

Echoes of a Legend

by Seán Allan



Heiner Carow's reputation as one of DEFA's leading directors owes much to the popular success of his earlier film, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*), starring Angelica Domröse and Winfried Glatzeder. Not only was its 1973 premiere a landmark event in the history of East German cinema; it is a film that, even today, remains deeply imprinted in the imagination of many of those who grew up in the GDR. Yet to see Carow's *oeuvre* solely through the prism of *Paul and Paula* is to ignore the full range of his extensive output as a director.

Born in Rostock in 1929, Carow belongs to the second generation of DEFA directors, a group which came to prominence in the mid 1950s and which included such major figures as Konrad Wolf, Frank Beyer, and Ralf Kirsten. Indeed, of all the directors still active in the post-unification period and included in the DEFA Film Library's *WENDE FLICKS* series, none of them had been making films for as long as Carow. Trained by Slatan Dudow and Gerhard Klein in Babelsberg during the early 1950s, Carow was initially assigned to the *DEFA-Studio für Populärwissenschaftliche Filme*—the section responsible for producing short social and scientific documentaries targeted at non-specialist audiences. Among the works that he scripted and directed was the documentary *Martins Tagebuch* (*Martin's Diary*, 1955)—a film exploring the role of unsympathetic parenting in a schoolboy's academic decline—which was awarded the Golden Dove at the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival of 1956. Although he subsequently moved into the production of DEFA feature films—joining Slatan Dudow's production group "Berlin" in 1957—his legacy as a documentary filmmaker lives on in the films of Helke Misselwitz and Thomas Heise, both of whom worked closely with Carow during the formative stages of their careers.

The focus on youthful protagonists and generational conflict that informs Carow's documentary work is also evident in his early feature films: *Sheriff Teddy* (1957), a crime story involving a young boy who feels isolated in the GDR following his parents' move from West to East Berlin; the highly acclaimed *Sie nannten ihn Amigo* (transl. *They Called Him Amigo*, 1959), a portrait of a 13 year-old Berlin boy who comes to the assistance of a concentration camp escapee; and *Das Leben beginnt* (transl. *Life Begins*, 1960), exploring the impact of a doctor's decision to leave the GDR upon his adolescent daughter's love affair. The uncompromising portrayal of everyday East German life that we find not only in *Sheriff Teddy*, but his other films, was to be singled out for criticism at the Second Film Conference of 1958: "The film conference [of 1958] was the first time I was forced to confront such issues," Carow commented in an interview of 1993. But it was not to be the last. Although Carow's name is conspicuous for its absence among the list of directors who suffered following the clampdown on production after the 11th Plenum of 1965/66, his next major feature, *Die Russen kommen* (*The Russians Are Coming*, 1968) was banned until 1987 because of its controversial representation of the Red Army.

The replacement of Walter Ulbricht by Erich Honecker as First Secretary of the GDR's Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1971 was a development initially welcomed by East German artists and intellectuals. Honecker's declaration that, "providing one starts from an established socialist standpoint, there cannot . . . be any taboo subjects for art and literature" appeared to herald the onset of a new era of liberalization in the cultural sphere. Carow's best known film—his adaptation of Ulrich Plenzdorf's *The Legend of Paul and Paula*—represents a highpoint in this all too brief period. An instant box-office hit, it was one of a series of films in the 1970s that featured female protagonists drawn from working-class backgrounds. In this context, Carow's film established

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Angelica Domröse as a genuine star in her own right. Yet, following her protest of the expatriation of East German singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann in 1976, Domröse was marginalised by East German cultural functionaries and—apart from her role in Carow's *Bis daß der Tod euch scheidet* (*Until Death Do Us Part*, 1978)—was confined to roles in television dramas. In 1980 she and her husband, the DEFA actor Hilmar Thate, left the GDR for good.

