

Interview with Bent Hamer

by Roni

In September 2005 our author Roni had the opportunity to watch a pre-screening of *FACTOTUM* by Scandinavian director Bent Hamer in Hamburg. After the movie, the director, who was there, was open for the public audience to ask questions. After that, Roni sat together with Bent alone to ask more questions. Here is the whole thing. We start with the public part.

? Was it your own idea to make the movie or was it suggested by anyone?

! Actually I met with Jim Stark. He is the one I wrote and produced the film with. We met in Cannes in '95. There was my first film *Eggs*. And we wanted to do something together. "What about Bukowski", I told him, and he said: "O.k. Which book?" and I said *Factotum* or *Post Office*. About one week later he said, that *Post Office* was out but *Factotum* was still available.

? Why did it take so long to do it?

! It was 10 years ago when we decided to do it. 8 years to finance it. We were very close a couple of times. When someone told me that Matt Dillon would play Henry Chinasky, I would say "No way!" it was like that: "Who could play this character?" It was really tricky. I think we needed this 8 years to do it.

? What did you like about the story?

! Well, in one way it's kind of crazy to adapt Bukowski's novels into films because more or less it's all the same, it's no dramaturgy to hook it on. You can go from one scene in a book to probably another scene in another book.

But I really think he's an important writer. For me. If you start with Walt Whitman and you can go through like *Huckleberry Finn* and John Fante, of course, which was very influencing to Bukowski. And you can go to Europe, all the way down to Jean Genet. But I think his work is something very special.

I also think that you have to read his poetry. So it was not only this book but it was his whole approach to people living on the edge. And

I haven't seen this properly done so far. I mean if you've seen, like *Leaving Las Vegas* – I didn't believe in that very much. I thought there was also some warmth and more that connects people living this kinda life than was separating them.

And I thought I could do something else but still keep it inside his universe. And I talked a lot to Linda Bukowski, his widow, to achieve it. Like when you saw *Barfly*, it was performed by Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway had the part that Lili played in *Factotum*, and Rourke was walking like he was shitting in his trousers.

I liked to do it more authentically. I mean Bukowski worked all his life until he was famous at last. And he worked at the post office for 12 years. In a way he was kinda one leg in normal society the other one deeper down in some shadows. And I wanted to explore THAT. So it was the whole life he got.

I also worked with some ideas like drinking as a force, what it needs to stay there or to get down to it. But I didn't want to do the film, because he is a good drinker and I did it very honestly without being pathetic. I mean he's a good observer, he describes a part of American life, which you really see on films these days.

So for me it's hard to point out, what it really was. It was a kind of 'the whole thing fits into something' I wanted to do. But you never know why you pick a project, it picks you also.

? Did you do much research?

! We had some very nice consulting and research I must admit. You have to have certain experiences and I'm not very fond of methods and like that. Matt Dillon was of course the one that might having taken his biggest risk: He didn't know if he could do it. He liked the script very much and he also read Bukowski when he was younger.

So, we talked about it. We had to forget Bukowski, because we knew that he would be all over anyway when we start working with him. And that's quite tricky.

It's also so easy to read: "Tell the story about Bukowski!" It's just about down and out drinking, fucking, losing jobs ... I mean it's so easy to have the cliché of him so clear. And also his face, his image, is all so visible.

And it's older of course then. This book is taking part from after the World War II until mid 60s or something. But we wanted to do it in a kind of 'No-Time-Environment'.

So this is the approach and I used to say, I have no method, but we talked a lot.

Of course we got a lot of input from Linda Bukowski.

But I think if there was a method, the method was I tried to forget Bukowski. I tried to do it based on Matt's experience. The way he moves and his body-language and all that. That was the only way to do it. And still we were very afraid of not getting away with it. It's really tricky, really difficult. Because he's so clear in a way.

? What was your budget for this movie?

! It's a low budget movie, we all worked for very little.

? How did you then get a cast like that?

