The Responsibility of the Director

Journalist Margit Voss in conversation with director Wolfgang Staudte, 1966

Margit Voss recalls the circumstances of the interview

"I remember very clearly, as if it were only yesterday, how the conversation came about. I had taken over the arts section's film department at the Berliner Rundfunk (Berlin Broadcasting) at the end of the 1950s from Wolfgang Gersch, who wanted to conduct research on Brecht and left the radio station. One could not disregard Wolfgang Staudte, especially since he had made such important movies as Rosen für den Staatsanwalt *(*Roses for the Prosecutor*),* Herrenpartie *(*Destination Death*) and* Kirmes *(*The Fair*) in West Germany, after making* Die Mörder sind unter uns *(*The Murderers Are among U*s). Thus, I felt encouraged suggesting to the main editorial office that I do an interview with the director. This, however, required a visit to West Berlin. My request was granted. Equipped with a passport and a western recording device, I travelled to Dahlem on a fall day in 1966. My host opened the door and led me into the living room. Staudte was almost sixty und obviously in a gloomy mood. I was young and inexperienced in my profession, I felt numb from crossing the border from East to West Berlin and I was not very familiar with the recording device. In a word, I was totally self-conscious about being allowed to sit opposite such a famous man. If I had had more courage and experience, the conversation would have gained in volume and validity, especially since Western journalists were not interested in Staudte at this point in time. He certainly would have been poised to comment more copiously on his filmography and other questions."* [1]

The following interview was broadcast as part of the Kulturmosaik program of the Berliner Rundfunk radio station on September 8 and 9, 1966, on the occasion of the 60th birthday of director Wolfgang Staudte.

Margit Voss: Wolfgang Staudte, you once said, "It is very difficult for me to talk, especially about matters that concern me deeply." But I think that it is sometimes necessary to talk about oneself, for example when an important anniversary is coming up, such as we will have next week. Maybe you aren't even aware that thirteen years after the October 15, 1946 premiere of your film *The Murderers Are among Us*, on the occasion of the West German premiere in 1959, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted the "startling foresight" with which you had recognized problems that are burning issues for us today more than ever. Wolfgang Staudte, what were the experiences that led to the insights underlying the movie?

Wolfgang Staudte: Probably it was predominantly a personal experience. I went into hiding in Berlin during the last days of the war and was discovered by an SS officer who knew me and, naturally, abused me, and who drew his pistol. I was not a soldier. I had no documents that would have exempted me from any warlike activity. I have to admit quite honestly that I was not very scared at that moment; I thought that the Red Army was already near Bernau, roughly in this area. I knew that everything would be over with these gentlemen in the next few days—and so I wondered what [this SS officer] would actually do when all this came to an end. What audacity: wanting to threaten an adult with a pistol at this point in time! This was basically a situation that affected me personally. The problem itself had already become clear to me much, much earlier. I had already written the exposé for this story before the capitulation. Days or weeks before, I had read it to a very trusted friend, the cinematographer Friedl Behn-Grund; and I told him that whenever this drama [WWII] was finally finished we would make this movie together. Friedl Behn-Grund had the bad fortune to lose a leg during a shell burst on the last day. This work, I think, or the prospect of this work helped him a lot. I told him we would wait until he could walk again, clearly; but not to worry, in the meantime I would try to set up our project. It was actually more of a dream, because there was nobody there. There was actually still war.

The time during the Third Reich was, I am convinced, simply a time that I had to survive. And when I realized that I had survived, there came a natural, irrepressible will: now I could finally do what I really wanted to do, what I was capable of doing and not have to continue doing things for mere expediency. My somewhat foolish idea back then was about not, under any circumstances, having to actively participate in these criminal acts. I am not very proud of it. In other words, I

[1] Margit Voss described the meeting with the director Wolfgang Staudte in an email to Hiltrud Schulz, DEFA Film Library, on May 2, 2016, and gave her consent for these recollections to preface the interview from 1966.

was careful not to become a soldier. Back then, I was very proud that I could say I had never fired a shot in my life. Today, I would say that this is no special reason to feel proud. I would be prouder if I had fired a few shots in the right direction.

But, back then, that's how it was. My views were, at this time, not so much those of a politically conscious man; or, let's say, at least not at the beginning of the Third Reich and its major political and criminal cataclysm. I became politically conscious as I gradually recognized the crimes. This is what I am today, as completely and totally as one can be as a movie director. I don't think the film is especially clear-sighted, because—independent of personal experience—it was to be expected that this problem would head our way. And I would say that not only were there murderers among us, but also many perpetrators. It did not take much clairvoyance to see that this problem would accompany us for years to come. The fact that we are still dealing with this problem in West Germany is the sole fault of these gentlemen who have to answer for the present, namely the government here in Bonn. There is no doubt about it. I do not want to recall the grotesque names of Globke and Oberländer[2] because you get sick of it. And yet, there is no comprehensible argument for how such people could be in these positions.

