



STAUDTE FILMS BRECHT: *MOTHER COURAGE CANCELED, THE THREEPENNY OPERA FAILED*

By Werner Hecht

Quarrels with DEFA

The idea of making a DEFA adaptation of *Mother Courage and Her Children* arose right after the stage production with Helene Weigel at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, which premiered on January 11, 1949. This came about largely because Erich Engel, also an experienced film director and Brecht's collaborator, was available for the project. Although the "battle of the critics"—as [theatrolgist] Werner Mittenzwei called the controversy over the stage production sparked by Fritz Erpenbeck [editor-in-chief of *Theater der Zeit*]¹—had cast an ideological shadow over the enormous theatrical success, DEFA was interested in a film adaption, and so a contract was drafted. The first film script was written by Robert A. Stemmle, an author who had done many film scenarios for Engel, but it did not receive Brecht's approval. The studio thus made another attempt with the screenwriting duo Joachim Barckhausen and Alexander Graf Stenbock-Fermor. Once again dissatisfied with the text, Brecht himself began working on a version with Emil Burri, a friend of his from the 1920s. Shooting was delayed for several more years, and Engel lost all interest in the film. DEFA began discussions with film director Wolfgang Staudte, who had established a reputation at Studio Babelsberg with *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*, 1946) and *Der Untertan* (*The Kaiser's Lackey*, 1951). With Staudte's help, the script was again reworked; this third version was finished in June 1952.

DEFA had reservations about Brecht's overall artistic oeuvre. In 1950, Sepp Schwab, the managing director of DEFA, and Albert Wilkening, the production director of the feature film department, asked Brecht "whether a film advocating peace must appear purely pacifist, or if it's possible for it to contribute to the active struggle against war."² The allegation of pacifist tendencies in *Mother Courage* had already been voiced by author Friedrich Wolf after the stage performance in 1949, when he asked Brecht: "How can we wake [the people] up from their fatalism and activate them against a new war?" He would have liked *Mother Courage* to change by the end of the play "as a consequence of this realization." In contrast, Brecht put his trust in the audience, saying that viewers could, "in my opinion, still learn something from observing her."³

The fierce debates over the opera *Das Verhör des Lukullus* (*The Trial of Lucullus*), by Brecht and Paul Dessau, brought new accusations of pacifism against Brecht. This contributed to DEFA's reservations about the *Mother Courage* film. Repeated demands for changes to the script were made, and Brecht complied. The film needed to show, more explicitly than the play, "how Mother Courage basically forces herself into this war; she travels a long way to get to the war and, at one point, she nearly pulls out and wants to buy a pub, but then changes her mind at the promise of an especially profitable business deal." By the same token, the film must explicitly show "that reality punishes the stubborn woman."⁴ The addition of the character of the Young Miller, a friend of Katrin, added weight to the forces protesting the war. In a separate scene ("Song"), Brecht put a song in his mouth:

O Germany, so torn in pieces
And never left alone!
The cold and dark increase
While each sees to his own.
Such lovely fields you'd have
Such cities thronged and gay;
If you'd but trust yourself
All would be child's play.⁵

¹ Mittenzwei, Werner. *Das Leben des Bertolt Brecht oder Der Umgang mit den Welträtseln*. Vol. 2. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1986. 309-338.

² See "Brief an Brecht vom 13.10.1950." *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*. Vol. 20. Ed. by Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, Klaus-Detlef Müller, Berlin and Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985-2000 (henceforth: GBA). 587; and Vol. 30. 494.

³ "Formprobleme des Theaters aus neuen Inhalten." GBA. Vol. 23. 112.

⁴ "Wie muß die 'Mutter Courage' verfilmt werden." GBA. Vol. 20. 579.

⁵ GBA. Vol. 15. 260. English translation in *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*. Ed. By John Willett and Ralph Mannheim. New York: Methuen & Co, 1976. 432.

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Brecht had already published this poem under the title “Germany 1952” in the playbill for *Der Prozeß der Jeanne d’Arc zu Rouen 1431* (*The Trial of Joan of Arc at Rouen, 1431*). Although this poem refers to a specific historical situation in the context of the play, Brecht’s repeated critique of a divided Germany must nevertheless have sparked some outrage.

Brecht, offended by the constant objections to his script, wrote a letter to the director of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin complaining that he had never before in his “career as an author” endured such “shabby” treatment. He wrote that, over the course of the last three years, he “could have produced this film in West Germany without any interference from the state.”⁶ Although the contract between DEFA and Brecht had already been negotiated years earlier, the film company drew out the actual closing of the contract and made it dependent upon an accepted script. Brecht felt deceived and demanded appropriate action against DEFA: “How can Mister Schwab, as the head of films in the GDR, bring writers and film together in a productive and responsible manner when he, as president of DEFA, employs such shady practices?”⁷ Understandably, Brecht started to lose all interest in the film. Various attempts were nevertheless made to attract new directors, all of which failed.⁸ After Johannes R. Becher became the GDR’s Minister of Culture in 1954, Brecht made another attempt to push the project forward and initially suggested that Wolfgang Staudte direct it.⁹ In December, the contract between Brecht and DEFA was finalized under the condition that Helene Weigel play the leading role. Casting of all the other roles were to be negotiated between Brecht, Staudte and DEFA. The basis for the new script became the aforementioned third version. Staudte was bound to Brecht’s opinion in questions of content and style; Brecht agreed to extend the Yvette-episode.

