feelings, frustrated desires and budding mistrust between the lovers. And then it's back to the bars, or brothels masquerading as "ateliers" and offering a fast track to ultimately urgent self-destruction. Those broken dreams need to be escaped one way or another.





Fabian, as the publishers titled the novel, has practically no plot. "At last! Wonderful!", I thought. A story of its times, of love and loss, and nothing else. Fabian is at odds with himself. He wants to be a writer, but is a copywriter. Even in love, which crashes over him like a wave, just when he's given up on the concept, he has to battle with himself, with the times he lives in. He is skeptical, smart, a bit of a grouch but an all-round sweetie. I was convinced that Tom Schilling could best embody Fabian. Without him, I don't think I'd have made the movie. It's easy to say in retrospect, but I swear that when we were writing, my cowriter Constantin Liebs and I had him in our minds' eyes.

Saskia Rosendahl, as Cornelia, who wants to go far, and take Fabian with her (despite his apprehension of her potential success!), and Albrecht Schuch as Labude, the crisis-prone heir of neglectful parents, disdained by others, who laughs a lot, tries to be happy, and wallows in the depths of despair—I was thrilled with the chemistry of my three leads.

And then, lots more parts—small, large, lots of them—floating toward us out of the mists of time, emerging, then disappearing again. Faces that must convey knowledge of the past. People didn't look like they do today. They thought and spoke differently.

In the end, it's always the same, every time young people are told of a marvelous "new time" that's coming, when they believe—encouraged by the announcements of political impresarios, showmen and profiteers—that they now have a real chance; when they believe their time has come, they are needed. For sure, as cannon fodder. They had the nightmare of one war behind them, and of the next one up ahead.

A movie taken from great literature—*Going to the Dogs* was ahead of its time, and still is—would ideally run as long as it takes to read the book. Here, I have tried my best to adhere to the maxim, and to capture the language of the novel and its very special author. It is almost more important than his imagery. No, that's nonsense, they have equal claims. I have tried to balance words and images. Kästner's writing—brilliant irony, fond lyricism, a healthy shot of bitterness—requires two narrative voices to do it justice, to express the full range of feelings. And since a battle of the sexes was raging alongside military campaigns at the time, in the end they had to be a man and a woman.

The aesthetic grittiness, which Hanno Lentz and I were looking for, shooting partially on Super 8, should also bring the period closer. The Golden Twenties were only a dirty yellow shimmer in the puddles, and life was stripped back to survival.

A word of thanks must go to the producer, Felix von Boehm. We formed a real team, and Felix had our backs, supporting our ideas, funding this dream, and moving the production forward every day (if necessary, by setting limits).

The movie was a dream when we were planning it. Usually, the director waves the film off, letting it make its way in the world, but how does it work for films completed when the world's in lockdown?

Whatever. We made it. It's there. That's the most important thing.

*Fabian sat on the window sill. Across the street, a light was on in a window. He looked into a nondescript furnished room. A woman sat at the table, with her head in her hand. A man stood before her, gesticulating, lips moving scathingly. He snatched his hat from a hook, and walked out. The woman took her hand from her face, and stared at the door. Then she lay her head on the table, very slowly and calmly, as if expecting an ax to fall. Fabian turned away and looked at the young woman sitting in the armchair beside him. She had observed the scene in the building opposite, too, and now looked sadly at him. "Another would-be angel," he said.*



## FABIAN, OUR CONTEMPORARY

The wind turns. These words, in the farewell letter of a young man who has tired of his life, constitute one of two sentences that neatly sum up the famous story Dominik Graf revisits in *Fabian*, or *Going to the Dogs*. The other sentence is glimpsed on an advertising poster that crops up in a couple of scenes in the film. It says, ominously, *Learn to swim*.

Kästner's novel follows Jakob Fabian, a jaded yet altruistic young Germanist, in his explorations of Berlin—and himself—in the early 1930s. With *Fabian*, we dive into the excesses of the city's nightlife, a world of refined brothels, extravagant artists' studios and illicit bars, where young and not-so-young men and women feverishly live it up, as if tomorrow may never come. We witness the social and political disintegration that heralds the tumultuous collapse of Germany's Weimar Republic: street fighting between communists and police, soaring unemployment, which soon afflicts Fabian, and the inexorable rise of national socialism.

