

Quirk on the draw

*He's loathed in the US for his scathing portrayals – as his new movie once again shows, but Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier doesn't give a damn what most people think, writes **Yenni Kwok** in Copenhagen*



Contrary to reports – one of which had him firing: "What's your next stupid question?" at one hapless hack - Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier appears friendly and down-to-earth.

He welcomes us to his little office cabin at Zentropa Productions, the centrepiece of Filmbyen (Film Town), built on an abandoned military camp in a suburb of Copenhagen. A few hundred metres away stands a US army tank that he's rented from the Danish government to serve as a memento of what the place used to be.

There are other hints of von Trier's quirky humour. The 49-year-old director has just seen off a guest in a camouflaged golf cart. His huge office, formerly an ammunition storehouse, boasts a personal computer, a DVD player, a television, a rowing machine - and a pinball machine called Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Von Trier might be a shy fellow - he has a habit of looking away when you talk to him - but he enjoys ruffling feathers. His films have always polarised critics and audiences. Either they like his work, thinking it's powerful and original, or they hate it, damning it as pretentious and manipulative. "That's very good," he says. "It's the criteria of success for me."

His most recent work is likely to cement his reputation as one of the most disliked filmmakers in the US, a country he's never visited (he's scared of flying), but one that continues to inspire him.

Manderlay, the second of his America trilogy, which screened at the recent Pusan International Film Festival, continues the story of Grace from *Dogville* (Bryce Dallas Howard replaces Nicole Kidman, who had other commitments). This time, the heroine is on a mission to liberate black slaves in Alabama, but she becomes caught in a vicious cycle of power and submission.

Von Trier also wrote the screenplay for fellow Dogme 95 director Thomas Vinterberg's latest feature, *Dear Wendy*. (Dogme 95 is a manifesto the two drew up 10 years ago, setting out rules for directors, to eliminate what they regard as cosmetic excesses in modern movies, and to bring realism back into filmmaking). *Dear Wendy* tells the story of gun-crazed pacifists, and is set in a mythical mining town in West Virginia, but was filmed at Filmbyen.

When von Trier shot *Dancer in the Dark* six years ago, little did he know it would ignite a fixation with the US. "It was more by chance that I chose America," he says. "I just needed a place that had the death penalty."

When the film took the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000, his portrayal of the richest country in the world caused such an uproar that he decided to make more films about the US. "I always do what people tell me not to do," he says. By the time he completes *Wasington* (the misspelling is intentional), the final instalment, von Trier will have directed or written five films set in the US. In all, they take on issues that read like a list of European gripes about the country: the death penalty (*Dancer in the Dark*), exploitation (*Dogville*), racism and democracy (*Manderlay*), guns (*Dear Wendy*) and religion (*Wasington*).

Still, von Trier insists he's not anti-America and the stories he tells could easily happen elsewhere. "I just wanted to put my story in a specific place in the world, in a country with a name," he says. "For me, America is a very important place. It's the land I dreamed of when I was a kid, with cowboys and so on. Then, later, the whole political thing in Denmark was against capitalism and the Vietnam war. Also in the film industry, America is such an important factor.

"Since America is an important and influential power, I think I'm allowed to talk about it," he says. "I think you're allowed to comment or criticise somebody stronger than yourself, because criticisms keep the discussion of power alive, and that's democracy."

Wouldn't he be offended if a foreigner made a damning movie about Denmark? "Of course, it would be like somebody's saying bad things about my family," he says. "But, once I got over that feeling, it's all vanity anyway and I find the whole thing with country and nationality stupid and not so important.

"It will be artistically interesting because it's a film put together from a different perspective and so I would see what the reflection was from the outside world," he says.

As with *Dogville*, *Manderlay* is a Brechtian parable set on a theatrical stage with invisible walls, doors and buildings. Bertolt Brecht's song *Pirate Jenny* inspired the story of *Dogville*, his tune *Alabama* gives the setting for *Manderlay*.

"I like a mixture of theatre, film and literature," von Trier says. "Nowadays, films are too explicit and leave little space for the audience's imagination. It's much more fun if we can imagine things, like in a children's play."

Raised by communist parents, von Trier converted to Catholicism 10 years ago. "I was trying to fill the longing I had for something spiritual," he says. But he hasn't turned out to be a good Catholic.

"I pray, but I don't go to church. I don't even know whether I believe in God. I'm thinking of making a film that proves God doesn't exist," he says, laughing.

Why did he add the German aristocratic "von" to his name? He laughs and says it's partly a family joke: his grandfather's name was Sven Trier, which was often mistaken as being von Trier. "And I like the idea of fake nobility," he says, mentioning two Germans who adopted aristocratic names once they went to Hollywood: director Josef von Sternberg (*Blonde Venus*), and actor Erich von Stroheim (*Sunset Boulevard*).

Von Trier has often been described as a misogynist because in his films - from *Breaking the Waves* (1996) on - his saintly female protagonists go through so much misery and suffering. He readily admits to having had a difficult relationship with his mother, whom he describes as a domineering feminist. "She was a bitch," he says. "She was the main power and the centre of my family. She was very liberal in bringing up her children. I feel I lacked rule and discipline.

"When she was on her deathbed, she told me that my father was not my real father. It was a piece of information I could have used some years earlier. I'd have liked to ask the man I thought was my father some questions."

But he says he's not exacting revenge through the way he deals with women in his films. "I don't see my characters as the representation of any sex," he says. "About 98 per cent of films are done with male leads, anyway. If I'd used male leads, I wouldn't get any question about this in my films."

Von Trier has started writing the screenplay for *Wasington*, for which he plans to cast both Kidman and Howard as Grace, but he won't start filming until 2007. He planned to stage a 15-hour performance of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle* at the 2006 Bayreuth Festival in Germany, but he has cancelled it.

Meanwhile, his next project will be a light one - for a change. "It's a Danish comedy taking place in an IT company, about an actor who plays the director of the company because the director doesn't really exist," von Trier says. "It sounds like a stupid idea, but it's actually funny. Anyway, I think it's time I relaxed a bit."

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