

WRITING ABOUT DAILY LIFE

Scriptwriter: Laila Stieler

The DEFA Film Library would like to thank Laila Stieler for this extensive interview that was conducted by Hiltrud Schulz (DEFA Film Library) in February 2011.



*Laila Stieler was born in 1965 in Neustadt, Thuringia. From 1986 to 1990, Stieler studied dramaturgy at the Konrad Wolf Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg. Since 1990, she has worked as a freelance scriptwriter and producer, working with directors such as Andreas Dresen, Dagmar Hirtz, Tim Trageser, Maria Schrader and, most recently, Doris Dörrie. Her collaboration with Andreas Dresen goes back to the late 1980s, when they were both students at the Film Academy. Stieler co-wrote the script for Dresen's feature film debut, *Stilles Land* (1992, *Silent Country*), followed by *Die Polizistin* (2000, *The Policewoman*), *Willenbrock* (2004) and *Wolke 9* (2008, *Cloud 9*), which won the *Coup de Coeur Jury Prize* at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival. *Die Friseurin* (2010, *The Hairdresser*) was her first collaboration as a scriptwriter and producer with the internationally-acclaimed director Doris Dörrie. Laila Stieler is currently working on a script about the East German singer-songwriter Gerhard Gundermann. This feature film, directed by Andreas Dresen, is announced for release in 2013.*

You belong to the generation of filmmakers that studied in the GDR and were then sent out into the film world of post-unification Germany. How did you, personally, experience this change of worlds?

I had a lot of fear and a lot of luck. After I finished my studies in 1990, I worked for a year as a dramaturg at Deutsche Fernsehfunk (DFF), the former East German television station. It was a one-year grace period that was very important for me, because I had no work experience and did not know whether a unified Germany would even need dramaturgs. Would I be able to feed my family? Should I look for another career? Those were my existential questions. My editor-in-chief, Karl-Heinz Staamann – who unfortunately died too early – supported me. He all but gave me my first film, *Mein Bruder, der Clown* (*My Brother, the Clown*). In this and the following years, it became clear to me that I had gotten a very solid education. It boosted my self-assurance. But back then I felt my otherness, a strong Eastern European imprint, very clearly. Sometimes it made me sad and sometimes proud.

The role of dramaturgs, which was central in East German film production, is not widespread in the US. What role did dramaturgs play in East Germany and what role do they play in German filmmaking today? Could you also please describe your training as a dramaturg at the Film Academy? As there is no specific apprenticeship for dramaturgs or scriptwriters here in the US, students are always positively surprised when they hear about the education of filmmakers in the GDR. How do you see your education at the Academy for Film and Television today?

There were only four young women in my year. We virtually had individualized instruction in several seminars and lectures, and it was really noticeable when one of us was absent. How we envied our fellow students! But years later I often thought it had been a blessing, that we couldn't get around working hard. A class with only four students—imagine the luxury! To think the GDR did this! We had

very demanding subjects – like: theory of film, culture, literature and media; film history; historical and practical dramaturgy. And also economy, Russian, English and Phys. Ed. Counting hands-on seminars, we often had 12-14 hour days.

Dramaturgs had a very present and responsible position in East German film and television. Value was placed on good scripts. The dramaturg was often the initiator of a production and thus responsible for organizational and financial duties. But sometimes the dramaturg also had to play the role of a political watchdog; that was the downside of the profession. Here and now dramaturgs no longer play such an important role, also because part of their work is done by line producers and producers. Pure dramaturgs, who develop the narrative of the film, hardly exist anymore. It also has something to do with the relative lack of importance attributed to scriptwriting in Germany.

You had already worked with the director Andreas Dresen as a dramaturg and scriptwriter during your years at the Film Academy. Would you please say something about working together, perhaps especially on Stilles Land (Silent Country)?

In my program, there was an open, creative, friendly atmosphere and we were downright obsessed with collaborative work. So I worked on projects with Andreas Dresen as of my first year. *Silent Country* was somehow handed to us on a silver platter. We wanted to make a film that meant something to us. And at the time the *Wende* – that deep break – was the topic that moved us the most. At the same time, we already had a bit of distance, a certain disenchantment. And we saw that the upheaval also had its comical aspects. We wondered how best to narrate a sort of *Wende*-chronicle – the day-to-day of a revolution, where engagement and lethargy, pathos and banality, tragedy and comedy stand side by side. So we hit on the idea of a theater. We divided up the scenes between us. I already had a computer, Andreas brought his handwritten text and we discussed and corrected our work together. Sounds exhausting, but the first version of the script only took 14 days. I never managed to do that again.

