
Press Kit



A production of Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH and
Hochschule für Film & Fernsehen "Konrad Wolf"

2001

Welcome to the Promised Land...

Welcome to Branson, Missouri



125-WORD SYNOPSIS

Branson, Missouri. Some call it the new Nashville or the Las Vegas of the Bible Belt. Over the past two decades, more than 40 theatres have shot out of the ground in this once sleepy Ozark Mountain town just over 6000 inhabitants. Here in America's heartland, country legends and television and stage stars from yesteryear have reincarnated themselves and offer up good ol' patriotic, Christian entertainment to six million tourists. Light-hearted and ironic, HEAVEN ON EARTH takes a behind the scenes look at this mythical American town. We meet colourful figures and see the spectacular resurrection of Jesus in the musical THE PROMISE. This is a film about God, country, and country music.

250-WORD SYNOPSIS

Branson, Missouri. Some call it the new Nashville or the Las Vegas of the Bible Belt. Over the past ten years, nearly 40 theatres have shot out of the ground in this once sleepy Ozark Mountain town of fewer than 4000 inhabitants. Here in America's heartland, country legends and television and stage stars from yesteryear have reincarnated themselves and offer up good ol'patriotic, Christian entertainment to six million tourists.

HEAVEN ON EARTH follows filmmaker Rick Minnich's quest to find the perfect America which Branson promises to be. Seeped in nostalgia, and wallowing in stars, stripes and neon lights, Branson is populated by such colourful figures as USO pin-up girl Jennifer Wilson, country music star Barbara Fairchild, boy wonder Matthew Matney, and of course, Jesus Christ himself in the bombastic musical "The Promise". Mixing show numbers, interviews, and behind the scenes shots, the film weaves a dense portrait of the making of the American myth. The film climaxes with the largest Veteran's Day celebration in the United States, including a rare, chilling interview with General Paul Tibbets, pilot of Enola Gay, in which he reflects upon his dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Still only a small dot on the map, Branson now offers ore theatre seats than Las Vegas and Broadway combined, and has established itself as the second most popular drive-to holiday destination in the United States.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Heaven On Earth is a personal documentary about my quest for the perfect America. After nearly ten years in Berlin, I have begun toying with the idea of returning to the United States. Until now, I haven't known where to go. My chance encounter with Branson (my mother moved there in 1996) left me with ambivalent feelings about the U.S., and the image my homeland presents of itself. The mythical America I found in Branson struck me as both irresistible and horrifying – a nightmare vision of the fundamentalist, patriotic attitudes I fled a decade ago, but which continue to fascinate me even today. The culmination of my quest was clearly my interview with General Paul Tibbets, pilot of the Enola Gay. His hair-raising account of dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and how he "did the right thing," was for me the ultimate tale of heroism which Branson likes to hold high -- a kind of heroism I want no part of.

Heaven On Earth is my attempt to convey in an entertaining, ironic, yet disturbing manner my ambivalence, fascination and repulsion at the country where I spent the first twenty years of my life. In many ways, the patriotic fervor which has erupted throughout the United States following the terrorist attacks on September 11th has proven the fulfillment of the vision of America Branson propagates on stage and off. It is my hope that "Heaven on Earth" provokes audiences to think twice about what it means to be an American, and not simply wave the flag because everyone else is.

Rick Minnich

Berlin, 2001

CREW

Writer/Director	Rick Minnich
Director of Photography	Eeva Fleig
Sound Recordist	Dietrich Körner
Editors	Robert Schneider, Xina Graff
Music	Antonin Dvorak, Jennifer Wilson, Matthew Matney, Barbara Fairchild, Randy Brooks
Executive Producer	Olaf Jacobs
Production	Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH (Berlin/Leipzig/Greifswald) and Hochschule für Film & Fernsehen "Konrad Wolf" (Potsdam-Babelsberg)

