



## Praunheim, Rosa von (b. 1942)

by Richard C. Bartone

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Filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim is one of Germany's leading gay activists and chroniclers of queer life. In almost sixty films made over four decades, he targets the gay community through deliberate confrontation, provocation, and satire in order to foster self-examination by gay people and to advance gay rights.

Born Holger Bernhard Bruno Mischnitzky on November 25, 1942 in Riga, Latvia, he changed his name in the early 1960s. He took the name Rosa from "rosa Winkel," a reference to the pink triangle of the Nazi era, and in a gesture of queer deviance adopted "von," a sign of German nobility. The name Praunheim apparently comes from the Frankfurt suburb in which he grew up.

He studied painting, then began making films in the late 1960s. After an early success, *Die Bettwurst* (1970), a parody of heterosexual marriage, he began making films that featured gay subject matter and that advanced the goals of gay liberation.

Von Praunheim's first gay film, *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse But the Situation in Which He Is Forced to Live* (1970), stirred controversy and met with harsh criticism from conservatives and liberals alike for its negative and degrading portrayal of irresponsible sexual behavior and narcissistic consumerism in the gay community.

Although publicly von Praunheim refers to it as his *Schwulenfilm*, or "faggot film," he is quick to add that the film started the gay rights movement in Germany and led to the formation of the Homosexual Interest Group.

Controversy and scandal are no strangers to von Praunheim, in any case. He courted controversy early in his career by outing politicians and businessmen on German television, a practice that he later came to regret.

One of his most controversial films is his nihilistic, strident, and comic depiction of AIDS in the gay community, *A Virus Has No Morals* (1985-1986), a combination musical and morality play. The film attacks the medical establishment, governments, journalists, charity organizations, and homosexuals for their complicity and passivity in the face of the epidemic. In this film, von Praunheim himself plays an HIV-positive bathhouse owner who equates sex with life.

Passionately committed to activism, von Praunheim frequently injects himself into his films, sometimes in ways that seem aimed at courting notoriety. In *Army of Lovers or Revolt of the Perverts* (1972-1976), for example, he filmed his students filming a gay porn star performing fellatio on him so they would have incendiary footage for a film project.

Decades of controversy and conflict with the gay community led to the self-deprecating and autobiographical film *Neurosia* (1995)--the title a combination of Rosa and neurosis--in which a drag queen investigates the murder of von Praunheim and digs into his past. While somewhat self-mocking, the filmmaker also uses the film to mock his detractors and reiterate his own accomplishments.

Critics have complained of the often chaotic and confusing structure of von Praunheim's films, overlooking their function as radical political tools. Adopting a style that often mixes fictional vignettes, old newsreel footage, stills, documentary film, and interviews, he eschews an entertaining narrative line. He opts, instead, for disjunctive and harsh argumentation.

A queer aesthetic is most evident in the non-fictional and quasi-fictional biographical portraits of outcasts struggling in a hostile environment, but refusing to relinquish their dignity. These affectionate and vivacious portraits of strippers, circus performers, transsexuals, and aging dancers and cabaret stars from pre-World War II Berlin stand in stark contrast to the targets of von Praunheim's films: weak, pensive, and assimilated middle-class gays.

*I Am My Own Woman* (1992) is von Praunheim's most successful portrait. It tells the remarkable story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a homosexual transvestite who survived decades of indignities only finally to receive the highest award bestowed by Germany, the Cross of the Order of Merit, for architectural and furniture restoration. In this film, von Praunheim uses non-fictional footage and interviews with von Mahlsdorf, as well as actors portraying her in brief vignettes.

Some of von Praunheim's films document queer activism. For example, films such as *Silence = Death* (1990) and *Positive* (1990) capture the voices of such AIDS activists as Larry Kramer, Michael Callen, Phil Zwickler, Keith Haring, and David Wojnarowicz, while *Transsexual Menace* (1996), reveals the complexity of the transgender community and documents transsexual activism in the United States.

In the 1990s von Praunheim turned increasingly to "correcting historical awareness" with such films as *Gay Courage--100 Years of the Gay Rights Movement in Germany and Beyond* (1998). *Einstein of Sex* (1999) chronicles the life of Magnus Hirschfeld, a gay, Jewish, sexologist, and pioneer for homosexual rights.

In celebration of his sixtieth birthday, von Praunheim directed, produced and starred in *Pfui Rosa!* (2002). Attesting to von Praunheim's status in Germany as a provocative filmmaker and political activist, the West German Television Network aired the 70 minute autobiography. Celebratory in nature, *Pfui Rosa!*, like *Neurosia*, is both self-indulgent and self-deprecating, and both irreverent and shocking.

In *Queens Don't Lie* (2003), an intimate portrait of the lives of four Berlin drag queens, whom he presents as important agents of social, cultural, and political change, von Praunheim returned to the documentary approach he perfected in *Anita--Dances of Vice* (1987), *I Am My Own Woman*, and *Wunderbares Wrodow* (1997).

In *Your Heart on My Mind* (2005), von Praunheim has galvanized public debate in Germany about cannibalism with a film based on the case of Armin Meiwes, a gay man recently convicted of manslaughter after using the internet to find a consenting male to dismember, murder, and eat.

Von Praunheim is currently working on films—one a documentary, the other fictional--about gay Nazis, tentatively titled *Homosexuality and Fascism* and *Even Gay Nazis Like to Kiss*.

Von Praunheim has used his films to spark or reconfigure debates on a number of queer issues. A risk-taker both in terms of the images he creates and the subject matter he tackles, he has influenced such filmmakers as Michael Stock, John Greyson, and Monika Treut. He has provided visibility to topics, people, and history that most filmmakers have ignored.

## **Bibliography**

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### **About the Author**

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