When interviewed during his work on the script, Staudte said that his intention for the film was “to maintain the style of Brecht’s original work, to preserve the effect of the great drama of ‘the woman unable to learn from any of her tragedies,’” and that he strove “to direct the film with the same stylistic devices that Brecht uses, to preserve the strong epic qualities the film should envy in the play.”¹⁰ Based on these statements, it would seem that the director and author saw eye to eye. The script produced by Staudte, Burri and Brecht¹¹ was finally approved by DEFA on June 28, 1955. In retrospect, however, it became apparent that Staudte only grudgingly accepted Brecht’s conditions in order to move on with production. There is no doubt that he hoped to gain more creative freedom during the actual shoot.



(Fig. 1-3) From August 18 to mid-September 1955, Wolfgang Staudte filmed thirty percent of *Mother Courage and Her Children* at the Babelsberg DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme. Unfortunately, the film material got lost and only some black-and-white and color photos remain from the 1955 production.

We thank the DEFA-Stiftung for making these photos available for the DVD release.

⁶ “Brief an Rudolf Engel v. 17.1.1952.” GBA. Vol. 30, pp. 149.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In 1953, Brecht tried to attract the Danish directors Astrid and Bjarne Henning-Jensen, who were recommended to him by Ruth Berlau (see: GBA. Vol. 30. 199). On March 12, 1954, he wrote a letter to Aldo Vergano, who had expressed interest in the *Courage* film when Brecht was in Vienna, and told him that DEFA declined and that Giuseppe de Santis was also interested in directing the film (see: GBA. Vol. 30. 235). On April 27, 1954, R. Barry wrote Brecht a letter from Rome and told him that Luchino Visconti would be available for a *Courage* adaptation with Anna Magnani (see: GBA. Vol. 30. 574).

⁹ GBA. Vol. 30. 250.

¹⁰ A.H.B., “Bei Wolfgang Staudte/Drehbuch zu Brechts *Mutter Courage* in Arbeit.” *Sozialistische Volkszeitung*. 4 April 1955.

¹¹ See, GBA. Vol. 20. 215-384.

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Quarrels with Brecht

Shooting began in Babelsberg on August 18, 1955, with an impressive cast. Aside from Weigel, the cast included Simone Signoret as Yvette, Sigrid Roth as Katrin, Bernard Blier as the Cook and, from the Berlin theater production, Ekkehard Schall as Eilif, Joachim Teege as Swiss Cheese and Erwin Geschonneck as the Chaplain. Brecht also installed Manfred Wekwerth, his assistant and co-director at the time, as a constant advisor and observer in Babelsberg to get daily briefings on the production. Staudte felt surveilled and, at the first opportunity, accused Wekwerth of being a “spy.” Brecht obviously defended himself against the accusation: “Wekwerth isn’t a spy, if only because I am not a hostile force.”¹² The ironic undertone already hinted at the difficulties that were to arise from the two men’s mutual distrust.

Just two weeks into shooting, Brecht wrote an extensive letter to Hans Rodenberg¹³ complaining about the insufficient pre-production of the film. He claimed that he was insufficiently involved in the casting and did not approve of some of the leading roles. Furthermore, he was not involved in deciding whether to shoot *Mother Courage and Her Children* in black-and-white or color. Brecht took this opportunity to decline all responsibility for extra costs related to shooting in color (a decision Staudte had long since already made). Brecht also disapproved of the post-production dubbing of the complete film. “I don’t know what else I can do to at least avoid wasting creative labor and copious amounts of money.”¹⁴ Only a few days later, the behavior of production manager Willi Teichmann led to a scandal that ultimately cost him his job on the film.¹⁵ In another letter to Rodenberg, Brecht already foresaw the premature end of production: “Due to the aforementioned conditions, there was no chance for this film to be finished.”¹⁶

Wolfgang Staudte, who would have preferred a more experienced film actress for the role of Anna Fierling (for instance, Anna Magnani), started pushing his actors to their limits with nighttime shoots and other measures. As a result, Helene Weigel felt she could not continue. After roughly 30% of the film had been shot, production was put on hold. DEFA desperately searched for a new leading actress. Although Brecht insisted that the film could only be shot with Weigel, DEFA tried to save the project with actress Therese Giehse. The predictable result: Giehse stood in solidarity with Weigel and declined the role. DEFA made one last attempt with Berta Drews, but was thwarted by West Berlin’s Culture Senator Joachim Tiburtius, who did not excuse the actress from her obligations at the Schiller Theater.

