

DEFA's *Coming Out*

For this DVD release, Hiltrud Schulz (DEFA Film Library) held an exclusive interview with Dieter Wolf in November 2019. Wolf was the founder and former head of the Babelsberg Artistic Production Group at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films, which produced Heiner Carow's 1989 film *Coming Out*.

Coming Out, for which Wolfram Witt wrote the scenario, was produced in your DEFA production group at the end of the 1980s. Do you remember how the production came about?

In addition to my work at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films, I headed the film studies/dramaturgy department at the Academy Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg. Here I met Wolfram Witt, who was my student from 1974 to 1977. In around 1985, working with Heiner Carow on a film project with the working title *Die Hebamme* (*The Midwife*), we were looking for an author. So I recommended Witt to my dramaturg, Erika Richter; she then introduced him to Carow, and they immediately clicked. The collaboration ran swiftly and without conflict all the way to the premiere of *So viele Träume* (*So Many Dreams*)—the final title of the film—in September 1987.

Already at this time, a plan to address the sensitive topic of homosexuality in the GDR was maturing. Witt was already in a long-term relationship with the journalist and author Jens Bisky, at this point. In 2004, Bisky made this relationship and his work on the movie *Coming Out* public in his autobiography, *Geboren am 13. August: Der Sozialismus und ich* [*Born on August 13: Socialism and I*]. It was known that Witt was homosexual; but in our taboo-filled and quasi-public communication, it would not have occurred to us to call him "gay" ... even though the term had been used with pride for a long time in West Germany.

What was the original film idea, the treatment, that was discussed and taken on by the Babelsberg Artistic Production Group?

Wolfram Witt presented a rough draft for the film, which we bought. I followed up with a contract for the treatment. Witt was to have his honorarium paid in three installments: upon signing, upon delivery and upon final approval.

The theme, the basic idea and the story were already exactly defined in the treatment: Philipp, 27, becomes the teacher of an 11th-grade class at a Berlin *Erweiterte Oberschule* (high school). An invitation to the home of his young colleague Tanya, whom he already knew in college, surprisingly ends up in bed. Tanya has already liked him for a long time, but never approached him. In high school, Philipp was very attracted to his friend Jakob, but ended the relationship for the sake of his parents. Since then, he has lived alone. In his tender relationship with Tanya, Philipp suppresses his earlier, rather latent homosexual tendencies, until he meets Jakob again. But he doesn't want to endanger his happiness with Tanya. Only a chance encounter with a young man, Matthias, leads to love at first sight. They celebrate Matthias' birthday in a gay bar, happy to have found each other. Philipp suffers from this conflict, but he can't tell Tanya. When Matthias runs into both of them together, he is shocked and runs away, distraught. Now Philipp must tell Tanya and she is terribly disappointed. In the course of a futile search for Matthias, Philipp gets to know the ignoble conditions under which homosexuals meet and find each other. He starts neglecting his work and his students. Eventually he gets advice from an old man, who himself was persecuted for being gay by the Nazis and put in a concentration camp. At the end of his rope, Philipp steps in front of his class, and the colleagues who have come to observe it, and admits he is gay.

How did the project continue after that?

On the basis of this treatment, we applied to the chief dramaturg for immediate further work on the scenario; he had to issue the assignment on behalf of the studio. Given that this was in late 1987, we decided it might be advisable for us to also offer a detailed cultural policy justification. This kind of document was called an Ideological-Artistic Guide to the Scenario. Erika Richter wrote it and we both signed the document.

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The story has a clear educational intention. Its goal is to tell people about the difficult conditions faced by homosexual people, to advocate for knowledge, understanding and tolerance and against the barriers and avoidance of contact which—while not based on restrictive economic, ideological, legal and moral conditions in our society—nevertheless exist and which severely impair and burden the everyday life of homosexual citizens. We think it is high time to employ a feature film like this to promote and accelerate the practical normalization process of integrating homosexuals into all areas of our social life, in accordance with the humanistic values of our society. This is a problem that moves many, as public response to Reiner Werner's non-fiction book *Homosexualität (Homosexuality)* and the discussion in the journal *Deine Gesundheit (Your Health)*, among other things, has shown. In recent years, there have been various efforts in our society, including a working group in the Central Committee of the SED Party, to make this previously taboo area of life more transparent.

