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**BOB EDWARDS, host:** “Das Experiment” is a German movie that opens in New York tonight. It stars one of Germany’s most popular actors and was a huge hit there. It tells the story of a failed psychological experiment about the dynamics of authority and submission. It was inspired by a real event. From member station KPLU, Bellamy Pailthorp reports.

**BELLAMY PAILTHORP reporting:** “Das Experiment” is set in modern-day Germany. In the film’s opening scene, a young taxi driver sees an ad in the newspaper.

(Soundbite of “Das Experiment”)

**PAILTHORP:** It says ‘Test subjects wanted. Earn 4,000 deutsche marks for a 14-day experiment in a simulated prison.’ The film’s hero rips the ad from the newspaper. He turns out to be an ex-journalist who decides the experiment would make a good story. He becomes one of 20 recruits. They’re divided up randomly. Some are guards who are given uniforms and told to enforce the rules. The rest are inmates who are dressed in hospital gowns and told to call each other by prisoner number only. The scientists monitor the experiment on a bank of video screens. Despite a rule against violence, after three days all hell breaks loose. The guards become sadistic; the prisoners suffer emotional breakdowns and worse.

(Soundbite of “Das Experiment”)

**PAILTHORP:** The first part of the scenario is true. In 1971, researchers at Stanford University in California conducted a prison experiment that went out of control. In real life, it took six days. The experiment was stopped and no one was seriously injured.

“Das Experiment” is not based on real events, says director Oliver Hirschbiegel. It’s based on a German novel that was inspired by the Stanford study. Hirschbiegel says he was looking for a believable story that would be clearly recognizable as a German film but that also had a universal message.

**MR. OLIVER HIRSCHBIEGEL (Director, “Das Experiment”):** That you as an individual are always responsible for what you do, no matter in what situation you are, and no matter whether someone claims to be responsible for what you do or gives you orders or whatever. That I think is the basic thing that you can take from this film.

**PAILTHORP:** Despite Hirschbiegel’s insistence that his film’s message applies to everyone, it’s hard not to see it as an allegory for his country’s Nazi past. The most sadistic guard is also the most Aryan-looking. The trouble-making journalist has his head shaved, and in an echo of Germany’s ongoing struggles with his acceptance of

immigrants, he has a non-German name. But speaking after a screening at the Seattle film Festival, actor Moritz Bleibtreu told the audience that filmmakers did not set out to make a parable.

**MR. MORITZ BLEIBTREU (Actor):** I knew that, you know, doing this movie that everybody's going to ask me about that, you know, and that always I have to answer that question. But you know, on the other hand it really makes me a little bit angry because, you know, like when you grow up in Germany and—especially like people in my age, we really don't have anything to do with what happened back then and we desperately try to find a new identity for that, you know, broken country. So it's a worldwide and international problem.

**PAILTHORP:** Director Oliver Hirschbiegel did turn to World War II for inspiration. He spent hours watching the U-boat film “Das Boot” before shooting “Das Experiment.” He says he wanted to convey a sense of claustrophobia.

**MR. HIRSCHBIEGEL:** I wanted the cells, I wanted the whole set, that whole prison, to be real, that when the doors were closed no one would be able to get out, not even the crew, actually. Like when they had locked all the doors and the fences we had there, we were really trapped in that environment.

**PAILTHORP:** Sometimes for up to 15 hours a day. Hirschbiegel says this is just one of several techniques to increase intensity on the set and create believable performances. The German release of the movie also included a statement in the opening credits that the film was based on the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment. Professor Philip Zimbardo was the researcher who conducted that experiment 30 years ago. Today he's the president of the American Psychological Association. He hates the movie.

**PROFESSION PHILIP ZIMBARDO (President, American Psychological Association):** Because it distorts totally what happened in my experiment, although it claims to be based on that experiment. And what I'm saying is I've gotten hundreds of e-mails from all over the world saying ‘How could you have done such a terrible thing? How could you be so inhumane?’ And I've had to answer every one of those and say, ‘No, it was fiction.’

**PAILTHORP:** After seeing the movie at a special screening in California, Zimbardo contacted Stanford's lawyers. The film's opening statement was replaced by a standard disclaimer deeming any resemblance to real events or characters pure coincidence. Zimbardo says he now wished he had insisted instead on a more specific description of what was real and what is fantasy.

**PROFESSOR ZIMBARDO:** My bottom line is psychological research of the kind I did is very rare. None of it could be done again. I mean, there's no university, there's no funding agency, which would allow any study of this kind. Thirty years ago, the situation was different.

**PAILTHORP:** Zimbardo's account of what happened and why is posted on his Web site. He was unable to prevent the BBC from staging his experiment as a reality TV show earlier this year, but he says he's collaborated with "Dateline NBC" on a documentary about the Stanford Prison Experiment which should air early next year. Actor Moritz Bleibtreu insists there is plenty of truth in "Das Experiment."

**MR. BLEIBTREU:** The emotional part of it, hating people just because they're different, that is something that you find all over the world and the psychological mechanism in this movie, you see them in every army of the world, in every prison of the world, I think in even every major company. In certain situations, people tend to lose their spine and that, I think, is very, very important to stay with yourself and take responsibilities for your actions.

**PAILTHORP:** "Das Experiment" opens in New York tonight, Los Angeles on Friday and in other cities around the country over the next few weeks. Meanwhile, Professor Philip Zimbardo hasn't given up on the movies. He's negotiating to sell the film rights for his story but he insists he won't sign any contract unless he can get assurances that the film will better reflect what really happened 30 years ago. For NPR News, I'm Bellamy Pailthorp in Seattle.