Now the film project was well and truly abandoned. For DEFA, this meant a loss of approximately 1,446 million East German marks (for which they held Brecht responsible). French film architect Max Douy has already prepared elaborate set designs and costumes. The two French film stars also needed to be paid even though the film had been canceled: Simone Signoret’s fee was 120,000 West German marks and Bernard Blier’s was 80,000 West German marks. The canceled film is now called “Mutter Blamage” [“Mother Embarrassment”] in *Der Spiegel* magazine, casting it as a scandal of international dimensions.¹⁷

On December 15, 1955, Brecht made one more attempt to get Erich Engel to direct his film. But Engel must have clearly seen that production problems did not arise solely due to casting choices, but also due to Brecht’s demands and directorial vision, which were highly uncommon in the film industry. Engel declined.

What led to the major disagreements between Brecht and Staudte? Wolfgang Staudte was working in keeping with filmmaking expectations and conditions, as he had experienced them in many different countries. Nearly twenty years later, Staudte reflected: “I wanted to make a truly international film, in CinemaScope and color and with a huge cast. Brecht didn’t want that.”¹⁸

¹² “Brief an Staudte vom September 1955.” *GBA*. Vol. 30. 371.

¹³ At this point, the managing director of the DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme.

¹⁴ “Brief an Hans Rodenberg v. 5.9.1955.” *GBA*. Vol. 30. 372-373.

¹⁵ Part of Brecht’s complaint to Hans Rodenberg reads: “He had someone listen in to a call between Mister Wekwerth and me, had it written down and those notes handed to Mister Staudte, apparently a totally distorted mess. I ask you to carefully investigate Herr Teichmann’s neglectful and irresponsible pre-production for the *Courage* film.” (*GBA*. Vol. 30. 374.)

¹⁶ “Brief an Hans Rodenberg, Anfang September 1955.” *GBA*. Vol. 30. 375.

¹⁷ [anon], “Mutter Blamage.” *Der Spiegel*. Hamburg, 23 November 1955.

¹⁸ “Wolfgang Staudte über die Produktionsbedingungen seiner Filme.” *Wolfgang Staudte*. Ed. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek. Berlin: Spiess, 1977. 73 (from an interview from May 13, 1974).

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Actually, Staudte did not do anything during his work on *Mother Courage* that could be considered “misconduct.” It was neither customary nor affordable for a director and his crew to spend weeks during pre-production to experimentally “prepare” the film. Brecht’s expectations were overly influenced by the elitist conditions he had created for himself at his Berliner Ensemble. There, a play’s premiere could be postponed if a production was not deemed “ready” yet, even if it took eleven months, as in the case of *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*), which was postponed from November 17, 1953 to October 7, 1954. The whole crew and all the actors obviously had to be unconditionally available until the production reached a high enough level of quality to be delivered.

How differently freelance directors and actors must plan in the cinema! Staudte had wrapped up production on a film in the Netherlands (*Ciske – de rat, Ciske the Rat*) a mere ten days before shooting started in Babelsberg. As they were already committed to other productions, his French film stars were only available for a certain period. From the very start, conditions were not ideal for the kind of experiments Brecht was dreaming of.

Brecht must have known of these differences from his time in Hollywood. The only film he worked on extensively, *Hangmen also Die*, ended up being one of the greatest disappointments of his life. His work with Fritz Lang, the director of that film, also led to considerable disagreements about casting and directorial decisions. In 1943, he offered the following devastating quip: “Recipe for successful film script writing: Write as well as you can and hope it is bad enough.”¹⁹

Then again, Brecht’s unusual concern and caution regarding the *Courage* film is understandable, given all the film-related disappointments he had experienced. He wanted to produce a grand film, one that did not deny its historicity. Therefore, he decided against a color CinemaScope film. His vision was a piece of art reminiscent of the beauty of old copper engravings. The use of chamois-colored material could produce a sort of alienation effect, giving the story the appearance of something from a faraway time. In a conversation with the painter Karl Hofer, he spoke of the possibility of creating images from the “*Courage*” performance. Apparently, he asked the chemist Robert Havemann to create an emulsion “that would make the film look like a daguerreotype,” and Hofer conceded that “artistic images could be created by softening the colors in the medium color range. In contrast, for the time being, color film is useless.”²⁰ These must have been indications of how he envisioned the *Courage* film. Yet even fifty years ago, such chemical experiments had little place in the strictly calculated economy of the film industry.

At the time of the disputes with Wolfgang Staudte, Brecht was involved in a wide range of projects that negatively affected his already poor health. As of September 1955, he felt unwell, suffering from a mild fever and exhaustion. He could only participate in rehearsals for his play *Life of Galileo* for no more than two hours a day. He was at the start of his decline and slow death.



(Fig 4-6) Director Wolfgang Staudte and actress Simone Signoret (Yvette) during filming.

¹⁹ “Notiz v. 13.10.1943.” *GBA*, Vol. 27. 177

²⁰ “Notiz v. 23.3.1950.” *GBA*, Vol. 27. 311.

