



# An Interview with the Director Kurt Barthel

*This interview with Kurt Barthel (1931-2014) was conducted by Ralf Schenk in April 2005 and was originally published in German by the DEFA-Stiftung in Informationsblatt zu Fräulein Schmetterling in 2021.*

**Ralf Schenk: Where did the idea for *Miss Butterfly* come from?**

**Kurt Barthel:** In 1963-64, I was an assistant to director Konrad Wolf and was involved in writing the script for his film *Der geteilte Himmel* (*Divided Heaven*). During this time, I met Christa Wolf. After the production ended, we began looking around for a topic for my own debut film. Christa Wolf had an idea for a story about adolescents making their way into society, whose dreams and hopes often clashed with the established rituals of adults, leading to frustration on both sides. Woe be to those who are different! She based this idea on her two daughters' experiences while growing up.<sup>1</sup> Conversations with the girls always revolved around daily life. In keeping with their ages, they would ask about the meaning of life, explore society and look for ways to explain what they experienced in school or kindergarten. The older sister took a kind of pedagogical role in this endeavor. Many aspects of this made their way into *Miss Butterfly*.

I liked the idea of having my protagonist be an adolescent trying to find her own place in society—unafraid to do her own thing and, in the process, diverge from socially sanctioned paths, able to expose contradictions without falling apart. In the film, *Miss Butterfly* doesn't want to be a fishmonger or a bus conductor; she wants to be a clown. In this context, I especially appreciated being able to tell a story that didn't just take place on a realistic level but also transcended reality. Christa Wolf led the scriptwriting effort.

***In 1961, you finished your education at the Deutsche Filmhochschule (German Film Academy) in Potsdam-Babelsberg and started working for the DEFA Studio for Feature Films. Had it always been your dream to shoot poetic films with a tendency towards legend and fairy tale?***

No. Back then, I wanted to adapt something by Lion Feuchtwanger or Heinrich Mann. I wanted to direct films that told about the dawning and fall of societies through the lens of personal stories. I was fascinated by Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi Fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960) and Fellini's *Otto e mezzo* (*8½*, 1963). Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) was too photorealistic for me. But my favorite was his *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1951).

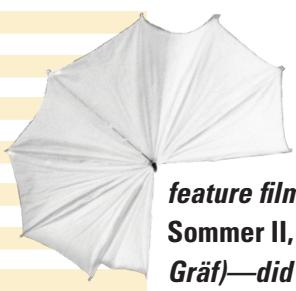
***Miss Butterfly indeed displays this fascination. You too blended dream and reality and added documentary observations.***

The foundational thought was to intertwine reality and dream. At the same time, the girls escape into entirely different dreams: Helene is dreaming of a better society, while Asta is having naïve dreams about witches and magic rings. The impetus for using documentary scenes arose when we were scouting locations. We could see how alive East Berlin was, how it was constantly changing and becoming a city again. The East Berlin motifs were supposed to bring the "flying" Helene in relation to East Berliners going about their daily lives.

***Such a combination of genres was highly unusual for a DEFA film back then. The genre of the documentary***

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Christa Wolf's two daughters were born in 1952 and 1956.



**feature film—which was established there in the late-1960s through films like *Dr. med. Sommer II* (*Dr. Sommer II*, 1969, dir. Lothar Warneke, 1969) and *Mein lieber Robinson* (*My Dear Robinson*, 1970, dir. Roland Gräf)—did not yet exist. How did the studio react to the script?**

Positively. I think Klaus Wischnewski—at the time the chief dramaturg, who later became the head of our Heinrich Greif Artistic Production Group—played a major part in this. With his fantastic analytic abilities, I assume he convinced some skeptics that such a blended form could work.

***DEFA nevertheless declared *Miss Butterfly* to be a sort of experiment. It had a budget of only a little over 900,000 East German Marks, and there was a provision for removing this funding should the experiment go wrong.***

I wasn't entirely aware of that. But the thought arose early on that this film was being shot for arthouse cinemas. Back then, I didn't mind that. Today, I find the idea of intentionally producing a film for an audience of cinephiles to be absurd.

