

TRIAL OF HEIN

Germany | 2026 | 122'

a film by
Kai Stänicke



76. Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Berlinale Perspectives

PRESS NOTES

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Synopsis

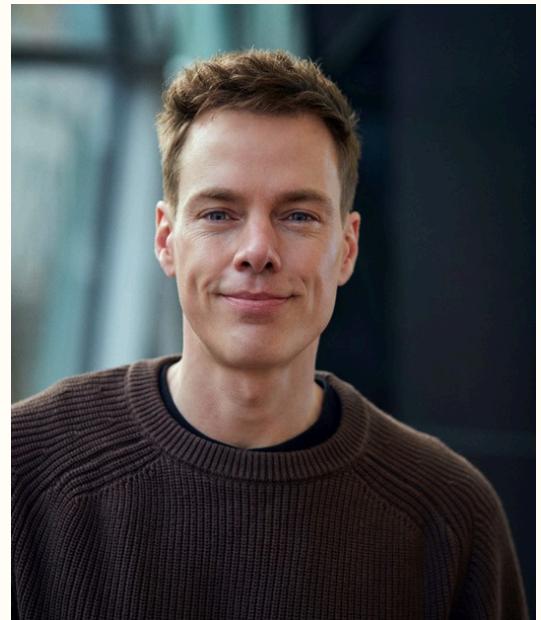
After fourteen years away, Hein returns to his home village on a remote island, only to discover that the close-knit community no longer recognizes him. Suspecting him to be an imposter, they demand a trial to determine his true identity.



About the director

Kai Stänicke

After studying Film and training at X Filme Creative Pool, Kai Stänicke worked as an assistant director before moving into his own projects. His shorts won recognition from Saatchi & Saatchi, Berlinale Talents and Nespresso Talents, and his debut feature Trial of Hein received support from Berlinale's Script Station and the Wolfgang Kohlhaase Scholarship.



Filmography

2026 TRIAL OF HEIN / Debut Feature / 122 min

2019 PACE / Animation / 11 min

2018 CIRCLE / Short / 3 min

2015 B. / Animation / 15 min

2015 GOLDEN / Short / 3 min

2013 GAY GOTH SCENE / Short / 5 min

2012 IT'S CONSUMING ME / Short / 3 min

2011 COLD STAR/ Short / 7 min

Director's Statement

Trial of Hein is an intimate exploration of identity and belonging. Who hasn't looked back at an earlier version of themselves and been surprised by how much has changed? Going back home forces us to confront the person we used to be. At its core, the film captures that fragile moment when you stop pretending to be who you once were, even if doing so turns you into a stranger to those who thought they knew you.



Interview with director Kai Stänicke

Trial of Hein explores identity, memory, and belonging. What inspired you to tell this story?

The story is deeply personal to me. Growing up in a small rural town in Germany in the 1990s, I often felt unable to truly be myself during the most formative years of my life - my childhood and youth. At the time, it wasn't something I fully understood. Only later, when I left my hometown to study and began living in larger cities, did I come to understand and accept parts of myself that had previously felt out of reach.

With the distance that time and place provide, returning to my hometown stirred a multitude of emotions, but above all the sense that the life I lived there belonged to someone else - a life that never fully felt like my own, and one I could never return to. That feeling is where the film originates.

The film centers on a return home that becomes deeply unsettling, as Hein's memories conflict with those of the community. What were you interested in exploring about collective memory versus personal truth?

I was surprised to realize that, when talking with relatives or childhood friends about my childhood and youth, they were often completely unaware of what I had been going through and struggling with at the time. I realized that I had kept it all inside, never allowing what I was experiencing internally to show on the outside.

This tension fascinated me: what value does a memory have when it is based only on external observation? What is the true memory in such moments - what I was actually feeling at the time, or how I appeared to others outwardly?

The film is focusing on self-deception and self-acceptance. What do you hope audiences recognize about themselves when they watch the film?