PRODUCTION FACTS

Original title	Heaven on Earth
German title	Der Himmel auf Erden
Year of completion	2001
Country of production	Germany
Shooting format	Super 16, colour
Shooting ratio	1:9
Sound	Dolby SR
Language	English with German or French subtitles
Length	52 min
Shooting location	Branson, Missouri (USA)
Shooting period	November 4-27, 1998

BIO-/FILMOGRAPHY OF DIRECTOR RICK MINNICH

14.6.1968	Born in Pomona, California
1988-90	Internship at film distributor Kino International, NYC
1990	B.A. in English literature from Columbia University, New York Internship as camera assistant for Latvian TV in Riga
1991-1992	Graduate studies in the School of Film and Video at CalArts
1995-2001	Graduate Studies in the directing program at the Hochschule für Film & Fernsehen "Konrad Wolf," Potsdam-Babelsberg, Germany
1993-97	Free-lancer responsible for making documentary trailers for DW TV in Berlin
since 1997	Freelance film and translation work
2002	Director of the SAT.1 series "So gesehen" (German TV) 30 x 3'
2003	Participant in the Berlinale Talent Campus

Selected Filmography

1993	DELPHI 1830 , experimental film, 16mm, color, 3'
1994	Next Time Everything Will Be Better ("Beim nächsten mal wird alles besser") fiction, 16mm, col., 9'
1993-96	The Book of Lenins , doc., 16mm, col. & b/w, 24'
1996	Untitled Picture ("Bild ohne Titel"), fiction, 35mm, Dolby SR, color, 4', ARTE/HFF
1997	Good Guys & Bad Guys , doc., S16, Dolby SR, col., 73', HFF/ORB
2001.	Heaven on Earth , doc., S16, Dolby SR, col., 52', HFF/Hoferichter / Jacobs GmbH
2005.	Homemade Hillbilly Jam , doc. S16, col., 80', Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH, distributed in the US by First Run Features & in Germany by Epix Media AG
2008	Forgetting Dad , doc., HDCam, 83', ZDF / Rickfilms / Hoferichter & Jacobs

Awards, Grants, Residencies (selection)

1992	Ahmanson Foundation Grant, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) grant
1995	Writer's grant, Schloss Wiepersdorf, Germany; Best of Festival Award, Short Attention Span Film and Video Festival, San Francisco
1997	Honorable mention, Leipzig Documentary Film Festival; Rector's Prize, HFF "Konrad Wolf"
1998	Jury prize, Cinarchea Int'l Archeology Film Festival Kiel, Germany; Bronze Plaque, Columbus Int'l Film & Video Festival (The Chris Awards)
2001	Babelsberg Media Prize–Best Graduation Film (doc.) in Germany Hans W. Geissendoerfer Young Talent Award (Ger.) Bronze Plaque, Columbus Int'l Film & Video Festival (The Chris Awards) Audience Award, Williamsburg Brooklyn Film Festival Special Prize of the European Film Schools Jury, SEE Docs in Dubrovnik

- Nominated for the IDA/David L. Wolper Student Doc. Achievement Award
Nominated for the German Cinematography Award
2002. FIPA d'Or (1st prize), FIPA TV Festival, Biarritz, France
- 2005 Prize of the State Film Service Rheinland-Pfalz, 22nd Video/Filmtage Koblenz (Germany)
- 2006 Artist residency at the Villa Aurora in Pacific Palisades, California
Development grant from the DEFA-Stiftung, Berlin
- 2008 Special Jury Award, Joris Ivens Competition – International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam IDFA
2009. Honorable Mention – Achtung Berlin – New Berlin Film Award
Audience Award – Ippokrates International Health Film Festival, Kos (Greece)
William Dieterle Filmpreis (Special Prize), Germany
Grand Jury Prize, GZDOC, Guangzhou (China)