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The Threepenny Opera Fails

Brecht had experienced the difficulty of financing a film in his early encounters with the German film industry. His first substantial encounter with the film branch resulted in a sobering clash. In 1930, when *The Threepenny Opera* was to be filmed, a conflict with the film studio over the script ended in court. Theoretically based on his sociological experiment “The Threepenny Opera Trial,” Brecht concluded that once money is invested into a movie, it becomes a “commodity” and is solely governed by economic rather than artistic considerations. Despite the disagreements between the author and studio, *The Threepenny Opera* film directed by Georg Wilhelm Pabst became a huge success in the early 1930s—a success that was reprised when it was re-released after World War II.

It is thus unsurprising that, after Brecht’s death in 1956, film studios tried to convince Helene Weigel to approve a remake of *The Threepenny Opera*. Early in 1958, the West Berlin film producer Kurt Ulrich finally managed to acquire the film rights from Weigel, the representative of the Brecht estate, and from Lotte Lenya, as Kurt Weill’s heir. In his euphoria, thinking he had scored a grand coup, he immediately committed 300,000 West German marks to hire the Italian actress Giulietta Masina, who became world renowned in Fellini’s *La Strada*. His vision was to produce a grand film with three language versions and an international cast. He considered casting Yves Montand as Mack the Knife.

However, the authors he hired—Erich Kuby, Robert A. Stemmle and Georg Hurdalek and directors Helmut Käutner and Rolf Thiele—were unable to come up with a concept that would effectively adapt this Weimar Republic theatrical hit into a film for the affluent society of West Germany. According to Käutner, this was because “the downtrodden are no longer trodden upon.” Wolfgang Staudte, whom Ulrich finally hired to direct the film in 1961, also struggled to see the topicality of the play. In his opinion, the problem was that “[c]lass-based attacks no longer have a target. Back then, we had six million unemployed. Today we have six million gone. That difference is like summer and winter.”²¹ At the same time, five years after the disputes over *Courage*, Staudte did not need to fear further quarrels with Brecht. The contract called for a verbatim adaptation of the original play. Staudte had what he called the “cardinal idea” that “the film should take place in modern-day London, where the criminals, whores and beggars at a fair in Soho meet to perform *The Threepenny Opera* on the primitive stage of a booth. A public protest of the underworld against the growing immorality of so-called good society.”²² Based on this framing narrative, which allowed for a few topical references, the film would be able to retell *The Threepenny Opera* without any major interventions. Ulrich accepted Staudte’s concept and employed Günter Weisenborn to help with the script. He prepared to start shooting in the studio in late 1961.

Quarrels with the Brecht Boycott

Then something happened that neither Brecht nor Staudte could have anticipated. On August 13, 1961, [Walter] Ulbricht closed the border to West Berlin with a wall (known in the GDR as the “anti-fascist protective rampart”). This triggered international outrage and had immense political, economic and cultural consequences. The temperature of the Cold War suddenly grew much colder.

Just four days after the construction of the Berlin Wall began, the [West German] theater critic Friedrich Luft cautioned against performing Brecht’s play *Mr. Puntilla and His Man Matti*: “Won’t that sound very wrong to us [at this moment], downright frivolous and erroneous? Do we know what we’re doing here?” And with a threatening gesture (aimed at Boleslaw Barlog): “We ought to seriously reconsider.”²³ Indeed, shortly thereafter, the management of the Schiller Theater announced that the premier would be postponed. Luft’s attack set the stage not just for a Brecht ban in West Berlin, but for a nationwide campaign against productions of his plays. After June 17, 1953, the SED regime mutilated Brecht’s stance on the uprising to such an extent that it read like a homage to those

²¹ Quoted in: [anon], “*Dreigroschenoper*. Wie am ersten Tag.” *Der Spiegel*, Hamburg, 7 January 1962.

²² Staudte, Wolfgang. “Die Legende vom politischen Gehalt der *Dreigroschenoper*.” Staudte/Heckroth/Raguse, *Die Dreigroschenoper* 63. Werkbuch zum Film. Munich: Laokoon Verlag, 1964 [without pagination].

²³ *Die Welt*. Hamburg, 17 August 1961.

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in power. Brecht was thereafter labeled a “communist” in West Germany and lumped together with those loyal to the party and Ulbricht. Of course, all of this was connected to the Cold War. This misconception survived a long time, as we can see, enabling the boycott of Brecht’s plays on West German stages during the construction of the Berlin Wall, well after his death in 1956. More than with any other author of this period, political figures were intensively involved in distorting Brecht’s image. While some (influential) East German politicians dressed him up in SED-red to hide his criticisms, some (influential) West German politicians—confusing this image for the man—covered him head-to-toe in the deepest, bloodiest red they could find.

This was the political tenor of the 1961 boycott. As a result, Kassel canceled *Schweik*, Bielefeld *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Hamburg *The Threepenny Opera* (Kammerspiele) and *The Good Person of Szechwan* (Thalia Theater), Tübingen *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, Lübeck *Trumpets and Drums*, Munich *Refugee Conversations* and Baden-Baden *Mother Courage*.

