

# THE LATE SPRING

*DEFA dramaturg Dieter Wolf remembers the production of Spring Takes Time.*

The first film to come into cinemas with the DEFA signet of the artistic production group Babelsberg 65 had its fate sealed already with its allegorical title: *Spring Takes Time*. The clairvoyant and rash allusion to Ilya Ehrenburg's novel, *Otpepel*<sup>1</sup> (*The Thaw*, 1954), reflects the naïve illusion of everyone involved—the hope for changes in the SED's film policies.<sup>2</sup> The film project was also inspired by the officially disputed Czechoslovakian film, *Obžalovaný* (*Defendant*, 1964), by Elmar Klos and Ján Kadár. By using the example of the fate of a plant manager, a film thematized for the first time through tragic escalation the absurdities of a socialist planned economy.

The DEFA Human Resource Officer, Lore Wulf, had made the young author, Hermann Otto Lauterbach, aware of an actual case about a serious company accident with legal consequences. Hans-Joachim Wallstein, the longest working DEFA dramaturg, offered the film idea to the newly founded artistic production group Babelsberg 65 after the group Roter Kreis turned it down for purely artistic reasons—not out of political fear. Roter Kreis was already working on an ambitious film idea set in the field of law, and which was written by a notable young author.<sup>3</sup> Bruno Pioch, who had just joined the studio, served as co-dramaturg. Pioch was shadowed by the intriguing rumor that he was a successful spy in the east with the French military intelligence agency, the Deuxième Bureau. The young author and the ex-chief dramaturg, Konrad Schwalbe, had given their best as screenwriters to add a character-determined, dramatic dimension to the clinical process of this accident involving a frozen gas pipeline.

*Spring Takes Time* discussed internal social problems and conflicts for the very first time. In our film, a prosecutor investigates a case of negligence against the senior engineer; even the political suspicion of sabotage is in the air. In reality, it is about the consequences of a misguided dedication to deadlines and to a disciplinary plan that an ambitious plant manager enforces at all costs and against all the concerns of his technical experts, and who was protected by his superiors and by an obedient union official.

The brisance of the material was obvious, but the young film team found itself in complete agreement with the Bitterfeld Conference<sup>4</sup> and with the Head of State, Walter Ulbricht: "Big conflicts in literature and the arts cannot only be of a private nature; there are real social contradictions underlying them. [...] Workers are not 'oppressed' by the major difficulties that arise during the work process; rather, in overcoming them, they become versatile and educated personalities, their communities grow, and the socialist collective grows."<sup>5</sup> And finally, our story does have an optimistic, positive conclusion: the first really brash prosecutor delivers a good ending with the exoneration and release of the innocent man.

DEFA Director of Production, Professor Wilkening, who was also a lawyer and worked for a short time after WWII as a senior prosecutor, was not left unimpressed by the argument of his young artistic production group leader D.W.<sup>6</sup> With our film and through the character of the prosecutor, the studio could positively modify the internal, already highly controversial critical image of the GDR judiciary in the film *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit Is Me*, 1965). It seemed to everybody involved to be preferable and not hazardous that our film brought to the fore the widespread management practices, a fixation on schedules, government pressure to succeed, careerism and self-importance, subservience and soft-pedaling. The new studio director, Jochen Mückenberger, encouraged by Party Secretary Dr. Werner Kühn, gave the green light, so they pushed for a rapid production even before Günter Stahnke's planned Anna Seghers adaptation, *Die Entscheidung* (*The Decision*, 1959). Stahnke, previously a journalist and now a director, accepted the offer immediately. With a young

<sup>1</sup> The novel was first published in the spring 1954 issue of the Russian language literary magazine *Novy Mir*. The American publisher Regnery launched the book in 1955.

<sup>2</sup> The SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) was founded in 1946 by a merger of the Socialist Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). It was the governing party in socialist East Germany for the duration of the country's existence, 1949-1990.

<sup>3</sup> The author Manfred Bieler worked on the script *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit Is Me*, dir. Kurt Maetzig).

<sup>4</sup> The Bitterfeld Conferences took place in 1959 and 1964. The ensuing policy emerging from the conferences, the *Bitterfelder Weg*, sought to combine the processes of production in the arts, in public life and in the lives of the workers and peasants.

<sup>5</sup> *Zweite Bitterfelder Konferenz 1964 Protokoll*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1964. 82, 89.

<sup>6</sup> D.W. stands for the author Dieter Wolf.

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team (camera, Hans-Jürgen Sasse; design, Georg Kranz; costumes, Dorit Gründel), he developed an expressive, stylized visual language done in black-and-white photography in extreme high-key style and dark suits in front of white walls in bright, shadowless, sparsely furnished rooms with standard selected props. During post-production he mixed pop music from the time with stylized sound montages. Stahnke did not want any “documentation of the destruction of a gas pipeline,” but rather “to make the psychological process visible through the approach with the actors.”<sup>7</sup>

As early as our artistic production group’s first discussion in August 1965, doubts were raised about whether the unconventional film language would make the unwieldy material and the dialog drama more adventurous or more alienating. Completely well intentioned discussants, production designer Harald Horn, director Gottfried Kolditz and critic Fred Gehler, praised the film’s good intentions while questioning its effectiveness in the cinema. By casting the negative key figure of the plant manager with Günther Simon, whose positive image and film roles represented moral integrity, we hoped for support against the expected criticism that we were fouling our own nest. Satirical accents in the representation of the trade union representative, played by Heinz Scholz, together with the comedienne Agnes Kraus, knowingly provoked such criticism.

