

Attempting Entertainment: The DEFA Musical

By Evan Torner

Educating the East German populace was the mandate of the state-owned DEFA (Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft) Studio for Feature Films, but entertainment and delight were essential in attracting cinema audiences. In the 1960s and 1970s, musicals proved one such entertainment vehicle. Talented singers and dancers of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) were intended to convey optimism about everyday life under socialism, all for the consumption of film viewers throughout the Eastern Bloc. In retrospect, DEFA musicals secured the careers of numerous East German stars: Manfred Krug, Christel Bodenstein, Frank Schöbel and Chris Doerk, among others. These films, in all their frivolity, provided serious jobs to hundreds of studio workers who ensured high-quality production values from script to screen. They also made great profits: *Der Kahn der fröhlichen Leute* (*The Barge of the Happy People*, 1949, dir. Hans Heinrich) sold 4 million tickets, *Meine Frau macht Musik* (*My Wife Loves to Sing*, 1958, dir. Hans Heinrich) sold over 6 million, and *Heißer Sommer* (*Hot Summer*, 1967, dir. Joachim Hasler) sold 3.5 million. Socialist culture industries were rarely displeased when their products sold well, same as under capitalism.

But could such a seemingly reactionary genre as the musical be, well, *revolutionary*? After all, under the Third Reich, the dominant film genre was none other than the musical comedy.¹ That was not an entertain-

¹ See: Rentschler, Eric. *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife*. Harvard UP, 1996; Weinstein, Valerie. *Antisemitism in Film Comedy in Nazi Germany*. Indiana UP, 2019.

ment model that the GDR wanted to follow. Similarly, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) musicals starring the likes of Gene Kelly and Judy Garland stood at the center of Hollywood and capitalism, which were considered antitheses of East Germany. West German film production from the 1950s through the mid-1960s had no issue in producing musical *Heimatfilme* and trivial musical comedies. But the escapism and kitsch of the genre were not easily co-opted into the sober rationalism of everyday socialism, in which, as Andrea Rinke points out, “the ideological function of cinema [...] was to help create the ‘new socialist human being’ in a different and better Germany.”² Nevertheless, East German filmmakers displayed great ingenuity in solving all the related problems of the musical, all issues of capitalism and socialism aside. What follows here is some documentation of how DEFA lived within these contradictions, focusing ever on the balance between political standing and commercial power, between production quality and social impact, between the problematic past of the film musical and its envisioned future under socialism.

“The DEFA cannot follow the tradition of spectacular films such as *Broadway Melody* etc.” wrote dramaturg Christel Gräf during her development of the musical comedy *Geliebte weiße Maus* (*Beloved White Mouse*, 1964, dir. Gottfried Kolditz). “[Glamour], glass, mirrors, fountains, and feather boas are out.”³ When it came to East German musicals, however, it remained an open question of what, in fact, was *in*. What was a socialist musical supposed to look like? In hindsight, the assemblage of DEFA musicals is a motley affair, with titles bound much more to popular desires and global entertainment trends than direct whims of the GDR cultural industry. This can be generalized as a maxim: Even under authoritarian regimes, international entertainment trends steer media creation more than state mandates. As Rinke argues, “The GDR film authorities realized that they had to compromise by meeting the people’s desire for light-hearted entertainment if they wanted to compete with and counteract the attraction of Western cinema.”⁴ By the technical definition of “musical,” the DEFA corpus includes operettas, back-stage films, summer revues, and even a sports musical. Dana Ranga’s popular documentary *East Side Story* (Germany, 1997) directly connects this movie-making tradition with that of the Soviet Union, especially the films by Grigory Aleksandrov *Vesyolye rebyata* (*Jolly Fellows*, 1934) and *Volga-Volga* (1938). But that neat categorization of “socialist musical” does not truly encapsulate the ongoing GDR cultural identity crisis expressed in DEFA musicals between 1958 and 1972, their primary historical period of production.

