



An Interview with Iris Gusner about *All My Girls*

From 1960 to 1967 you studied at the renowned VGIK film academy in Moscow. One of your teachers was Mikhail Romm.¹ In your book *Fantasie und Arbeit*,² which you wrote with Helke Sander, you vividly describe several experiences you had with Romm. To what extent did Romm and your studies in Moscow influence you as a filmmaker?

In the 1960s, when I studied at VGIK, an ideological “thaw” in the Soviet Union was taking place, which had been initiated by Nikita Krushchev. It was a time of upheaval and re-evaluation, a type of brief and cautious anticipation of Gorbachev’s Glasnost and Perestroika, which is still referred to as “the happy 60s” among Soviet artists and intellectuals.

This short decade of relative freedom gave Soviet filmmaking so much creative impetus that it regained international respect and won awards at the big festivals around the world—with films like *Ballad of the Soldier* by Grigory Chukhrai, *The Cranes Are Flying* by Mikhail Kalatozov, *Nine Days of One Year* by Mikhail Romm, *Ivan’s Childhood* by Andrei Tarkovsky, *The First Teacher* by Andrei Konchalovski, *Ordinary Fascism* by Mikhail Romm, to name but a few. And the creators of these films were our teachers or had studied at VGIK before us. We had living role models!

We students who studied during this “window of time” had the opportunity to critically confront both contemporary themes and the traditional forms and expressive vehicles of film. Of course, all students in all eras have the urge to change the world and put everything “old” into question; but the climate of this period in Moscow and at that school was propitious for such questioning, and our training sent us into our professional lives with, in addition to a solid mastery of craftsmanship, the energy and the courage to get involved and take a position.

At that time, I felt everything was possible... Even though it turned out to be a delusion later on, I have never lost this energy or courage.

VGIK was an international school. So many nations, both belonging to and outside of the Soviet Union, studied, lived and worked in that tight space together! The “exoticism” of their personalities and backgrounds, their stories and the story of their countries, their expectations for the future expanded our horizons and our understanding of the world. I consider this the second greatest gift “for my whole life” that the Moscow film academy gave me.

Were Italian neorealist films, or those of the French *Nouvelle Vague* also available to you? If so, do you see your films in the tradition of these periods of film history?

The influence of Italian neo-realism on my generation was very strong because we ourselves had the need to tell real-life stories that reflected our own experiences, about people we knew, and all as realistically as possible. So: out of the studio and the artificial world, out into natural interiors and onto the streets.... Had there been no Italian neo-realism, it would have nevertheless emerged in some other place. It was not imitation; rather, it met a general need of our time, as did the *Nouvelle Vague*, which continued in the same direction.

What influence did Czech and Polish films have on you?

I always liked Polish cinema, especially because it was thematically and politically more courageous than ours in the GDR. But it was not transferable. My concrete connection to it was established through its actors; in three of my films, Polish actors play the lead. They brought their somewhat different approach and vibes into the German acting ensemble and thus expanded and enriched the small world of my films.

Unfortunately, the Czech films mostly passed me by—either because I had no opportunity to see them, or because they didn't speak to me. After the suppression of the Prague Spring of 1968, the best Czech directors left for the West or stayed home and had to make even more conventional films than we did in the GDR.

You joined the DEFA Feature Film Studio in the early 1970s. When you had your debut at the studio with your film *Die Taube auf dem Dach* (*The Dove on the Roof*, 1973/2010),³ you were one of very few female directors. How was the atmosphere in the studio with respect to female colleagues and, especially, female directors?

Back then I was so convinced of my equal rights as a woman—and thus as a director—that I never gave it a thought. And DEFA management always treated me fairly and equitably, as did my colleagues. The differences that my position as a woman did entail—namely, the double burden of career and childrearing, housekeeping and other smaller issues—these differences and inequalities I only grasped much later.

You also wrote the scenario and script for your first films, *The Dove on the Roof* and *Einer muss die Leiche sein* (*Someone Must Be the Corpse*). Later on others wrote your scenarios, then you did it again. How did this changing “division of labor” play out in terms of the creation of the films?

Not much, because I adapted the two scenarios that were offered to me—*Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*) and *Im Gegenlicht* (*In Back Light*), which I later re-named *Alle meine Mädchen* (*All My Girls*). If this had not been possible—if I hadn't been able to relate to the themes, or if the author had not allowed my intervention into his or her text—I would not have made these two movies.