Neither the sensationally low production cost of 680,000 MDN<sup>8</sup> in comparison to the budget limit of 800,000, nor the positively scaled critical self-evaluation—considering also artistic details—of the artistic production group were able to appease the acceptance committee. The group’s precautionary idea to shorten the arrest scene in order to mitigate the situational coldness of the event, was now imposed on the group as a condition by the Film Minister and Head of the Central Administration of Film (HV Film) Günter Witt: “The cut must be done from shot 20.” The group leader and studio director reported the implementation to the “Dear Comrade Minister,” but they informed him that his further demand that “image 7 (the scene with Ms. Faber/Inge) must be deleted” was impracticable for dramaturgical reasons. Instead, the group promised a gentler synchronization to redress the criticism about the principle as well as the cold confrontation between the pedagogy instructor, who is also the plant manager’s wife, and her student, the daughter of the man they arrested. The deliberately wooden performance by Karla Runkehl was not designed to arouse sympathy. Other scene edits were meant to accelerate the pace of the film and to lighten the film’s basic atmosphere. Regardless of these ideological skirmishes, and despite “the shortcomings and weaknesses in [the film’s] intellectual and artistic treatment,”<sup>9</sup> D.W., the invariably optimistic, young group leader, applied for a rating of “Good” before the premiere.

After the barely representative premiere on November 25, 1965, in the somewhat remote Berlin cinema Colosseum with friendly but in no way provocatively emphatic applause, Horst Knietzsch wrote in the official SED party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* with critical but in no way damning foresight, a “misunderstanding in black and white,” which nevertheless seemed to him to offer “a promising talent [in the director].” But after praising the film idea and topic by writing “the film encourages thinking and demands awareness [...],” the critic warned readers, with a good sense of the situation at the party’s central committee, as well as for the latest party line, “that the director falls into a vacuum with a narrow, subjective point of view [...]. Although the constellation of socialism and individualism is in itself already an absurdity [...], the director transposed the conflict situation onto the level of social universality. With that he puts himself in contradiction with historical truth.”<sup>10</sup>

Other than in the district of Gera, the film was released nationwide to theaters, but it is uncertain into which theaters it came. The district managers for cinema probably did not show the film in the big theaters. Their political instincts, as well as their often accurately down-to-earth box-office expectations would prevent it. Ultimately, in the two opening weeks before the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum in 1965, the film reached over 17,000 viewers; in Berlin alone it was about 2,500.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Film concept by Günter Stahnke. Private archive, Dieter Wolf.

<sup>8</sup> MDN = Mark der Deutschen Notenbank (Mark of the German Bank). The average cost of a film was around 1.3 million MDN.

<sup>9</sup> Artistic production group statement in preparation for the studio’s acceptance screening. Private archive, Dieter Wolf.

<sup>10</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, November 28, 1965.

<sup>11</sup> 4th weekly report by DEFA Central Accounting, January 12, 1966.

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Of all things, the participants of a training seminar hosted by the artist's union of the Dresden district council decided after a screening of the film that it was "appropriate to share the results of the discussion to the public, because this film raises fundamental political and aesthetic questions of general interest." These "experts" discovered a contrast between people at the bottom and those at the top. They noticed "the filmmakers had simplified the actual dialectical complexity of the development of new government and economic managerial methods," and also that "an illustration of the prejudices among artists in relation to reality [...] gives a distorted image of our problems and doesn't help anyone in any way in managing his own life." And they proved "how this schematic conception led to artistic means that we know from directors of critical realism, such as Antonioni, Fellini, among others [...], for which coldness, desolation and solitude are characteristic." Nevertheless, the cultural officials still recommended "that the film be screened in a way that guarantees the viewers the possibility to express their opinions publicly."<sup>12</sup> After every screening a discussion? And who with whom?



This advertisement—published in the daily paper *Neues Deutschland* on January 12, 1990—announced the revival of the film on January 18, 1990: "Moral values versus power and ownership. An inspiring DEFA film about everyday questions, filmed in 1965!"