No matter how the theater managers regretted these measures—purely temporary and taken only in the face of the current general disapproval of the “communist Brecht”—the bias was undeniable: hardly any stage or municipality could avoid participating in the witch hunt. But there’s more: television was also attacked for announcing commissioned productions of Brecht’s plays. Hamburg’s *Bild* newspaper, for example, lambasted the ARD network for planning to air Egon Monk’s production of *Life of Galileo* in January 1962 after canceling it in October 1961.²⁴ According to the criticism, it demonstrated a complete lack of “political instincts” to air a piece “whose now-deceased communist author congratulated the concentration camp guard Ulbricht for crushing the June 1953 uprising.”²⁵ No reference was made to the importance of director Egon Monk, head of the television drama department at the NDR network. Monk was Brecht’s favorite pupil in the early years of the Berlin Ensemble; he left for West Germany in 1953 and produced groundbreaking theater productions in Hamburg. The witch hunt’s goal was to clear Brecht away entirely.

The nationwide Brecht boycott gave [West German film producer] Kurt Ulrich a major shock. He realized that, at this point in time, there was no chance that a Brecht film would be profitable. All preparations for the *Threepenny Opera* were immediately halted. The financial investment thus far was already considerable: in mid-1961, 1.5 million West German marks.²⁶ Without a second thought, Ulrich had already hired most of the main cast members and set a production schedule that could no longer be met in the current conditions. According to the contract, the actors were to be paid in 1961. Thus, Curd Jürgens (whom Ulrich deemed “more marketable” than Yves Montand) received his agreed-upon 600,000 West German marks without shooting a single scene. Giulietta Masina had a similar experience: she received her money years earlier and was now recast because her popularity had waned.

In many places, the enraged attacks against Brecht ultimately led to counter-protests. After theater managers in Ulm declared they would not strike Brecht from their programs, Harry Buckwitz announced that he definitely wanted to stage *The Life of Galileo* in Frankfurt am Main. He found “the reprisals leveled by the CDU for political reasons against a dead writer ... positively shameful.”²⁷ The incipient collapse of the Brecht boycott was eloquently expressed in a public statement by 66 theater managers, in which they protested against the restricting of their intellectual and artistic freedom: “In view of these symptoms, the theater managers who have signed this statement find it necessary to explicitly caution against the tendentious influence on programs of groups outside of the theater. An indispensable condition for artistic work in German theaters is that theater managers retain personal responsibility for their repertoire.” They strongly objected to the “infantilization of judgment by the public and critics.”²⁸

²⁴ *Life of Galileo* ends up being aired by ARD on January 11, 1962 (with Ernst Schröder as Galileo, Hartmut Reck as Andreas, Angelika Hurwicz as Mrs. Sarti). It was not aired on West Berlin television.

²⁵ Krt., “Kommunist Brecht doch im Hamburger Fernsehen/Instinktlos!” *Bild-Zeitung*. Hamburg, 20 September 1961.

²⁶ *Der Spiegel*. loc. cit. 7 November 1962.

²⁷ Quoted by André Müller according to the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* from 9/11/1961, in: *Kreuzzüge gegen Brecht. Die Kampagne in der Bundesrepublik 1961/62*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1962. 42-43.

²⁸ In: *Kultur und Gesellschaft*. November 1961.

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It is not possible, in the framework of this essay, to further trace West German theater's confrontation with Brecht. One thing is certain, however: filmmakers (and not just Kurt Ulrich) must have followed this debate carefully. Well aware that the contract between Ulrich and the Brecht and Weill heirs would expire on December 31, 1962, the US-American producers Carl Foreman and Harold Hecht and the MCA Agency inquired into procuring film rights for *The Threepenny Opera*. Italian producer Carlo Ponti sought the film rights for the song "Pirate Jenny" for Sophia Loren in Vittorio de Sica's film *I sequestrati di Altona* (*The Condemned of Altona*, 1962); while shooting part of the film at the Berliner Ensemble, he told Helene Weigel that he would also be interested in a film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*. Ulrich took these forays by international competitors as a clear sign of a newly reawakened interest in Brecht. Another sign was the democratic means by which the boycott is overcome. At the proverbial last minute, Ulrich took initiative to realize the stalled project—which had already cost him so dearly—before the deadline.

Ulrich greenlit the production and made plans for fourteen days of shooting—for three language versions! To be on the safe side and sidestep any possible conflicts with Helene Weigel, he jettisoned Staudte's framing narrative and ordered "a literal and faithful adaptation;" only optical elements not possible in the theater should be "intensively activated."²⁹ Staudte immediately accepted the new conditions but hid his actual motives for doing so. In his opinion, commercial considerations, which delayed the start of shooting because of the Brecht boycott and led to the current very tight schedule, were not to blame. He blamed Helene Weigel, probably still due to his frustrations with the failed *Courage*. If you didn't follow Brecht to a tee, he had said, "suddenly the old barricade-Duse [Helene Weigel] would appear with a cease and desist order and that was the end of it."³⁰ Sarcastically, Staudte even thanked Weigel, claiming he had already felt uneasy about the changes to Brecht's original text; but, after this "useful exercise," he came to the amazing conclusion: "And so the play was adapted for film – just as the law commanded!"³¹