AWARDS

- May 2001 **Audience award for best documentary**, Williamsburg Brooklyn Film Festival, New York
German Cinematography Award nominee
- June 2001 **Special Prize of the European Film School Jury**, SEE Docs in Dubrovnik
- July 2001 **Babelsberg Media Prize** - Best German Graduation Film
- Oct. 2001 **Bronze Plaque, The Chris Awards**, Columbus Int'l Film Festival USA
- Dec. 2001 **IDA/David L. Wolper Student Documentary Achievement Award** nominee
- Jan. 2002 **FIPA d'or (first prize) in the category "Reportage and Current Affairs"** and **honorable mention from the youth jury**, International Festival of Audiovisual Programs (FIPA) Biarritz, France

FESTIVALS

- April 2001 **Sehsüchte International Student Film Festival**, Potsdam (Germany)
- May 2001 **Williamsburg Brooklyn Film Festival**, New York
- June 2001 **Art Film Festival, Trencianske Teplice** (Slovakia)
SEE Docs in Dubrovnik (Croatia)
- Oct. 2001 **Denver International Film Festival** (USA)
International Leipzig Festival for Documentary and Animated Film (Germany)
The Festival of Festivals, Palm Springs (USA)
- Nov. 2001 **Competition "First Appearances" IDFA**, Amsterdam (Netherlands)
Sleepwalkers Student Film Festival 2001, Tallinn (Estonia)
- Sept. 2002 **St. Petersburg Filmfestival "Message to Man"** (Russia)
International Filmfestival Split (Croatia)
- Oct. 2002 **Independent Filmfest of Osnabrück** (Germany)
- Nov. 2002 **Kassel Documentary Film and Video Festival** (Germany)
- Dez. 2002 **Semaine du cinéma ethnographique au Cinéma Lux à Caen**, Frankreich
- Sept. 2006 **Werkleitz Biennale, Halle** (Germany)

TELEVISION BROADCASTS

- 22.08.01 **IKON-TV**, (Nederland 1) Niederlande, Broadcast "Werelden", Dutch title: "Het drive-in paradijs," 22:47, repeat broadcast: 25.08.01, 11:04
- 02.09.02 **TSR2** (Switzerland) Program: "le doc du lundi" 20:35
- 04.09.02 **TSR1** Repeat broadcast 1:12
- 04.07.03 **WDR**, WDR-dok: "Der Himmel auf Erden – ein Besuch in Branson, Missouri" 23:00-23:50, repeat broadcast: 07.07.2003 WDR, 10.15-11.00
- 01.11.04 **3sat**, "Der Himmel auf Erden – ein Besuch in Branson, Missouri" 12.00-12.45

PRESS (selection)

"The Americans must be nuts. Anyone who doesn't believe so should take a look at this terrific documentary by Rick Minnich. For his graduate thesis film at the HFF Babelsberg, the American took a trip to a very special small town in his homeland: Branson, Missouri. Over the past several years, this dump has developed into a Mecca for over-the-hill artists. Some 40 theaters court the busloads of tourists carted into town for their favor. From the devote country blonde to the substitute Christ (see photo) from a musical, to the self-styled successful painter, the most bizarre figures are to be found here. And veterans are celebrated in Branson just as much as the crew of the "Enola Gay," who were responsible for dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. 52 minutes of the USA to fear: God Bless America. The director will be in attendance." - MS, **Zitty**, Berlin, Germany, April 21, 2001.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR RICK MINNICH ON "12 Noon" Radio Eins (Potsdam-Babelsberg, Germany), April 21, 2001

KNUT ELSTERMANN: In this corrupted world, there's still one place where everything's still in order. There's no prostitution, no gambling. You can still go out on the streets in the evening or late at night without fear of being mugged. It's an artificially created place, which disseminates an artificial atmosphere, and has something completely unreal about it. And it's wonderful that you're all going to get to know this place now thanks to a film. The film title alone describes how bizarre this place is, which is in America, but – and this is saying a lot – is quite eccentric, even for Americans: "Heaven on Earth." The small town in question here is called Branson and it lies in Missouri. Rick Minnich made this film, and I'd like to give him a warm greeting here. Hi, Rick.

RICK MINNICH: Hi.