With our project, we are part of this more general social movement. At the same time, by engaging with this issue and setting out to achieve said goals, we are breaking new ground in cinematography, and not just in our own country. This gives this film a good starting point for achieving success. In addition, the chosen subject offers a foundation for touching upon the comprehensive question—which goes far beyond the problems faced by homosexuals and affects all of us—of a life without lies, without repression, and with trust, openness and tolerance, corresponding to the fundamental ideals of our social order.

In addition to these programmatic declarations of intent, was there any concrete dramaturgical advice or demand?

Erika Richter also formulated concrete priorities for the film. They concerned dramaturgical questions and psychologically-accentuated problems in the behavior of the characters, and whether they would be comprehensible to an unprepared, in part homophobic audience. Understandable, yet beside the point for the authors, was the expectation expressed in this three-page document: "Tanya (will) perhaps even be the main identification figure" and it is our hope that "she will perhaps arrive at a confident attitude towards the man she loves, but has no chance with. (...) Aside from this other natural variation of sexuality, Philipp and Lutz and Matthias and Jakob are just like us, just as distant, just as reserved, just as mocking and ironic, even in moments of mourning, and, like us, they cry only in the rarest of cases. Any semblance of neurotic behavior outside the norm must be strictly avoided."

On this basis, the chief dramaturg promptly granted the contract for the scenario to Wolfram Witt and, in addition, a consulting contract to Heiner Carow. That way, work on the script could continue without delay.

And yet, production did not start until 1988...

There were production-related reasons why we did not start before 1988-89. For a long time, Carow had been preparing a big, historical antiwar epic, *Simplicius Simplicissimus*. In the scenario—based on the autobiographical novel by the late medieval folk-poet Grimmelshausen—author Franz Fühmann had created a strong social and human drama set during the Europe-wide Thirty Years' War. But in 1986-87, the project was halted by studio management during the script stage because, with a planned budget of 16 million GDR marks, it would have cost almost half of DEFA's budget for the year. This led to an extended, serious conflict between Carow and DEFA's general director, Hans Dieter Mäde. I told Mäde about the work on *Coming Out*, and he made it very clear to me—in a private conversation—that he refused to be the first studio director in a socialist country to produce a film about homosexuality.

And this didn't impact the continuation of the project?

We didn't let it throw us off, and the general director did nothing to stop the successful development of the script being financed by the studio—even though later Carow tirelessly spread the word in the German public that he had had to fight eight years for this project and that the film had to be made quasi-secretly and behind the management's back. Nobody asked how that could have worked in the GDR: without a contract and with whose money? The legend stemmed

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more from the secret desire of the artist, but it had nothing to do with reality.

I experienced a last, deeply shocking clash between Carow and Mäde in a management meeting, in perhaps June 1988. The meeting was supposed to be about the production of *Coming Out*. Mäde was still in the midst of his wordy introductory statement, when an angry Carow could no longer contain himself in the guest chair. He would not listen to this any longer, he said, and, slamming the door, he left the now frozen group. I hurried after him, but he would not return. “No, I won’t talk to him again!” In the meantime, another of his projects, the filming of the rock opera *Paule Panke*, had been rejected by Mäde and Horst Pehnert, the Minister of Film. And in reality, there were no opportunities for Carow to talk to him anyway, because Mäde, the extremely diligent general, left his increasingly rebellious troops, first temporarily and then for good in September 1988, for an early retirement. This was very unusual in the GDR; it was allegedly for health reasons.

The scenario was written in three months and accepted by the chief dramaturg in May 1988. This was the prerequisite for us to apply for production permission and the release of the budget. The application was accepted in late summer 1988, but by Mäde’s deputy, Production Director Gert Golde. There was a rumor that Carow had visited Politburo member Kurt Hager about the matter, but we knew nothing about an endorsement from above. So, the first feature film about homosexuality in the Socialist Bloc was actually made in Babelsberg and, as predicted by Mäde, without his approval and his usual influence.

