

# CHOICES AND DESTINY

By Peter Rollberg

Frank Beyer's *Königskinder* (*Star-Crossed Lovers*, 1962) belongs to arguably the noblest category of East German cinema: the antifascist film. These pictures had a significance far greater than that of regular historical movies. Their overarching message was considered vital for a peaceful German future.

Beginning with Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*, 1946), the first German post-World War II movie, the DEFA Studio for Feature Films released antifascist films on a regular basis, with the intention of helping Germans come to terms with their catastrophic past and enabling them to draw conclusions needed to build a society that would be immune to the temptations of National Socialism. Wolfgang Staudte, Kurt Maetzig, Erich Engel and other filmmakers had witnessed the Nazi years as adults; they made films to which the members of their own generation in both East and West Germany could relate. The much younger Frank Beyer continued this tradition. Born in 1932, he and his generation had witnessed the twelve Nazi years as children and youths. *Star-Crossed Lovers* was made at a time when the antifascist genre had developed certain invariable features, such as the central presence of an active communist as the most consequent fighter against Nazi terror. This perspective was rooted in the history of the German Democratic Republic, whose communist leaders and most prominent cultural representatives had been active in the resistance against the Nazi dictatorship. Beyer, who became a filmmaker in the 1950s, embraced the ethical foundation at the center of the East German antifascist film but also attempted to explore new ground, not so much thematically as aesthetically.

Walter Gorrish (1909-81), co-author of the screenplay for *Star-Crossed Lovers*, had also written the screenplay for Beyer's previous film, *Fünf Patronenhülsen* (*Five Cartridges*, 1960), which also belonged to genre of antifascist film. *Five Cartridges* became a sensational success: an action-filled heroic drama about members of the International Brigades that supported the Spanish Republic in its fight against the Franco regime in 1936-39. As a young communist, Gorrish had participated in the Spanish Civil War, an experience that became the basis for several of his literary works. And while the plot of his next film, *Star-Crossed Lovers*, may at first glance seem somewhat constructed, it, too, was based on Gorrish's own life. He was extradited to Nazi Germany, imprisoned for several years and then drafted into a penal battalion of the Wehrmacht. In 1944, on the Crimean Peninsula, Gorrish defected to the Red Army. Thus, *Star-Crossed Lovers* portrays real life, just like *Five Cartridges*, albeit a life that was experienced by only a minority—the few hundred Germans who were members of the International Brigades in Spain and the few thousands who switched sides in World War II.

The two title characters of *Star-Crossed Lovers* are active antifascists, in other words, atypical of millions of regular Germans. But this was exactly the point of the film, its purpose. Gorrish's narratives, whether dealing with the Civil War in Spain or resistance in Nazi Germany and the Wehrmacht, were not primarily intended to be typical stories, recognized by East German mass audiences as their own, but rather as teachable moments, representing the 1930s-40s in a manner that was the only correct and permissible one from the official East German point of view. Not only did Gorrish's story conform to the communist master narrative, with the German Democratic Republic as the legitimate heir to a limited, yet proud antifascist legacy—it also

gave the young generation of East Germans a chance to identify with a positive legacy, rather than with the more common experiences of millions of active or passive participants in the Nazi catastrophe. Stories such as Gorrish's were of fundamental importance for the education of East Germans.

Gorrish and Beyer's *Star-Crossed Lovers* shares the antifascist foundation of *Five Cartridges*, but it is worlds apart from the earlier film in regard to plot and atmosphere. On the surface, the story of Magdalena and Michael, the star-crossed lovers (literally, the "royal children" who cannot come together), is a melodrama. Its title and plot were inspired by the beautiful, bittersweet German folksong "There Once Were Two Royal Children," which is sung by Leipzig's famous St. Thomas Choir in the film's opening. The melodramatic plot is blended with a didactic tale about political and ethical choices: morally righteous ones, such as Michael's and Magdalena's, and wrong ones, such as Jürgen's. Blending a love story with a political narrative was a common feature of East German antifascist films; in *Star-Crossed Lovers*, this blend may come across today as overly transparent in its intention to generate human interest. Still, it is the combination of melodrama and political lesson that gives the film its romantic flair and allows viewers to identify with situations that most of them have never experienced.