On his way through this turbulent world, Fabian falls in love. And in the wake of love, he encounters hope, then disappointment. He loses a good friend. He repeatedly bumps into signs of the catastrophe bearing down on Germany and himself. Perspicacious and impudent satire, critical take on society, grand tragedy—Kästner's novel is an outstanding account of the times he lived in. In barely a few months after its release, it sold more than thirty thousand copies, before almost becoming another of the period's victims. Immediately after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Kästner's name appeared on the long list of writers whose works were burned by the Nazis. *Fabian* survived, however, and remains one of the most popular German novels of the 20th century.



Now, ninety years after the publication of Erich Kästner's classic, Dominik Graf gives Fabian new life. The vitality and impudence, as well as tragedy and urgency, which are the cornerstones of the novel, come together in Graf's film. We have the reserved observer, Jakob Fabian, superbly played by Tom Schilling. Until the very end, he resists conforming to the ever crueler world he lives in, and so never learns to swim in those waters. It will be Fabian's undoing, but ultimately remains the foundation of his dignity. We have his hopeless love story with actress Cornelia (Saskia Rosendahl), who suffers from her own pragmatism. We have his friend Labude (Albrecht Schuch), who is destroyed by his own idealism, as well as by the lies of a Nazi thug.

And we have Berlin. Graf cleverly spotlights the big city rhythms, and the growing fracture in society, so perfectly described in Kästner's novel. He allows cinematic collages to emerge, combining new images with footage from the 1930s to show Berlin bustling in black and white. At other points, he deploys split-screen techniques to show parallel scenes that evoke the visual experiments of expressionist cinema.

The film's essential originality and relevance stems from the way Graf projects the complexity of the lives and times at the heart of the story. Past, present and future intertwine. We see disfigured faces from the Great War—the war that brought Kästner's world into being. Then, alongside Fabian, we run into men in brown shirts and black leather boots, with swastikas on their arms. These encounters are all the more disturbing since we, present-day audiences, unlike the characters in the novel and its adaptation, know precisely what lies ahead. As reminders, we glimpse traces of the historical future, such as the brass cobbles implanted in sidewalks as memorials to victims of the Nazis. And so, as we roam with Fabian through the Berlin of his time, we recognize—on a street sign, in an Underground station, or in a minor character's demeanor—our own present-day Berlin.

Dominik Graf's Fabian reveals to us once more the narrative and emotional power of Kästner's novel. But it doesn't stop there. Like the original novel, Graf's film is released in a time of social uncertainty and political tension, to which the phrase *The wind turns* is just as applicable. As we watch this brilliant and modern adaptation, we catch ourselves reflecting on our world, and we have to ask ourselves, What does it mean today to learn to swim?

*by Hernán D. Caro*

## BIOGRAPHIES

**DOMINIK GRAF** was born in Munich in 1952. He graduated from Munich Film and TV Academy in 1980. In his career as writer and director for TV and cinema, his films have garnered national and international prizes, including prestigious Lola Awards and Grimme Awards. His credits include the Der Fahnder series (1984), The Cat (1988), The Invincibles (1994), Hotte im Paradies (2003), The Beloved Sisters (2014), the 10-part series In the Face of Crime (2010), several episodes of the Polizeiruf 110 series, and five episodes of Tatort, including Frau Bu Laughs. In 2010, a book of Dominik Graf's essays on cinema was published.

Born in Berlin in 1982, **TOM SCHILLING** made his screen debut in the East German film Stunde der Wahrheit. After appearances in several stage productions, his breakout performance came in Crazy (2000) alongside Robert Stadlober, opposite whom he also starred in Play It Loud (2003) and Black Sheep (2006). In Before the Fall, he co-starred alongside Max Riemelt. In 2006, Tom won a scholarship to study at the Lee Strasberg Institute in New York.

In 2008, he played the title role in Leander Haußmann's comedy Robert Zimmermann Is Tangled Up In Love, and young Adolf Hitler in Mein Kampf, directed by Urs Odermatt. His performance in Jan-Ole Gerster's tragicomic A Coffee In Berlin (2012), brought Tom particular acclaim, as well as the Bavarian Film Prize and Lola Award, and nominations for Best Actor at the German Film Critics' Awards and European Film Awards 2014. In 2013, Tom co-starred in the TV mini-series Our Mothers, Our Fathers, for which he won the Bambi Award for Best German Actor. He followed up with Who Am I – No System Is Safe (2014), directed by Baran Bo Odar, the TV movie Auf Kurze Distanz (2016), directed by Philipp Kadelbach, and the mini-series Der Gleiche Himmel (2017) by Oliver Hirschbiegel.