Under consideration in this musical era of “cultural identity crisis” are 10 films. *My Wife Loves to Sing* is a backstage musical about a woman gaining confidence in her own singing abilities. GDR society and her husband conspire to suppress her, until they themselves hear the beauty of her vocal performance. Günter Reisch’s *Maibowle* (*The Punch Bowl*, 1959) and *Silvesterpunsch* (*New Year’s Eve Punch*, 1960) are a pair of musical comedies that first ask how the community & family of a chemical-plant manager come together – despite all obstacles – to celebrate his birthday and then ask how different chemical-plant factions come together to organize an ice revue. *Auf der Sonnenseite* (*On the Sunny Side*, 1961, dir. Ralf Kirsten) introduced Manfred Krug as the easygoing, jazz-singing steel smelter pursuing both his dramatic career and the love of his life. Another Krug film, *Revue um Mitternacht* (*Midnight Revue*, 1962, dir. Gottfried Kolditz), is a self-reflexive thought-experiment feature about a team of creatives who are kidnapped and forced to ideate the new socialist musical. *Beloved White Mouse* is perhaps an example of such a musical, a cheery

² Rinke, Andrea. “Film Musicals in the GDR.” *Film’s Musical Moments*. Edinburgh UP, 2006, pp. 183-194, here 184.

³ Gräf, Christel. “Neukonzeption des Schlagerfilms Einmal mit Musik, Exposé einer Neufassung unter dem Arbeitstitel ‘Geliebte weiße Maus’.” BAArch, DR 117/9768.

⁴ Rinke. “Film Musicals,” 185.

comedy about an everyday socialist traffic cop in Dresden. This would be the last DEFA musical starring an older actor (Rolf Herricht); from the mid-1960s onward, DEFA musicals would primarily focus on their own country's youth. To be more precise, all the later musicals would feature at least one young actor in particular, a pop star named Frank Schöbel. Schöbel debuted in *Reise ins Ehebett* (*Journey into the Nuptial Bed*, 1966, dir. Joachim Hasler), a film about a cheeky sailor caught up in the machinations of his captain and several women on board. *Hochzeitsnacht im Regen* (*Wedding Night in the Rain*, 1967, dir. Horst Seemann) saw Schöbel's biker protagonist Freddy pursuing Gabi (Traudl Kulikowsky), who aspired to become a horse jockey. The film's simple plotline permitted the DEFA Studio to focus their energies on improving their technical capacities for musicals. This arguably led to DEFA's best-known musical, the seaside vacation hit *Hot Summer*, starring Schöbel and his then-sweetheart, fellow pop singer Chris Doerk. The pair would reprise their presence in the starring roles of *Nicht schummeln, Liebling!* (*Don't Cheat, Darling!*, 1972, dir. Joachim Hasler), playing two rival soccer captains who come closer as they face off in a sports-based battle of the sexes. The transition from stuffy theater and opera in the 1950s to youth-oriented pop culture in the 1970s becomes quite noticeable when we take this simple long view. But a few titles merit a closer look nevertheless, especially if we are concerned with what these musicals mean, in retrospect.

Wedding Night in the Rain (1967, dir. Horst Seemann)

Equality of women in the workforce was one of the key socialist accomplishments to be celebrated in the DEFA musical.⁵ Catering to an anticipated majority-women audience, almost all such musicals since *My Wife Wants to Sing* foreground GDR gender relations in a positive light. This is also the case for *Wedding Night in the Rain*, which was Schöbel's second musical, although he was by no means the leading star. The lead was played by Traudl Kulikowsky, director Horst Seemann's then-spouse who had already distinguished herself in films such as *Das Lied vom Trompeter* (*The Trumpeter's Song*, 1964, dir. Konrad Petzold) and *Egon und das achte Weltwunder* (*Egon and the Eighth Wonder of the World*, 1964, dir. Christian Steinke, TV). She plays Gabi, an ambitious, pig-tailed blond hairdresser who dreams of riding a white horse on a beach. She wants to be, more specifically, a professional horse jockey, and much of the plotline centers on this goal. After all, shouldn't the GDR be a country where someone from either sex can aspire to work in any profession whatsoever?