After my first film, *The Dove on the Roof*, was banned, my second film was cancelled a month before shooting began. The studio management then asked me to make the fairy-tale film *The Blue Light*—in other words, something absolutely “unthreatening”—to show that I was good at my job. In the meantime, rumors were circulating that I was incapable of making a film, something that people liked to believe about novice directors, especially a woman novice. For this reason, I agreed.

The characters in the scenario fulfilled the usual clichés: the king was rich and cruel, the princess sophisticated, vain and arrogant; they lived in an amazing palace, repressed the poor and ate off golden plates.... I was of the opinion that children do not yet live in a world stratified by class, but rather in a single, whole world, where the “good” people are those who are friendly and the “bad” people are those who are not.

Thus, my king is not especially rich. He lives in a sort of big manor, where things are rural and earthy, loud and chaotic. He is not cruel, but rather a crass man who angers easily. The princess is not sophisticated and vain, but rather a brat—a child reared by anti-authoritarians—who is allowed to do everything children want to do: splash their hands in their soup, kick the babysitter, suck their thumbs.... And I got it right: children adored the princess (played by the young Katharina Thalbach) and, because many children knew angry fathers and adults, the king too resembled their experience—because for children rage is “evil,” because it's frightening. So the young viewers could have some fun, I wrote the figure of the robber with the stolen cannon into the story and

more things like that. And I tried throughout to tell the story in a simple manner with a twinkle in the eye.

This is an example of what I mean when I talk about adapting material written by someone else. I think that's how directors work, more or less, who do not simply see themselves as executives.

Most of your films have a female protagonist at their core, all very different women with different social backgrounds. Your characters are depicted with a great deal of feeling and detail. Where did your inspiration for these figures come from?

Basically I could build on my own observations and experiences as a woman. Through my profession, I came together with people of different social classes, including at the studio: the DEFA Feature Film Studio had 2,000 full-time employees! The artistic professions—directors, cinematographers, film editors, set and costume designers, make-up artists, authors and editors (which we called dramaturgs), musicians in the studio orchestra, etc.—only made up a small percentage of the total. In addition, there was every other imaginable profession: various department heads, economists, engineers and technical personnel, such as lighting technicians, painters, stucco workers, carpenters—all the way to the sewing department and the chauffeurs for the studio's fleet of automobiles....

Above all, we had very clever producers, location and props managers, who, in the context of the socialist economy of scarcity, were trained to procure everything we didn't have and organize even the impossible . . . discreetly skirting various laws, if necessary. With respect to this there are the most adventurous stories, from which you could learn a lot about how our society functioned. I always admired these guys; all our films owe them a lot!

We had our own film laboratory, our own ambulance with nurses and doctors (both male and female), our own kindergarten, a supermarket, cafeteria and restaurant, a small print shop attached to the studio-owned academy that, along with the studio newspaper, published interesting articles on film history and analyses for employees. For example, I translated a lot of „liberal“ things for them from Russian, which no one else would have published. If we had had some farmland and domesticated animals, the DEFA Feature Film Studio would have been more or less autonomous.

This is all to say that even in the studio I met many women with widely varied professions and social backgrounds.

In addition, the different social classes were much closer together in East Germany than today. This came out of the socialist system: there were no very rich, and no very poor people. Private ownership of land or means of production was low; most people lived more or less at the same level, under the same conditions, among the same pieces of furniture and driving the same cars. As a result, there was little social envy or competition and a great mutual willingness to offer help.

It depended on what you had studied, what you could do, and based on that, what positions you had and your relationships. That determined our position in society. Relationships—that so-called Vitamin C, for connections—were very important, especially connections that could alleviate the prevalent scarcity in any given domain. Because with your money you often could not buy what you needed when you needed it. The GDR—like all socialist countries—evolved increasingly into a barter society: offer and counter-offer. For example: „I'll trade you a heater for a trip to Crimea.“ The builder with access to building materials and the mechanic with

access to automobile parts were more precious than gold and were courted. As a result, you'd meet craftspeople and their wives—people who were „sources”—at parties thrown by professors, doctors and artists.

