At the Hairdresser’s with Brecht and Dudow

Translated excerpts from an 1981 interview with Hertha Thiele, by film historian Ralf Schenk, which appeared in Film und Fernsehen, 5/1982

From 1928 until 1931, I worked at the Schauspielhaus in Leipzig. I had also starred in Girls in Uniform, which had not yet premiered. Brecht and Dudow were preparing to make Kuhle Wampe and were looking for a new face for the role of Anni. The film editor of Girls in Uniform showed them some clips, even though this wasn’t allowed. After this sneak preview, on September 1, 1931, I received a telegram from Prometheus [production company], asking if I could come to Berlin to plan a project. I went in secret because I was supposed to be going to a dress rehearsal [in Leipzig]. In Berlin, Prometheus offered me parts in three films within a year. They gave me a summary of Kuhle Wampe to read. I knew of Brecht, his “Drums in the Night” and “The Threepenny Opera.” So I accepted immediately. On September 5th, I was in Berlin and started shooting Kuhle Wampe….

… Anni represented a type of person you often saw on the street at that time, similar in dress and thought; but for me she was completely new. I grew up in a middle-class home and first learned about socially critical art at the theater in Leipzig….

… The first thing that happened was that Dudow and Brecht took me to the hairdresser. I had long hair at the time. They asked me to cut it short, the way I still wear it today. It was hard for me at first, but then I felt free, more comfortable, like I was transformed. That was the start….

Then I met Ernst Busch, who played the role of Fritz. Busch was a complicated and difficult person, but throughout my life he remained my favorite colleague. I also met Lilli Schönborn, who had already acted in many communist plays. Both of them molded me intellectually. Brecht, who sometimes took me to workers’ meetings, also had a part in that. … Brecht worked on the dialogues during shooting, as he was the dialogue director. Ernst Busch was very helpful while I was learning the text, because of his calm and quiet attitude.

We often shot on location – on Müller Strasse, for example, where we shot in a room in which 7 people used to live. …This was an eye-opener for me, like many other things I saw during the shoot. … It was the first time in my life that I saw a factory from inside – the female workers at their places there. … We [also] hired athletes from the [working-class] Fichte sports club, who really needed to earn the two or four marks being paid. 4,000 Fichte athletes were needed for some scenes….

Brecht had an endless supply of sometimes very biting humor. Dudow, in contrast, was very spare in his emotions and manner of expression. This sometimes caused arguments. In the end, they always quickly realized that they both wanted the same thing, but had different ways of expressing it – partly because of the style of mediation used by Hanns Eisler, who was often present. … [Dudow] was a honest person, but he was also a little difficult, stubborn, you could say. … He would stubbornly pursue his goal and not accept anything else. It was not always easy to deal with him. We had our first argument on the very first day. Dudow took me out to lunch. When I admired the very nice roses on our table, Dudow responded with, “Well, factory chimneys mean a lot more to me.” I didn’t understand it at all at the time.