

Xavier Koller was born in Schwyz, Switzerland.

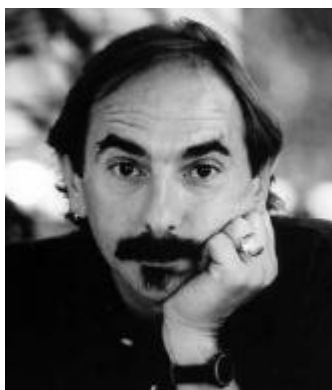
After graduating from High School, Xavier Koller first went through a four-year apprenticeship as a precision toolmaker and then, after three years of training at the Academy of Drama in Zurich, Switzerland, graduated as an actor/director. The next several years he spent acting and directing at German and Swiss theatres.

He did a number of TV-plays as an actor, directed commercials, acted in movies, and wrote and directed his first full length feature film in 1972.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- 2001** **Highway**, theme park simulator film, 70', director.  
Condor Communications
- 1999** **Gripsholm**, German-speaking period piece, director/co-writer.  
Wilkening Film/Catpics Ltd. / DOR Film  
Awards: Prix C.I.C.A.E. (Confédération des cinémas d'art et d'essai européens)
- 1998** **Ring of Fire**, feature film, director  
Neveland Films Inc.  
Award: Crystal Award, Heartland Filmfestival
- 1993** **Squanto, a Warrior's Tale**, feature, family adventure film, director  
Walt Disney Company  
Award: Award of Excellence, Film Advisory Board of the United States of America
- 1990** **Journey of Hope**, feature film, drama, writer/director/producer  
Awards: Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film 1990; Bronze Leopard International Film Festival Locarno; 1st Prize Film Festival of Nuremberg; National Award of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture; Sergio Leone Award  
Biggest grossing Swiss film of the year
- 1986** **Tanner, the Rebellion**, feature film, drama, writer/director/producer  
Awards: National Award of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture; Winner of the Karlovy-Vary Film Festival; FIPRESCI-Award Montreal Film Festival 1986; Swiss Entry for the Academy Awards 1986  
Biggest grossing Swiss film of the year

## XAVIER KOLLER



## Emotion is Motion is Emotion

Long before Xavier Koller settled in the United States to write and direct films, following his success with *Journey of Hope* (Reise der Hoffnung – Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1990), he gave me some food for thought: It's not action that moves the plot of a film, it's emotion. A film can be full of special effects and action, but if the audience doesn't feel for the characters and relate to what they are feeling, the

film will fail. Emotions create action. Emotion was and is the starting point and goal of Xavier Koller's cinematic work – always has been and probably accounts for his success, too.

Before Koller became a filmmaker he studied acting at the Academy of Drama in Zurich (1964–1967): "I realized that before an actor moves he must achieve the correct emotional truth. I had trained my body intensively and studied movement, but whatever action and move I made was empty until I got a certain picture of my emotional psyche." Later, as a film director/writer, he used this understanding when focusing on the movement of his characters and the plot of his stories.

In *The Frozen Heart* (Das gefrorene Herz – 1980) a devious tramp moves an icy corpse from one village to another, past a boundary stone buried in the snow. In *Tanner, The Rebellion* (Der schwarze Tanner – 1986) a furious mountain farmer grabs a perplexed official by the hair and pulls out a clump – an

"I moved and I essentially relished it. I enjoyed acting, with my body, and I got a certain picture of how, from what point on, one has to act in order to achieve the right form."

Xavier Koller

action that plunges him into endless difficulties with the representatives of the State and with his fellow farmers. In *Journey of Hope* a Turkish family sets off for Switzerland – and is drawn into a never-ending cycle of hope and despair. In all these cases, the primary action that propelled the plot forward was motivated, not by what they did, but by the primary emotions of the characters.

## Stories

"Whatever one writes about Xavier Koller's *Fanø Hill* will never do justice to *Fanø Hill* because *Fanø Hill* is a movie." This sort of summary repudiation of the critics was in fashion at the time. It was 1969, the year after revolutionary 1968, when the "old guard" of Swiss films had been nonchalantly consigned to the scrap heap of Swiss movie history by the film rebels. The prevailing genre – screen adaptations of literary and social and provincial comedies – was being reinvented by a rising generation: the term "New Swiss Film" was born, and the concept of "Jungfilmer" i.e.

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1982 **Citizen in the Computer – The End of Freedom?**, TV play, writer/director

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1981 **Freedom of the Press**, TV play, Co-writer/director

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1980 **The Frozen Heart**, feature film, comedy, writer/director  
Awards: National Award of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture; Winner of the Latin American Film Festival in Ecuador; Award of the City of Zurich; Movie of the Year  
Biggest grossing Swiss film of the year

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1978 **Galgensteiger**, TV movie, historical drama, director

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1977 **Homosexuality**, TV play, co-writer/director

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1976 **The Rifle King**, feature film, drama, writer/director/producer  
Awards: Quinzaine des Réalisateurs, Cannes 1973; National Award of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture

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1969 **Fanø Hill**, short feature film, writer/director/actor/producer  
Awards: National Award of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture; Award of the City of Zurich

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Young Filmmaker, became standing phrases. Both coinages were more an outgrowth of Swiss movie journalism than the indication of an identity chosen by the young filmmakers themselves.

### Xavier Koller was there from the very start

French-Swiss Alain Tanner's film *Charles Mort ou Vif?* was captivating movie buffs across Europe (and later round the world). In German Switzerland the cinematic innovators were celebrating their creations at their own festival – the newly established Solothurn Film Days.