These „relationships of necessity“ that linked people with entirely different professions and interests often led to friendships and gave people—including me—insight into different walks of life I would never otherwise have had. In my last years in East Germany I had, for example, „my“ window washer, who came every three months. To get a skilled worker privately was not easy in socialism, because they were all employed full-time in state-owned concerns. What did I offer my window washer, seeing that money was irrelevant? Well, he always had problems with his wife. After he had washed all my windows and I had paid him, we sat down with a cup of coffee and he told me everything that had been going on, including in his marriage; and I gave him the best advice I could. Basically, these were therapy sessions. For him it was important to be able to talk things through on a regular basis. This concrete example gives an idea of the multitude of ways in which such exchanges functioned in the GDR, of how each of us got a glimpse into and were connected to all levels of society.

Before beginning to write about a given theme, I also conducted extensive research. For *Kaskade rückwärts (Bailing Out)*, for example, my co-author Roland Kästner and I conducted many interviews with single men and women. In the movie, our protagonist is searching for a new partner. We interviewed men and women from very different social classes—from doctors to cleaning women—about their former relationships, their ideas about love and happiness, and their attempts to find a new partner. The two of us went dancing and observed what went on in the dance halls and bars. I even placed a personal ad to see how it works. It all resulted in very interesting material! Some of it appears not only latently, but also concretely in the film.

I also interviewed young people about their aspirations and, for my film *Ich liebe Dich – April! April! (I Love You – Just Kidding!)*, about having fathers who were at home or absent.

All of these sources enriched my films.

Could you please say something about the preparations for *All My Girls*? How did the film come about? Did you suggest the idea or was there already a script or scenario?

DEFA General Director Hans-Dieter Mäde showed me this scenario by Gabriele Kotte with the rough title, *Im Gegenlicht (In Back Light)*. He thought that this interesting brigade of women “would be something for me.” The material had been hanging around the studio for a long time, because apparently no director wanted to work on it.

The state was interested in films that played in industrial or agricultural production contexts. They were not especially appealing to either directors or audiences, because they were often full of clichés: the politically insightful and therefore good worker, versus the worker with no political insight, who learns and in the end helps increase productivity in socialist industry. . . .

So I took up Gabriele Kotte's scenario somewhat hesitantly. But once I had read it, I was determined to shoot it. I had found my theme immediately in the material. Between high school and film school I spent a year working on the assembly line in a women's brigade at a wood-processing factory in Leipzig. I had the same struggles as the brigade in the this script: that the only thing that helps people to protect their 'humanity,' their human worth

in the face of such stupid, alienating work as an assembly line—the same motion day in and day out!—is good, straightforward communication within the brigade. Solidarity with one another means that you don't feel like a tiny, replaceable cog in a huge wheel, but rather like you have individual worth and keep your own face; and this solidarity also makes it possible to stand up against bosses.

That was all in the script. And because I could immediately "see" the women through the dialogues, which captured them well, I told Hans-Dieter Mäde that I would make the film if I were allowed to update and adapt the material. Mäde gave me permission, as did Gabriele. I think she was happy that her scenario would finally get filmed and she handed over the scenario for my deletions, expansions and small changes. To deepen and widen the theme I wrote new scenes; for example, where one instructor from the film academy lets his colleague know that he knows that she drinks at home alone in the evenings—the theme of loneliness. I also re-wrote the last scene, etc. And one morning, when I heard the song "All my little ducklings swim upon the lake" on the children's radio program, I finally found my title: *All My Girls*.

Why did you choose the NARVA light bulb factory? And how did the collaboration with the factory workers work out?

The story of the film plays out in a light bulb factory, and there was only one in the GDR, namely, the NARVA factory, a huge complex in Berlin. Here is where they produced everything used to illumine East Germany, from regular light bulbs to special bulbs.

The women workers at the factory were friendly and eager to help. Before we started shooting, I had my actresses spend a week working on the line with them. I wanted them to learn the procedures, the hand motions, as well as the behavior of the workers, the way they deal with one another. So the young women spent a week before shooting really working at the factory.

In the factory halls it was very hot and very loud because of the machines. The women were therefore dressed lightly, always spoke loudly, smoked a lot, were stressed and easily irritated because of the noise and heat. All this we transferred straight from reality into the film. Apparently we caught the social tenor of the place so well that foreign colleagues—for example, the Russian director Alexander Mitta—were of the opinion that the young women were not actresses at all, but rather very talented workers that I had somehow "found." But no, all the actors and actresses were professionals who worked at theaters and were, in some cases, also known through films. The forewoman, Lissy Tempelhof, was a star of not only the Deutsches Theater, but also DEFA films.

