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The Icon and the Actor

Run Lola Run star *Franka Potente* and co-star *Benno Fürmann* talk about their new melodrama *The Princess and the Warrior*.

By [Tor Thorsen](#)

It's not every day the darling of German cinema tells you to shut the hell up. But that's just what happened a few weeks ago, when I was waiting to interview [Franka Potente](#), Teutonic thespian/goddess and vivacious star of the breakout hit [Run Lola Run](#).



Benno Fürmann & Franka Potente

Of course, she didn't say those words — she was much nicer about it, popping her head into the adjoining suite of her room at San Francisco's swanky W hotel where I was making chitchat with her publicist. She looked straight at me, flashed that beaming, dimpled smile under a tangled mass of very short, dyed-red locks, and said, "Please — we hear every word you say."

Embarrassed and more than a little in awe, I quickly clammed up and looked over questions to ask Franka and her co-star [Benno Fürmann](#) — who apparently is the German equivalent of [Ben Affleck](#) — about their new film, [The Princess and the Warrior](#), written and directed by her boyfriend [Tom Tykwer](#), who also helmed *Lola*. While *Lola* won over festival audiences with a lightning-quick pace and existential whimsy — think the French New Wave on speed — Potente and Tykwer's new collaboration is a horse of a different color. An occasionally suspenseful melodrama about a mental hospital nurse (Potente) who falls in love with an unbalanced ex-soldier (Fürmann) after he saves her life, it's much closer to the slow rhythm's of Tykwer's earlier work [Winter Sleepers](#). Will audiences expecting another whirlwind tour of Berlin be disappointed? I sat down with the two German stars to find out.

Q: So where's Tom [Tykwer]?

Franka Potente: He's working on his film [Heaven](#). It's a [Krzysztof] [Kieslowski](#) script with [Cate Blanchett](#) and [Giovanni Ribisi](#). It's tearing his heart away he can't be here.

Q: Are you in that?

FP: No, I'm not. I'm working on other projects.

Q: Like [The Bourne Identity](#) [[Swingers](#) director [Doug Liman](#)'s adaptation of the Robert Ludlum espionage novel, co-starring [Matt Damon](#)]?



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Franka Potente

FP: No, I'm done with that.

Q: So what's next for you?

FP: [Sighs] I'm doing press for *Princess* and then, hopefully, going on vacation at some point.

Q: This isn't a vacation?

FP: [Looks outside at pouring rain and gray skies and smiles] No.

Q: You were involved with *Princess* from the very beginning and have a very, er, close relationship with the director, who said he tailor-made the character of Sissi for you. How much input did you have into the creation of the character?

FP: I didn't really have any input into the writing — he's very good at doing that. But I mean, we interacted. He had the idea for writing *Princess* while we were on a month's vacation on an island. So, I happened to be there and I was going to be the character, so whenever he had a piece [of Sissi] in his head he would start talking to me about it, and we would try together to get to know this person that I am [going to be]. And we did very basic things we tried what she could walk like, what she could talk like, and he just would tell me. For instance the trach-, er, the trach-

Q: Tracheotomy.

FP: Yes, the tracheotomy scene is one of the first things he had in mind.

Q: He wasn't a failed medical student or anything, was he?

FP: [Laughs] No.

Q: Was that scene difficult for you to do? [To Benno] I mean, you literally slurped a good half-pint of that red stuff out of the straw in her throat — I hope that was just corn syrup. How did you guys actually do that?



Benno Fürmann & Franka Potente

Benno Fürmann: Well, we —

FP: [Interrupts] It was a special, extra throat. Benno had a really, really sharp knife, and he had to exact hit a little point that was marked by a fake little mole. But underneath was a tiny...[turns to Benno] [Wie] Sagt man den Sieb? ... a tiny piece of metal, in case he really cut through he couldn't hurt me. So we were just like, "Here we go," and he was lying on top of me for two days under a truck.

