

Thank you for using our printer friendly story page.

[Return to story](#)

Moe: Bizarre 'Stroszek' coming to film festival

By Doug Moe
608-252-6446
January 29, 2009

Maybe the only thing weirder than famed German director Werner Herzog's deeply weird 1977 film, "Stroszek," is the circumstances of its making.

Another famous film name, documentary director Errol Morris, is involved, and so is Ed Gein, the late resident of Plainfield who dug corpses out of the ground and danced with them.

Did I mention this was weird?

It is of interest now because "Stroszek," in all its bizarre glory, is going to be featured at the 2009 Wisconsin Film Festival, which runs April 2-5 in Madison.

Festival director Meg Hamel was aware of the film's interesting history -- and its many Wisconsin ties -- so when she heard that a new print of the film had recently become available in Germany, she made inquiries and secured it for the festival.

Writing about "Stroszek" in 2002, Roger Ebert called it "one of the oddest films ever made."

Here's the lead to Ebert's Chicago Sun-Times piece: "Who else but Werner Herzog would make a film about a retarded ex-prisoner, a little old man and a prostitute, who leave Germany to begin a new life in a house trailer in Wisconsin? Who else would shoot the film in the hometown of Ed Gein, the murderer who inspired 'Psycho'? Who else would cast all the local roles with locals? Who else would end the movie with a policeman radioing, 'We've got a truck on fire, can't find the switch to turn the ski lift off, and can't stop the dancing chicken. Send an electrician.'"

The film never would have been made had Herzog not been introduced, in Berkeley, Calif., in the 1970s, to a struggling graduate student named Errol Morris.

Morris, who earned his undergraduate degree at UW-Madison, was unhappy in grad school at Berkeley and began going to movies at the Pacific Film Archive on campus. He eventually began writing program notes for the archive and the director introduced him to Herzog, who at the time was probably best known for his 1972 film, "Aguirre, the Wrath of God."

Herzog and Morris, the Boston Globe later noted, "found they had an

interest in common -- Wisconsin mass murderer Ed Gein, the model for Norman Bates in 'Psycho.'"

Gein, who died in Madison (at the Mendota Mental Health Institute) in 1984, could fascinate even as he repelled.

I once interviewed a woman, Helen Morrison, who had been a staff psychiatrist at Mendota and had talked to Gein. Morrison later became a forensic psychiatrist and authored a book titled "My Life Among the Serial Killers."

Early in her career, at the facility in Madison, Morrison approached Gein. Sitting by himself, shrouded in smoke, he looked like a ghost.

"I heard that you did some things, Ed, some things that were not so good."

"I did some things," Gein said. "I did 'em. So what?"

"Ed," Morrison said, "they said you never got over your mother's death. What do you think of that?"

"I cared about her. Cared about her a lot. But it wasn't like I didn't get over it. Everyone cares when their mother dies."

As Herzog and Morris -- whose documentaries include "The Thin Blue Line" and "The Fog of War" -- spoke about Gein, the subject of his mother came up. Gein was known to have dug up graves in the Plainfield cemetery but no one knew for certain if he'd dug up his mother's grave.

Herzog and Morris decided to travel to Plainfield to find out.

In a joint interview at Brandeis University in 2007, a transcript of which was printed in The Believer magazine, Morris and Herzog told what happened next. Herzog was filming in Alaska and drove to Plainfield, where he waited for Morris, who didn't show up.

The plan was to dig up Gein's mother's grave -- how else to see if she was there? -- and Morris got scared. "I saw myself arrested," Morris said.

Herzog didn't do any digging, but he hung around Plainfield -- his car broke down -- and he became intrigued with several local residents. Herzog eventually cast them in the movie that became "Stroszek," which he wrote in four days.

For a time, Morris was angry that Herzog had appropriated the Wisconsin setting for his film (Morris had actually lived in Plainfield for a time). By the time of their discussion at Brandeis, Morris was over it. Speaking of "Stroszek," Morris said, "It's a very good film."

Herzog got the last word. "It has a beautiful end with a dancing chicken," he said. "And I really like it."

[Return to story](#)