

Director Jörg Foth and the Latest from the East German Film Studio

by Reinhild Steingröver



Jörg Foth, born in 1949 in Berlin, belonged to the generation of film workers at the East German DEFA Studio for Feature Films who were trained in the 1970s and early 1980s, but found few opportunities for new visions and independent work. Foth himself once famously declared: "*Unsere Welle war keine.*" (Our moment never came.) Foth's experience at DEFA differed fundamentally from that of earlier generations, as the studio had become more and more bureaucratized and mistrustful of its younger talent under studio director Hans Dieter Mäde. Many of Foth's colleagues also voiced the frustration they felt at being a well-educated but untapped workforce in the studio. Scriptwriter Carmen Blazejewski described the situation in the 1980s as follows: "When I arrived at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films in 1981, the boat was already full. There were 44 fully-employed directors, but only 16 feature films were produced each year. There was no room, no need for the new generation. We were superfluous."

Since 1982 Jörg Foth, in particular, had worked actively for the establishment of a smaller studio within DEFA where the younger generation could work on more experimental productions. At the Congress of the Film and Television Association (VFF) in 1982, during a casual conversation with Politburo member Kurt Hager, film students and recent graduates of the Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg—including Jörg Foth, Maxim Dessau and Helke Misselwitz—complained about poor training conditions and lack of opportunities in the Academy and the DEFA studios. Upon being invited to report their concerns to Hager in greater detail, the students organized an unprecedented meeting at the House of Hungarian Culture in Berlin on October 28, 1982. At this meeting, about seventy recent graduates of the Film Academy openly expressed their anger at being a highly-qualified, but superfluous workforce, which was neither wanted, nor entrusted with shaping new visions for the nation's movie theaters. Such open complaints in the presence of the entire film leadership were highly unusual in the studio, and indeed in the GDR. It marked the beginning of a cycle of hopeful initiatives—often led by Foth—and frustrated realizations that the studio was not truly interested in engaging criticism. Instead, the studio, party, and VFF leadership simply channeled the youthful energies, by means of skillful procrastination maneuvers, into dead-ends. On February 2, 1988, at the next meeting of the VFF, Jörg Foth delivered his now famous line in a speech in which he described the younger generation's frustrated attempts at reform over the previous decade.

Despite years of working within the DEFA bureaucracy, the goal of an independent studio for more experimental films was not fulfilled until January 1, 1990, when the *Gruppe DaDaeR*, led by Thomas Wilkening, was established. Later Foth laconically commented, "He who enters the apparatus, gets lost in it; he who doesn't loses," thus summing up his decade-long and largely futile reform efforts. Foth's *Letztes aus der DaDaeR* (*Latest from the Da-Da-R*) was the first feature film that this newly founded group elected to produce. (Originally called the *Nachwuchsgruppe* [or Younger Generation Group], the group changed its name to *Gruppe DaDaeR* in reference to this first film.) The group had only existed 13 months when it was dissolved, along with the entire DEFA studio, in 1991. In these months, it had produced Foth's film, Herwig Kipping's *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (*The Land beyond the Rainbow*), and Peter Welz's *Banale Tage* (*Banal Days*).

Before *Latest from the Da-Da-R*, Foth had directed a children's film, *Das Eismeer ruft* (*The Arctic Sea Calls*), in 1983, and the youth film *Biologie!* (*Biology!*), in 1989, that dealt with environmental issues. He had also been the assistant director for several films with important directors,

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such as Günther Reisch, Lothar Warneke and Ulrich Weiß. But he had not been given a chance to realize his own projects, including a rock musical he had written in 1982, entitled *Herr Schmidt. Ein deutsches Spektakel mit viel Musik und Polizei* (*Herr Schmidt—A German Spectacle with Lots of Music and Police*).

The use of Foth's own team, including cameraman Thomas Plenert, was crucial for the aesthetic of *Latest from the Da-Da-R*, which uncompromisingly exposes a bankrupt and ossified state. Foth's relief at finally having worked himself free from the petty interferences of the studio hierarchy is palpable in the film. In 1999, he stated: "The collapse at DEFA was a relief for me, as was the collapse of the GDR. It was too much, too long, too idiotic, too aggravating how we waited for the slightest improvements, that never came."