! They also worked for very little and they wanted to do it. That's the only answer. We shot it in 24 days. It's all on location and we worked night and day like we're used to [laughs]. The production-wise was more like we are used to do it in Europe, at least what I'm used to.

? To how many countries is it sold now?

! Something like 35 countries.

? When does it start in Germany?

! In Germany it's the 8th of December [2005].

? How did you have the idea of the poems in the movie?

! First when we decided to do the voice-over - we have all seen so many films destroyed by the voice-over - but if you plan it in the beginning it's so beautiful to tell a story with the voice-over as one of the elements.

And we were very lucky also, because we planned it before, we knew that Matt will play the part, but he has such a beautiful voice. He has done a lot of readings actually and won prizes, nobody knows that, I didn't know it.

And we thought it was necessary. It's hard to show someone writing without telling what he's writing. And I mean it's so transparent. So this was also a way of getting a kind of resonance and depth in this

Bent Hamer Interview

extensile way of describing and living life that he's doing, the way he's reporting.

This was the public questioning so far.

What comes up now is the exclusive interview that Roni had with Bent after that:



? Bent, what is your personal favourite of Bukowski's books?

! Well, I haven't read all of them, I suppose. I've read quite a lot, but during many years. But I really liked *Factotum* very much and I liked *Post Office* very much. It's hard to compare those to, for example *Ham on Rye* because it's a different book in a way. But I liked those books very much.

And the poetry... that's what I try to explain also: you really have to read more than one book or two books, you have to read all of it - not All of it, but quite a bit. I always have a hard time to tell, what my favourite is, whether it's films or books or whatever.

? You do like *Factotum* and you did a movie on it, but there are people, at least in Germany, who think that amongst his novels it might be one of the weakest.

! Oh, I didn't know. And ... I disagree. Because I think, *Factotum* is some kind of double-basis for his life. And maybe that's why it's not too high lightened for people.

And that was what interests me also, that, like I said, he had to work all the time. And to write so much and drink and womanizing and all that but still go to work, I mean that's, for me that's really something very special. I mean it needs a lot of guts.

And as we know, he described his life as it was in a way. That's what I like with him. Without any ... it's not getting pathetic, it's just as it is.

And the different jobs that he had, I think that's perfectly described in *Factotum*, so I disagree about that. I think that's a kind of BASIS. That's how I see it.

? We know how you cast the actors. But how did you come to score Kristin Asbjørnsen for the soundtrack?

! It's so much 'man' in this character, this description of life, this point of view ... And I think it started with that: Kristin's voice is something in between - in one hand she's like a kind of female Tom Waits or something between him and Janis Joplin or whatever and her raw voice, but still it's so full of atmosphere, so full of warmth. I liked that so much. I thought that would be a very good ... supplement in a way. And not very obvious either but still inside the atmosphere that I wanted to create.

? Really great choice. When I first heard her song *Slow Day*, I was so fascinated, I was immediately looking through the internet to find out, who this was. I'd never have heard about her without this movie.

! No. Obviously not. And that was the first song [for this movie].

She sent it to me, when we were shooting in Minneapolis. And I was just - wow!

? Linda Bukowski was also involved in the project. What did she do?

! First of all, when Jim found out that *Factotum* was available of course he had to go to Linda - she's the one who has all the rights - and ask her.

And she heard about Jim [Stark] and his producing of Jim Jarmusch-Films and she loves his films. Obviously she hadn't heard about me. So Jim sent her my first film, *Eggs* and she saw it and she just called me and she talked for hours. She loved it. So that was pure luck. And then she said: "Of course, I want you to do this film."

And from that point we had been meeting with her, drinking with her, being, visiting her. And she has been fantastic support through all the project.

And in between I made another film, *Kitchen Stories* and I invited her to the screening. And she liked what I'm doing and that was very good.

And beside it, we became very good friends, I been talking to her, writing, thousand times on the telephone. And I asked her and she was very very supportive and very afraid of interfering because she trusted us so much.

