MAHLER ON THE COUCH

A FILM BY PERCY ADLON AND FELIX ADLON
JOHANNES SILBERSCHNEIDER
BARBARA ROMANER
KARL MARKOVICS

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EVA MATES FRIEDRICH MÜCKE LENA STOLZE
and NINA BERTEN as Anna von Mildenburg

ESA-Pekka SALONEN leading the Swedish Radio Symphonic Orchestra

A pellembe FILM & STAGE and Cult Film production with ARD Degeto and ORF

100 minutes
August 1910. Devastated and confused by the discovery that his beloved wife Alma is having a passionate affair with architect Walter Gropius, controversial composer Gustav Mahler travels to Holland to consult with Sigmund Freud, who is on vacation in Leiden.

Feeling humiliated and betrayed, Mahler initially refuses the couch, but when Freud wheels a camp bed into the room, he has no choice. Fiery yet full of humor, their encounter stretches into the night as Mahler vividly recounts his seduction of Alma, 19 years his junior, the beautiful darling of Vienna’s arts scene. Alma and Mahler fall madly in love and marry, but he frustrates her ambitions to be a composer in her own right. When one of their daughters dies, their marriage begins to fall apart, culminating in Alma’s infidelity.

Next day, the two great men go their separate ways. Overjoyed with what he sees as his cure, Mahler travels to rejoin Alma...

A suspenseful marital drama with detective Freud pulling the strings.
PERCY’S ALMA

A film about Gustav Mahler meeting Sigmund Freud? Yes, but...

The vibrant, playful, serious young woman is the center of attention. This voluptuous Vienneois daughter of an artist who grew up surrounded by the most prominent personalities of the time, a time when all the “tens” were shattered and a new concept of art was invented, in Paris, Barcelona, Munich, Vienna... Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, Klimt, Schiele...

She writes diaries that are so fearlessly unconventional, improvised, open-minded that the reader tries to imagine the lucky guy who would bring her home and build a new world system with her and her ideas of freedom and equality.

But she also has the talent to find the one genius within her realm, her circle. There are several who deserve attention. The painter Klimt, for example. Zemlinsky, the composer and music teacher to the likes of Schoenberg, Alben Berg, and the designers who called themselves Secessionists, and the Secession movement, marking the departure from traditional styles.

One man fascinated all Vienna: the director of the Vienna Court Opera, conductor and composer Gustav Mahler, whose musical directions, and progressive productions were admired by beyond Vienna, and whose compositions where a hard sell for most in the public.

But Alma, as soon as he came close within reach, fell for him, and he for her. For him, she was the one he wanted as his haven, his hearth, his wife and lover, the stewart of his private life. She told him that the one thing she would die for are their compositions. He forbade her to compose because he needed a wife, not a co-artist.

She married him anyway. Her genius was to find and to engage with the one person that interested her most. And this was Gustav. He was the one genius, superior to everybody else who ever came into her view, who was worth every sacrifice.

Now look at this sexy woman who tries to fulfill her mission of serving the genius. Bearing children, cleaning up the financial mess that his sister had left him, making his house in the mountains where he found the peace and quiet that he needed for his work, the apples from Meinl, the eight pens and ink, but most of all the silence while he composed from early morning until noon. A coughing child, a mooing cow could send him berserk.

But he is happy. He works. He feels protected.

She realizes that her body doesn’t get what it demands, that her concept of equality isn’t fulfilled, that all her dreams of a colorful life surrounded and protected by creative friends is just a fantasy. She realizes that she is cut off from everything that interests her, that she lives in a prison, and that the marital bed is mostly cold.

A passionate affair with a young man turns the Mahlers’ world upside down.

ALMA MAHLER

Born in 1879, Alma was the daughter of landscape painter Emil Jakob Schindler and Alma von Bregen. When her father died in 1892, Alma’s mother married Carl Moll, one of the founders of the Vienna Secession. In 1902, Alma married Gustav Mahler. She gave birth to two daughters, but their elder child tragically died of scarlet fever in 1907, plunging Alma into depression. While recovering at a spa, Alma met and began a passionate affair with architect Walter Gropius. After Mahler’s death in 1911, Alma had affairs with other artists including Oskar Kokoschka, who married Gropius in 1915, divorced and married writer Franz Werfel in 1929 after living together for nearly a decade. Alma’s early compositions were eventually published during her lifetime and continue to be performed today. She died in the USA in 1964.
How did you come up with the idea for this movie?

