

Working with Lay Actors in *Jana and Jan*

A Interview with Helmut Dziuba



This interview with director Helmut Dziuba (HD) was conducted by Maxi Richter, an intern at the DEFA Film Library (DFL), in summer 2009.

DFL: *In East Germany, juvenile detention centers were almost entirely sealed off from society. What led you to direct a feature film set in a juvenile detention center during the Wende period, when there was such great social upheaval?*

HD: There were different kinds of juvenile detention centers in the GDR: open vs closed, single gender vs mixed The guys and girls in the detention centers were no saints; they came from broken families, had been abandoned, were sometimes criminals, familiar with drugs and violence, and difficult to control and educate. The juvenile detention center was the last stop before being sent to a high-security juvenile prison. The goal was to keep them until the age of 18, give them a completed vocational training, and make them socially competent. Juvenile detention centers were a “closed society” with extreme conditions and strict rules. Then all of a sudden the borders opened, the walls broke, rules and laws had to be newly formulated . . . You can go out! You are free! What does this “freedom” bring? Hopes, dreams that might come true? Fears? New limits? For me it was a metaphor for lived reality.

DFL: *A long search for the right actors was typical for films made at the East German DEFA studios—as much as independence from producers pushing for commercial success. Do you think it would be possible to make a film on this kind of topic in the same way today?*

HD: After my experiences as co-author and mentor in the children’s and youth film scene—for example for *Die Blindgänger* (*The Blind Flyers*, 2004)—and with all the screenplays that are lying in some drawer or producers who can’t find investors, I can answer with a definite “NO!” Today, film is business. Even films for young people.

DFL: *An enormous amount of social work went along with shooting *Jana and Jan*, because of the difficult background of the young people. What inspired you to use lay actors?*

HD: I think it was only possible to make the film because I worked with the same production team with whom I made almost all my films. We used our experience about the way people interact; in other words, how the professional actors, children and teenagers interacted with one another. The important precondition, which this crew immediately understood, was that each of these boys and girls saw us as partners and not as supervisors or educators.

DFL: *While you were searching for the right actors for *Jana and Jan*, you went through all juvenile detention centers in eastern Germany. Why did you choose this difficult approach over simply casting actors?*

HD: My seasoned co-workers, Barbara Mädler and Bernd Sahling, went through the juvenile detention centers in eastern Germany—in what would come to be called the “new federal states.” At the same time, I looked around for other young people and auditioned them.

Why? Because of my experience with prior films, in which I had always worked with lay actors.

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Protagonists had to be found who fit the heroes of the story; lay actors, young people, who were ready to reveal their own “I”—to put forth their whole personality with no “ifs” and/or “buts.” Behind every face is a different experience. That is the appeal of discovery: naiveté, spontaneity of character, personal idiosyncracies. In my experience, a patient search and arranging individuals into the psychological and social physiognomy of the ensemble both influence the quality of the story considerably. The success or failure of the film is partially determined in this phase.

Nothing is more detrimental to a story than over-trained, child semi-professionals, who are confident of themselves and their “acting ability.” Or young semi-professionals recommended by casting agencies and “used” by directors and producers so they can have “quick partners” during filming. The result: typed, standard gestures; empty eyes; repetitive, un-thought-through text. The breath is missing, the tension, the relationship to the partner, the randomness. Every day of shooting counts. The budget is tight, much too tight, to cautiously fathom the possibilities and limits of the acting before filming begins, to uncover characters and personalities and render them useful to the hero of the story. This is indispensable, however, when working with lay actors; it allows the audience to truly identify with the hero on the screen and makes possible an enthralling, memorable and lasting film experience. And, finally, it also saves time filming! The ensemble mirrors reality. The young people who came from the detention center and the other young people coalesced into a single entity.

There are no professional actors who are the same age as the heroes of the story.

DFL: *East German juvenile detention centers were a sort of home—or prison—and it wasn't easy to get children and youths out. How complicated was it to get the young people out for filming?*

HD: Not a home, not a prison. The detention center was an attempt at re-education through work-based learning. As you pointed out earlier, we were filming in a time of upheaval and transition. Due to this transitional situation, the supervisors responsible for the young people were increasingly willing to support our undertaking. And the girls and boys felt trust and were really dedicated. Even though it was sometimes very difficult for them.

DFL: *Who took responsibility for the teens during filming?*

HD: Bernd Sahling, my assistant and social worker with his small crew of street workers.

In the end, actually, all of us were responsible—from the lighting technician to the production manager.

DFL: *Did young people ever use the chance to flee, or were there other unexpected incidents?*

HD: No one ran away. Why would they? But there were incidents. They cleared them up themselves, under Bernd's leadership. Filming went without a hitch.

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DFL: *How was the cooperation between the young lay actors and the professional actors, like Karin Gregorek and Peter Sodann?*

HD: It seems to me that the result is clear. The professionals had to stretch themselves. Karin Gregorek, Peter Sodann—we knew each other from previous projects; they knew our approach and accepted the “lay actors” as equal partners.

DFL: *You once said in an interview that the young people were unbelievably honest. You acknowledged “that they were by no means little dolls and tots and so many saw the film as a chance to express and free themselves.” Do you know whether participating in this film brought a real-life change for any of them?*

HD: The work was a unique experience for each of them. Their self-confidence grew: I am somebody! I’m being taken seriously! I’m an important part of the whole! Saying goodbye after filming was not easy. There were even tears. I mean—what are 33 days of filming? Whether there were lasting changes in the life of one or another person, I can’t say. I would hope . . .

DFL: *Why did you choose this ending for your film?*

HD: Ultimately Jana and Jan face the question: “Now what?” There were suddenly freedoms that people weren’t able to grasp or take advantage of, because they were so preoccupied with themselves. “Now what?” And what determined these people’s feelings? Hope, perhaps? Skepticism? That was a question for me as well. And therefore the film basically ends in no man’s land. At the end, the birth of the baby is hinted at, but the cry is missing. Simply because we still had no answer for the story of these young people.

Translation by Delene White, DEFA Film Library.

The DEFA Film Library would like to thank Helmut Dziuba for sharing his time for this interview.

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