True, the political alternatives that Beyer's film features are schematic. Michael embodies the courageous communist whose spirit can be broken by neither economic pressure, nor terror, nor prison. His convictions are so deep that they even override personal loyalties. Magdalena, too, has little doubt about which the right side is. The only conflicted character is Jürgen, Michael's friend and competitor for Magdalena's heart. But at the end, even he is persuaded by Michael's example and joins him in defecting to the Red Army, reversing his role in a war that he recognizes as lost, if not criminal. For an active SA-member to realize his errors so radically and to make an equally radical decision so quickly may seem overly convenient. Indeed, few indications signal the inner developments and insights that lead Jürgen to his final step, except that he witnesses the Wehrmacht's military defeat and inhumane practices. The film leaves basic motivational questions unanswered. What counts is Jürgen's ultimate choice, his joining the right side—thus he is saved, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. Herein lies the true happy ending of the film. Implicitly, in the context of the early-1960s, Jürgen is ready to join Michael and Magdalena in building a better society. In the context of the Berlin Wall that had been erected a year before the film's release, this was meant to signify the moral superiority of East Germany as the self-proclaimed sole, legitimate heir to the antifascist tradition.

As mentioned before, *Star-Crossed Lovers* and Beyer's previous film, *Five Cartridges*, have little in common, except one aspect: the spirit of internationalism. In *Five Cartridges*, the main characters come from Russia, France, Poland, Spain and Germany, which accurately reflects the nature of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. In *Star-Crossed Lovers*, the internationalist approach focuses on German-Soviet and, more narrowly, German-Russian relations. This was a vital yet touchy subject for East Germany. From the day of its founding to the last day of its existence, the GDR, although a de jure independent state, lived with the permanent presence of half a million Soviet troops spread throughout the country in closely guarded garrisons. As a member of the Soviet-led alliance, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) followed Soviet (USSR) policies to the letter, often more dutifully than other Warsaw Pact states, such as Poland or Hungary. Russian language was an obligatory subject for all children and youths, and Russian and Soviet literature was an essential part of the curriculum. "Learning from the Soviet Union means learning to win," was the official slogan that reflected the mentor status of the USSR for the GDR in all spheres.

The challenge for East German artists loyal to the communist cause was to present this alliance as a

quasi-natural outcome of historical developments. In *Star-Crossed Lovers*, German-Soviet and German-Russian relations are shown in a surprisingly smooth manner. Michael and Magdalena make their choice in favor of the Soviet Union without the slightest hesitation—which, in Marxist terms, is clearly an outcome of their firm class consciousness—and their Russian counterparts embrace them wholeheartedly. Gorrish and Beyer wanted to demonstrate that entering an alliance with the archenemy of Nazi Germany was not only not treasonous, but the only ethically justified choice. The representation of Russians in uniform is, therefore, of enormous significance.

The theme of Soviet-German friendship, one of the pillars of East German education and everyday propaganda, was promoted relentlessly and on many levels. But in everyday practice, it often turned out to be more difficult than official slogans would have East Germans believe; indeed, sometimes it was an unrequited love altogether. As Beyer tells in his memoirs, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht* [*When the Wind Turns*, 2004], Soviet authorities were deeply distrustful of East German advances while he was asking for official support for *Star-Crossed Lovers*. Ultimately, the communist allies refused to endorse the project, even after months of inspecting the screenplay. According to Beyer, the Russian side never explicitly stated the reasons for their skepticism. But their disturbing refusal to cooperate with the DEFA Studio on an utterly pro-Soviet project almost derailed the entire production. Finally, Beyer got permission to cast members of the Music and Dance Ensemble of the Soviet Military stationed in Potsdam, who saved the film and delivered passable performances, including a charming guitar solo. But what this part of the production history reveals is that the plain and pure internationalism of films such as *Star-Crossed Lovers* was largely based on wishful thinking. One can assume that for Soviet authorities in the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Ministry of Culture, barely fifteen years after the end of a devastating war, East Germans were as much part of the defeated enemy nation as West Germans, official declarations to the contrary notwithstanding.