Felix: We wanted to do something about Mahler for his two big anniversaries, his 150th birthday (July 7th, 2010) and the 100th anniversary of his death (May 18th 2011).

Percy: My brother Thomas, a radio man in Munich, told me the incredible story of the ‘love letter’ and that Mahler subsequently met with Freud in Holland while Freud was on vacation. Felix was inspired the moment he heard the music that Mahler wrote when he was in complete despair.

And when I told him about the letter with Mahler’s name on the envelope and a love letter to his wife Alma inside, he said, ‘We have to write this together!’

Felix: For my father knowing him as I do, it was Alma, the famous femme fatale who was married to three men of genius, Gustav Mahler, Walter Gropius, and Franz Werfel. I think he wanted to know who she really was when she was young.

You co-wrote and co-directed. How do you divide up each task?

Percy: We sat across from each other, at our computers, which were connected so that we could work simultaneously on the same document.

Felix: The story is so strong, the characters so rich, there’s so much conflict, it was like a gift for us. We decided that I would study Freud and he would study the Mahlers.

Percy: We work very differently. I dig into the material and throw out a lot of stuff quickly. He sits and waits until I get edgy or even angry. Suddenly he grabs his keyboard and starts changing my stuff and comes up with beautiful ideas.

Felix: Co-directing was a clear divide between him next to the camera, directing the actors, and me in front of the monitor working with Benedict, our DP on the look, the style, the angles, and constantly reminding my father that we need more then just ‘a master’ from one point of view.
A title card at the beginning of the movie states: «That it happened is fact. How it happened is fiction.» Can you explain?

Percy: That Mahler and Freud met in Leiden, Holland, one afternoon in August 1910, is fact. The «letter» and Alma’s affair is fact. But what they spoke about, and how the whole drama played out is fiction.

Felix: We also found out that on that day in Leiden, the last train had left and Freud and Mahler may have stayed the night in the same small hotel.

Percy: So we added a night of analysis to the afternoon, and this is when Mahler finally lays down on the couch... or the camp bed on wheels.

Did you do a lot of research before you wrote the script in order to give freer rein to your imagination afterwards?

Percy: We read a lot, but very selectively. Most fascinating for me were Alma’s diaries from the time when she was still a teenager. It’s so spontaneous, improvised, more spoken than written, «modern». She writes about fashion, opera, her compositions, the men she has a crush on, petting with her music teacher, how much she wants to have real sex but must stay a virgin until she meets the ultimate man.

Groepius: Are you planning on fulfilling your marital duties?
Felix: Who was Gustav Mahler. We read biographies of course, Alma’s and Gustav’s letters, but also a lot of eye-witness accounts from people who knew Alma and Mahler. There was so much gossip around them, one of the most famous couples in Vienna. They were like Brad and Angelina. We created a whole layer of ‘eyewitnesses’ who speak directly to camera.

Percy: And Felix had his Freud thing going. He concentrated on Freud’s writings before the meeting with Mahler, for example Contributions on the Psychology of Love.

Barbara Romoner, who plays Alma Mahler, will be a new face to many people. How did you come to choose her?

Percy: We have excellent, well-known young movie actresses in Germany now. Obviously we should have chosen one of them. But there is something about Alma... I don’t know. The intelligence, the sensuality, the music, the fire, the power, the independence. We went to see a play at the Volkstheater in Munich. Barbara was in it. There was a scene where she spoke in an invented language and moved to it in a hilariously abstract way. And we knew we’d found our Alma. We met. She was Alma. We did some photos. She was Alma. She put on a big hat. She was Alma. Ten years later Thank you, Barbara. Yes you will be the new face for many people.

Tell us about her husband in the movie, Johannes Silberschneider.

Felix: Silberschneider is an institution! He’s been in dozens of films. He is a face that represents a certain European region, a certain dialect, and body language that fits Mahler perfectly. And he is a wonderfully sensitive, shy, deep soul. Actually, he was playing the lead in the play where we discovered Barbara. And Friedrich Mücke was also in it. He is our Gropius. And he is a star now in Germany because of the hit movie Friendship. Nobody could believe that we cast three of our four leads on one evening from the same play.