What approvals did DEFA’s general director usually give?

The general director usually approved the director’s script, as submitted by the production group, with his stamp and signature. This was the binding production document and could be used as evidence for possible changes in case of subsequent disputes. Basically, it meant that even variations in dialog during shooting were not allowed. But in the differences of opinion that I recall, it was mostly used to discuss more fundamental questions, not quarrel over a few word changes. For example, in the final editing stage of Carow’s film *Bis dass der Tod euch scheidet (Until Death Do Us Part)*, it was used to discuss how extensive sexual and violent scenes should be.

In addition to this, the general director reserved the right to issue written approval of the final casting. He made use of his right to veto casting decisions—for example, when it came to casting actors in roles as representatives of state power, such as police or party personnel. This happened in the case of Rainer Simon’s casting of the village policeman and the SED district secretary for his film *Jadup und Boel (Jadup and Boel)*. But by this point, that wasn’t even relevant anymore. With the appointment of Gert Golde as the new general director of the studio in September 1989, Chief Dramaturg Prof. Dr. Jürschik became the artistic director and functioned more as an advisor than a supervisor to the directors.

What was involved in transitioning from the literary work to shooting the film?

Shooting *Coming Out* began in mid-November 1988, although Heiner Carow did not submit the required directing concept in writing until four weeks later. By that time, he had already made all the important decisions. As cinematographer, he had managed to get young Martin Schlesinger from the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films, in order to distinguish himself aesthetically from known DEFA styles. The leading roles were played by the debutant actor Matthias Freihof as Philipp, by Dagmar Manzel—Carow’s female lead in *So viele Träume (So Many Dreams)*—as Tanya, and by the highly-talented lay actor Dirk Kummer, as Matthias. Carow had already appointed Kummer as his second assistant director while preparing the production because of his intimate knowledge of the gay scene.

Was your dramaturgy group involved in shooting?

No. Although Carow, from the start, had scheduled the delicate erotic scenes for the end of shooting—after the protagonists and the staff had “gotten closer”—we avoided getting overly nosy, especially around this topic. So we viewed the rushes—normally a daily occurrence—less often than usual for us and the artistic director. Shooting in the

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studio also went smoothly, although the topic itself drew curious onlookers from among the large studio collective. I can't say anything reliable about the opinions of fellow directors, who were always in competition for one of only sixteen annual slots for feature film productions. The younger generation of directors, in particular, were critical of the rapid succession of films by some of the older directors, because they themselves were often waiting years to make a film. But Carow and Schlesinger opted to shoot at original locations wherever possible: the bars and actual meeting spots of the gay scene. Along with Carow, Wolfram Witt—who was very familiar with all shades and dark sides of the scene—wanted to not only tell the story of a young man's coming-out as a process of self-discovery; above all, they wanted to critically portray the social environment of the characters. This was exactly what interested the director, who was fixated on controversial issues.

What happened after shooting ended?

A good quality rough cut was the first material that Carow showed the group. We recommended it for studio approval in our statement of April 19, 1989. The final production, fine editing, dubbing of the many original recordings, the music design by Stefan Carow—son of the director and Evelyn Carow, the film's editor—and the final mixing lasted the usual three months, as it always did at the DEFA Studio. But the approval procedures went smoothly, without any long debates, recommendations or additional requirements, as we had feared and had been common. Although the film wasn't submitted to the Ministry of Culture's Film Office for state approval until the end of July 1989, the premiere was already pre-scheduled with PROGRESS Filmverleih for the then-current cinema year and was, a short time later, properly scheduled for November 9, 1989.

Did people at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films know of the short documentary *Die andere Liebe (The Other Love)*, which the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden had commissioned from the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films? It had premiered a year earlier—almost to the day, on November 2, 1988—at the Babylon cinema in Berlin.

In the midst of the tumultuous work in the studio, and because of our self-image—as taking a pioneering role in feature films—we had not registered this film. But I'm only speaking for myself. When we'd approached the topic in the mid-1980s, it had seemed advisable to legitimize our initiative with leadoff journalistic articles ahead of time. Although the infamous § 175, which punished homosexuality, had been abolished in the GDR (in contrast to in the Federal Republic of Germany) as early as 1968, we had to reckon with widespread and deep-rooted prejudices on the part of the audience; for this reason, we wanted to support homosexual emancipation with the means at our disposal.