Beyer was also on his own when he tried his utmost to believably portray a positive Soviet alternative; not surprisingly, he ended up with a simplified, even simplistic depiction of Russian-German relations. It took several more years before Konrad Wolf—who grew up and studied in the Soviet Union and was the son of Jewish communist émigré playwright and doctor Friedrich Wolf—was able to bring his own, more complex experience as a Red Army lieutenant to the screen. Only then were the deep wounds left by the war in the Soviet consciousness laid bare, and the painful underside of “German-Soviet friendship” made obvious. Wolf’s *Ich war neunzehn* (*I Was Nineteen*, 1967) shed light on aspects of World War II that *Star-Crossed Lovers* would not—or could not, because its concept of “the good Soviet” and “good Russian” had to be free of serious contradictions and frictions.

The title *Star-Crossed Lovers* conveys an openly romantic spirit. In 1962, the choice of such a title—one that was inspired by an old German folksong—was a significant gesture in itself. While, on one hand, Magdalena and Michael are socially marked as members of the working class, they are, on the other, also rooted in the depths of German culture. This twofold association was typical of the GDR’s pre-1971, Walter Ulbricht era, when national culture was presented as a legitimate framework that did not necessarily contradict but complemented the the Marxist class approach. The film’s attempted synthesis of the political and the mythological, although not entirely successful, provides its love story with a poetic dimension and legitimizes a number of motifs, such as the fountain with the statues of the royal children, the frightening stairs, the lonely lantern and the poplar alley. But the ultimate consequence of the title motif of “royal children” (or star-

crossed lovers) is never spelled out. Surely, in the first half of the film, Magdalena and Michael are separated because of an intrusive political system that mercilessly punishes its opponents. But why can they not come together in the end, when both are aligned with the Soviets? Why is their political loyalty not rewarded in their personal lives? Just because a happy ending would be overly sentimental? *Star-Crossed Lovers* hints at the notion of destiny, but never addresses it explicitly. The viewer who is waiting for the moment of final harmony and catharsis cannot help but feel frustration about the impossibility of happiness for these two selfless idealists. Or was this perhaps the purpose of the dissatisfying ending?

Within the antifascist tradition in East German cinema, *Star-Crossed Lovers* occupies a special place thanks to its aesthetics. The film premiered on June 8, 1962, at the 4<sup>th</sup> Workers' Festival in Gotha. Compared to Beyer's other antifascist films, its reception in East Germany was less enthusiastic than that of *Five Cartridges*, two years prior, and that of his following picture, *Nackt unter Wölfen* (*Naked Among Wolves*, 1962). True, the depiction of moral conflicts in a totalitarian society is overly linear and the representation of relations between Germans and Russians/Soviets in World War II comes across as too easy. However, *Star-Crossed Lovers* has a quality that distinguishes it to this day and makes it a noteworthy outlier: its passionate emphasis on visual expressiveness. At the time of its release, some even viewed Beyer's new picture as experimental. For East German cinema, explicit and heightened attention to formal aspects of film was certainly a new phenomenon. Its origins lay in developments in the Soviet Union.