The faculty of the Wilhelm Pieck Youth Academy<sup>13</sup> stated in a document, which was sent to the Politburo, the Central Council of the FDJ,<sup>14</sup> the Minister of Culture, and the editorial boards of *Junge Welt*<sup>15</sup> and *Neues Deutschland* that there is "only one conclusion: to hold comrades from DEFA and the VEB PROGRESS Film Distribution accountable for this film and to ban public screenings of it." This time the polemic was aimed not only at the film team, but also at artistic production group Babelsberg 65, which was only known from the opening film credits. In subtle ironic allusion to the film title, the faculty at Bogensee Lake<sup>16</sup> had discovered the cause: "[...] the deepest, absolute deepest ideological winter in the minds of this group. It borders on lack of political instinct to show our people the content of this film as typical of the development of our state. The film is not true; it spreads skepticism and distrust. It simply hinders our construction of socialism."<sup>17</sup> Afterwards, the film was quietly taken out of the cinema program without officially informing those of us in the studio. The 11th Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED Party was only a few days away. The group stayed somewhat quiet. After everything, our film was officially approved by the state and screened to the public for two weeks...

Thus, the irruption of the Berlin storm was not completely unexpected, as memory might suggest. At the end of November 1965, Film Minister Günter Witt invited his company and studio directors, and for the first time, the heads of the artistic production groups, for instruction at the HV Film at the Ministry of Culture. The instruction was a debriefing of Walter Ulbricht's

<sup>12</sup> *Tribüne*, December 16, 1965. *Tribüne* was the daily newspaper of the Free German Trade Union Federation (FDGB).

<sup>13</sup> The Wilhelm Pieck Youth Academy was "the highest educational institution of the central council of the FDJ for basic training for functionaries in Marxist-Leninist education, and for the promotion of international relations." (*Meyers Jugendlexikon*)

<sup>14</sup> FDJ stands for Free German Youth, the official youth organization in the GDR and the SED Party. The organization was meant for young people between the ages of 14 and 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Junge Welt* was the official daily paper of the GDR Free German Youth organization.

<sup>16</sup> The Wilhelm Pieck Youth Academy was located at Bogensee Lake, near Berlin.

<sup>17</sup> *Film und Fernsehen*. 3/4 (1996): 50.

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conversation with artists and writers, which had taken place on November 25, 1965. There was not only talk of the notorious political—both foreign and military—threats to the GDR, but for the first time, the never publicly acknowledged social phenomena as well. Ulbricht informed the participants about hooliganism, robberies and local crimes by youth. Female students compromised the annual harvest with scandalous topless demonstrations before the appalled eyes of the LPG farmers. The most recent celebrations of the *Tag der Republik* (Founding Day of the GDR) on October 7, in both Berlin and Leipzig, had been misused for hostile gatherings. Since internal social and political conditions could not withstand such dangerous developments, the logic of our leadership was that the causes were the influence of the enemy, that Western ideology and propaganda sought to influence our art and literature.

The film minister warned against taking wrong positions in feature filmmaking: alienation (*Spring Takes Time*); false conflicts between the youth and the older generation in films such as *Denk bloss nicht, ich heule* (*Just Don't Think I'll Cry*), *Karla* (*Carla*), *Fräulein Schmetterling* (*Miss Butterfly*), *Wenn du gross bist, lieber Adam* (*When You're Older, Dear Adam*); false confrontations between non-party individuals and party comrades and functionaries in *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit Is Me*). The HV Film now also discovered the same convulsive sex propaganda that Ulbricht had criticized in the harmless DEFA comedy *Ohne Pass in fremden Betten* (*Without a Passport in Strange Beds*, dir. Vladimir Brebera), which premiered on November 25, 1965.

Party and studio management were already thinking in subsequent meetings about how they could bring the most threatened films by Kurt Maetzig (*The Rabbit is Me*) and Frank Vogel (*Just Don't Think I'll Cry*) out of the line of fire. Everybody still believed that they could be saved with corrections and compromises. Fatal error. With the Politburo's decision to screen and judge both films during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the Central Committee, the die had been cast, and the banning of a half-year's film production followed. Even Günter Stahnke's *Spring Takes Time* was included. On December 22, 1965, the HV Film's Division for Approval and Control at the Ministry of Culture officially withdrew its approval of the film.<sup>18</sup> Only one day later, Film Minister Witt gave the orders for a disciplinary procedure with the goal of the summary dismissal of the director. But that was not very easy to do with the GDR's Labor Code. The film was, after all, sanctioned and approved by the state. So the studio suggested a less discriminatory termination agreement. Some time later, Günter Stahnke started working at GDR television, primarily as a director of entertainment television.

The film was reapproved by HV Film on November 16, 1989<sup>19</sup> and finally screened on January 18, 1990 at the Berlin cinema International. The spring took some time...

*Translated by Victoria I. Rizo Lenshyn.*

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<sup>18</sup> Editor's Note: The short, confidential document 130/65 dated December 22, 1965 states: "The approval of the film is withdrawn as of now. Progress Film Distribution must collect the film prints from all districts immediately." A copy of the original document was made available by the DEFA Foundation Berlin in September 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Editor's Note: The HV Film document 155/89—marked with 'for official use only'—dated November 20, 1989 reads: "Date of approval: November 16, 1989. The film is approved for public screenings in GDR cinemas. All earlier decisions regarding the distribution or against the distribution are invalid. [...] This approval follows the recommendation by the Association for Film and Television Worker's Committee for Banned Films." A copy of the original document was made available by the DEFA Foundation Berlin in September 2015.