

# DESIRE WILL SET YOU FREE

*a film by Yony Leyser*

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# DESIRE WILL SET YOU FREE

## SYNOPSIS

### Short

A young American writer falls for a Russian hustler and introduces him to his alternative lifestyle amongst Berlin's queer and underground scenes, but as they make their hedonistic journey through clubs and parties, their inner desires reveal themselves.

### Long:

Ezra, an American writer of Palestinian and Israeli parentage living in Berlin, spends his days clubbing, taking drugs, having pseudo-philosophical conversations and wanting to be more punk, whilst wishing he wrote more. Most of his time is spent with his privileged dark, but witty friend Catharine, who has an unsettling fetish for Nazi paraphernalia. As the two of them look for their next excitement fix, they end up in one of Berlin's famous gay hustler bars.

Almost on a dare Ezra meets Sasha, a Russian immigrant working as an escort. Ezra pulls Sasha on a journey through Berlin's underground and queer scenes. He discovers the stomping ground for hedonism and exploration. He discovers remnants of WWII, The Weimar Republic, Bowie and the present day party kids. Much like taking a drug itself, the line between reality and desire is blurred in the land of excess. What starts out as a seemingly conventional gay relationship reveals itself as more complex and dynamic as their true inner desires are revealed.

Filmed entirely in Berlin, the film uses real locations where many Berlin based personalities give performances some playing themselves. These include 'Godmother of Punk' Nina Hagen as Oracle, cult musician and performance artist Peaches, along with Rosa Von Praunheim, Rummelsnuff, Blood Orange, and Einstuerzende Neubauten and Blixa Bargeld (formerly of Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds).



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

***I don't want to show people what the world is like, I want to show people what the world can be, for all it's dirty, sexual, crazy, campy and colorful potential.***

Berlin is a city of division and distraction, of death and depravity, of rebirth and rediscovery, and since Christopher Isherwood penned his first novel, the international capital has held a place of interest for those that feel alienated from the mainstream. I moved to Berlin in 2010 just after finishing my first film *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within*. As a child, I had heard stories about Germany from my grandparents who were German Jews narrowly escaping the Nazis, moving to what was then Palestine in 1937. The rest of the family was left to perish under the new dictatorship which squashed much more than the Weimar spirit. I never really felt safe to fully accept my identity and beliefs until I moved to Berlin. Here I feel at home.

I know the scene I was thrown into in Berlin is a unique one. It existed in sex clubs and squats, in all-night parties and drugs, in sexual expiration and activism, in excess. Just before December 2012, what we thought would be the end of the world, according to the Mayan calendar, I was involved in LGBT activism and I was working to connect with queer people in Russia. One of the young men I was communicating with said he wanted to spend the end of the world in Berlin. I decided to invite him to stay at my shared queer artist flat. He arrived on December 15, 2012, seven days before the planned end of the world. I showed him my life in Berlin. He could barely speak and would watch quietly and scribble in his journals in his free time. He was totally overwhelmed. Six days later, one day before the end of the world he came out to me as Transgender. The world did not end but she did explain to me all of the things she had seen in Berlin, and for the first time I saw my life through her eyes. The craziness, hedonism and disparity, the life without consequences. We went to a screening of 1980's cult film *Liquid Sky*. The next night I started writing *Desire Will Set You Free*. She would later tell me that it was the greatest honor of her life to have been the catalyst of the film.

The name of the film came from the name of a flyer for a queer underground party we were invited to. On the flyer it showed the gates of Auschwitz but instead of the famous entrance gates reading "Arbeit Macht Frei" which translates to "work will set you free" it read "Lust Macht Frei" (which can be loosely translated to "desire will set you free") and showed people in concentration camp clothes dancing in front of the gates. I almost vomited when I saw the image. Had "my culture" really become so nonchalant about acknowledging the atrocities that occurred on this land? Had I become the alienator rather than the alienated? The Sodom and Gomorrah aspect of the city was instantly clear to me. I discussed what to title the film with my mentor, German film legend Rosa Von Praunheim (who also acts in the film) and he convinced me use the *Lust Macht Frei* (*Desire Will Set You Free*) as a title.