After it was announced that work would continue on *The Threepenny Opera*, Berlin's *BILD-Zeitung* newspaper made another attempt to torpedo the project, writing that the West Berlin producer should withdraw and leave the film to Carlo Ponti. "There is no good reason for a German producer to shoot the communist Bert Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* now. If an Italian producer wants to do that, that's his business! ... At any rate, Brecht is not one of ours. Not for three pennies and not for millions."³²

Yet Ulrich remained resolute. He needed to react quickly. Improvisation was unavoidable. The yellow press concert that followed, with tabloids reporting details, was a bit strange. One *Bild-Zeitung* headline claimed that Curd Jürgens played gangster Macheath "for free." As conveyed above, the truth was that Jürgens had already received his fee a year prior. When he then slyly tried to get more, Ulrich considered recasting the role; since Jürgens did not want that, he had to play the part for what he'd already received.

Shooting finally started with the following crew and cast: Wolfgang Staudte (director); Hein Heckroth (set and costume design), Peter Sandloff (musical arrangements), Roger Fellous (cinematography), Curd Jürgens (Macheath), June Ritchie (Polly), Hildegard Knef (Jenny), Ger Fröbe (Peachum), Hilde Hildebrand (Mrs. Peachum), Lino Ventura (Brown) and Sammy Davis Jr. (street singer).³³

Because there was no time to lose, different studios needed to be involved. Some scenes were shot at the UFA compound in Berlin-Tempelhof, others at the CCC compound in Spandau: "By doing this, scenes could be shot [in one location] while the sets for the next scenes were under construction [in the other]."³⁴ No question about it: conditions were not as Staudte would have wished. He was essentially working according to a stopwatch.

²⁹ Quoted in: *Der Spiegel*. 7 November 1962.

³⁰ Ibid. In his *Werkbuch zum Film* (loc. cit.) he claims that she had actually taken legal measures to forbid "such a topicalization." In 1961/62, Helene Weigel discussed all details of the *Threepenny Opera* film with Erich Engel and me. We knew nothing of the 160-page script with a frame narrative that Staudte mentioned.

³¹ *Werkbuch zum Film*. loc. cit.

³² [anon], "Wir wollen Brecht nicht! Weder für 'Dreigroschen' – noch für Millionen." *Bild-Zeitung*. Berlin. 7 June 1962.

³³ The production company is Kurt-Ulrich-Film GmbH in cooperation with C.E.C. Paris. Also involved: Script: Wolfgang Staudte, Günter Weisenborn; Architect: Gerd Krauss; Choreography: Dick Price; Cut: Wolfgang Wehrum; Sound: Fritz Schwarz; Line producer: Heinz Willeg; Producer: Kurt Ulrich. Other actors include: Marlene Warrlich (Lucy), Walter Giller (Filch), Hans W. Hamacher (Smith), Henning Schlüter (Kimball), Siegfried Wischnewski (Matthias), Walter Feuchtenberg (Jakob), Stanislav Ledinek (Robert), Martin Berliner (Wally the Weeper), Erna Haffner (First Prostitute). Distribution: Gloria-Film, Global Distribution: Kurt Ulrich-Film. A film in color and Franscope.

³⁴ Schimming, Wolfgang. "Hochzeitssmahl im Pferdestall. Unter Staudtes Regie entsteht in Berlin der neue *Dreigroschenoper*-Film." *Rheinische Post*. Düsseldorf, 17 Nov. 1962.

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On December 31, 1962, just in time for the deadline, the rough cut of the film was shown to Helene Weigel, Lotte Lenya and Erich Engel—and was approved by the widows. Erich Engel—whose stage production of *The Threepenny Opera* had been a hit at the Berliner Ensemble for a year and a half now³⁵—supposedly said: “Maybe the *Threepenny Opera* can and should not be adapted for film—but if it is, it should be done the way it was here.”³⁶ His statements at the Berliner Ensemble were significantly more critical. The German film premiere was on February 28, 1963, at the Gloria Palast cinema in Munich.



(Fig. 7) Simone Signoret presumably singing the song *And When the Enemy Entered the Country*.



(Fig. 8) Simone Signoret and Erwin Geschonneck (Chaplain).



(Fig. 9) Simone Signoret and Ekkehard Schall (Eilif).



(Fig. 10–11) Simone Signoret with Helene Weigel (Mother Courage).



³⁵ Premiered on April 1, 1960.

³⁶ Quoted in E. A. Walter, “*Dreigroschenoper*-Premiere 28. Februar.” *Die Welt am Sonntag*. Berlin, 10 February 1963.