Profound changes during the period of post-Stalinist liberalization, the so-called "thaw," put Soviet cinema into a genuine vanguard position. Thaw films—such as Grigory Chukhray's *Sorok pervyy* (*The Forty-First*, 1956) and *Ballada o soldate* (*Ballad of a Soldier*, 1960), Mikhail Kalatozov's *Letyat zhuravli* (*The Cranes Are Flying*, 1958) and Sergey Bondarchuk's *Sudba cheloveka* (*Fate of a Man*, 1959)—were narratively and cinematically so innovative that they became festival sensations on both sides of the Iron Curtain and attracted millions of viewers worldwide. In East Germany, *The Cranes Are Flying* became a box-office hit and its star, Tatyana Samoylova, a household name. For cineastes, the camerawork of Sergey Urusevsky in *The Cranes Are Flying* was a source of astonishment and an inspiration for young filmmakers. The ability of Soviet thaw films to generate wide interest across the Iron Curtain—at a time of deepening tensions between the military blocs—was primarily based on their profound humanism. In addition, their avant-garde cinematic techniques intrigued even Western filmmakers, to say nothing of ambitious young directors in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland. No wonder budding DEFA filmmakers, such as Konrad Wolf and Frank Beyer, found inspiration in these Soviet pictures and those of like-minded young artists such as Andrzej Wajda in Poland.

The aesthetic revolution in Soviet cinema of the mid- to late-1950s demonstrated, for the first time since the end of silent cinema, that communist societies could still promote cultural vanguards on a global scale. The effect of that aesthetic revolution on East German filmmakers is hard to ignore. Thus, Konrad Wolf's antifascist dramas, *Sterne* (*Stars*, 1959) and *Professor Mamlock* (1960-61), featured much more sophisticated camerawork than his previous films. Young Frank Beyer and his team, too, moved forcefully in the direction of visual sophistication. *Five Cartridges* stood out for its chiaroscuro lighting and skillful use of close shots. Two years later, *Star-Crossed Lovers* was rendered with an even higher degree of visual inventiveness and control. Many of its shots are deliberately stylized and refer to classical masterpieces of world cinema. The director of cinematography in *Star-Crossed Lovers*, Günter Marczinkowsky (1927-2004), was Frank Beyer's trusted partner on his films from the late-1950s to the mid-1960s. In *Star-Crossed Lovers*, he demonstrated



a rare ability to saturate—some might say oversaturate—the imagery with symbolic and ominous meaning, forcing the viewer out of conventional and convenient shot/counter-shot routines. But the trend to draw attention to cinema as an art per se remained short-lived. In his following film with Beyer, *Naked Among Wolves*, Marczinkowsky returned to a more restrained cinematic language.

Why did the experiment in formal exploration not leave a deeper trace in East German cinema? The visual expressiveness of *Star-Crossed Lovers* was perceived as an aim in itself, an independent element that did not energize the story or deepen it, but rather remained an isolated aspect. Director, cinematographer and art director found fascinating solutions for several episodes, but these solutions resulted in aesthetically marked moments that seemed to stop the action to draw the viewer's attention to themselves. And yet, the film increased the prestige of the DEFA Studio on the international festival circuit, with both its uncompromising antifascist message and its formal extravagance.

Had that development led to a lasting heightened aesthetic intricacy in East German cinema, the results might have been astonishing. Alas, all thematic and formal ambitions were interrupted in 1965, when the GDR's ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) prohibited almost all feature films produced in the previous year and reprimanded even the most loyal communist directors, such as Kurt Maetzig and Frank Beyer. The cinema of East Germany never fully recovered from that blow. When Beyer, after years of involuntary exile from cinema (he worked at a Dresden theater and for television), was finally able to return to filmmaking, his earlier visual daring was gone. Even his best pictures, including the Oscar-nominated *Jakob der Lügner* (*Jacob the Liar*, 1974), while boasting remarkable narrative originality, were aesthetically mainstream. The road toward greater aesthetic experimentation and risk-taking that was attempted with *Star-Crossed Lovers* had been abandoned for good. As for the tragic romance about Magdalena, Michael and Jürgen, its unusual cinematic form became one of its lasting highlights.

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