I drew influences from filmmakers like John Waters, Bruce LaBruce and Harmony Korine but wanted to also take my own approach. I wasn't interested in something overly

processed, rather I wanted to investigate the raw, at times psychedelic, at times naturalistic feel as I blurred the line between documentary and fiction. To make the film as real as a dream of the city could be, we shot in all original Berlin locations and I cast people from clubs, and would chase after punks I saw in the street inviting them to appear. Along with a few known names, I also cast many original Berlin artists and nightlife personalities, including myself. I styled the film to feel like a dream, like Sasha's dream through this city and through their self discovery.

- Yony Leyser

## Filmography

### **Documentary Feature:**

William S. Burroughs: A Man Within (2010)

### **Narrative Feature**

Desire Will Set You Free (2015)



## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Yony Leyser grew up in Chicago. His mother is of Israeli/Iranian origin and his father of German Jewish origin. His school and university years were tumultuous as he regularly came into conflict with educational authorities who balked at the challenging nature of his projects

He attended CalArts in 2004. Unsettled and in yet another conflict with school authorities, he expressed his feelings through an art piece that was a fake expulsion letter addressed to himself with a forged signature by the dean of students. He enlarged it and hung it in the main gallery of the school, which resulted in him being asked to take "creative leave". He decided not to return. He eventually graduated from The New School University in New York City.

After CalArts he moved to live with his sister in Lawrence, Kansas where he enrolled in the University of Kansas. Lawrence was also where William Burroughs lived from 1981 until his death in 1997, and Yony began to investigate his teenage muse. What began as a modest student project about the local arts festival which Burroughs hosted, continually expanded in scope and became the feature documentary "William S Burroughs: A Man Within". For 4 years Leyser travelled across the States filming interviews and collecting materials, often with just a camera and a rucksack. His enthusiasm and ability to connect to his subjects gained him the support and aid from personalities including The Allen Ginsberg Estate, Patti Smith, John Waters, Iggy Pop, and Genesis Breyer P-Orridge. He completed the film in 2010 at the age of 24.

Premiering at Slamdance to immediate acclaim the film went on to play at over 60 film festivals, theatrical releases in 5 countries and broadcasts on more than 25 television stations. According to Leyser, making the film enabled him to "shed the angst of my teenage years and gain a better understanding of both Burroughs and myself."

In 2010, Leyser moved to Berlin from where his paternal grandparents had fled the Nazis in 1937, having discovered the contemporary version of the city of the Weimar era that had emerged post re-unification. "I never really felt safe to fully accept my identity and beliefs until I moved to Berlin. Here I feel at home."

His sophomore film, and first narrative feature is *Desire Will Set You Free*, which he was inspired to make after an unexpected visitor from Russia ended up staying with him and he began to see the city he lived in in a new light. In this film, he is paying homage to styles of underground filmmakers of the 70s, 80s and 90s, but tells a very contemporary tale. In an attempt to blur the lines between documentary and fiction, he acts in the film along with many original Berlin personalities playing themselves.

*Desire Will Set You Free*, is in many ways an expression of Yony's life in Berlin and of

his philosophy as a filmmaker. - "I don't want to show people what the world is like, I want to show people what the world can be, for all it's dirty, sexual, crazy, campy and colorful potential."





## **Principal Cast**

Ezra	Yony Leyser
Sasha	Tim - Fabian Hoffmann
Cathrine	Chloé Griffin
Jayne	Amber Benson
Alexandru	Anton Andreew
Ezra's Agent	Rosa Von Praunheim
Oracle	Nina Hagen
Peaches	Herself
Blixa Bargeld	Himself
Blood Orange	Dev Hynes and Samantha Urbani
Rummelsnuff	Themselves
Labanna Babalon	Herself
Bastian	Til Shindler

## **Principal Crew**

Director	Yony Leyser
Executive Producer	Yony Leyser
Assistant Director	Arto Sebastian
Writer	Yony Leyser
Co-Writer	Paula Alamillo Rodriguez
Producers	Paula Alamillo Rodriguez and Sonja Klümper
DoP	Ali Olcay Gözkaya
Sound	Achim Burkart
Costumes	Ramona Petersen
Editor	Rob Myers

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