No objections were raised outside the team while we shot the film. My mentor, Konrad Wolf, stopped by the studio a few times, but he felt my need to stand on my own two feet, after having worked as an assistant director so often, and didn't get involved. Maybe that was wrong, because I had a problem I could have discussed with him from the very start. The problem had to do with the characterization and casting of the title character. Our *Miss Butterfly* was too old. We should have cast someone around 15- or at most 16-years-old—that was the age and mentality the script was written for. On the first day of shooting with Melania Jakubisková, I realized: My god, she's a mature woman.

With the budget weighing heavily on me, I couldn't muster the courage to tell the production group leaders that I had made a mistake, that we had to start the casting process over. The shoot had already been postponed due to our problems with casting.

***The daily logs show that you filmed a lot of screen tests, including with Yvi Cant—also known as Eva Kant—the daughter of the Belgian director Frans Buyens...***

Yes, especially for the title role we tried out a lot of young women. Our dream was Jutta Hoffmann; she was already engaged for a film by Herrmann Zschoche, however, and couldn't take the part. Today I know that Jutta Hoffmann would also have been too old for the role of *Miss Butterfly*.

***Did no one other than you and the team's inner circle see the screen tests?***

Other people saw them too, of course, but the problem didn't stand out for anyone. It must be said that the Heinrich Greif Group, which I had joined in 1961, was also a highly democratic team. We spoke often and freely. Today I see that, given how things were back then, I'd landed in a really ideal group.

But coming back to the dilemma I faced: With younger actresses, the main conflict of the film would not have worked because, legally, Helene had to be 18 to rent an apartment, become her sister's legal guardian and become independent...



### ***How did you find Melania Jakubisková?***

She was recommended to us by Milan Sládek, who plays the mime in the film and was running a pantomime studio in Bratislava. During the early stages of working on the script, we were still unsure if his character should be a mime or a clown; we could imagine a very delicate and friendly clown with a white face, like Charlie Rivel. Later this character became a mime. This decision was definitely influenced by my adoration of the French mime Marcel Marceau, who had often performed in East Berlin and whom I came to know as a larger-than-life artist. With our budget, we probably wouldn't have been able to hire Marceau; we didn't even try. A colleague told us about Milan Sládek after a trip to Bratislava. We arranged a meeting. Herbert Ehler who was originally going to be the associate producer and I, drove to Slovakia. We were fascinated by what Sládek was doing and became big fans.

***You finished shooting the film in early December 1965. The 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the SED Central Committee took place just a few days later. When you heard about the plenum and the pointed attacks on artists and especially DEFA, did you suspect that Miss Butterfly would also soon be under investigation?***

No, I shared the same naïveté as Frank Beyer with his *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*, 1966/90). After all, I never thought of *Miss Butterfly* as a film against socialism. Our aim was merely to show that people in this country could be a bit nicer to each other, and that we should consider what people actually need and not force them into societal templates. If you like, it was an ode to the individual.

That's why, at first, we didn't have the slightest inkling of the danger looming. Then we had some closed screenings at the studio, from which some people suddenly emerged with very, very serious faces. So, just to play it safe, we decided to rework the film and cut certain things that it had become fashionable to criticize. To take the sting out of the film a bit, we added a voice over to tie the different levels of the story together and to both ironize and mitigate Helene's dreams and ideas. Christa Wolf wrote the voice-over text literally overnight, a bit before Christmas 1965. I remember that Manfred Krug, whom we had hired to read the voice over, had already packed his bags for his Christmas vacation. With him and his [Swiss] Nagra tape recorder—a rarity in the GDR—we moved into the top floor of the Berlin artists' club Die Möwe.

So we were fairly confident going into the New Year's break. But in early January 1966, when we screened the film with the finished voice over, people said we had made matters worse. With Krug's ironic tone of voice, the film now truly appeared subversive. Then the Ministry of Culture's newly founded Film Advisory Board met to discuss the film, and it was all over for us.