The success that Carow enjoyed with both *The Legend of Paul and Paula* and *Until Death Do Us Part*—two films which cruelly exposed the shortcomings of “real existing socialism” in the GDR—was never likely to endear him to cultural functionaries in the SED. In the early 1980s a film project based on Grimmelshausen's epic novel *Simplicissimus* was abandoned, ostensibly on financial grounds; likewise Carow's efforts to make a film about the GDR rock band Pankow (working title *Paule Panke*), and his initial attempts to adapt Werner Heiduczek's novella *The Mistake* [written in 1982 but not published until 1986] for the screen were to prove equally unsuccessful. Such was the degree of mistrust that it would be some seven years before he directed another film. With *So viele Träume* (*So Many Dreams*, 1986) Carow had something of a comeback, resorting once again to a female figure to explore the contradictions between the demands of the collective and the individual's claim for personal happiness. Perhaps Carow's most remarkable film of the 1980s, however, is the one that—at the time at least—passed almost unnoticed. With *Coming Out* (1989) the director turned his attention to what was, not least in cinematic terms, a completely taboo subject, namely homosexuality in the GDR. As it premiered on November 9, 1989—the same night as the opening of the Berlin Wall—the film's potentially explosive resonance was, understandably, swamped by the momentous events on the streets. The premiere of Carow's adaptation of Heiduczek's novella *Verfehlung* (*The Mistake*) finally took place on March 18, 1992 at the International, one of East Berlin's former major movie theatres. Though made after German reunification, Carow's film is set in the GDR of the late 1980s and explores the relationship between a middle-aged couple, Elizabeth Bosch, from the East, and Jacob Alain from Hamburg, in the West. Those familiar with Carow's work will immediately discern the echoes of *The Legend of Paul and Paula* that permeate the film's *mise-en-scène*. The run-down, provincial GDR village where Elizabeth lives is almost a rural version of the decrepit tenement building in which Paula lives; like Paula, Elizabeth has a menial job, cleaning for the unscrupulous and exploitative local mayor, Reimelt.

What really underlines the link between the two films, however, is the presence of Angelica Domröse as Elizabeth, in her first role in a DEFA production since leaving the GDR twelve years earlier. As she recalls in her 2003 biography, Carow saw the character of Elizabeth as “a fifty year-old Paula.” Yet while there are plenty of reminders of Paula's uncompromising vitality in *The Mistake*—one thinks of the opening sequence in which Elizabeth bathes naked with her young grandchildren—as the film unfolds, the echoes of Carow's earlier heroine become increasingly muted and are recapitulated in a minor key. Although the central female protagonist of *The Legend of Paula of Paula* dies at the end of the film, the memory of Paula lives on triumphant; by contrast, Elizabeth, her counterpart in *The Mistake*, may survive all that is thrown at her, but ultimately she ends up a victim. Just like many of the other films released by East German directors after the collapse of the GDR, an atmosphere of collapse and decay pervades *The Mistake*. When Reimelt watches the 750th anniversary celebrations in the village of which he is

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mayor, the tears that well up in his eyes evoke images of an emotional Honecker, as he stood beside Gorbachev watching the parades marking the 40th—and final—year of the GDR’s existence.

As Carow had discovered when he first explored the possibility of filming *The Mistake*, political tensions between East and West at the start of the 1980s meant that making a film in which the Stasi and petty GDR bureaucrats combine to destroy a German-German relationship was impossible as long as Germany remained divided. And after the demise of the GDR, Carow’s immediate concern, as he confessed in a 1992 interview with Ralf Schenk, was that the film would no longer be relevant to movie-goers in the post-unification era. Accordingly, he tried to widen the film’s appeal. “What interested us was the fact that, in the last hundred years, it has always been those at the bottom of the pile who have to face the music when those in power get into a pickle. Seen from that angle, we realized that the basic principle underpinning the film applied to the whole of the last century—and that’s what made it possible for us to make it.”

One consequence of the film’s delayed production, however, was the opportunity to cast the well known (West) German actor Gottfried John in the role of the West German Jacob Alain—something that would have been inconceivable during the 1980s. John is perhaps best known for his roles in the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, which include Willi Klenze in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1978) and Reinhold in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980). Indeed it is tempting, at least in some respects, to see Carow as an East German counterpart to Fassbinder. What links the two filmmakers is how they analyze the destructive relationships in which their strong female protagonists are caught up as a means of critiquing their respective societies. At the same time, the performances of Domröse and John—a combination from which the film draws much of its strength—serve to underline what might have been, had détente and the politics of the Cold War allowed filmmakers in both East and West to draw on the whole pool of available talent.

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