But I asked about anything. She's really ... I would say, the biggest supporter of the whole project. And she loved the film. And I was very afraid though, maybe I'm killing everything, all was cute, but maybe, because she's so close.

But she saw it and she called and she said she was so touched, that she had to leave. And she said: "It's Hank. It's just Hank you describe." She haven't seen this before, she said. The warmth and the things I tried to get, she recognized.

And even if that was not, I mean it's a fictional work, it's not biography. But I was very happy about that. I was not sure because she's too close in a way, but still she loved it very much. She still is a huge supporter on the project.

? So it was not only advice from her ...

! No. She was very afraid of pushing anything. She has been a sweetheart all the time. And I could ask her about anything and she

would explain but she was very afraid though. She has been just very very helpful, very very supportive in a very gentle way.



Matt Dillon and Marisa Tomei meet in a bar in *factotum* (photo: Pandora Film)

? Was it easy or hard to make a screenplay out of the novel?

! Like I said before, you have nothing to hook it on. It's just character-driven and it lives on situations. So I started to scan through the book and then I selected scenes and I made kinda first draft.

And then we started to pull back and forth. But of course you have to take out a lot of stuff and probably for some Bukowski-fans that's very offending. But you have to.

You can't compare: The book is written and it's fantastic, but it's not the same thing, you have to take away a lot of things for a film. But I'm actually quite proud of how we did it and I thought we got the basic things in there.

Like, I was very unsure with the scene with the mother-and-father but I thought it was so important. Maybe I didn't *need* it but I think to give a kind of understanding of him, why he did what he did; I mean you don't understand all of it, but it gives a kind of references. And I think

it's also recognizable, to have parents that are telling you way often the opposite of what you want to do. And it's so bitter. His father is so bitter. And I loved it, Matt adored that scene and it's so beautiful done.

And you know, the two couples who acted the parents, I casted them through a very good casting agent in Minneapolis ...

? They worked together before?

! They worked three times before in their whole career, they were more that 70 years old. But the main thing was that they came to me: "Do you know? We are married." So I chose the right couple without knowing. I liked that. And then I knew it will be good.

? Do you have any more anecdotes from the set?

! Yes, when we came to Minneapolis we did some scouting - and they had this strip-bars, big houses actually, with hundreds of girls, and we went in with Matt. You can go to a long kind of bar there and then you can drink alcohol. But when you go *in* to see a show, it's really odd, then you CAN'T drink. See this double-moral, well they blame it on the health rules or health law: You can smoke but you can't drink alcohol.

So you sit there ringside with the ladies doing everything, and drink water! [*laughs*] That's quite stupid! You're smoking cigars, but you have to drink water!

? That's strange. Any more things, that come to mind?

! We worked for eight years with it and what surprises me in a way - that's no anecdote, though - but what I thought all the way and I still think it and it looks like people think it, it's Bukowski always had this distance to what he did - you can't write if you don't have it - still he was just in the middle of it.

And the humour is something very special with him, which for me is part of a self-view. If you have humour, you also have a self-view. And I thought always, that that was obvious, when I read his books. I was laughing a lot. It's something good.

I don't say, I defend everything he did. He did a lot of stupid things. If I had a friend who did this and that, of course I would say: "come on, don't do it!" So it's not about that, but he, ... it was very funny, a lot of

it, and I thought that that was maybe the main-connection to the way I see life and make films. I mean I never thought I did comedies, but still, all my films are full of comic elements.

And I feel very related to him and to do it this way, you do it right through. And you don't try to make it comic. It is comic or around the corner, whatever. And I feel really related to that.

And the people couldn't see that so much when we struggled with the financing. But like I said, it's so easy to re-tell the cliché about him. It's just about boring, all the same again. But that's life in a way. And for me it's, it's ... I love him. And other people do also.

? That humour-remark reminds me of our last symposium in Andernach, when one of our members held an address on the subject 'Humour with Charles Bukowski' and it was all about this, these comic situations and how to survive through this ...