Karl Markovics plays Sigmund Freud. How did he react when you offered him the part of a 20th century icon?

Percy: He just said Yes! He hadn’t even read the script. I told him how much I admire his performance in Die Fälscher (The Counterfeiters) And he said how much he likes Out of Rosenheim (Bagdads Cafe). And that was it.

Felix: He didn’t want to play an icon. He plays Freud with so much subtle humor, you want to sit down next to him and tell him about your own problems.

MAHLER
I never dream.

FREUD
That’s what everybody says... at first.
How does Mahler’s music inspire you? How did you choose the pieces you recorded with conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen?

Felix: There is one piece that Mahler wrote during the crisis with Alma. The first movement of his 10th symphony. It was the very last piece of music that he wrote. It contains the whole drama of that summer of 1910. His pain, his rage, his pleas, his moans, his accusations.

Percy: We sent the script to Salonen. He loved it, and he wanted to conduct the music for the film. But we also asked him not just to record the Adagietto from Mahler’s 5th, because Mahler gave it to Alma as a gift after he fell in love with her. And my own favorite, the Ruhenvoll from the 4th, for the sequence we call «Mahler in love».

The film takes place in Viennese artistic circles at the time of the Secession. Did this movement influence the way you shot the movie?

Percy: Yes, very much. The Secession was in the center of a movement that broke out like wildfire all over the world. Modern art was born! Picasso, Schönberg, Kandinsky, Frank Lloyd Wright, Klimt. Viennese designers and architects met at the Villa Mall, where Alma grew up, to discuss the newest works, their movement, their protest against lame traditions.

Felix: You see colors, fabrics, furniture, paintings of this exciting period everywhere in our film, especially in the clothes that costume designer Caterina Csepel translated into our time, and made them even more «contemporary». We took this license from Alma who was always progressive and ready to break the rules.

If I painted the way he composes... I wouldn’t sell a single painting.
Certain characters offer a kind of commentary of the story—Alma’s mother, Gustav’s sister. On what basis did you choose these characters?

Felix: We chose the eyewitnesses that contributed best to the conflicts but also the Viennese gossip in our story. Percy: Alma’s mother is only on her daughter’s side. Justine only on her brother Gustav’s. Bruno Walter’s mother’s friend and colleague, Zemlinsky and Burckhard are Mahler’s rivals for Alma’s hand. Frau Zuckerkandl arranged the meeting between Alma and Mahler in her salon.

You give great importance to the lighting, to the extent that it plays a role in the narration of the story. Tell us about your collaboration with DP Benedikt Neuenfels.

Felix: Benedikt makes the whole film vibrate! There is always a brightness that wants to intrude on the images. It takes the story to a new level. To a fictitious one. It carries us into another dimension.

Percy: It doesn’t try to tell us that this is history and this is how historical characters and places look, just the opposite. It makes people and places real. But it’s an imaginary reality. One that you enter when you read an exciting book and are transported into a new existence on your own hard drive...your head!

You shot the film in the Dolomites, Vienna and Leiden. Were the locations also a source of inspiration?

Percy: Our art directors Bernit Capra (who also worked on Baghdad Cafe) and Veronica Merlin, gave us an abundance of great original locations. Vienna is so full of incredible residences with high elaborate ceilings and floors, original music halls, villas by Otto Wagner, Hoffmann, Olbrich. Then there is the grandeur of the Opera.

Felix: Old Leiden is like a movie set. It inspired the idea that Mahler and Freud are in their own world. They’re transported into their own imagination. No “historical” extras around them, as if “Leiden” is not a reality but just an idea. Mahler could have been on the moon.

Percy: The farmhouse in the Tyrolian mountains...well, this is one of our fictitious elements, and there was a lot of discussion if the Mahlers would have moved into such an ancient wooden box. The reality certainly was different. But we wanted the most radical contrast to their life in Vienna to portray their crumbling marriage.

Felix: And those are not the Dolomites, it’s the Karwendel. But that will be up to the Mahler loving alpinist to spot.

If Alma had met Freud, what would they have said to each other?

Percy: Freud would have said: «You first.»
What would Visconti’s Death in Venice be with Mahler’s Adagietto?

Our film describes the impact of Alma’s affair with Walter Gropius on her husband Gustav Mahler not only in words and images, but also and especially in music.