I am currently writing a script. I was therefore forced to inform myself, so I picked up and read Stuckart and Globke. I found sentences there that I would not even dare quote in a political satire.[3]

MV: When you made *The Murderers Are among Us*, you didn't think that you'd make *Roses for the Prosecutor*, *The Fair* and *Destination Death*. These are actually all movies that in one way or another…

WS: … all relate to the same thing.

MV: But let's return to *The Murderers Are among Us*, the movie that made you world-famous. You directed this movie at DEFA. That is to say, DEFA did not exist yet back then. One simply says DEFA—that was in Babelsberg. You had to go to the Soviet Military Administration. That was not at all usual for a person who, like you, lived in the British sector.

WS: At the time of the capitulation and the first postwar period, for me, they were the allies. I was not pro-Soviet, or pro-American, or pro-British, or pro-French. And since I lived in the British sector, it seemed natural to go to the British with my short exposé. Then, to make a long story short, I went to the Americans and I went to the French.

MV: Peter van Eyck was with the British back then.

WS: No, he was with the Americans. He was the presiding film officer with the Americans, and he told me in broken German—but wearing an incredibly well-fitted uniform—that we Germans shouldn't even think of making movies for the next 20 years.

MV: Did you ever remind him of this later on?

WS: No, I actually never saw him again in person. Later, I went to Dymshitz, the Soviet officer in charge of culture, and there we had a very short conversation. Maybe I should mention that at the end of the movie it is the hero who shoots the Nazi, the bourgeois Nazi, in my original version. This was the only objection that Dymshitz had. He said, listen, that won't do! It's almost an invitation for someone to do that. I can imagine that there are many people you would like to shoot. However, I think that there has been enough shooting here. We want to stop the shooting here. Do come up with something. He should be handed over to the courts. Where would we be if we all started to kill each other? Well, first I was basically against this, just like any angry young man today, but I soon realized that it was appropriate.

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[2] Editor's Note: Hans Globke, although known for his anti-Semitic activities as a lawyer before and during the Nazi period, was recruited to serve the West German Adenauer administration. Theodor Oberländer, scientist and Nazi officer, supported the ethnic cleansing policies of the Nazis. He joined the Adenauer government in 1953.

[3] Editor's Note: Wilhelm Stuckart was a Nazi Party laywer. After WWII, he was convicted as war criminal.

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MV: Someone said to you during an interview that you are always the one whose movies are provocative. And you answered that you do not provoke, but are being provoked. How should we understand your response?

WS: Social conditions provoke me, and they must provoke me considerably before I have enough time, strength and energy to write a movie against these conditions. You can't say that I am being provocative when Mr. Seebohm delivers a speech. Then it is Mr. Seebohm being provocative, not I! If I portray someone like this man in *Destination Death*, then it's the result of a provocation.

MV: Could we say that all the movies we've talked about, e.g. *Destination Death*, *The Fair*, *Roses for the Prosecutor* and *Der letzte Zeuge* (*The Last Witness*)—films that you made in West Germany—all came about because you were provoked by a certain situation at the time? I read, for example, that *Roses for the Prosecutor* came into being through your studiously reading newspapers and collecting newspaper clippings.

WS: Yes, that is correct! I mean, this problem was also in the press back then. You have to say that the West German newspapers naturally got awfully upset about the constant cover-ups and how Nazi judges who were guilty of real crimes dared dispense justice again. For me the most incredible thing is not that they get interviewed for one position or another and then get invited to fill it. The unbelievable thing is that these people accept these positions…! I would like to know how it looks in their hearts, their consciences. That's what I find so outrageous! I ask myself, how does it look inside a highly-decorated Nazi general who is a commander in the West Germany army today? In my opinion, this is the moral defect that surfaces again and again and that is not acceptable. It needs to be challenged and attacked. And it is being attacked. I will be working in the academy now. This means I will have some German and foreign students. I told them already that the fact of being a movie director, or nothing but a movie director, is in and of itself actually nothing.

The question is: why and for what reason am I a movie director? What is the purpose of my being a movie director? For whose benefit am I a movie director? To just make movies is a learnable craft. This I find neither especially laudable, nor especially reprehensible. It is like any other craft. I remember once saying that, with the special position of being a movie director in a society, there comes a special obligation towards the era I live in and towards that society—the one I receive acclamations and, for all I care, protests, whistling, shouting and ranting from.