***What charges were made against Miss Butterfly?***

They accused us of prioritizing old East Berlin, with its streets full of junk, over the newly thriving socialist capital. That the girls would choose to stay in their old apartment, instead of moving into the new apartment they are offered on Karl Marx Allee, was met with complete incomprehension. They accused our dialog of advocating for an apolitical life and "Being nice to each other." This last, which echoed the "Seid nett zueinander" campaign of the conservative West German Springer press, they accused of being removed from struggle between the systems.

Ultimately, the ban of the film had to do with Christa Wolf's speech during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum, however. When a female comrade dared to contradict party leadership so confidently, she had to be punished.



***That could be, but I suspect that the ban was also triggered by the dream sequences. Helene finds happiness and fulfillment only in her dreams and never in reality. She takes flight only in her dreams, while reality always knocks her down.***

It was really naïve of us. Life is gray; you must fight and, if necessary, dream yourself out of reality—that clearly did not comply with the ideology of the time. Instead, the SED party demanded that we conquer reality, always have a plan, tackle life headfirst and push on to victory. That was the ideal. By the way, did you notice that Helene never wears the blue shirt of the Freie Deutsche Jugend youth organization and Asta never wears the blue neckerchief of the Junge Pioniere?

Maybe we did make our film too removed from the desired portrayal of reality. On the other hand, although we did portray the GDR's dark sides, we showed even more of its bright sides. The documentary scenes, in particular, are very cheerful and animated.

***Miss Butterfly clearly shows that people lived, they didn't just suffer in the GDR.***

And Helene is portrayed as an outlier, someone for whom it was a struggle to adapt.

***Another charge was that the authorities were depicted as too rigid, as in the case of Frau Fertig, the woman from Youth Welfare Services.***

Yes, even though she is a caring person and many of the things she says are true. In one of the synchronizations, we changed her name from "Fertig"<sup>2</sup> to "Fenske"—thereby removing the rigidity that her name implied—but that didn't matter anymore. I think the only way to explain all the charges is by imagining the panic in which the party leadership must have been at the time.

At the Film Advisory Board, founded in early 1966 by the Ministry of Culture, I got a glimpse into what a tribunal must be like. The board saw itself as an instrument of the party, founded to analyze the philosophical principles of the forbidden films and to uncover ideological commonalities among them... for how else could so many filmmakers have strayed from the "good path"? To me, those meetings felt like the inquisition. I still remember the room. It was like a small auditorium. We—that is, Gerhard and Christa Wolf and I—sat at the very bottom, on the stage; and in the ever-ascending rows of seats sat our inquisitors. They were as if enthroned high above us, as they accused us of dabbling in existentialist philosophy and of spreading a strange, if not exactly hostile worldview among the population. Of course, we had had no intention of making an existentialist film; back then, I wasn't even really sure what that was...

The outcome of that meeting was that *Miss Butterfly* was blacklisted, and Christa and Gerhard Wolf and I parted ways. That's just how such tribunals end, or maybe that's how they are supposed to end. Every one of us wanted to save our own hide. Even though they phrased it carefully, the Wolfs said: If Barthel hadn't directed the film in such a melancholic manner, then this might not have happened. They had imagined the film lighter and more cheerful. I responded by saying that I had only filmed what was written in the script. Both parties emphasized that they never intended to produce an anti-GDR film. Which was the truth, after all.

***They approved the scenes in the Exquisit shop—the expensive fashion boutique on Karl Marx Allee?***

Not really. The "censors" considered these an affront against socialist community. After all, we were depicting that, even in the GDR, there were two worlds: the one in which people had the money to shop

<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: "Fertig" means "done" or "exhausted" in English.



in luxury stores, and the one where they could only press their noses up against the display windows and dream. The crowds of people outside the stores were living in an environment still shaped by post-war deprivations and here they were confronted with this luxury boutique. That's what we recorded with our hidden cameras—not in the style of today's entertainment reality shows, but because we wanted to capture people's fully authentic reactions.