The plot twist is, however, related to a well-known structural issue in the GDR: the general lack of housing in urban areas. Gabi moves to Berlin and quickly realizes the only way she'll be able to live there and work at the horse track at Hoppegarten would be to marry someone who already has a Berlin apartment. Enter Schöbel's character, Freddy. He drives a motorcycle, wants to remain independent, and supposedly has a Berlin apartment. Of course, it later turns out that he lives in Jena, and has been camping out by a nearby lake. Gabi nevertheless advances her career in horse-racing, and Freddy eventually decides to sell his prized motorcycle so Gabi can further her ambitions. For a film with thoroughly 1950s vibes and song riffs, he's the greaser in the leather jacket with a heart of gold. Schöbel's enchanting blue eyes do a lot to subtly undermine his "tough guy" image, and it's no surprise that much of this musical is spent in close-up on Freddy or Gabi.

⁵ Rinke, Andrea. "Singing and Dancing for Socialism." *Film History* 18.1 (2006), pp. 73-87, here 75.

The titular song “A Wedding Night in the Rain” is sung during a moment far from any Berlin apartment, because Freddy hasn’t got one. Atmospheric environmental close-ups show rain falling everywhere before we find Freddy singing in a half-tent on the lakeshore. An abrupt cut shows us Gabi in a medium close-up on her side, continuing the song and restlessly awake. A few cuts later lead us to a bizarre fantasy space in which both Freddy and Gabi twirl in the rain as they sing, Gabi’s long red scarf dominating the shot. There is cross-cutting between the rainy fantasy, and the rainy reality: Freddy is out in an ineffective half-tent and Gabi is in a slightly warmer full tent. “A wedding night in the Rain,” they sing, “and that brings no blessings to the children.” The sequence means them both recognizing the mutual challenges of their current situation, and that maybe love will be the way to overcome it. The sequence ends with Gabi inviting Freddy into her tent and calling him a coward when he doesn’t initially accept the invitation.

The mid-1960s genre productions, especially the DEFA Westerns such as *Die Söhne der großen Bärin* (*Sons of Great Bear*, 1965, dir. Josef Mach) and adventure films like *Mir nach, Canaillen!* (*Follow Me, Rascals!*, 1964, dir. Ralf Kirsten) all shared extensive horse sequences. Directors such as Gottfried Kolditz explicitly wanted to improve the DEFA Studio’s capacity to handle horses, because then a whole host of entertainment film genres would open up to the studio. *Wedding Night in the Rain* is clearly also a “horse film,” which meant that on-set production woes with horses were a given. Actor Peter Reusse recalls, for example, a distressing shoot for *Wedding Night in the Rain* when his horse wandered away with him. Then there was a conversation scene intended to be filmed with two jockeys on horses that wound up, instead, requiring long-time production manager Horst Dau to carry Reusse on his shoulders, simulating a horse’s movements, because all the real horses wouldn’t cooperate.⁶

The identity crisis at the center of *Wedding Night in the Rain* revolves around whether or not the GDR was a place in which one could get the housing and employment one wanted. Although there is no direct critique of East Germany in this light-entertainment film, key plot points would have resonated with audiences facing a similar lack of options. It is better to stand in a downpour with a loved one, than alone. Perhaps more dizzying, however, is the innocence of this feature film compared with Traudl Kulikowsky’s later collaboration with the Stasi in the 1970s and early 1980s, spying on much of Prenzlauer Berg’s arts and intelligentsia community on behalf of the government. The relatively lukewarm reception of the film, in any case, meant that Kulikowsky was out and Chris Doerk, Schöbel’s fellow singer and romantic partner, was *in*.

Hot Summer (1967, dir. Joachim Hasler)

Wedding Night in the Rain had barely hit theaters when the DEFA film artistic group Johannisthal, in particular *Journey into the Nuptial Bed* director Joachim Hasler, had initiated the next Schöbel musical production. From the beginning, Hasler made explicit how important having a catchy soundtrack was: “It is well known that the emotions that music conveys are much stronger than a thousand words.”⁷ This meant a shift away from the 1950s crooner love songs and toward boisterous, big band numbers that would celebrate life and youth in the late 1960s. The script “Heißer Sand” (“Hot Sand”) by DEFA musical veterans

⁶ Zeitzeugengespräch: Peter Reusse: Erinnerungen an ‘Hochzeitsnacht im Regen.’ DEFA-Stiftung. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UlhTacYMeI0> Accessed 23 January 2025.

