A SCREENPLAY IN TIME

By Frank Beyer

While we were filming *Fünf Patronenhülsen* (*Five Cartridges*), Edith and Walter Gorrish were working on a screenplay called *Königskinder* (*Star-Crossed Lovers*). Following the lyrics of the old folk song, it tells the story of two lovers who do not end up together, though they are made for each other. Star-crossed lovers Magdalena and Michael, two working-class young people, have been in love with each other since early childhood in Berlin. They have also always been friends with Jürgen. After the Nazis seize power, their love is put to the test, however—a long and strenuous test. Michael, a young mason and communist who is working against the Nazis, gets sentenced to 15 years in prison. Magdalena, who has always anxiously observed his activities, takes his place. When she too gets in trouble, their former friend Jürgen, who has joined the Nazis but has not lost his conscience, tries to save her. When Michael is ordered to the Eastern Front as part of a penal battalion, he meets Jürgen again, who is stationed there as a sergeant. Michael wants to defect to the Red Army. In a dramatic showdown that twice drifts toward a tragic ending, the two childhood friends face each other in a life and death situation…

For us, this screenplay came at the right time. We had seen the new movies from the Soviet Union engendered by Nikita Khrushchev's liberalization politics, which were shown in East Germany as of 1958. *Letyat zhuravli* (*The Cranes Are Flying*, 1957, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov) and *Dom, v kotorom ya zhivu* (*The House I Live In*, 1957, dir. Lev Kulidzhanov) had a lasting impact on us; and then we watched *Ballada o soldate* (*Ballad of a Soldier*, 1959, dir. Grigoriy Chukhray), *Chistoe nebo* (*Clear Skies*, 1961, dir. Grigoriy Chukhray) and *Sudba Cheloveka* (*Fate of a Man*, 1959, dir. Sergey Bondarchuk), films which were continuing the great tradition of Soviet cinema. The era of "radio films" was over. Finally, the image in cinema had regained its rightful place, and stories were being told with the camera again, not like illustrated radio plays.

We were euphoric as we started preparations for *Star-Crossed Lovers* because we were advancing our *optisches Drehbuch* (visual screenplay) technique.[1] We had developed this method after seeing Sergei Eisenstein's brilliant drawings for his films *Ivan Grozniy* (*Ivan the Terrible*, 1944) and *¡Que viva México!* (*Da zdravstvuyet Meksiko!*, 1932) and Bertolt Brecht's "model books."[2] The visual screenplay was based on extensive photo series of outdoor filming locations that our set designer, Freddy [Alfred] Hirschmeier, had edited using a wide array of different techniques. All the films we were making at the time had the advantage that their visual narratives were set in many outdoor locations. Filming on location always brought some sort of reality into the film, no matter how much we ended up "stylizing" this reality during production. The designs for the interiors had to align with the exterior locations. With his enormous visual imagination and his concurrent obsession with naturalistic portrayal, Freddy was the perfect partner for me and my cinematographer, Günter Marczinkowsky.

---

[1] Translator's Note: Frank Beyer's set designer, Alfred Hirschmeier, developed and mastered the technique of the *optische Drehbuch*—a visual screenplay. He would break the script into single scenes and prepare detailed visual descriptions of each camera shot—with drawings or photographs or a combination of both—as well as camera angles and the length of the scene.

[2] Translator's Note: The Berliner Ensemble produced *Modellbücher*—model books—to document productions of several plays by Bertolt Brecht. They included photographs and explanatory texts by Brecht and his assistants, and were meant as guides to help spread Brecht's post-WWII ideas for how to stage what he termed Epic Theater.

While preparing for *Star-Crossed Lovers*, I made my first trip to the Soviet Union. We were scouting for two Soviet actors and a Russian town to use as a shooting location. We received a warm welcome and found an ideal location in Zagorsk, near Moscow, a town with beautiful monasteries. I was also happy with the actors that had been selected, and there were even alternate actors in case of scheduling problems. It was nevertheless unclear whether we would ever actually work together. The film administration in Moscow made collaboration dependent on their evaluation of our screenplay. We had sent the screenplay to Moscow in German and in a Russian translation, but we were still waiting for a response.

Shooting itself was strenuous, because we had many nighttime shoots at outdoor locations and because our leading actors, Annekathrin Bürger, Armin Mueller-Stahl and Ulrich Thein, were often able to arrive on location only after midnight, after their theater performances were over.

It was troubling that we still hadn't heard from our partners in Moscow. It stayed like that until we'd filmed 80% of the movie and all we were missing were the exterior scenes in the Russian town and the studio scenes with the Russian actors. Finally, we got a message from Moscow; but it wasn't the permission we'd been waiting for. Instead, the director and executive producer were summoned to the film administration in Moscow for a talk. I knew that was bad news. My executive producer, Hans Mahlich, who was familiar with the Moscow bureaucracy, decided to take one of the unit production managers with us to escort our passports from one government agency to the next, so we'd be able to return to East Germany the next day. Without taking such measures, it wasn't possible (at least for us ordinary people) to visit Moscow for only one day.