In 1969, Koller bared his soul on celluloid for the first time: as director, cast member and producer of a short fiction film entitled *Fanø Hill*. Shot on a Danish island using the simplest possible means, it is a "Cain and Abel" story, playfully existential but devoid of theoretical pretension. *Fanø Hill* was awarded a film prize by the City of Zurich. Three years later, in 1972, Xavier Koller again traveled to an island, to shoot *Hannibal*. But this time it was Crete, or more precisely, the old leper colony of Spinalonga, where, according to a story he wrote himself, an old German doctor with a fascist past had gone into hiding. No question that, in the context of the young filmmakers at work in Switzerland in the 1970s, this is material bearing Koller's own personal stamp.

### Trilogy of success

One is tempted to call the films made by Xavier Koller at the end of the Seventies, in the Eighties and in the early Nineties the "mountain trilogy", "success trilogy" or "homeland trilogy", but in any case a trilogy. *The Frozen Heart*, *Tanner*, *the Rebellion* and *Journey of Hope* have a great deal in common: their success in the movie theaters; their use of the mountain landscape as a factor in the plot; the exact rendering of the language and mentality of local characters through the precise direction of the actors and the enormous trouble taken with the dubbing. The voices of the international cast had been replaced with the voices of dilettantes from the respective valleys to achieve the authenticity and identity for the local characters. Language is music, Koller says. Hundreds of people's voices were tested for their sound and talent to select the few who were able to deliver the quality Koller was looking for.

These three films also marked the start of his collaboration with his friend and producer Alfi Sinner, with whom Koller founded the Zurich production company Catpics for *Tanner*, *the Rebellion* in 1984. But there is undoubtedly another way of seeing it: *The Frozen Heart* and *Tanner*, *the Rebellion* are both based on stories by the Central Swiss writer Meinrad Inglin (1893–1971), whereas *Journey of Hope* was inspired by a ten-line item in a newspaper. One might also object that *The Frozen Heart* is a comedy and owes much of its success to laughter; *Tanner*, *the Rebellion*

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is a historical epic that brings a successfully repressed segment of Swiss history to the screen; and *Journey of Hope* is a topical drama with a poignant immediacy capable of gripping the general public.

Xavier Koller as an entertainer in one film, a political teacher in the second, and the warning voice of conscience in the third: and each time as different as can be. Yet, what the three films have in common is that Koller knows all the people in his stories down to the last detail – and likes them, best of all the rogues. Running the gamut from cheerful to gloomy, happy to miserable – that is what Koller's films share.

### **Auteur**

Xavier Koller is a film auteur – which is decisive to his work – with all the ramifications, positive and negative: he takes possession of every story, not sparing a Meinrad Inglin (or even a Kurt Tucholsky); and his intense, work-intensive manner of taking possession can sometimes come down to a virtual dispossession of his co-authors. The stories he shoots must first of all become his own stories. That's the way Xavier Koller works.

However different his movies are, Koller's signature with regard to story line, precise characterization, and his typical feeling for the rhythm of the plot, make *The Frozen Heart*, *Tanner*, *the Rebellion* and *Journey of Hope* into the trilogy of success that culminated in an Academy Award in 1990 – a hitherto unattained triumph for the “new Swiss Film.”

### **Forget it**

Xavier Koller took his revered “Oscar” back to where he had received it and, with his wife, Sabina, pitched his tent in Santa Monica – looking out on the Hollywood Hills – to face a new challenge. Koller started anew: thematically and geographically.

In his opinion, there is no looking back – the challenge is in the next scene. What has come before is in the past. “Forget it!”, as he always says. Looking back isn't his specialty. However, farewells are painful for those left behind, and new beginnings always rough for him.

The native of Central Switzerland remains stubbornly on the carpet, takes possession of the material offered to him, refusing to notice that, in Hollywood's multi-million-dollar circus, it can never completely belong to him. In 1994 he made a \$20-million film about Native Americans for the Walt Disney Company: *Squanto – a Warrior's Tale*. The film was an impressive re-enactment of a time when America was first discovered by Europeans and the consequences that ripped a young Native American away from his homeland. In 1999 Koller made *Ring of Fire* on a small

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Walo Deuber worked with Xavier Koller on projects for Swiss television and on *Der schwarze Tanner*. He lays claim to being the first person to demonstrate the gooeyness factor of American white bread to Xavier. That was in February 1980, at the Grand Union on West Broadway in New York. Holy smoke!

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## TRANSLATION

Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart,  
Riehen

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budget with one of the independents. The gritty story, set in the rodeo world and filmed in the country and in Las Vegas, had already been edited and was ready for launch when, shortly before the premiere, the distributor went bust, dragging the film down with it. Although still not in commercial release, the film has been extremely successful in film festivals. "Forget it," he said again. The past is the past. He moved on.

Then Xavier Koller did something he had never done before. In the year 2000, at the request of his Swiss producer Alfi Sinniger, he got involved in a project that already existed: the filming of Kurt Tucholsky's novella *Castle Gripsholm*. With his typical meticulousness, he immediately set to taking possession of the existing script, Tucholsky's light summer story and the heavyweight biography of the great writer and journalist who was persecuted by the Nazis. And with his typical consistency, film auteur Koller turned it into his own Tucholsky story for the screen: *Gripsholm* - after Tucholsky's *Castle Gripsholm*. But by now *Gripsholm* had long become above all "Tucholsky according to Koller."

### Full power

Film auteur Koller wouldn't have it any other way. That's something one has to know. But in return one gets a full-power plot, full-power emotions, and gripping stories. In *Gripsholm* emotion is everything: it drives the action of the film.

Xavier Koller himself is constantly on the move, and I suspect his favorite direction is uphill. And although he moves his audience now up, now down – the one element that constitutes the soul of his films is, as always... emotion.