

## Helmut Berger - filming a great artist

By Alexander Tuschinski, August 2015



Filming with Helmut Berger was a rewarding experience; the past few weeks, we got to know each other quite well. I have met many incredible actors during my time as a filmmaker, and he is certainly one of my favorites, both as an artist and as a person. There are many misconceptions about him, so I feel this first-hand experience is very needed - and it will shed light on one of the greatest actors of his generation. Since I saw "The Damned" as a teenager I wished to direct him in a film. Talking to my friend Tinto Brass about "Salon Kitty" where Berger played a major part made me even more curious to meet him during the past years. And when we filmed his part for

"Timeless" this week, finding out that he still possesses the same energy as an actor that he possessed in the 60s was a very pleasant, exciting revelation.

Helmut Berger is what I consider a perfect artist - very serious in his craft, intelligent in his thoughts, without any time or patience for "bullshit" or empty phrases that litter many people's everyday lives, conversations and relationships. He radiates an honesty that is very rare to find - speaking his mind when many people hide behind little convenient lies or stereotypical masks in daily life. His way is refreshing - we connected immediately when first meeting in Austria, and our topics never once entered the realm of "empty" smalltalk. If I strayed into that field, he challenged me to get back to more honest, sincere topics. Talking to him is a truly rewarding experience if you allow yourself to get into his way of thinking and break away from superficial formalities. If you don't, he might try to "provoke" you to see how you react, to gauge how open minded you are. That's one of his big qualities, making him such a strong character: He doesn't care what others think of him - if someone respects him the way he is, that's the person he likes to be around. If someone doesn't? Berger doesn't care, he doesn't try to please others. We connected well - I never once had any conversation with him that was less than pleasant and interesting. And no matter how busy the set was - he was always respectful and kind to me and everyone he met on set

regardless of how "important" their part in the production was - whenever I was around him, he was true gentleman.

As an actor, he is one of the most dedicated professionals I have met. He prepared thoroughly for his role during the weeks preceding filming, occasionally suggesting changes. All the changes he suggested made perfect sense and stemmed from deep understanding of the character he was portraying. We connected well - he understood what I wanted to say with his part, and I liked his very creative suggestions. In fact, together we reworked the part to make it stronger and better. The collaboration was extremely pleasant. There is no "ego" in him that tries to force changes on the scene only to be "right". Instead, he is a sensitive artist putting his thoughts into the character, and together we bounced ideas back and forth until the final scene took shape.



On set, he is mostly quiet and concentrated. I can't say for certain if he stays in character during breaks - but he is not doing any idle chat. He waits. Preserves his energy until the camera rolls. And once the camera is rolling suddenly the character becomes alive. I was deeply impressed by his delivery of his lines - he acts very subtle, but always to the point. His eyes are one of his most powerful "tools" as an actor: With one single look, he manages to say more than some others in a long monologue. He is 71 years old - but the look in his eyes still has the same intensity and energy it had in the 1960s. While filming and editing, I fell in love with his eyes and the intense looks he can give and made sure the film includes a lot of close-ups of them. We finished filming even earlier than anticipated, which gave us time to try some incredible spontaneous ideas; Berger likes to try different approaches and styles in different takes. In the final film, the ending of the scene is one of the most memorable moments - featuring a surprising laugh that Helmut did after he asked if he can improvise "something" in the

ending... And which is the one aspects giving the ending a unique energy.

Our last evening after filming is one of my fondest memories. He invited my family and me for dinner, told us stories about his past experiences, discussed current issues; the sheer amount of topics still makes me excited to think about the evening. Saying farewell at the airport was emotional, I felt as if we have known each other for years already. I wish to collaborate with him again - and the future might bring some very interesting projects.

Helmut, you are wonderful!

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