⁷ Hasler, as quoted in Raddatz, Helmut. “Finale für Heißer Sommer.” *Nationalzeitung Berlin*. November 18, 1967.

Hasler and Maurycy Janowski, who took these trends into account, would become the most famous and popular East German musical, *Hot Summer*.

One summer, as the movie tells it, a group of eleven carefree girls from Leipzig run into a group of ten annoying boys from Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz), and it turns out they are both vacationing on the Baltic Sea. Stupsi (Doerk), the leader of the girls, and Kai (Schöbel), the leader of the boys, are both angry that the other group is there at the same seaside accommodations, leading to the song "That Cannot Be True" ("Das darf nicht wahr sein"). Gradually, they begin to warm up to each other, with song-and-dance numbers shot in warm ORWO-color stock casting the Isle of Rügen as attractive summer vacation spot. A mild love triangle leads Kai to fight another boy Wolf (Hanns-Michael Schmidt) over the girl Brit (Regine Albrecht) before their own socialist compassion for each other prevents disaster. Stupsi and Kai become a couple. The film enshrines youthful innocence, foolishness, and, above all, ersatz summer vacation memories.

Hot Summer sold over 3 million tickets throughout the Eastern Bloc and was considered a breakout success, even if it is viewed in retrospect as a class-A example of socialist kitsch. It debuted June 1968, one of the most politically charged months in generations. The Prague Spring was unfolding in Czechoslovakia before Soviet tanks would squash it in August. Ralph Abernathy in the United States was leading the Poor People's Campaign in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and Robert Kennedy had himself just been assassinated. Student protesters poured into the streets of Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Belgrade and Bonn. This was a time of promise and turmoil for many. In the midst of it all, however, an escapist beach musical may have been just the right fare for Eastern Bloc audiences.

Critics were not convinced of this film's relevance or greatness, however. Film journalist Friedrich Salow complained that, while it was a "commendable project" for DEFA to continue to develop its capacity for studio musicals, the belief that a "musical doesn't need anything special for its storyline" meant that the film simply explores a "banal love triangle."⁸ Jutta Voigt asked why this "hot" summer came across "lukewarm:" "Was it the dialog? The directing? Choreography? Acting capabilities of the cast? Dramaturgy?"⁹ The impression across many reviews were of cultural observers wanting to enjoy the film but stumbled on the thin plot and lack of meaningful characters.

Thus, *Hot Summer* became a "tribute to ... mild socialism"¹⁰ that conceals perhaps more about its historical moment than it ever reveals. The paradox here is that a film about young people in the late 1960s expressed absolute cluelessness about global youth culture at that crucial juncture. New Hollywood with *The Graduate* (1967, dir. Mike Nichols) and *Easy Rider* (1969, dir. Dennis Hopper) had meanwhile hit the cynical nerve of the era; even *Oliver!* (1968, dir. Carol Reed) and *Funny Girl* (1968, dir. William Wyler) seemed to take class struggle, the GDR's *raison d'être*, more seriously than *Hot Summer*, a deliberately depoliticized and kitschy romp. But audiences at the time could consume it as discardable fluff, like Karel Gott's Eurovision performance that year. In hindsight, Doerk and Schöbel's celebrity images benefited greatly from the film, as a darling young musical couple who could smile well for the cameras. They would receive a kind of "sequel" several years later, as a reward.

⁸ Salow, Friedrich. "Junger Sommer." *Film Spiegel* 14. 1968.

⁹ Voigt, Jutta. "Versuch mit leichter Hand." *Sonntag*. Berlin. August 18, 1968.

¹⁰ Torner, Evan. "1968 Leftist Utopianism in The Young Girls of Rochefort and Hot Summer." *Popular Music and the Moving Image in Eastern Europe*. Bloomsbury UK, 2018, pp. 25-43, here 35.