Some articles mention that Jürgen Böttcher's documentary *Stars* (1963), which was also shot at NARVA, had an influence on your film. Is that the case?

I did not know this film. I saw it for the first time in an arthouse cinema in Bonn in November 2004, where it was shown with *All My Girls*.

How did you find the cast for your film?

I built on the characters that were in the script. I also made sure that the young women were different from one another in terms of temperament and looks, so that the audience would have no trouble recognizing each of them within the group and not have to wonder: which one was she again?

The group is very compact in *All My Girls*. The young women almost always appear together, so the plot offered few moments in which to show their lives outside of the group and work. For the group scenes I therefore worked with the actresses to develop as many small, individual details as possible to characterize each of them—and, ultimately, to make each of them into an unmistakable person for the viewer. In this respect, Gabriele Kotte's script was a wonderful starting point; her dialogues were socially spot-on and psychologically varied and communicated to us a malleable, concrete idea of each individual woman.

An added piece of good luck was that the actresses and "their film student" got along very well together! While we were shooting the film, there was no bickering or vanity and no intrigues. On the contrary: every day we were in a good mood and happy to get together again.

In *All My Girls* there are six women in front of the camera, including women of different generations. Marie, the forewoman of the brigade, belongs to the wartime generation, whereas the young members of the brigade must have been born around 1960. So Marie represents a generation that eventually matured with the GDR and the young women a generation born into it. It is also something of a mother-daughter constellation. Was that a conscious choice or chance?

That was determined by the story—so neither planned, nor chance.

The film-in-a-film constellation is fascinating in *All My Girls*. Could you say something about what inspired that? And also, how "realistic" are the documentary scenes?

This too was basically a given, based on the script. I liked it and I used and expanded it very consciously, because it lent some distance to and/or emphasized the events taking place. Naturally my protagonist, actor Andrzej Piezciński, did not shoot the scenes, but rather the cameraman Günter Haubold. And I staged them, like the whole film.

The director in your film is a man, which helps create the tension and conflicts within the film. But to what extent did you project your own experiences as a director onto this figure?

There was nothing to project. Maybe I am represented by the attitude that is given voice in the film: "You must do your own thing. Yours!" That's the attitude that the film student and young women try to establish in the film. But that doesn't differentiate male from female directors; you either have it or you don't.

I read in a 2003 interview with Gabriele Kotte, the scriptwriter for your film, that the film was originally to be shot in black-and-white. Could you please say something about the change in color concept?

I already mentioned that Gabriele's script had lain around the studio for a long time. As we went into production in the winter of 1978-79, DEFA had long been shooting all its films in color—except in cases in which one wanted to achieve a particular artistic effect through black-and-white.

My cameraman Günter Haubold and I studied the scenic and optical potentials of the NARVA factory in great depth. After all, the bulk of the film takes place in one hall, on the assembly line. It was a real challenge for us, because our audience had been fed so many monochrome images of factories and industrial life that they were sick of it. Not again!

But here is where bulbs—that is light—was produced . . . and Günter Haubold creatively inserted the glass and light into scenes so as to create beautiful and effective images. They were the result of our long observation of all work processes in the hall in which we were shooting. These images would not have been possible in black-and-white; the film would have lost a lot of its visual excitement and the women a lot of their sensuous effect: their fresh young faces, the color of their eyes. . . . They already had to spend all their time in the same boring smocks!

The author and dramaturg thought that we had “improved on” reality by filming in color, that everything looked a lot better than it really was. They were dissatisfied with the film. But we did not see it as our assignment to make a sad document about conditions in the factory, but rather a film that was as interesting as possible, including visually. In addition, the young women in the script were vital and in love with life. For me, they were “in color” and produced that particular light that brought clarity and color into all our lives—which in no way prevented us from shooting our film! Why should they, of all people, be shown in gray-on-gray? I’m sure that if it had been so, the film would have lost a lot of its charm and popular success.

Günter Haubold was your cameraman for *All My Girls*, and later you also shot *Wäre die Erde nicht rund (Were the Earth Not Round)* together. . . .

In the DEFA Feature Film Studio we had only good and very good cameramen, and I am not the only director who has a lot to thank these cameramen for! I always felt my cameraman was my most important and thus closest partner in the realization of a film. A director is dependent on no co-worker as much as on his or her cameraman. I would have been in trouble without Günter Haubold’s eye for visual opportunities, even where gray tones dominate, like at NARVA.

