

## Preview

# The Devil's workshop

Karl Markovics tells Sarah Lang about playing a real-life forger in a Nazi concentration camp.

**I**N SACHSENHAUSEN concentration camp, Germany, 1944, a group of inmates — forced by the Nazis to produce millions in counterfeit money in a bid to weaken the British and American economies — are dragged from their bunks in the dead of night to await their fate.

Did the Bank of England pronounce their pounds authentic or bogus? In one of several superbly suspenseful sequences in about-to-be-released film *The Counterfeiters*, it could go either way: bullets or back to bed.

Drawn from the memoirs of surviving counterfeiter Adolf Burger, this year's Oscar-winning movie (Best Foreign Language Film) — released in New Zealand September 11 — has been criticised in Austria and Germany for being too entertaining. But, as director Stefan Ruzowitzky has explained, it's not attempting to do justice to the horror of the Holocaust; rather it zooms in on a slice of the story.

It's set in a concentration camp, but not as you know it. In a comparably luxurious existence, the counterfeiters are allowed soft beds, enough to eat, a ping-pong table and even opera music, while the screams of the tortured reverberate through the wall. But a Damocletian sword hangs over the men, who know they too will be dispatched once their usefulness is outlived.

Because the meat of the movie is a flashback, the film's about how, not if, chief counterfeiter Salomon Sorowitsch (based on real-life master forger Salomon Smolianoff) survives. An exploration of the tension between pragmatism and idealism — personified by Sorowitsch the survivor and Burger the saboteur — the film poses the question: how much co-operation with evil is justified in the name of survival?

Honing in and hinging on a chain of unpredictable reactions, the film pivots around Sorowitsch who, played by Austrian actor Karl Markovics, appears in every single scene. We see only what he sees, or chooses to see.

Markovics (an articulate, earnest 45-year-old



IN CHARACTER: Karl Markovics' portrayal of Holocaust survivor Salomon Sorowitsch drained him physically and emotionally.

who needlessly apologises for less-than-perfect English) says since his career began in a mime theatre, he's taught himself to "express his performance not only with language and lines. I've always felt the most important moments are when a character doesn't speak, just reacts with his body and with his eyes."

And Sorowitsch is the master of reaction. "He constantly checks the situation around him, adapts himself to the circumstance, and always finds ways to survive," says Markovics. "I often felt he had the instincts of an animal rather than a sophisticated human being."

Markovics' triumph is a compelling portrayal of a fundamentally flawed, self-serving man, while at the same time creating deep empathy for the character. He comes across not as a hero or would-be martyr — rather, as a survivor whose principles and compassion surface in spite of himself.

Researching the real Smolianoff's history, Markovics discovered that the artist — who left Russia for Germany because of the 1917 revolution — became a counterfeiter because he couldn't make a living from painting.

"He threw his ideals overboard because he thought, 'No, I don't want to starve for my art, I want to have a good life'. Knowing this helped me to get to know the real human being."

During filming, which took place in Austria, Germany and Monaco, the real-life Burger (who penned his recollections in 2006 book *The Devil's Workshop*) turned up on set.

"I felt suddenly so ridiculous that, in the 21st-century Western world, I was pretending to be a concentration-camp inmate while this incredibly strong 90-year-old man had survived and was standing opposite to me," says Markovics. (They later became good friends.)

So how did he shuck off the intense emotions of hatred, fear and contempt generated during filming? You'd imagine he might have to withdraw into his caravan or go for a walk to calm himself down.

The only way he could cope, switch off and stay sane, he says, was to follow a strict plan for each day: up early, jogging then a swim, breakfast, then to the set. And, both literally and figuratively, he didn't take anything from set back to the hotel or vice versa.

"Going from a five-star hotel to a concentration camp felt very rude, and switching off like that was almost cold-blooded, but I knew it was the only way it would work."

And work it did — until shooting wrapped. "Then it struck me, I felt really depressed and I needed two weeks to get out of this story."

And even longer to put some meat on his bones. The naturally lean Markovics, who laughs at film critics' descriptions of him as "hatchet-faced" and having a "pugnacious anvil of a head", wasn't asked to lose weight for the role. But the kilos fell off, partly because he expended so much energy during rehearsals and filming, and partly, he believes, unconsciously — in sympathy with his character.

*The Counterfeiters* has propelled Markovics — who's starred in numerous feature films, plays and TV shows mainly in Austria — onto the international stage.

"The part was an actor's dream. Really good scripts with strong characters like this are very rare, but now I'm getting that quality of offers." You'd think he might be keen for something lighter next up. Markovics says: "I don't have a real plan; good things happen by accident."

And while he'd dearly love to know what happened to Smolianoff, all traces of the man vanished after his liberation.

— *The Counterfeiters* is in cinemas September 11.

## Giveaway

WE HAVE five double passes to give away to *The Counterfeiters*. To be in to win, email your name, address and phone details to: [view@heraldonsunday.co.nz](mailto:view@heraldonsunday.co.nz) (with *Counterfeiters* in the subject line). Or put the same details on the back of an envelope and send to: *Counterfeiters* Giveaway, *View* magazine, *Herald on Sunday*, PO Box 3290, Auckland.

Entries close 1pm Monday, September 8. Winners' names published in *View*, September 14.

## Behind the scenes



JASON

# Knight of the realm battles trolls and

David Hollingsworth talks to David Jason about his role in the TV comic-fantasy *The Colour of Magic*, an adaptation of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* tales.

**L**OOKING AT Sir David Jason, you might think he'd just landed a role in one of the *Harry Potter* movies. Unusually for a knight of the realm, he's sporting a long red cloak, a fluffy white beard and a pointy hat. Turns out the new look is for David's starring role in *The Colour of*

*Magic*, a lavish \$18.6 million two-part adaptation of Terry Pratchett's first two *Discworld* comic-fantasy novels. The show will screen on Prime next week.

Jason, 68, a huge fan of Pratchett's writing, has already appeared in the *The Hogfather*, the first live-action TV adaptation, screened in Britain at Christmas 2006. He hopes to draw more

people into the author's magical world with this second adaptation.

"This sort of entertainment, which has no gratuitous violence, is long overdue," says Jason, who has a 7-year-old daughter, Sophie Mae, with his TV director wife Gill Hinchcliffe.

"It's not like the new *Rambo* film, where there are 257 deaths before the interval.