Don't Cheat, Darling! (1972, dir. Joachim Hasler)

It is always surreal to embark on a viewing of *Don't Cheat, Darling!*. Shot in the old city of Quedlinburg, re-named Sonnetal, this film begins not with a musical number, but with the city waking to the backfire of a defunct bus belonging to the boys' soccer team. This vehicle represents the town's paradox: the soccer team is Sonnetal's pride and joy, but there's no money for them. "Soccer is our destiny!" the mayor (Karel Fiala) proudly proclaims, much to the chagrin of the city's cultural minister Eduard Gross (Rolf Herricht), who knows the enormous costs underlying sports funding. Dr. Barbara Schwalbe (Dorit Gäbler), a newly arrived school administrator, has yet another demand: if the mayor wants to spend big on boys soccer, then he will also need to invest in girls soccer as well. This leads to the founding of the girls' soccer team, which proceeds to trounce the boys'. The captains of the two teams Brigitte (Doerk) and Bernd (Schöbel) fall in love, just as Schwalbe and the mayor do too. And when the mayor finally accedes to Schwalbe's demands, so too does Schwalbe help with the beautification of Sonnetal, including new lighting for its streets. This musical about everyday socialism, much like *Beloved White Mouse* and *Hot Summer*, depicts the GDR as a humble-yet-plucky country filled with citizens who mean well, but who suffer from usual sorts of money troubles and have their tongue firmly planted in their cheeks. The result is a bewildering mess that prompted critic Manfred Haedler to describe its brown-dominant color hues as "nightmarish" and to confess he left "crying from his cinema seat and slinking off into the beer cellar."¹¹

Don't Cheat, Darling! premiered in summer 1973 as a double feature with the DEFA Western *Apachen* (*Apaches*, 1973, dir. Gottfried Kolditz) at the famous *Sommerfilmtage* (Summer Film Days) in the GDR. Families would show up at an open-air theater and lay out picnic blankets to then watch two back-to-back light-entertainment films as everyone ate and drank through the night. In the case of *Don't Cheat, Darling!*, its main attraction for such audiences would have been the music. The film offers a dozen new songs, some of which, such as "If We Want To," embrace the funkier sound later found in disco. On the one hand, Doerk and Schöbel are still in peak form, at least as far as their singing and dancing is concerned. The soccer musical has a brilliant pop-music soundtrack, built from successful collaboration between Gerd Natschinski, Gerhard Siebholz, and Schöbel himself. On the other hand, as Manfred Beckmann commented in a *Filmspiegel* review, "when the singers only have to 'act,' then the film drags from scene to scene as the viewer wishes for the next song title."¹² Indeed, much of *Don't Cheat, Darling!* teases us with musical numbers, young love intrigue, and soccer, only to spend most of the film's duration grappling with the romantic situation between the mayor and Schwalbe, a ponderous cat-and-mouse game that weighs a film about athletic and musical *performance* down with mere *acting*.

The GDR identity crisis at the center of the film concerns *tradition*. Clearly, the moribund town of Sonnetal needs to embrace new ways of thinking and acting, whether they come from the global women's rights movement, from soccer, from young people singing and dancing, or from hard-won prosperity. But none of it seems to make a difference; the town's prospects haven't changed very much by the end of the film, just as the myriad Friedrichstadtpalast dancers cannot enliven the dreary backdrops behind them. A splash of color and the removal of much of the plot would have done this film wonders, but it nevertheless showcases the DEFA musical enterprise under Hasler, Janowski, Natschinski, Siebholz, Doerk, and Schöbel before the team would be broken up entirely.

¹¹ Haedler, Manfred. "Mit Musik und schnellen Pferden." *Der Morgen*. Berlin. July 1, 1973.

¹² Beckmann, Manfred. "Nicht schummeln, Liebling!" *Film Spiegel* 16. 1973.