K.E.: The film can be seen tonight at 7 p.m. at the Babylon in Berlin Mitte, and will also be shown at the "Sehsuechte" festival on April 28th at 2 p.m. in the large cinema at the HFF. We've already spoken about "Sehsuechte," which Radio Eins will be presenting. So there are two good reasons for talking about this film. But first to Rick: Before you made this film, did you have a vision of how strange Branson is, or are Americans less conscious of it? After all, you are American.

R.M.: I didn't know the town first-hand. I was there as a little kid, but couldn't remember it. Then my mother moved there. I visited here in 1996, and was surprised at just how strange the town is. I saw a couple of shows, and knew immediately that I wanted to shoot a film there someday. And two years later, I did exactly that.

K.E.: Now it has become your graduate thesis film at the HFF. The film that describes this place is nearly an hour long. Now we've got to describe it, too. I'd say you can maybe compare it with the country Mecca Nashville. It's a conscious counter model to Nashville. You could take Nashville and strip it of gambling, prostitution, and other evil things, and it would be a bit like Branson.

R.M.: Yes, you could say that. Branson's not really a real city in that sense. The people in Nashville say: Nashville is a real city, a real country music industry, and Branson is nothing but a tourist attraction. The people in Nashville don't really take Branson seriously. But millions and millions change hands in Branson. Branson can't simply be ignored.

K.E.: Then what's special about it? Perhaps we should really try to describe that: there are 40 different shows. You can go there like to Disneyland. Six million people, mostly older people, do that, I believe. What does Branson offer them that they can't find anywhere else?

R.M.: Memories are brought back to life; it's like turning back the clock. There are shows with music from the 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's, show-girl numbers and the like. There's a lot of country music and variety shows with jokes and dancing. There's no cussing, no sex, no violence, everything is clean, there's nothing to fear. You can bring the kids, and they won't see anything they shouldn't see or hear. It's just a really clean, family-oriented place.

K.E.: And this place, Branson, Missouri, sells visitors a vision of America, which is backwards and nostalgic. Back then, America was still clean. That's what they keep saying in the film: back then, the only thing we had to fear was the board of education. All this insanity is told on stage and audiences are filled with it. But actually, Rick, it's a construct of America that never existed, just like the good ol' days in Germany that also never were. It's only an invention.

R.M.: That's how I feel, too, but for the people there – there are a lot of people on stage, entertainers, some of whom were big stars in the 70's. They toured around for years, playing at fairgrounds. They grew tired of it, and realized they could build their own theaters in this place – huge tin boxes with 1000, 2000 seats, really enormous things – and they didn't have to tour around anymore. The people now come to them, to Branson, by bus. They realized there's a market for such things. And there are a lot of people, especially here in the Midwest, where Missouri is – almost directly in the middle of the USA – there are a lot of people who still believe in or want to believe in this vision.

K.E.: You'll never believe this, but a few years ago, destiny brought me to Branson. I was really there. We're probably the only Central Europeans – you're really a Central European; you've lived here for many years – who have ever been there. I, for example, found it very odd and even completely abnormal: there are absolutely no Blacks in Branson. There are really only older white people there, and very few younger people. There are no Blacks, which also has the sad consequence that there's no Black music. You really here only these country sounds everywhere. Why is that?

R.M.: If I were black, I wouldn't want to live there either.

K.E.: They don't travel there either, not even in groups.

R.M.: Yes, it's rare. As far as I know, there are five Blacks in Branson. Four of them are "The Platters."

K.E.: What's that?

R.M.: "The Platters" were a group that were popular in the 60's. They have a show there. Then I met a gospel singer from New York, who came to Branson and was trying to make a go of it there. Otherwise, it's pretty close to the Arkansas border, and only about 20 miles from the national headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan. It's simply an area – where the South begins – that's still very racist.

K.E.: And that comes through?