MV: This means you clearly argue for social engagement.

WS: Yes, totally.

MV: … and that you also want your art to be understood in this way.

WS: I would be bored without engagement. I would be bored simply making a movie, and I have gotten bored, I must say. I have been in some situations in my life when I made movies that bored me. I simply made these films, better than not making one at all, or when it was not possible to make a certain film. You must not forget … the aggravation, or the rage I have to come to terms with demands that an appropriate plot occur to me before this galling occurrence can be turned into a movie. First of all, I have to come up with a plot. Sometimes I am enraged about matters, but by the time a plot occurs to me, the rage has subsided. And secondly, I need money from people who are not enraged about these matters. Do you understand how complicated this is? Whenever I want to carry out a project, I need, let´s say, about a million Marks, and usually from people who are not at all interested in this problem, who only think they might make some money with it.

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MV: But, Mr. Staudte, you have often been accused, among other things, that with your criticism you are only against things and do not provide anything positive.

WS: Well, I am, for example, against the atomic bomb! I wrote a film proposal about this with Robert Jungk. And as a precaution I did not write the script myself but asked a highly-decorated author—Heinz Pauck, who had been awarded the Bundesfilmpreis (German Film Award)—to write it. I wanted to produce it myself. To my great chagrin, but not to my amazement, this script did not get the 200,000 Marks funding. I don't know if you know that this exists. You hand in your script to a somewhat Kafkaesque authority, you do not quite know who this actually is, and then you either get 200,000 Marks, if the gentlemen…

MV: … it's a government office.

WS: …it's a governmental office. You get 200,000 Marks production support from them. For example, a movie that did not conform with my intentions, *Das Lamm* (*The Lamb*). It is as placid as a lamb and, naturally, it received 200,000 Marks. And I don't know how many useless movies also got it. Admittedly, I do not know whether one or the other useful movie got it. I don't know this.

In any case, I was unable to make this movie in which I clearly expressed myself against political gambling with atomic and nuclear powers. It is still sitting, unmade, in a drawer.

MV: Does this mean that there is something like pre-censorship?

WS: This is basically a… at least pre-censorship. It is a regulation, a tacit regulation.

MV: …through the power of money.

WS: …through the power of money and due to the economic position of cinema in a capitalistic country. That is clear.

MV: With this example, with your script against the nuclear bomb, you actually said what you are for?

WS: I am for many things. I am for peace, for example. I am for a politics of coexistence. I am for communication. I could mention much more. I am also for joy and for cheerful people and for sunshine. But those are not my responsibility, I leave those things to others to portray…

MV: …things that are only good and beautiful.

WS: …good and beautiful, as long as there are still so many things that are not good and beautiful.

MV: Wolfgang Staudte, which of the movies that you made in West Germany did you make the way you wanted to?

WS: It is not very easy to answer this question. You must not forget that with each hour, as soon as one has a project, a movie, when one plans a movie, the manipulations begin. In that moment, when the idea for a movie occurs, the manipulations of an indirect nature begin, because you ask yourself: can or will this movie prove at all successful at the box office? If you want success, you might have to make the movie somewhat more attractive. And to which producer should you entrust the script? And who should the film distributor be? And from whom will you get the money? These considerations, these bad fairy godmothers stand at the cradle of the first ideas for a movie. And, as I said, these thoughts did not stand at the cradle at DEFA, or during time I worked for DEFA. There was incredibly more freedom to work. This degree of freedom can be explained simply by the fact that everything I wanted to do, what my ideal was, my dream, my wish, was in sync or coordinated with the place of production. Or they had same desire to say it more clearly. It was no problem for me to return from England and say that I wanted to make *Der Untertan* (*The Kaiser's Lackey*). There was no powerful boss who says: Have you gone crazy, man? Such an expensive movie, that's out of the question! And who is

supposed to see it? And by Heinrich Mann, why on earth? And you want to have 140 actors? You must be crazy! It's simply not possible here. And most people don't even know who Mann is. And the next love scene—no no, bring me something else. Do you understand what I mean? That's what influences it!

MV: Especially from a commercial point of view?

WS: Yes, to a great extent.

MV: But there were different objections in the case of *Roses for the Prosecutor*. And I read that you had a lot of problems, especially with *The Fair*.

WS: Well, you know, I have to tell you something. If people decide, or if a man decides to criticize or attack the society in which he lives—or the dominant society at the moment—in all fairness, he has to permit this society to defend itself. It would be much worse if I made a political movie and got the German Film Award for it.

MV: Which you never received.