Q: [To Benno] So how did you get involved?

BF: Tom called me.

Q: But you two guys knew each other before, since you both worked on [Anatomy](#) [a recent German horror film].

BF: Yes, briefly.

Q: Are there a lot of horror movies made in Germany?

FP: I guess it's like here — there's waves.

Q: [To Benno] How did he get the idea of casting you as Bodo? Were you in the army, too? [Benno stares at me incredulously]

FP: [Laughing uncontrollably] Benno's really famous in Germany!

Q: [Grins sheepishly] Oh. [shuffles papers as though looking for something] Er, that's not in my notes. That damn assistant of mine! He couldn't research to save his life — I'll have him flogged. (Note: The interviewer does not now have, nor has he ever had, an assistant. Hell, he doesn't even have an office.)

BF: [Now laughing a bit] No, no, that's how it happened — I was walking down the street one day with my gun, you know and just saw a film crew ...

Q: But in Germany you have to be in the army, right?

FP: Not necessarily, you can do your civil service.

Q: [To Benno] Did you even do that? In your file it says you just ran off to the Lee Strasberg institute.

BF: Well, I got out of it for personal reasons, because I was still suffering the lingering side effects of [high] school.



Benno Fürmann & Franka Potente

Q: So when Tom called you did you take the part right away?

BF: Yeah, he told me it was two people meeting under a truck, over a tracheotomy tube. These were the first things he gave me in a printed form. It sounded so weird, I loved it right away. Of course, there was some processes to go, you know...

FP: [Tom] wouldn't have let him go, anyway, he was so excited to meet him. For Tom, it was him [motions to Benno]. I remember he came back from meetings and was so excited, even if Benno had [refused], he would've tried to convince him.

BF: Yeah, and that click moment [snaps his fingers] happened really quickly. That was good because I only knew Tom from premieres, where you come up to people and just say, "Hi, how you doing?" "Great, bye."

FP: We were at the *Lola* premiere —

BF: [Interrupts] At the *Run Lola Run* premiere, that was the first time that I, er, chatted with Franka and that was the first time I chatted with Tom.

Q: But you guys both went to the Lee Strasberg school...

FP: At different times.

Q: What was that like? [To Benno] I mean, I noticed you had to cry a lot in your scenes....

BF: Yeah, but these were like, technical scenes. Those were artificial ... er, artificial tears, because Bodo wasn't really crying.



Franka Potente & Benno Fürmann

Q: I was going to ask you about that because a lot of actors, especially Method actors, get hysterical when they cry, but you seemed really stone-faced. [Benno stares coldly, making an uncomfortable pause considerably more uncomfortable.]

BF: [Repeating himself with a slight edge of annoyance] Ja, these were technical scenes, with artificial tears, because he's not really crying. He is too busy holding himself together, and not showing emotion. Those tears had to release themselves.

Q: Er, okay, that clears it up for me. Moving right along Was it a difficult shoot? How long did it take?

BF: Three months. Actually, for a German feature, that is an incredible amount of shooting, a big stretch of time. The longest I ever worked on a movie. The days were long, Tom had the biggest budget he ever had, which was about \$4 million U.S. — you guys over here laugh about that, but for us, that's a lot.

Q: Guess we're just spoiled over here. [To Franka] Okay, both *Princess* and *Lola* tackle questions of fate, the decisions we make and their ramifications. What's the single biggest decision you made and how did it affect your life?

FP: The first thing that comes to my mind is the decision to leave the acting school earlier. I was discovered in a bar, my second year of ... school, I went to a stage school, when I made my first movie. I come from a small town, I had no movie goal back then, because we didn't have a movie theater there, so I started on the stage. And, er, I did this first movie, and I was so happy about the experience with the camera — I liked it better.

Q: Better that getting in front of an audience?