What role did the film play in the homosexual emancipation movement?

I don't know of any reliable study on audience numbers or analyses of the social value and impact of the film. In any case, the numerous press reactions in East Germany were very positive and helped promote our mission and the message of the film. Only a few West German film critics considered the title old-fashioned and the topic outdated for their circumstances. The political turbulence of the Wende period of 1989-90 foreclosed the broad socio-cultural debate we had hoped for in the new, freer public sphere, which was now preoccupied with questions on a completely different scale.

The premiere took place as planned on November 9, 1989 and became a very unusual public event.

Since a large crowd was expected, a kind of double premiere was planned at the large, central International cinema—namely a screening at 7:30 pm and a second one at 10:00 pm. We were not mistaken. We had an enthusiastic audience; they celebrated both the film and the team—after they went out on stage—almost triumphantly, with a standing ovation. The second screening was also completely sold out, but it ended up being shown to a half-empty theater.

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What had happened?

My son Stefan had not gotten a ticket for the official screening at 7:30 pm. He met my wife and me at around 10:00 pm in the cinema foyer. We were talking to Horst Pehnert, head of the Ministry of Culture's Film Office, his assistant Dr. Eberhard Ugowski and Dr. Jürgen Harder, head of the Film Department in the Cultural Section of the SED's Central Committee. Stefan surprised the small circle with the news: "The Wall is open!" The news was met with skeptical faces and bewilderment. Not far from our group, the ambitious West Berlin journalist Michel Gaißmayer was waiting. The officials left for an undisturbed discussion of the new situation, saying "He doesn't need to hear this!"

Stefan insisted, "Yes, yes, it's true!" With his own eyes, my son had seen the line of people along the Wall from Oberbaumbrücke almost all the way to Ostbahnhof—today, this section of the Wall is the world-known East Side Gallery. They squeezed through the narrow pedestrian gate at this border crossing that, until then, had been available only to western visitors to the GDR capital. The film minister and his comrades had expected all kinds of things after the last four weeks—with the forced resignation of Erich Honecker, the head of the State Council, on October 18 and the voluntary resignation of Politburo Member Kurt Hager on November 3—but not the opening of the Berlin Wall in such a chaotic manner.

News of this unbelievable occurrence—"madness" became the buzzword of the Wende—must have spread through the cinema like wildfire. Only very loyal film fans or dogged deniers of reality still wanted to see the film and they applauded it just as long and warmly when it ended at midnight.

Did the half-empty movie theater end up being a bad omen for the fate of the film?

Yes and no. Because from this point forward everything was different, the East German cinema world was facing an exodus, just like the rest of the country. But at the same time, we were so proud to have overcome not so much the political, but more the social and aesthetic taboo against homosexuality and homosexuals. Against all reservations and fears, we'd made a film that was artistically convincing and morally incontestable, a humane appeal for solidarity and tolerance in this society.

Coming Out could have been a big hit; but the social situation had fundamentally changed. Although the film's distribution started with forty prints, instead of seventeen as was usual, there were unfortunately no reports of audiences storming cinemas. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, East German citizens were even harder to lure to the cinema than before. From West Berlin, however, those in the gay and art scenes, curious to see how we dealt with the topic, luckily filled the empty seats in East Berlin. But soon, our big movie theaters were earning their money with until-then-unknown American blockbusters. Realistic DEFA film art was out.

The 1990 Berlin International Film Festival soon gave *Coming Out* a big international stage, however, and awarded it the Silver Bear. The film was shown again at the Berlin Film Festival in 2001 and 2006, as well. *Coming Out* is still occasionally shown at international film festivals, in retrospectives or on TV and continues to prove its relevance, and not only as a symbol of coming out in the GDR.

—Translated by Jan Jokisch (DEFA Film Library)

The DEFA Film Library thanks Dieter Wolf for his generosity in sharing these insights for this DVD release.