You worked with the dramaturg Tamara Trampe on two of your most important movies: *All My Girls* and *Were the Earth Not Round*, which is semi-autobiographical. Where did the ideas for these films come from and how was the collaboration? Did Tamara Trampe, as a female dramaturg, have occasion to bring in other aspects than a male dramaturg would have?

Long before I was offered Gabriele Kotte’s script, Tamara Trampe had been assigned to the film as dramaturg. So when I took the film on, I automatically got Tamara as well. In this case, there was no choice. But I liked working with her on *Girls*. She is a very intelligent and creative dramaturg; that’s why I went to her with my next project, *Were the Earth Not Round*, and was pleased when she agreed to work on it.

Tamara was part of the “Berlin” group at the studio, so the material automatically belonged to that group as well, which meant that the group was determined by the choice of dramaturg.

The DEFA Studio was divided into working groups or teams. . . . *All My Girls* came out of the “Berlin” group. But you also made films in other working groups. Who chose the group and how was it done? What influence did the working groups have within the DEFA studio?

As I said: When a director proposed a script or idea, he or she then turned to a dramaturg of his or her choice; if the dramaturg accepted, the film belonged to the working group to which the dramaturg belonged.

The material, the script took shape within a working group; the dramaturgs associated with the group worked with the author, already in conversation with the director who had shown interest in working with them. The

dramaturg and the group to which he or she belonged then guided the realization of the film until it was approved by the state. In other words, they too were responsible for the film and, from the start, they took care that it contained nothing technical or political that had no hope of making it through the approval process.

So, on the one hand, the working groups were the “birthplace” of our films; on the other hand, they served as an ideological filter. Because the ideological requirements changed constantly, however, it could happen that a film that seemed fine today, failed tomorrow—i.e., that it ran into ideological problems. So, by no means did all the material that was developed make it to production. In such cases, the dramaturgs allied themselves with the directors and the working group fought for its material as well as it could.

In the same period as *All My Girls*, there appeared other films on contemporary subjects with women in the central role—for example, *Ein April hat 30 Tage (April Has Thirty Days)*, *Solo Sunny*, *Seitensprung (Escapade)* and *Glück im Hinterhaus (Backhouse Bliss)*.⁴ Were different directors in contact with one another? Did one know about other people’s projects within the studio?

Unless they happen to be friends, directors seldom talk with one another in any depth about their projects. That’s what they talk about with their authors, dramaturgs and their future film team. Because each director is focused on his or her project and style, another director is seldom helpful in this domain.

At the same time, we all worked together in one studio and naturally knew who was making what. And we saw our colleagues’ films before they opened in theaters at the big approval screenings, to which all members of the studio were invited.

Your film premiered in April 1980 and is now over thirty years old. Given the distance represented by these three decades, is there anything more you’d like to say about the film?

I think back very fondly on the work on this film—and on all my girls and boys!

This written interview was conducted in summer 2012 by Hiltrud Schulz, DEFA Film Library at UMass Amherst.

¹ Mikhail Romm (1901-1971) was a Soviet director of internationally known films, including *Ordinary Fascism* (1965), *Nine Days of One Year* (1962), *Girl No. 217* (1945) and *Lenin in 1918* (1939). He also taught at VGIK (S.A. Gerasimov All-Russian University of Cinematography) and influenced many renowned filmmakers, including Andrei Tarkovsky, Nikita Mikhalkov, Elem Klimov and Gleb Panfilov.

² Gusner, Iris and Helke Sander. *Fantasie und Arbeit: Biografische Zwiesprache (Fantasy and Work: A Biographical Dialog)*. Berlin: Schüren, 2009.

³ This film was banned and then lost; re-found and screened in 1990 and then lost again; then finally re-found, digitized and released in Germany in 2010 and in the U.S.A. in 2011.

⁴ *Ein April hat 30 Tage (April Has Thirty Days)*, dir. Gunther Scholz, 1978; *Solo Sunny* (dirs. Konrad Wolf und Wolfgang Kohlhaase, 1979); *Seitensprung (Escapade)*, dir. Evelyn Schmidt, 1979; *Glück im Hinterhaus (Backhouse Bliss)*, dir. Herrmann Zschoche, 1979