At the Soviet film administration, we were greeted by department head Igor Chekin, who was very familiar with DEFA issues, as he had worked for many years as the Soviet advisor for the studio. He had read our screenplay and praised it beyond all measure; only the scenes with the Soviet soldiers and generals, with whom our hero Michael interacts after he defects, were not to his liking. He suggested just dropping them from the film. To me, that sounded like suggesting to a theater director that he drop the role of Gretchen from his production of *Faust* five minutes before opening night. I couldn't figure out why Chekin had a problem with those scenes. Maybe he disapproved of the very idea of anyone deserting—even if it was a German communist defecting to the right side. It was obvious that the Soviets would, under no circumstance, participate in this film; so, at this point we just had to stage a friendly exit as quickly as possible. I asked Chekin if the Soviet film administration would mind if I hired Soviet actors from the Red Army ensemble that was stationed in Potsdam. He had no problem with that since the ensemble was outside of his jurisdiction. And thus, we said our goodbyes with thanks for the sound advice and the promise that we'd think everything through again. We found two actors who fit the roles, in terms of age and type, in the Red Army ensemble in Potsdam—one of them, Leonid Svetlov, a former assistant to Eisenstein, even turned out to be a real godsend—and the Russian town was constructed outdoors on the DEFA Studio lot.

During the last phase of shooting *Star-Crossed Lovers*, everyone was taken by surprise by the construction of the Berlin Wall. Shooting was halted—which had something to do with so-called combat groups. These combat groups had been founded in all state-owned enterprises after the workers' uprisings of June 17, 1953. Their mission was to defend businesses in case of an attack by the "imperialists" from the West. The only thing was that very few people actually felt like participating. The training, which took place outside of working hours, was tiresome and monotonous and, of course, nobody really believed there was any danger

of an attack. But, in accordance with the principle "Freedom is the understanding of necessity," the whole thing was pushed through from above. So a combat group was founded at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films, which was a state-owned enterprise after all. That sparked the question: In the event of an actual crisis, were the workers—lighting technicians, stagehands and tradespeople in the workshops—supposed to defend the studio with Karabiner-98 rifles (which was how they were originally armed), while dramaturgs, directors and creative staff stood on the sidelines? In the event, it was obvious that all younger directors—at least those who were party members, which was basically all of them—would have to be part of the combat groups as well.

Everyone tried their best to dodge the assignment because the trainings were really boring. It reminded me of field exercises with the *Jungvolk*.[3] From time to time, there were trainings from Friday night to Saturday morning. When one of these overnight trainings was coming up, you'd unplug your phone and stick a wash-cloth between the bell and clapper of your doorbell. On May 1, we'd be driven in trucks in full uniform to the May Day demonstration. To our surprise, the trucks would first drive twice through the town of Babelsberg. Our commander justified this based on the following psychological factor: the population was supposed to believe there were twice as many trucks as there actually were. It must have gone over the heads of those psychological warriors that everyone just went home afterwards and told their family: "Those idiots drove us around Babelsberg twice again today."

On August 13, 1961—the day "the border of the GDR was secured," as the official line went—the combat groups got called up, and this time a washcloth in the doorbell wasn't enough to get you out of it. Within a few hours, we found ourselves in a little tent camp in the woods near Teltow. We were equipped for combat, with our Karabiner-98s and 10 live rounds in our ammunition bags. Our mission was to guard the border to West Berlin at the Teltow Canal and prevent any form of "border infraction." We all knew what they meant by border infraction. Nobody was worried about an attack from the West; but they did expect GDR citizens to try and leave the country at the last second before the trap finally snapped shut. We were given clear rules of engagement: an attempted escape was to be prevented as quickly as possible, even in the area before the canal, if necessary, and enforced by using guns. What was strongly prohibited, however, was shooting towards the West; if someone reached the bank and jumped into the water, we weren't supposed to shoot. This put us in the strange position of defending the country, but against the enemy from our own hinterland, not from beyond the border. If it actually came to it, I was determined to shoot to miss. Nobody could have held that against me since I'd never shot my weapon before. In the combat group, I had never made it past disassembling and cleaning my rifle, never gotten to the shooting range.

So we spent our days and nights standing near the Teltow Canal and were happy nobody picked our little stretch of border to escape to the West. It also gave us a lot of time to think about what would become of the GDR now that, "with the construction of the antifascist rampart, a first important victory against the warmongers in the West had been won." That's how the GDR media celebrated the erection of the barbed wire fence and wall along the western border. It was the first time the concept of "antifascist" was used in an inappropriate, even perverted manner.

---

[3] Translator's Note: The *Jungvolk* were the junior group of the Hitler Youth.

I did not consider building the Wall a victory, but rather a defeat—although perhaps one we could ultimately get out of. Back then I thought that, in comparison to West Germany, we were the poorer country but had a better social order, with no unemployment, bearable social differences and equal access to education.

And what films could I have made in West Germany? There were two main genres in West German cinema in the 1950s: sentimental *Heimatfilme* and war movies that rendered the Nazi Wehrmacht socially acceptable again. Of course, there were also films like Bernhard Wicki's *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*) and films by Wolfgang Staudte or Helmut Käutner and Kurt Hoffmann that I liked, but they were the exception.

What I was completely dissatisfied with in the GDR were the media and cultural policies. They had explained to us that we are living at the seam between the two blocs, on the front line, so to speak. And on the front line, you obey. Any critique of our society just gives the class enemy ammunition. With these and other similar slogans, they blocked all attempts to have an open discourse about social problems and difficulties in the press and on radio and television.

Now we were no longer on the "front line." Instead, it was "just us," sealed off from the western world by barbed wire and the Wall. It was clear to me that a new chapter in the story of the GDR had begun.

Translated by Jan Jokisch.

We thank Karin Kiwus for her generous permission to translate and use this excerpt from Frank Beyer's autobiography *Wenn der Wind sich dreht: Meine Filme, mein Leben* (Berlin: Econ, 2001) for our DVD release.