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Quarrels with the Critics

To cut to the chase: Staudte had no luck with his second attempt to shoot a Brecht play. Though it was the “most expensive German film” to date, at four million West German marks, it succeeded in breaking even thanks to international sales but it bombed with the critics. Understandably, most compared this *Threepenny* film to the first one, directed by G. W. Pabst in 1931. In his review entitled “Wie man Brecht nicht verfilmen kann” [“Why It’s Not Possible to Adapt a Brecht Play”], Peter Daniel wrote: “Rather than taking into account the important changes in Brecht’s work over the course of the last 30 years, he [Staudte] even falls short of the Pabst film of 1931.”³⁷ In the same vein, Georg Ramseger resignedly wrote for *Die Welt*, with a nod to the *Threepenny Opera* lyric “For love will endure or not endure”: “Despite all the effort and attractive qualities, love for the old version will endure a bit longer than for the new.”³⁸ More than a few critics seemed so impressed with Brecht’s use of language that they tried their hand at it. In his critical review “Es geht auch anders, doch so geht es nicht” (“It Could Be Different, but Not Like This”), Hans-Werner Beck rhymed: “Oh this film has no teeth, dear: / Smoke and mirror, lots of light. / Just shed some hot tears, dear, / Because Brecht is not in sight.”³⁹

Staudte and Ulrich’s decision to make the film as elaborate as possible in hopes of making it more profitable was clearly not well received by experts and critics. As many critics noted, the high production costs basically prevented the film from achieving the same effect as the play. K. H. Ruppert summarized it as follows in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “A widescreen musical in color with a script by Bert Brecht. The widescreen and the color have thoroughly detoxified the film. Punchlines that get spelled out are no longer punchlines. What is specific to Brecht’s diction—its hard pithiness, its coarse poetry, its aggressive bluntness—are lost when the crisp lyrics of the songs dissolve into visual passages.”⁴⁰ Most critics felt that the play has been “defanged.” For example, Rolf Traube wrote in the *Deutsche Volkszeitung*: “Wolfgang Staudte has turned these sharpest anti-bourgeois satires in literary history into an honorably well-financed, meticulously arranged, glitzy, symphonically booming widescreen extravaganza. And he deserves no credit for the moments when, despite all the goings on, the wise and sly face of the indomitable playwright Brecht peeks through the gloss.”⁴¹ The review in the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* targeted not just the monumentality of the film, but also the music arranger—who was recommended by Lotte Lenya, of all people. “A super-color and costume show is not what Brecht intended. If he had, he would have written lyrics for songs in the style of Jack Lerner and would have asked not Kurt Weill, but someone like Leon Bernstein to compose the music—or like Peter Sandloff, to remain with arrangers who make a hodgepodge of Weill’s music.”⁴²

Most papers also criticized the casting. Curd Jürgens himself had had doubts about whether he could portray Macheath properly, but Ulrich was set on casting him and Staudte, once more, complied. According to the director, the actor had voiced his doubts during their first meeting; “But when I introduced him to how I envisioned Mack the Knife and how the role, aside from minor details, followed the Brechtian model, he was clearly relieved and quickly convinced.”⁴³ Jürgens’ doubts were justified; he comes across less like a smart gangster than “some sort of Rosenkavalier”⁴⁴ or a mix of “Fra Diavolo and the Gypsy Baron.”⁴⁵ A critic in the *Allgemeine Zeitung* in Mainz was even harder on the cast: “All of that [disproportionate scenography] could have been compensated for by the right casting. But already in his choice for Mack the Knife, Staudte made a mistake. Curd Jürgens is not Macheath, that gentleman-gangster, tough guy, Mephistopheles of the slums. Jürgens comes across like a ham actor in a farce. His gangster wears a gentleman’s mask hanging crookedly on his face.”⁴⁶

³⁷ Daniel, Peter. “Wie man Brecht nicht verfilmen kann.” *Die Andere Zeitung*. Hamburg, 14 February 1963.

³⁸ Ramseger, Georg. “Ein angenehmes Schauspielstück blieb.” *Die Welt*. Berlin, 2 March 1963.

³⁹ Beck, Hans-Werner. “Es geht auch anders, doch so geht es nicht...!” *Mannheimer Morgen*. 30 March 1963.

⁴⁰ Ruppert, K. H. “Mackie Messer ist nicht mehr der alte.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. München, 2 March 1963.

⁴¹ Traube, Rolf. “Ein Haifisch mit Prothese.” *Deutsche Volkszeitung*. Düsseldorf, 15 March 1963.

⁴² Wild, Winfried. “Der Haifisch ohne Zähne.” *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*. 3/2/1963.

⁴³ *Werkbuch zum Film*, loc. cit.

⁴⁴ Müller, André. “Und ein Haifisch ohne Zähne.” *film Spiegel*. 31 May. 1963. Editor’s note: *Der Rosenkavalier* is a comic opera by Richard Strauss, with libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

⁴⁵ Ruppert, K.H. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. loc. cit. Editor’s note: *The Gypsy Baron* is an operetta by Johann Strauss II, with libretto by Ignaz Schnitzer. *Fra Diavolo, ou L’hôtellerie de Terracine* is a French comic opera by Daniel Auber, with libretto by Eugène Scribe.

⁴⁶ hei, “Ein Haifisch mit Prothese.” *Allgemeine Zeitung*. Mainz, 3 March 1963.