The Final Number

By the mid-1970s, it became apparent that if MGM-style musicals weren't doing well for Hollywood anymore, then their socialist counterparts in the GDR certainly couldn't stand a chance with their own audiences either. The DEFA Studio for Feature Films successors to these musicals were "Musikfilme," or regular feature films with long rock-song interludes. 1973 brought the Puhdys's music to millions of GDR citizens in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, dir. Heiner Carow) and launched the Klaus Renft Combo to prominence with their songs for *Für die Liebe noch zu mager* (*Too Young for Love*, 1973, dir. Bernhard Stephan). Scruffy rock bands trumped the full Friedrichstadtpalast dance lines and tie clad Babelsberg film orchestra and were far more affordable. The grandiose film musical turned out to be a mid-20th century phenomenon, expressive of a long-standing relationship between full-service film studios and a quarter century of post-war prosperity. When both studio structures and those financial good times began to crumble in the 1970s, it made sense to turn to the popular music of the times rather than try to force compositions through new musical productions. That was where the youth could be found, in any case. A Stephen Sondheim or Andrew Lloyd Webber-style revitalization of musical theater in the West was nowhere to be seen in the East.

Nevertheless, musical comedies still found their way into DEFA's production schedule. *Orpheus in der Unterwelt* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*, 1973, dir. Horst Bonnet) is a gorgeous, 70mm homage to Jacques Offenbach's 1858 operetta. While not a film about everyday socialism, *Orpheus* still relies on the everyday studio talents built up at DEFA from the musical's era. Konrad Wolf's *Solo Sunny* (1979) is about a stubborn, aging singer named Sunny (Renate Krößner) who is determined to make it in a rough GDR cultural environment. Music in Wolf's film is, of course, all part of Sunny's diegetic performance, rather than a fantasy element. Another "late" musical is Dean Reed's *Sing, Cowboy, Sing* (1981), a "singing Western" based on the eponymous American 1937 Tex Ritter movie of the same title. Frequently received as a movie that is so bad, it's good, *Sing, Cowboy, Sing* relies on the audience's foreknowledge of Western tropes and leans hard on Reed's own singing talents to get them through tepid acting and a tired plotline.

Socialist musicals used light entertainment to educate the youth and celebrate the future of socialism. Yet during the key period (1958-1972) of its existence, the crisis of what that might look and sound like took center stage, with no real resolution of any kind. *My Wife Wants to Sing*, *The Punch Bowl* series, *Midnight Revue*, *Beloved White Mouse*, and the Schöbel films all formally experiment with the transformation of ordinary GDR citizens into singing, dancing stars. The characters are sometimes concerned with the embarrassing nature of that transformation (*My Wife Wants to Sing*, *Midnight Revue*), and other times un-self-consciously singing and dancing in the streets of Dresden and Leipzig (*Beloved White Mouse*, *Hot Summer*). In the case of the former, we sit with the awkwardness of a society founded on an unambiguous concept of "work" embracing forms of "play" that don't come easy to it. The final "everyday street" review number of *Midnight Revue* is a good example of this: inventing the "future" of socialist musicals as one muddles along in the present, exalting traffic signals and citizens commuting to their jobs. In the case of the un-self-conscious films, however, these productions easily fall into a western notion of "socialist propaganda" that belies the fact that these films were made to *distract* ordinary GDR citizens from the drudgery of everyday life, same as in the west. This parallel musical-film reality never replaced actual reality; audiences could consume the superficial, carefree Schöbel films *precisely* because they were neither too difficult nor meditative. Musicals meant socialists embracing their own socialist kitsch. What Rinke calls

the “weak plot and trite dialogue”¹³ of these films can be considered a feature, not a bug. They simply do not demand much from us.

Dismissing the GDR musicals as frivolous or propagandistic denies how much frivolity and propaganda exist in all popular culture. From their production documents through their reception, for example, the DEFA musicals are described with the German adjective “heiter,” meaning “cheery,” “bright,” or “hilarious.” Their intention is to fix their audience’s attention for but a fleeting moment and let their cares melt away, only to later say, as per the title of Schöbel’s 2021 pop-single album release: “I’m back!” (“Ich bin wieder da!”). Even 50 years after these musicals ended their production at the DEFA Studio, we still have the pleasure of re-watching, remembering, and (perhaps) discarding them anew. Let the “heiter” in!

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Recommended citation format:

Torner, Evan. “Attempting Entertainment: The DEFA Musical.” DEFA Film Library at UMass Amherst, 2025, URL. Accessed date.

¹³ Rinke, “Singing and Dancing,” 86.