R.M.: It comes through. You can sense it. It's a subliminal feeling. People whose skin color is not white are simply not welcome. You won't necessarily be assaulted on the street, but it simply doesn't fit the vision of America presented on stage in Branson.

K.E.: And I find this to be the shady side of this vision, which the artists present as so clean and so friendly time and time again in the film, that there's something subliminal there, which has an impact on the townscape. It's been a few years since I was there. In the meantime – as I could see in your film – everything has become more radical, it's got worse, also this Christian patriotism, which is – and now I'd like to talk about the film some more – somehow very comical. I mean, when you see your Jesus actor – there's a real Jesus show there – when you see how he suddenly runs through the foyer, half-naked, then you realize how your humor, your irony can be clearly felt in the film. You don't make fun of the people. But it's really enough to show what's there.

RICK: Yes, that's what I was trying for. I have certain demands upon myself as a filmmaker: I want my personal feelings to come across. Even if I find some of the people horrible, I don't want to pass judgment on them. I want to give the people in the film the opportunity to present their views. The editing or such scenes where the Jesus actor runs across the foyer and smears himself with artificial blood are simply my way to show my feelings on screen.

K.E.: Nevertheless, this is also a very personal film. You also made a film about the Lenin statues you explored in the East. That was also a very personal film, with your own commentary, your own narration.

And I'd finally like to know: this perspective you now have, hasn't it become a foreign perspective in the meantime? You're an American, but you've lived here for a long time, studied at the HFF, have settled down here. Could it be that your take on Branson, Missouri is no longer that of an astonished American, but that of a European taken aback?

R.M.: Yes, it's entirely possible. That could also be the reason that my films do so poorly in the USA. I have neither the perspective of an American, nor that of an outsider. It's something in between. The film will be shown in New York in early May, and I'm very anxious to see how it's received there.

K.E.: First it will be shown here, tonight at 7 p.m. in the Babylon, Berlin Mitte, on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, and during the "Sehsuechte" festival on 28 April at 2 p.m. in the new HFF building, in the large cinema. Rick will be there each time, and will maybe explain some of the oddities to be seen there. Because it's really a film about America, which couldn't be any more American, and couldn't be any more ABWEGIGER: "Heaven on Earth." Travel to Branson, Missouri with Rick, take a look at this film, and be amazed. Thanks a lot, Rick, and best of luck with the film!

R.M.: Thank you.

Hoferichter & Jacobs

Gesellschaft für audiovisuelle Medien und Kommunikationstechnologien mbH

Company profile

Since 1996, Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH continuously produces documentaries and feature films. Our main focus lies with contemporary topics realised in long formats. We are interested in exceptional, intriguing and fascinating stories baring the potential to be told, in a highly qualified manner, to both a German and an international audience. We aim to find an adequate realisation for unique stories strengthened by a convincing authorial stance and a gripping narrative approach. Dealing with such various filmic forms as the docu-soap, docu-dramas and different hybrid formats during the last years has often led us into the fascinating borderlands between reality and fiction.

At the moment, our main focal point is on further developing individual filmic approaches and visual styles. Working together constantly with a range of authors and directors creates the core of this intention - the mutual knowledge of individual strengths and weaknesses gives the opportunity of shared success. At the same time, Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH increasingly produces on an international scale: In 2004, more than two thirds of our productions have been realised as an international co-production. In pursuing this further, we can produce films for which a national market would have been proven too small. Numerous awards, festival invitations as well as an abundance of international sales support this stance.

The Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH team consists of nine permanent employees. The CEO Olaf Jacobs, together with the producers Carolin Scheffler and Anne Stephan, accounts for the film productions. Peter Effenberg supervises the production process and all technical services.

Matthias Hoferichter left the company in 1999. Olaf Jacobs is CEO. In between 2003 and 2006, Hoferichter & Jacobs acted as executive producer of the European Film Academy's master classes. The company holds shares in the Cocopelli Musikverlag GmbH, in the art & pictures Medien GmbH and in the PentAlpha Verlag für Kunst und Medien gGmbH, Leipzig.

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