The collaboration with Steffen Mensching and Hans-Eckardt Wenzel, the popular GDR clown duo, was Foth's chance to make his music film. Mensching and Wenzel's 1990 program was not their first to comment on political events in the GDR; nor was *Latest from the Da-Da-R* their first filmic collaboration with Jörg Foth. Their first clown program, *Neues aus der DaDaeR* (*News from the Da-Da-R*), had premiered in small cabarets across the country in 1982, followed by *Altes aus der DaDaeR* (*Old News from the Da-Da-R*) in 1988. In 1989, Jörg Foth also produced the short film *Tuba wa duo* with Wenzel.

Very much resembling an absurd, Beckett-inspired endgame, in *Latest from the Da-Da-R* the clowns Meh and Weh roam the desolate land, performing the country's swan song, emphasizing the destruction of the GDR and its creative energies through boredom and stagnation. Over and over again, the clowns return to the themes of waiting for nothing and aging without the hope for change. At the same time, however, the film derives energy from the skillful combining of the clown's cabaret program with the beautiful filming of significant historical locations: the Leuna chemical works; the Rüdersdorfer cement factory;¹ a still-barricaded and -abandoned subway station under Potsdamer Platz;² the Natural History Museum in East Berlin; and a slaughterhouse in Potsdam. In other scenes, we see the well-known author Christoph Hein, in the role of a garbage man, delivering a Heine-inspired, melancholic and self-deprecating monologue about witnessing historical upheaval:

As I saw my country dying, I discovered that I loved it.

I feel the mourning felt by the Roman patricians in the fourth century.

I feel a baleful barbarism arising from the ground.³

Finally, a brief appearance by former GDR cycling star Täve Schurr, as a mailman with a flat bicycle tire, adds a touch of humor for GDR insiders.

Foth's objective in this film is partly documentary. It contains a remarkable, unstaged scene, in which the clowns are confronted by a group of drunken revelers celebrating German unification on Brocken Mountain. Unlike many later, (n)ostalgic depictions of the GDR as the protected *Leseland* [readers' country], where life was slower but somehow more wholesome, Foth's film records his generation's frustration with the wasted years of artistic stagnation. As Foth commented, "Because GDR reality was more bizarre and tragic than traditional narrative cinema could convey, we decided to use the clowns' program to capture its essence."

Foth's film speaks directly to a question raised by many films in the *WENDE FLICKS* series: namely, the relative use or futility of withdrawal from society as protest. In both the film and

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interviews, the clowns have repeatedly stated their conviction that it is necessary to remain socially and politically involved, and provoke audiences through art. Hans-Eckardt Wenzel explained this in 1990:

Radical refusal would have been the ‘cleaner’ attitude. But it was important to us, despite our recognition of the limitations, to keep people awake and aware. I think that this made a big difference, even though it is brushed aside now by many West German critics. I think it helped to preserve a certain kind of spirit and humanity.

While the clown duo does not profess any illusions about the true nature of “real existing socialism,” the quote manifests the continued belief in the ideals of *Geist* [spirit] and *Humanität* [humanity] as values in the non-capitalist system. Mensching and Wenzel—as the officially tolerated “motley fools of the GDR” (albeit not without their own run-ins with the *Stasi*)—and Jörg Foth, in his long years of struggle within the DEFA studio, had to cling to this faith in reformable socialism in order to continue working. *Latest from the Da-Da-R* therefore reflects the schizophrenic dilemma of the clowns—and young DEFA directors like Foth—who were committed to their art and worked within the system, despite knowing that the utopian project had failed.

Latest from the Da-Da-R premiered on October 7, 1990, four days after German unification. In spite of favorable reviews emphasizing the popularity of the clown duo and the remarkable camera-work of Thomas Plenert, it disappeared quickly from the public radar screen. When the film was screened in a DEFA retrospective at the Potsdam Film Museum in 1996, however, a critic wrote: “The film may have met with lack of understanding and irritation upon its release six years ago, but it is remarkable how it has not aged. It is simultaneously comical and poetic . . . I am certain that *Latest from the Da-Da-R* will find its place in film history, and not just in German film history.”

The film’s focus on the specificities of the unique moment in history that took place in 1989-90 has not been detrimental to its shelf life. As it satirically maps a topography of pollution, oppression, opportunism and passivity, *Latest from the Da-Da-R* offers a dystopian view of modern civilizations far beyond the GDR. Luckily for us audience members, it does so with much humor, wit, and ultimately hope.

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¹ where the cement to build the Berlin Wall had been produced three decades earlier.

² before the construction of the SONY Center on the former wasteland of Potsdamer Platz.

³ Quoted from the English subtitles of the 35mm print of *Latest from the Da-Da-R*, produced in 2009.