

Philipp Timme, Director of Photography



Die Jahrhundertlawine

Germany

When I first read the script for *Die Jahrhundertlawine* (Avalanche of the Century), an action-adventure Movie of the Week directed by Jörg Lühdorff and based loosely on the avalanche that destroyed the Tyrolean village of Galtür on February 23, 1999, killing 31 people, I was astounded by the sheer scope of the story. In addition to a five-minute sequence depicting the avalanche itself, there were numerous action elements of all kinds—from a bus driving off a bridge to crashing helicopters and collapsing buildings, not to mention hair-raising stunts on and off the edge of a 1500-foot cliff. To top it all off, the main storyline of the movie—the night the survivors have to spend in the ruins of their village, cut off from the rescue efforts with no power and virtually no medical aid—takes place in a continuously worsening snowstorm, culminating in a second avalanche.

Clearly, this big-budget project—starring Vincent Perez and Désirée Nosbusch, and shot on 35mm 3-perf in Munich and on location in Vent, Austria—called for a very thorough preparation to coordinate 30-plus days of principal photography, eventually involving up to five units shooting simultaneously and a host of different locations that would have to fit together seamlessly in the end. Backed by Producer Stephan Bechtle and Production Manager Jürgen Klauser, Jörg and I were able to produce a detailed storyboard depicting every angle and including all technical specifications for Special Effects Supervisor Willi Neuner and his crew, as well as notes for Visual Effects Supervisor Denis Behnke. Both departments were necessarily extremely busy, and we hardly had a day of shooting without artificial wind, snow and fog—and in most cases, all of it together...

Even though almost all of the destroyed village was built on the back lot of Bavaria Studios, this and most of our other locations would be snow-covered and very uneven, so Jörg had planned on the extensive use of a Steadicam as well as handheld camera rigs of all kind, offset by elaborate crane moves we had carefully laid out with Key Grip Till Treutler.

This was just one more challenge gaffer Michael “Rossi” Röska and I had to address in creating the lighting plan. About half the movie takes place at night, with no power and no light sources other than flashlights, candles and lanterns. In addition, we wanted to be as flexible as possible with our camera moves, not limiting the angles through complex lighting setups on the stage floor, while still creating a warm-cold contrast between the chaos outside and the relative safety inside the makeshift hospital. Based on these thoughts, Michael came up with some very ingenious ways of rigging overhead soft sources as a basic fill light, in which the practical light sources, heavily modified for maximum output, would act as the actual key light, moving on and off the actors and providing a constantly changing back-lit and front-lit feeling. Another great advantage of this lighting setup was that the snow and fog would read extremely well, giving our exteriors the kind of mysterious, “snowy” feel I was looking for.

We then took this idea and modified it for our interiors—mostly shot on stage at Bavaria Studios in Geiseltal near Munich, carefully switching from the monochromatic cold look of the exteriors to a warm, comforting glow for the interiors that would get softer as the story moved on. These overhead setups called for a close cooperation with Rudolf Czettel, our fabulous Production Designer, who incorporated Michael’s specifications and rigging needs in his set designs. Based on this lighting plan, and the wish for a working T-stop around f4.0, I chose ETERNA 500 as the main stock for the night exteriors and interiors. Apart from giving me the necessary exposure, I knew it would work extremely well in the kind of high-contrast lighting we were facing, holding the highlights while still giving me enough latitude in the shadows—which would clearly dominate the frame—yet showing almost no grain.

Similarly, I knew through previous shooting experience in high-alpine situations that our day exteriors would be dominated by constantly shifting light conditions – created by the huge amount of bounce light coming off the white

slopes, changing color and direction throughout the day. Contrast in conditions like these can be quite excessive, and our film stock had to be able to handle it, while still giving me the kind of cold look that I wanted. I remembered the excellent results I had gotten from Super F-125 film before, and despite the fact that it was being discontinued, Jens Seddig, our Fuji Rep office in Hamburg, was able to get a hold of enough raw stock to cover principal photography. This also addressed the need for a virtually grainless, high-latitude stock for the countless VFX-shots, including a host of blue- and greenscreen work. For day interiors, I chose ETERNA 250, perfectly filling the gap between the high-speed ETERNA 500 and the slow Super

F-125 stock. Shooting repeatedly in temperatures of -15°C and below puts a lot of stress on the equipment, not to mention the cast and crew. Retakes have to be reduced to an absolute minimum, and failure of equipment can spell disaster for an expensive production on location. Reliability was of the utmost importance, and Fujifilm’s stock never once let us down. The film stock worked beautifully with our matched set of Cooke and Angenieux lenses, and we were able to capture the drama, the despair and the elation of the rescue as realistically as possible, staying close to our heroes and reliving the nightmare of the avalanche of the century with them—all faithfully rendered on Fujifilm Motion Picture Film. ■

► **Die Jahrhundertlawine (The Avalanche of the Century)**

The story is based on an avalanche catastrophe in the year 1999 in Galtür in the Austrian Alps. *Die Jahrhundertlawine* is an international French-Austrian co-production operated by Bavaria Film. The shooting of the technically elaborate production took place from January until March 2008 at the back lot of Bavaria Film and in original locations. Due to the relatively snowless winter the avalanche scenes were shot in the studios, requiring artificial and real snow to be brought in. For the director Jörg Lühdorff and DOP Philipp Timme this production provided many challenges.

► **Synopsis**

A young assistant doctor Marc (Vincent Perez) and his girlfriend Anne (Désirée Nosbusch) are on duty at an alpine rescue outpost when they are called to an emergency. A snowboarder is in a life-threatening situation and Anne is shocked to discover that the person is her brother Michael. The rescue fails and Michael falls to his death. Wasn’t there an opportunity for Anne and Marc to have saved him?

Torn by self-recriminations, Anne and Marc break up and Marc returns to Paris. Eight years later, Michael’s body is found and Marc and Anne meet at his funeral for the first time since the incident. But they don’t have much time to deal with the past as a huge and growing amount of avalanche snow is building up above the valley. A proposed evacuation is postponed because it is the peak winter sports season...

FILM PRODUCTION

Production Company Bavaria Pictures GmbH
 Producer Stephan Bechtle

CREW

Director Jörg Lühdorff
 DOP Philipp Timme
 2nd Unit Camera Frank Hackeschmidt
 Nikolaus Summerer
 Michael Praun
 Steadicam Operator Michael Praun
 Martin Lippert
 Camera Assistant Sebastian Grundt
 Jakob von Lenthe
 Jens Wenzel
 Director of Production Jürgen Klauser

PROJECT INFORMATION

Format 35mm
 Duration 95 minutes
 Language German, French, Polish
 Genre Drama
 Principal Photography January 29–March 17, 2008
 Locations Germany (Munich, Bavaria Studios),
 Austria (Vent/Ötztal, Dachstein), France
 (Paris)
 Main Cast Désirée Nosbusch, Vincent Perez
 Raw Stock Super F-125, ETERNA 250, ETERNA 500
 Release Date Winter 2008/2009

<i>Die Jahrhundertlawine</i>	
STOCK USED	Super F-125, ETERNA 250, ETERNA 500