Matt Dillon giving a goodbye-hug to Lili Taylor (playing the part of Jane Cooney Baker of real-life) in one of the saddest scenes of *factotum* (photo: Pandora Film)

! ... However dark it is and however hopeless, if you can't see the humour in things, you wouldn't survive, no ways!

? Yeah, that's a very important thing. Another question: I guess you've read *Hollywood* by Bukowski. Do you find it a matching picture of the reality of film-making?

! I don't remember it that good, but I think, I can say yes. If you're talking about Hollywood, the studios and all this bullshit, it's - I think you can come up with Everything and it's true. Nothing is a lie, if you're talking about Hollywood. That's my impression.

? When you were shooting, was there alcohol prohibited on the set?

! No, it was not forbidden, but it's very hard, I think, to drink when you are shooting, so we didn't. We didn't have any rules. We didn't use it as a method or so. It was quite straight I would say.

Oh, that's another anecdote actually - about the people: We shot everything on location, with a little budget. We rented these apartments from people living like this. And of course we gave them the money but also some booze, because we had some booze. And sometimes, when we were shooting longer than we planned to, they had to get more booze and it was o.k. for them, we could shoot more. [laughs] So that was kinda cute.

And they were all around there and Matt is a very social person, so he was sitting among them and it was really just ... [knocks on the table] like it was taken out from Real Life!

? Now some personal questions: What is your favourite liquor?

! Well, as a Norwegian, I should say: What there is available! [laughs] O.k., but, ... what do I drink most as a liquor? [thinking seriously] I think, Calvados, is what I do mostly. You can really drink lots of it.

? Can you?

! You want to bet? [laughs] - No it's more Coffee and sometimes I'd add a few, but not like heavy drinking ... then it's more wine, beer and of course drinks. I drink everything.

? Do you smoke?

! Cigars. I never smoked [cigarettes] in my whole life. But I've been a cigar-smoker for about ten years. And I love it and it's really something that I enjoy. And I *can* enjoy it, because I am still not a smoker, and I don't *have* to do it in a 14 days.

I just bought a case of Cohibas, when I came here. I went off during the screening and smoked one here in a literary cafe down there.

? Oh, I know it, it's just around the corner! I was there with my friends before the screening, looking through the boxes and even just bought four of their books for only 4.50 altogether.

! Yeah. Very nice people there. I sat outside. But I didn't take coffee with Calvados, they didn't have it, I had to take coffee with Rum in it. But that was o.k. too. [laughs] So I smoked one cigar and sat there during the screening.



Matt Dillon enjoying a good cigar in *factotum* (photo: Pandora Film)

? Another personal question: What's your favourite music?

! Once again: it's hard for me to have favourites. I listen to every - not everything! but - from Classic to Pop to Jazz ... I mean, whatever. I don't have favourites.

? Now at the end - is there anything that you'd like to add about Bukowski for this interview? Anything I haven't asked?

Bent Hamer Interview

! I think, he's an important writer. I studied literature when I was younger. And to read him is for me a kind of ... he's important to report back from the American society. Mark Twain, John Fante, he's a part of that tradition.

And he's outstanding. Very often he was compared to the beat poets, but he always said, he was none of the beat poets and Linda were eager to stress that. And I think that's correct, because he stands on his own in a way.

? ... and he never liked this group-sticking that the beat poets did.

! And he's not intellectual like the beats. What does he say: "An intellectual is a man who's saying things in a difficult way. But a poet is a man who says difficult things in an easy way." and I think that summarizes it.

? This is true.

! And his poetry is really ... it's beautiful. I don't think it's discovered fully yet. He's too much connected to his novels, I think, to his prose. So I think, that will be valued much more later.

? That goes for his whole reputation as a writer, I think. The sheer quality of his work is still waiting to be really discovered.

! Yeah, and his production is huge! That's what amazes me, as an old sportsman and a drinker. To do this is amazing, that he could do ... it's very few who can do that. It impressed me a lot, how he can do it on a kind of first level.