FP: Yeah, because on stage it's like [strikes a Shakespearean pose with her arms in the air] "TRA-LA-LA-LA!" I liked the acting school and everything I learned there, but I was always like "God, this feels fake." I was thinking to myself, after the [movie] experience, I went back to school and was thinking "I don't know if I would like to continue." And everybody told me that one movie was not enough, that I wasn't going to have a career, "Finish school, finish school!" But I had two years of school left and my stomach was telling me something different. And, being really alone on that decision, I decided I was going to leave. And [smiling] I did a really horrible movie right afterwards, because I wanted to do something. It was horrible, I haven't even seen it! But it didn't harm me, and from then on I got work and everything worked out, even though nobody could believe it.

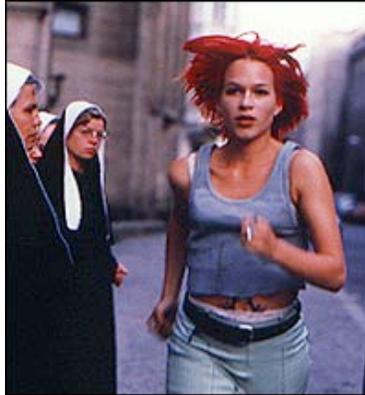
Q: Don't worry, when you start getting really famous it'll come out on video. Now, *The Princess and the Warrior* is a really different movie than *Run Lola Run*. Those who saw *Winter Sleepers* will know that Tom can make both slow-paced and fast-paced films. But a lot of people are going to into *Princess* expecting it to be like *Lola* — which it's not — and many of them might walk away disappointed. Does that prospect worry you? I mean, did this gap between expectations and the film's reality

affect its success in Germany?

FP: [Pauses] The success was not as wide as *Lola*, because *Princess* was not as easy to swallow. It requires a lot of brain [taps head] from the audience.

Q: Well if that's the case, you're going to be in trouble in America....

FP: [Smiles somewhat disingenuously] But, really, it's not that different from *Lola*. The pace is a lot slower, but it deals with the same things. It's like getting into the microcosmos of *Lola*, it tries to get closer to all the answers of the same questions. I think Tom's work in general, you have to see it like a painter's work. It's not once he does this genre and once he does this one, it's really about questions that matter to him personally, and to anybody who lives on this planet, questions that mankind has been asking itself forever. But I don't know. It might reach outside the 'smart' audience. From our experiences, the movie did quite well in Germany, it reached all the expectations we had.



Franka Potente in *Run Lola Run*

BF: Especially for what it is. It requires a lot of concentration, and it wasn't as mainstream-y as a lot of films that were running in German theaters at the same time.

FP: And it got four German Oscar nominations, by the way! So it's got some awards already....

Q: What's the German version of the Oscar called?

FP: [Straight-faced] Lola.

Q: You're kidding.

FP: No. They just renamed it Lola.

Q: [Laughing] Wow, you've got an award named after you, not too bad. [Potente remains straight-faced, I quickly compose myself]. Er, so, getting back to the question of audience expectation — do you worry that people aren't going to be as receptive to *Princess* as they were *Lola*?

FP: Well, you know, you can never force people into a movie theater. As an artist, I see it like this: What does it do if a movie gets a large audience because the makers had a lot of money to spend on advertising, but the millions of people who saw the movie are puking their guts out because they don't like it? Then there's a small, nice brainy audience who likes a little movie, which is remembered for a longer time. I mean look, [De Niro](#) just had his largest success with [Meet the Parents](#), a larger audience than [Raging Bull](#) ever had, but in retrospect which is the bigger movie?

Q: Yeah, artistic integrity versus box office.

FP: Look, we know what we have with the movie. It's a great movie. I'm shouting it out loud because I really do think that. I'm proud of it, and for me personally, it's the best work I've ever done. It doesn't happen all the time that you get to say that



about your work. You know there's good stuff and then there's mediocre stuff, but this movie's very special. It's also a project of idealists.

BF: I agree, it was a really special work for all those involved.

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