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## HERZOG EATS HIS WORDS

## A German Director's Sole Food

BY SHEILA BENSON

BERKELEY—Director Werner Herzog has paid off some bizarre debts. He has jumped into a thorn bush for his cast of dwarfs and midgets, so they could film him. He has walked 400 miles from Munich to Paris with a can of film under his arm, where his mentor Lotte Eisner lay ill, willing her to recover. So there weren't too many eyebrows raised as Herzog arrived at the UC Theater in Berkeley quietly determined to eat his shoe.



Werner Herzog

This bet was born in September of 1977 in the film cafe that adjoins Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive. On each visit Herzog listened to Errol Morris, a young philosophy graduate student and archive hanger-on, who'd never made a film, but who was forever full of great movie ideas: his giant chicken film, his Wisconsin mass murderer film. This day Morris waved a newspaper clipping about pet cemeteries, which provided tombs for snakes, rats, monkeys, chickens, hamsters, dogs and cats that had passed on. Clearly, another dynamite Morris idea, limited only by his lack of wherewithal. Something in Herzog snapped. "You do a film with guts, not money," he exploded. "When I made my first film, I stole the camera. It is a great idea, but all you'll do is talk it away. I doubt that you're ever going to do this. If you do, I eat my shoe."

Stung by this public challenge, Morris was galvanized into action. The next morning, archive director Tom Luddy remembers, Morris cabled him. Did Luddy know any cameramen willing to work on speculation? Luddy suggested one, then learned, open-mouthed, that after two days Morris fired him, hired a second cameraman, fired him, and took a third. Clearly, the mantle of DeMille had descended with a vengeance.

Morris began wild money-raising, borrowing from everyone, holding work in progress screenings at the archives to raise completion funds. What emerged was "Gates of Heaven," an 85-minute documentary eventually

accepted by the 1978 New York Film Festival, the London Festival and by Filmex, whose program compared Morris' passion to Herzog's and his eye to Diane Arbus'.

Now Herzog had arrived to pay his debt. Since midafternoon, flanked by documentarian Les Blank and his camera unit, Berkeley's most innovative and highly regarded restaurant, Chez Panisse, has been simmering Herzog's European-size 42 desert boots in their French aluminum pot. These were, naturally, the shoes Herzog wore when he took his vow. "I didn't come here in track shoes," Herzog muttered. "I don't like cowards."

How do you cook a shoe? In duckfat broth, plumped out with a whole red onion, fresh purple rosemary and four whole heads of garlic. What worried Herzog's friends were the gummy shoes that had thinned out some lethal mixture of mucilage and boiled garden slugs. There were serious debates about whether he should be allowed to do it. There was, of course, no deflecting Herzog.

As the packed UC audience watched under eye-squinting filming lights, Herzog attacked the boiled boot with game shears and garden clippers, cutting it into tiny chips and triangles, triangles that lay like petrified pemmican. You don't chew shoe, Herzog wisely discovered, you swallow it back manfully with a good dark German beer.

Blank's crew and Herzog moved to the lobby where Herzog cut, swallowed, and answered questions from a pressing crowd of fans.

What can film do? "It gives us some insight, it does not cause revolutions, it could change our perspective," the director ruminated as he swallowed. "As you see, it makes me into a clown, at least I do it for a friend's film, not my own."

It takes a very long time to eat a shoe. The possibly toxic shoe was almost all that was left when Herzog finished. Paler than ever, the Byronically handsome 35-year-old director had one last sentence: "'Gates of Heaven' was a more potent state of the union message than anything Carter could come up with."

And Errol Morris? Strike-bound in a New York airport, the young director had missed his whole tribute. However, Herzog has saved the second shoe. The film needs a distributor. Was he sick? Herzog smiled. "Not when you've eaten as many Kentucky Fried Chickens as I have."

Benson is a film critic for the Pacific Sun in Marin County.