In Never Look Away (2018), co-starring Sebastian Koch, Paula Beer, Saskia Rosendahl and Oliver Masucci, Tom played an artist whose life draws on the biography of Gerhard Richter. The movie was Germany's official entry for Best International Feature at the 2019 Academy Awards. In 2019, Tom starred in Jan-Ole Gerster's Lara, in Alireza Golafshan's comedy The Goldfish, and Robert Thalheim's TKKG. Most recently, he starred in Leander Haussmann's A Stasi Comedy, and in the Ich Und Die Anderen series, directed by David Schalko.



Born in Jena in 1985, **ALBRECHT SCHUCH** graduated from Leipzig's Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy Academy for Music and Theatre in 2010, and has performed on stage in Jena, Leipzig, Vienna and Berlin since 2001. He made his first screen appearances in the TV series *Polizeiruf 110* and *Tatort*. In 2010, Albrecht was in Hermine Huntgeburth's adaptation of Sven Regener's novel *Neue Vahr Süd*, for which he won the German Comedy Prize. The next year, he starred as Alexander von Humboldt in the adaptation of the bestseller *Measuring The World*. He followed up with roles in *Westwind* (2011), the mini-series adaptation of Ken Follet's *A Dangerous Fortune* (2016), and the award-winning three-part series *NSU: German History X* (2016), for which he won a Grimme Award. In Christian Schwochow's 2016 biopic *Paula*, Albrecht played landscape artist Otto Modersohn. In August 2017, he starred in the ZDF thriller *Verräter*. Besides his screen work, he continues to appear regularly in stage productions.

In 2018, Albrecht Schuch won the Lola Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in the TV movie *Gladbeck*, and the German TV Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Bad Banks*. In 2019, for *Gladbeck*, *Der Polizist und das Mädchen* and *Kruso*, Albrecht won the German TV Academy Award and Golden Camera Prize for Best Actor. For his performances in *System Crasher* (2019) and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (2020), he won the 2020 Lola Awards for Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor respectively.



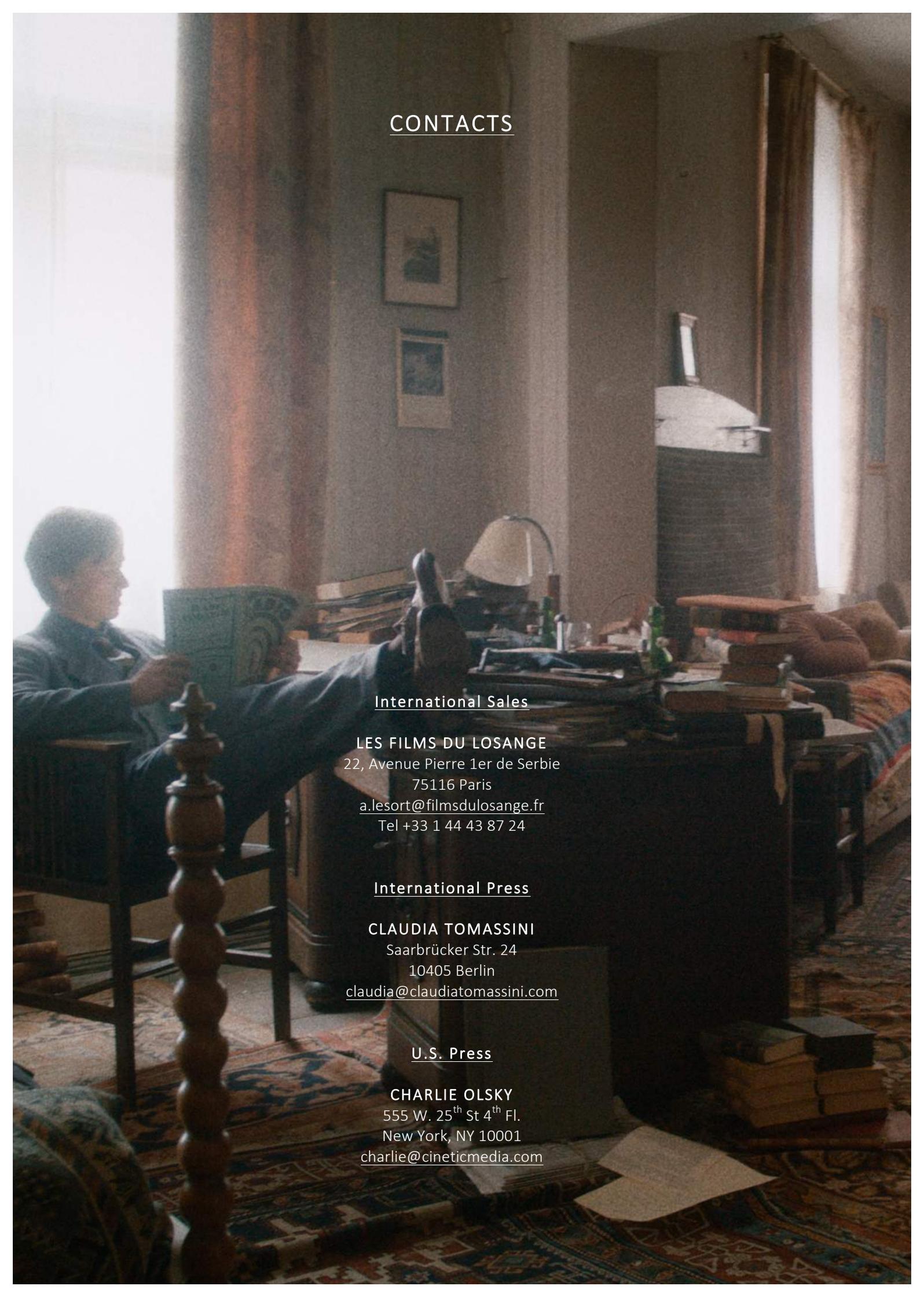
**SASKIA ROSENDAHL** was born in 1993 in Halle an der Saale, and made her stage debut at age 8 with the Halle Opera children's ballet company. She made her screen debut in 2010 in Wolfgang Dinslage's *Für Elise*. The following year came her breakout performance in the title role of Cate Shortland's *Lore*, winning a number of prizes, including the Australian Film Critics' Award and Best Actress Prize at the 23rd Stockholm Film Festival. At the 2013 Berlin Film Festival, Saskia won the European Shooting Stars Award, and she was nominated for a New Faces Award later the same year.