Silent Country was Andreas Dresen's first full-length feature film, as well as his thesis film. At that time you had already graduated from the film academy. How did the script originate? Were some of the narrated stories from your own experience? What were the sources for this script?

Andreas Dresen comes from a theater family; he was, so to speak, the original source. Together we did research at the Anklam Theater, where we later shot the film. There we found the exact atmosphere we were looking for, the tension between hope and resignation. I then visited a few other provincial theaters and found the situation was similar. Many of these impressions and stories were then incorporated into the script: like the relationships inside of the ensemble, for example; the little fights about status; the lack of distance that develops when you work too closely and too long with one another; the course of certain love affairs. The basic idea of the script: a hopeful graduate starts his first job at a theater and runs into encrusted structures. It came out of our own life situations – after all, we were both fresh graduates.

Silent Country takes place at a small provincial theater in fall 1989. The Film Academy's website describes the film as, "The story of a revolution that isn't one—but nevertheless, the story from the epicenter of the world." What role does the universal aspect of stories play in your scripts?

I always do very exacting research, because I believe the more concretely you tell a story, the more universal you can be. This seems to be a contradiction, but it is my experience. The better I know the details, the deeper I go into a story, the greater the chance it will reveal its universal core. I always strive for that working principle. In *Silent Country*, we had the universal aspect of the story in sight from the start; a theater is, after all, a small world, a universe unto itself. That's how we wanted to tell the story.

Many of your scripts, like Die Friseur (2010, The Hairdresser) or the ZDF/arte television production Die Lehrerin (2011, The Teacher), are stories about day-to-day life. How do you find these stories? And how do you discover the details – of characters and stories, for example – given that I assume they are very different from your own life? What role do your own experiences play in your scripts?

I come from a documentary-film family. As a child at the International Festival for Documentary Films in Leipzig, I had to watch films about striking Bolivian miners, about the English union movement and schools in Africa – which really bored me back then. But it must have made an impression on me. Daily life interests me, the apparently unspectacular. If I should tell a story about a king, I would describe his daily life. The stimulus for *The Hairdresser* was the stories of my hairdresser, three doors from me. And teachers were just generally interesting to me, because they have such a difficult job and get so little respect in German society.

When you were still a student, you wrote the script for Dresen's So schnell geht es nach Istanbul (1990, Shortcut to Istanbul), which is based on motifs from Jurek Becker's short story, Romeo. Also adapted from literary texts are The Policewoman (original story by Annegret Held), Willenbrock (novel by Christoph Hein), and the script for Liebesleben (2007, Love Life, based on Zeruya Shalev's novel), which you co-wrote with the director Maria Schrader. How is it for you, as a scriptwriter, to work from literary sources? Does the scriptwriter have room for creative license in adapting a literary work? And what is the relationship like between the literary author and the scriptwriter?

I have thought about these questions for a long time. I wrote my thesis about literary adaptations; I evaluated linguistic theories that sought a sort of formula for transforming literature into film – and predictably didn't find one. Adaptation is a mysterious process; sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

I found out for myself that the success of an adaptation depends in great part on the scriptwriter's/director's reading. In any case, as a scriptwriter working with a literary work, I feel like I have a little treasure in my hand – a wealth of ideas, figures, patterns. The transformation of a literary work into a script is then mostly a suspenseful process. With all due respect, I must distance myself from the original, in order to be able to create another original. On the other hand, I must not distance myself too much, so as not to lose the intention of the literary work, not to become arbitrary. All authors I have met so far in my career showed great understanding for this problem and more or less let me do my work.

Could you please say something about the process of finding filmic images, which accompanies a reduction of the original...

In adapting a novel reduction is unavoidable, because it involves a substantial work. At the same time – it sounds paradoxical – I often invent additional episodes or extend plotlines that support my reading. In the novel *Willenbrock*, for example, the inner conflict of a man who loses his sense of self-confidence after a robbery is depicted in various areas of this character's life. In the adaptation, I concentrated on Willenbrock's relationships with women, in which his inner conflict took on a sensually concrete form. To this end, I expanded and intensified an episode that is only hinted at in the novel.

There was an article here in The New Yorker (Jan 10, 2011) about Stieg Larsson's trilogy (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The Girl Who Played with Fire and The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest) that stated that the movie adaptations are better than the books and that this is, above all, thanks to the scripts. What do you think about this? What role does a well-written script play for a director?