***After the tribunal, was it immediately clear that the film would not make it to the public?***

Yes, absolutely. There was no hint of the slightest chance of salvaging the film in any form. They acted like we'd poisoned someone. At the DEFA Studio, too, no one dared touch the film again.

***The DEFA leadership intentionally sacrificed certain films, among them Miss Butterfly and Zschoche's Carla, to save other films that were more important to them—like Frank Beyer's Trace of Stones and Gerhard Klein's Berlin Around the Corner.***

Which also didn't work. The DEFA leadership team also changed quickly. In 1966, Jochen Mückenberger, DEFA's managing director, and Klaus Wischnewski, the head of the Heinrich Greif Artistic Production Group, were laid off, and the group—this alleged cradle of revisionism—was disbanded.

***Did other directors stand with you in solidarity?***

The colleagues who were affected by the banning of twelve films weren't banding together under the flag of the righteous. The bans were announced from December 1965 to August 1966—and each time, everyone was just happy when it didn't affect them.

***What did you think of the open letter that Kurt Maetzig sent to Walter Ulbricht in January 1966, in which he distanced himself from his film The Rabbit Is Me, which had come under heavy attack during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum?***

Back then, I thought that was terrible. Today I think that Maetzig did the only right thing. He allowed the party to say: See, our artists are back in line again. Maetzig's intention was for his open letter to help get DEFA out of the crosshairs a bit.

***Did you have difficulties remaining at the studio?***

I had problems with my new projects. They canceled an East- and West-German ghost story that I was working on with the author C. U. Wiesner—even though it was in keeping with the party line, a kind of socialist comedy. I then had no real project until dramaturg Inge Wüste offered to write me a scenario about the anti-Nazi underground focusing on a young boy, *Nacht im Grenzwald* (1968, *The Night in the Border Forest*). They couldn't find a director for it, so they asked me to direct it. But it was just a job. I did it without enthusiasm; solid handiwork, but nothing more. Wiesner later asked me if I'd like to direct a science-fiction film he'd written, but *Signale – Ein Weltraumabenteuer* (1970, *Signals: A Space Adventure*) was given to Gottfried Kolditz to direct. The project probably wouldn't have fulfilled me either.

To keep busy and not just slip away, I agreed to organize two or three major events for the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*. After that Albert Wilkening, the director of DEFA, told me I had to work as an assistant director again. I didn't want to do that. Since I'd liked science journalism in earlier years, as of 1970, I worked as an author and director at the DEFA Studio for Short Films in Potsdam-Babelsberg. I directed a great many documentaries and



popular science films there, continuing long after 1990. And, with the years, I grew less and less jealous of my colleagues in feature film.

***Did you ever consider directing another feature film?***

Not at all, at first—especially not under GDR conditions. Later, I did, but I grew increasingly afraid that I wouldn't know how to work with actors anymore.

***In 1989-90, the Film and Television Association of the GDR established a commission to deal with films that had been banned in East Germany. Miss Butterfly was on the list. Why did you decline to finish it?***

It wasn't quite like that. At first, the screening of our last cut from 1966 gave me a lot of courage. Some colleagues in the commission, especially its head, Rolf Richter, told me they were impressed by how well *Miss Butterfly* captured East Berlin in the 1960s. So I thought we should give it another go. Gerhard Wolf, who co-wrote the script with his wife and attended the meeting with me, was against it, and I was in favor.

I spent days going through the footage on a flatbed editing table and finally came to the conclusion that, aside from some film historians, the general public would not know how to approach the film. In 1990, we would have had to add a whole different level to explain what our intentions had been in 1965. I gave up. In a letter to Richter, I wrote: We cannot assume that the ideas and zeitgeist of the GDR in the early 1960s can be conveyed to contemporary audiences. I don't think that [...] anyone would be interested in what we were trying to do back then, what sources our aesthetic building blocks or our hopes for the rebirth of East German cinema came from, or what allusions would have been meaningful to cineastes at the time.

An additional important argument was my work at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films, which had become much more important to me than the restoration of my debut. I didn't want to leave the documentary studio for several weeks at such a socially important time, when everything was changing.

*Translated by Jan Jokisch.*