Mahler and Freud’s meeting is given its full power, dimension and significance by the work that Mahler composed exactly at that time. His last summer, after he learned of his wife’s adultery, is the last piece of music he was able to finish, the first movement of his 10th symphony. The desperate man scribbled Alma’s name and pleas for help on his score.

This movement carries all the elements that a genius film composer would invent for this story: the pale, deathly mood, glimmers of hope, cultural ruins of rage, playfully sweet melodies, torture, pain, consolation, and a sudden resonant, massive chord, like a mountain wall, out of which comes the piercing sound of a trumpet playing an A for Alma.

Alma, in her marriage with Mahler, receives her vindication through his music, because she was not only his wife, she was also his assistant, copyist, critic, and protector. The film takes her side against later biographers and their accusations that portray her as an alcoholic whose only goal was to drag celebrities into her bed. But her nine years from the age of 32 to 37, she served only Mahler’s needs. After that she was burnt out. She began a life that made her famous and infamous. There is no doubt that a substantial part of Mahler’s development as a composer is due to Alma.

For our film, Esa-Pekka Salonen recorded two of the most beautiful movements of Mahler’s symphonies, the Adagietto from the 5th, which Mahler gave as a gift to Alma after he fell in love with her, and the Ruhévoll from the 4th symphony.

The main piece, however, is the Adagio from the unfinished 10th, that we use in a very unconventional and perhaps unprecedented way. After the movement was rehearsed and recorded, we asked Esa-Pekka Salonen to record a prepared list of sections from the movement, not with the full orchestra but just groups like wind, brass, cellos, and solo instruments even when the score didn’t specify solos.

These 49 small pieces became the hub of the film’s score. The colors are so different, and the moods so diverse, that we were able to characterize moments and scenes with Mahler’s music without having to use the full orchestration.

There are times when the full composition takes over, but for all the “incidental” moments, the “deconstructed” material was the right choice.

There is not one note that is written by a film composer in the entire film. It is all original Mahler, but with a multitude even beyond the details of Mahler’s last work the way they hear them in our film.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAHLER’S MUSIC FOR THIS FILM
Percy Adlon – DIRECTOR
Hawaiian Gardens (2001)
The Glamorous World of the Adlon Hotel (TV) (1996)
Younger and Younger (1993)
Salmonberries (1991)
Rosalie Goes Shopping (1989)
Bagdad Café (1987)
Zuckertobias (1985)
Céleste (1981)

Johannes Silberschneider – Mahler
Henry of Navarre by Jo Baier (2009)
Little Secrets by Pol Cruchten (2006)
Welcome Home by Andreas Gruber (2004)
Hamlet X by Herbert Fritsch (2003)
Bride of the Wind by Bruce Beresford (2001)

Karl Markovics – Freud
Henry of Navarre by Jo Baier (2009)
The Counterfeiters by Stefan Ruzowitzky (2007)
Academy Award for Best Foreign Feature
All The Queen’s Men by Stefan Ruzowitzky (2001)
Come, Sweet Death by Wolfgang Murnberger (2000)
CAST

JOHANNES SILBERSCHNEIDER
BARBARA ROMANER
KARL MARKOVICS
EVA MATIES
FRIEDRICH MÖCKE
LENA STOJE
NINA BERTEN
MATTHIAS FRANZ STEIN
MICHAEL DANGEL
KARL FISCHER
MAX MAHER
MICHAEL ROTSCHOFF
JOHANNA ORSINI-ROSENBERG
SIMON HATZ
MANUEL WITTING
DANIEL KEBERLE

Gustav Mahler
Alma Mahler
Sigmund Freud
Anna Moll
Walter Gropius
Justine Mother-Rose
Anna von Mildenhurn
Alexander von Zemlinskys
Bruno Walter
Carl Moll
Max Burchard
Alfred Roller
Berta Zuckerkandli
Arnold Rose
Gustav Klimt
Franz Hrn

CREW

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PERCY ADLON and FELIX ADLON

original music by
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production sound
DIETMAR JUZON

sound
MICHAEL ETZ

editor
ZACH SEVERS

casting
JOCHEN KÜSTER

make up
Nicole Schmid

producers
Eleonore Adlon

co-producers
Babu Hartern Ernst

producer
konstanzin Seitz

producer
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producer
HEINRICH MIS

producer
EBERNARD JUNKERSDORF

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