Here in Germany, audiences usually say: But the novel was better. It's rarely the other way around. And I believe that people in Germany feel the same about the film *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*: But the novel was better. The reason for this might be that here film is still seen as entertainment,

while literature is serious art. You'll notice I find this really galling. A good script is clearly not a discrete work of art; but it is the requirement for a good film. And not only because the story and the dialogues are right. It starts with the colleagues; actors like to play well-written characters, the whole team is more motivated when the material is good.

Your stories are often set in the former GDR, or East Germany is part of the background of the stories. Are there reasons for this? Do you think it is still important today to retain images of the GDR in film? And has this presentation of the GDR in films changed for you in recent years?

I basically like writing about people I know or think I know. And I don't think much of prematurely negating differences; people are shaped by their past. As for the presentation of the GDR, I think we must be careful, that images don't get stuck in our heads that are too starkly reductive. I simply miss differentiated films that deal with everyday life in the GDR, with its contradictions.

What influence does the director have on the script? Do you write your scripts with the director and/or audience in mind?

I am my first viewer. I cannot write a film that I wouldn't watch myself. And I'm very critical. It tends to block me to imagine other, diffuse viewers. Certainly I think about the director, if it's already clear who that is. Is s/he able to stage this? Does s/he get the subtext, or do I have to write it down? (No, that was a joke. I always have a lot of luck with my directors.)

Various writers worked on the script for Dresen's Cloud 9. It is known that the actors also had a lot of room for improvisation. How did the idea of using actors' improvisation in the film influence work on the script?

There wasn't any script, just a detailed treatment, which rarely went as far as to work out dialogue, in order to leave the actors the room to improvise.

Does it also sometimes happen that you first write the script, and then look for a director or producer?

Yes, I've experienced that too. It's not bad either. It obviously gives me a lot of freedom. On the other hand, I miss the constructive input of the director.

What influence do you have on the film as a scriptwriter? Are you there for the shoot, or later for the rough cut? How important is it to you that the finished film be close to your script?

It all depends on the director how involved I get during the shoot or editing. For films for which I am „only“ the scriptwriter, I'm often not too interested in always being on the set or in the editing room. I mean, I've done my work. And sometimes it bothers me to watch others doing theirs. So, I also don't pay scrupulous attention to how closely the edited version follows my script. Directors mostly have good reasons for deleting scenes or changing their order. But I have also never experienced having the entire structure or atmosphere drastically changed.

For some of your most recent films, you were the producer as well as the scriptwriter. What does it mean for you to take over these two extremely important roles? Could you imagine also taking on the role of director?

Actually, I only got into it by chance; I had started producing a film and then jumped in as co-author in an emergency. Up until then, I'd rejected situations like this, because I didn't want my authors to feel in competition with me. In this case it worked out and was a surprisingly positive experience. It gave me the courage to continue working this way. As an author I am my own worst critic, I don't have to mince words. Besides, I know all the details, because I know the text so well. Changes necessitated by the production process can be made right away. So I am very happy with this personal blending. On

the other hand, becoming a director has never appealed to me; I believe that would take very different talents.

How would you describe the situation for scriptwriters in the German film industry? Are there any differences if scripts are written for film or television?

Scriptwriters often get forgotten in Germany, whether at award ceremonies or the party held to celebrate finishing a production. But these are only symptoms. I think it is really essential to note that we scriptwriters don't appear in press releases, media presentations or the short reports of television magazines. The director and actors get mentioned, but rarely the scriptwriter. In short: We only get mentioned when a critic notices something negative about the film. Then they mostly say: Thanks to a brilliant performance, it is a good movie, despite the mediocre script by So-and-So. Of course, a mediocre script rarely becomes a good film, and it's much more common for a good script to turn into a bad film.

So it's a question of the public recognition and respect, which don't come to us in the measure we deserve. In my opinion, this is still left over from the German "auteur film" tradition, according to which the director is the all-encompassing genius. I have the impression, however, that now we have a very self-confident generation of scriptwriters coming up and that, in general, there is a growing awareness of the division of labor in filmmaking.

Writing scripts for cinema films sometimes takes years, are developed longer than scripts for television films. That means certain stories, for example those that need more extensive research, are excluded from the start. But there are always exceptions; for example, I spent months doing research at various schools for my television film, *The Teacher*. So in the writing itself, I see hardly any differences. I don't write faster or in less detail because it's for television.

What are you working at the moment?

I'm writing a biography of the East German singer-songwriter Gerhard Gundermann; but I'd rather not say anything about it, because I'm in the middle of working on it.

For which director would you like to write a script?

By all means and whenever possible for Andreas Dresen. But I'd also like to write for Fatih Akin. Maybe you could let him know?