

Document Citation

Title	Director sends up his own life
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Source	<i>Newark Star-Ledger</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Neurosia: 50 jahre pervers (Neurosia: Fifty years of perversity), von Praunheim, Rosa, 1995

The Star-Ledger

THE NEWSPAPER FOR NEW JERSEY

Movies

Review/ 'Neurosia: 50 Years of Perversity'

Director sends up his own life

By ALLEN BARRA

In Vito Russo's book, "The Celluloid Closet" (on which the superb new documentary is based), onetime German New Wave filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim is described as "a director who makes home movies for the gay movement."

That's an exaggeration, but the point survives it, particularly as it applies to von Praunheim's most famous film, "It's Not the Homosexual Who is Perverse, But the Situation in Which He Lives" (1970), which was a focal point for gay liberation in the Seventies. Von Praunheim himself is quite a character; he took the name Rosa (after being born Holger Mischwitzky) in commemoration of the pink armbands gays were forced to wear in Nazi

"Neurosia: 50 Years of Perversity," starring Desiree Nick. A First Run Features release, rated R. Opens Friday in New York only. ★★★½

prison camps during World War II. Controversial in both gay and straight film and political circles for "outing" several German celebrities, von Praunheim has been widely quoted as saying, "I don't want audiences at my movies to have a good time, I want them to be upset."

Von Praunheim is being disingenuous: His "Neurosia: 50 Years of Perversity" is one of the funniest and most inventive German comedies ever made, a murder-mystery in the form of a mock-documentary. It opens with von Praunheim murdered on stage as

he is about to introduce his new film; given the range and number of people von Praunheim has angered over the last quarter-century (including uptight gay militants in this country), the killer could be just about anyone.

The film then turns into a bargain basement "Citizen Kane" spoof, as an obnoxious TV journalist (played by the delightful cabaret singer and actress Desiree Nick) tries to dig up the "truth" about von Praunheim's wicked life, pursuing friends, relatives, colleagues and ex-lovers, everywhere from living rooms to public toilets. Von Praunheim splices these with phony documentary footage — a phony documentary inside a spoof of documentaries — and passages from von Praunheim's "diaries" (which, actually, sound nutty enough to be real).

Thus, von Praunheim creates a fictional history for himself, but one that pretty much fits the facts of his known life — sort of a cartoon autobiography. Only, von Praunheim has thrown in two hilarious twists to his story, both of which kick in precisely when you think you have the film pegged.

Von Praunheim is perverse, all right. He's made a film that defies categorization and cuts across sexual boundaries in its search for something that can be offensive — and funny — to everyone.

RATING NOTE — Rated R for sexual content.