She co-starred with Marie Bäumer, Mark Waschke and Sylvester Groth in Denis Dercourt's psychothriller *Happy Birthday* (2013), and with Hannah Herzsprung, Meret Becker and Marie Bäumer once more in Vivian Naefe's screen adaptation of *Der Geschmack von Apfelkernen*. She followed up with powerful performances in multi-award-winning *Wir sind jung. Wir sind stark* (2015), Nicolette Krebitz's provocative drama *Wild* (2016), and *Nirgendwo* (2016), alongside Ludwig Trepte.

After appearances in Hans-Christian Schmidt's mini-series *Das Verschwinden* (2017), and the fourth season of the hit series *Weissensee* (2018), Saskia starred in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's epic *Never Look Away* (2018), alongside Tom Schilling, Sebastian Koch and Paula Beer. Her most recent credits include the third season of hit series *Babylon Berlin*, Mariko Minoguchi's debut feature *Relativity* (2019), and Sabrina Sarabi's debut feature *Prelude* (2019).

## CREDITS

TOM SCHILLING	Jakob Fabian
ALBRECHT SCHUCH	Stephan Labude
SASKIA ROSENDAHL	Cornelia Battenberg
MICHAEL WITTENBORN	Justizrat Labude
PETRA KALKUTSCHKE	Frau Fabian
ELMAR GUTMANN	Herr Fabian
ALJOSCHA STADELMANN	Produzent Makart
ANNE BENNENT	Baronin Ruth Reiter
MERET BECKER	Irene Moll
DIRECTOR	Dominik Graf
SCREENPLAY	Constantin Lieb und Dominik Graf
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SET DESIGN	Claus-Jürgen Pfeiffer
COSTUMES	Barbara Grupp
MAKE UP	Nannie Gebhardt-Seele, Anna Freund
SOUND	Martin Witte
EDITING	Claudia Wolscht
MIXING	Michael Stecher
SOUND DESIGN	Florian Neunhoeffler, Martina Bahr
MUSIC	Sven Rossenbach, Florian Van Volxem
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	Christoph Daniel
	Wiebke Andresen
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	Christoph Fisser / Studio Babelsberg AG
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF	Daniel Blum / ZDF
	Olaf Grunert / ARTE
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