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The only actor considered to have at least some sense of Brecht was Hildegard Knef as Jenny. After the film was also released in East Germany, in 1964, Eike Middell wrote in the East German *Sächsisches Tageblatt*: “There we see those tones of malice and harshness otherwise foregone in this defanged *Threepenny Opera* turned flashy Agfacolor spectacle.”⁴⁷ Middell judged the film as critically as others, though he is less malicious than the West German critics. He concluded: “Wolfgang Staudte was clearly aware that *The Threepenny Opera*, in particular, requires the use of alienation, today more than ever before. He turned it into a show, a revue, an operetta, a colorful cinematic spectacle that offers a multitude of things to see—only not a lot is left of Brecht.”⁴⁸ The reviewer at East Berlin’s *Der Morgen* was so irritated by the film “that all you can do after seeing this cheerless Staudte film is to rush to the Berliner Ensemble to quickly reassure yourself that the true *Threepenny Opera* is indestructible.”⁴⁹

The film was not well received in other German-speaking countries either, probably due to this domestic roasting. Werner Wollenberg, a critic for the Swiss *Zürcher Woche*, wrote a highly nuanced review that struggled to come to a conclusion. In addition to misbegotten scenes, he wrote, the film reveals some successful details: “The scenographic schizophrenia that repeatedly overcame Staudte in this film is so unfortunate because from time to time there are scenes that adhere fairly closely to Brecht and the original, which are very impactful. Everything that takes place in the basement of Peachum, the beggar’s friend, is unadulterated Brecht and extraordinarily impressive.” Yet those few good scenes are outweighed by the “corruption” of the original and of the genius of Brecht’s oeuvre, which is why Wollenberg was ultimately unable to refrain from the following conclusion in verse:

“And poor Brecht, our Bertolt,
Who is as famous as can be,
Woke up one day and was defiled—
Staudte, how high was your fee?”⁵⁰

In 1964, Staudte, Heckroth and Raguse published a *Werkbuch zum Film (Production Notebook)* under the title *Die Dreigroschenoper 63 (The Threepenny Opera ‘63)*, obviously to vindicate their film in the face of its critical failure.⁵¹ Addressing the negative press overall, which he had allegedly “anticipated,” Staudte again explained his agreement with all of Brecht’s stylistic and expressive devices:

In this sense I decided to emulate Brecht by employing all means the film offered to intervene as incisively as possible into the public sphere of our time. In doing this, I had to reckon that the apparent defanging of the play would leave me and possibly my artistic companions open to critical misjudgments by our strict professional judges—especially, since they would have rather expected the opposite from me, that is, an exaggerated politicization of the *Threepenny Opera*.

To help clear up the director’s rather convoluted justification, the publisher remarked in a footnote: “With films like *The Murderers Are among Us*, *Rotation*, *The Kaiser’s Lackey*, *Rosen für den Staatsanwalt (Roses for the Prosecutor)* and *Kirmes (The Fair)*, Wolfgang Staudte made a name for himself as Germany’s most politically-engaged director.”⁵² The Production Notebook contains expensively printed photographs, beautiful drawings and production notes in an unusual book format—so to speak, in CinemaScope and color.

Staudte’s attempt at justification might explain some things; but it also shows that he was apparently unaware of the misfortune involved in trying to film Brecht. Staudte was interested in a writer who, in both 1955 and 1961, became the focus of a political power struggle. He tried to deal with Brecht in the same way that he, as a director, was used to dealing with authors. In both cases, he had pushed for big, technically and financially demanding films. In 1955,

⁴⁷ Middell, Eike. “Die Dreigroschenoper.” *Sächsisches Tageblatt*. 22 February 1964.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Haedler, Manfred. “Die Dreigroschenoper.” *Der Morgen*. Berlin, 22 February 1964.

⁵⁰ Wollenberg, Werner. “Staudte, welches war dein Preis?” *Zürcher Woche*. 19 April 1963.

⁵¹ *Werkbuch zum Film*. loc. cit.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Quoted in Karl Kleinschmidt, *Neue Zeit*. Berlin, 19 August 1956.

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the politically suspicious Brecht impeded the CinemaScope spectacle. In 1963, the topic seemed fairly apolitical, and yet, even after his death, the politicized writer was once more caught in the stranglehold of the Cold Warriors.

Before he died, Brecht voiced a wish regarding his obituary: "Write that I was uncomfortable and that I intend to remain so after my death."⁵³ He clearly could not have known that it would botch a film production. But that is what happened. For Staudte and Ulrich, the Brecht boycott of 1961 created conditions under which no high-quality film could have been produced. This time, there was nobody stopping the production and no state to cover the financial losses.

Translated by Jan Jokisch

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Werner Hecht (1926-2017) studied theater and literature with the well-known literary scholar Hans Mayer and others. He joined the Berliner Ensemble as a dramaturg in 1959 and became Helene Weigel's close collaborator. Hecht was the director of East Germany's Brecht Center from 1976 to 1990. In this position, he was responsible for the international organization and coordination of research on Brecht's work. Hecht was one of four editors on the East/West German team that put together the extraordinary 30-volume edition, *Bertolt Brecht: Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* [*Bertolt Brecht: Works. The Extensive Annotated Berlin and Frankfurt Edition*].

⁵³ Quoted in Karl Kleinschmidt, *Neue Zeit*. Berlin, 19 August 1956.