WS: Which I never received. But I think that this is fair. I think it is OK. I have never understood left-leaning intellectuals who blithely rant and then complain that they were never recognized by those circles they railed against. I do not want to be accepted by them; I would find it incredibly embarrassing. I wouldn't even know how to behave. If I were a coward, I would call in sick. If I were courageous, I would tell them to go sit on a tack.

MV: In your movies, in retrospect, it is almost always so-called ordinary people who are your heroes. You put these ordinary people in extreme situations and evaluate their behavior.

WS: I mean, first of all, it is the fate of ordinary people to deal with evil powers. This conflict reveals deficits more commonly than showing equal worth. And something else is important: because of my nature and my opinions, I am not that interested in an individual's fate, even if that person has problems. If he is representative of only a small minority, I don't find his personal fate as interesting as if he represents the fate of a multitude of people. The fate of a person who stands for a million people is simply a more important subject.

MV: Wolfgang Staudte, one notices a satirical element in many of your movies. I am thinking, for instance, of *Die Abenteuer des Fridolin B.* (*The Adventures of Fridolin B.*), one of your early movies, but also of *Roses for the Prosecutor*, or especially *Destination Death*. In *Destination Death*, the tragic is tied strongly to satirical traits. Do you think this shows an idiosyncrasy of your artistic persona, or is determin by given materials?

WS: Both. A satirical vision is one of my characteristic traits in everyday life as well. Some friends resent this and others are amused by it. I do not know where it comes from. Strangely enough, I have a penchant for a facetious point of view. As far as the movies are concerned: for one I had a brilliant book by Heinrich Mann, *The Kaiser's Lackey.* There I was under his spell. And gladly so. I actually only needed to adapt everything he had projected. And, naturally, it suited my penchant for mocking exaggeration. As far as the other movies are concerned… as far as satire in *Roses for the Prosecutor* is concerned, there was a reason for me to choose this topic. For a start, I had already made *The Murderers Are among Us*. Second, I knew that I would only be able to get such a fervent and important topic across to the audience if I offered them the opportunity to laugh. I think that laughter is a strong and also a political weapon. Someone who has been laughed at is actually more done-in than someone who is being scolded.

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MV: In the press you frequently have been accused of fouling your own nest. Nevertheless, your movies screened abroad; and you were frequently a guest in these countries and were able to observe audiences for yourself. What sense did you have of the impression your movies made abroad?

WS: Well, this sentence, "to foul one's own nest," is simply idiotic. When we started working [after WWII], the nest was so fouled that every activity could only be a cleansing; it was impossible to think it could be even more fouled. Secondly, it is just insane to think that we are respected abroad—I am not only talking about the East, I am also talking about Scandinavia, France, the Netherlands. It is outrageous to believe that we would have any standing abroad—be it a political, human or national one—or that we would lose face if we show that things do not function impeccably in our country. Coming to terms with the past. Of course, the opposite is true. It is absolutely true that all the movies that here were watched with light resentment and accordingly commented upon, also brought an increase in [international] prestige for West Germany, given they were made here.

And the very first movies, the ones I made for DEFA—well, we do not have to talk about those. Because, for instance, the movie *The Murderers Are among Us*. It was not clear to me when I made that film—I did not understand what I was actually doing while I shot that movie. And I was one of the first who was invited to England, to Holland. My films are shown in the Netherlands as documentation of a Germany as people there wish it were.

MV: Thus, you gave audiences abroad some hope. Hope that even West Germany might face the past, if there is someone like Wolfgang Staudte who raises his voice.

WS: I must tell you that we are many, very many. Luckily, I am not the only one. Rather, there are very many for whom it is a constant concern and constant preoccupation. So I am only doing, in my field, that which I am capable of doing.

Translated by Sigrit Schütz.

Margit Voss was born in Labenz, Kreis Lauenburg (Eastern Pomerania, today Poland) on June 22, 1931. She received her Abitur (high-school diploma) in Schwerin in 1951. She attended the School for Broadcasting in Berlin in 1952 and became an editor for Berliner Rundfunk (Berlin Broadcasting) in 1953. Voss completed a degree in journalism from Leipzig University through distance learning and a degree in film studies from the Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg. Voss was a movie critic for the East Berlin Berliner Rundfunk radio station until 1991, after which she worked as a freelance journalist for local television stations, including SFB, ORB and MDR, and for various print media. She has served on committees for the German Film Award and for script development at the Ministry of the Interior.

We thank the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv and Margit Voss for permission to translate this interview and publish it on this DVD. Every effort has been made to find and contact Wolfgang Staudte's copyright holder as well, in order to obtain permission to reproduce the interview.