Looking honestly at yourself today, and at the person you once were, is never easy. I tried to take my own experience and transform it into something universal.

Interview with director Kai Stänicke

I would be flattered if it encourages people to reflect on the roles they themselves - and ultimately everyone - play at different stages of life. And to consider how difficult it can be to distinguish which parts of ourselves are truly our own, and which were shaped to protect us - especially when those roles were assumed in childhood, at the very moment we are still discovering and forming who we are.

What is also striking about your film is the choice of set design and location. Could you explain how this aesthetic choices came about?

Very early on, while writing the script, it became clear to me that the story had to take place on an island - for several reasons. I wanted the place Hein returns to be isolated and reclusive. He arrives like a foreign body in a close-knit community, one that is not used to strangers and not welcoming to them. I also wanted the setting to feel somehow otherworldly, detached from time and from the real world. I always envisioned the film as a parable, a sort of fairy tale, and for it to carry this universal quality, it was important that the audience could not pinpoint the exact time or location. An island naturally embodied all these qualities.

Initially, the decision not to create a fully realistic historic village, but rather open houses and theatrical backdrops, was driven by budgetary constraints - we simply couldn't afford to build an entire village. But this limitation pushed me to embrace the film's timeless nature and consider how we could strengthen this approach, how to make it even more universal. I was inspired by Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, a film I deeply admire, yet I wanted to create something unique, merging the island's landscape with a theatrical, stage-like setting. The village court was always conceived as a kind of amphitheater, emphasizing the performative nature of justice - courtrooms have been stages for human drama for centuries, after all. I extended this theatrical approach to the village itself, which made perfect sense given that the film is about playing roles and hiding truths. The open, fragmented houses mirror the story's themes: you are always on a stage; you are always performing.

Interview with director Kai Stänicke

This is your first feature film. What shaped your cinematic approach to Trial of Hein?

Most importantly, I wanted to take the audience with us on Hein's journey. The abstract, theatre-like setting helped to visualize the story's universal, modern fable quality, but it also carried the risk of creating distance – that the audience might not be able to fully immerse themselves in Hein's story.

My approach to counter this was to use a handheld camera, always very close to Hein, following him, seeing and discovering the story alongside him. The acting was crucial as well. We are on a kind of theatre stage, yet we are not performing theatre – everything had to feel real and believable. The actors did an incredible job, I am in awe of them. It was not an easy task, given the historic language and abstract setting. Costumes and makeup supported this approach too, maintaining the illusion and allowing the audience to fully immerse themselves in the story.



Credits

Title	Trial of Hein
Original title	Der Heimatlose
Directed by	Kai Stänicke
Written by	Kai Stänicke
Produced by	Tamtam Film
Co-produced by	Lupa Film ZDF Das kleine Fernsehspiel
Producers	Andrea Schütte, Dirk Decker, Dario Suter
Co-producers	Felix von Boehm, Katrin Jochimsen, Kai Stänicke
Cinematography	Florian Mag
Editing	Susanne Ocklitz
Production Design	Seth Turner
Costumes	Stefanie Bieker
Make-up	Christina Wagner, Tanja Adams
Original Sound	Maj-Linn Preiss
Sound Design	Kirsten Kunhardt
Sound Mixing	Philipp Kemptner
Starring	Paul Boche (Hein) Philip Froissant (Friedemann) Emilia Schüle (Greta) Stephanie Amarell (Heide) Aaron Hilmer (Volker) Irene Kleinschmidt (Mechthild) Jeanette Hain (Jorinde) Julika Jenkins (Gertrud) Sebastian Blomberg (Hauke) Margarita Broich (Svantje)

Trial of Hein is supported by MOIN Film Fund Hamburg Schleswig-Holstein, nordmedia – Film and Media Company of Lower Saxony/Bremen, Hessen Film & Medien, the German Federal Film Fund (DFFF), and German Films.