

Silver Bear, Golden Cadillac: An Interview with Dirk Kummer

In January 2020, Hiltrud Schulz of the DEFA Film Library interviewed actor and director Dirk Kummer, who was involved in the production of the only two films about being gay ever produced in East Germany.



© Photo: Frederic Battier

HS: In the GDR, two films were produced that dealt with homosexuality: the documentary *Die andere Liebe* (*The Other Love*) and the feature film *Coming Out*. You were involved in both of those films! In 1988, a year before *Coming Out* was released, you appeared in Axel Otten's and Helmut Kissling's documentary *The Other Love*. It was the first film about homosexuality ever made in East Germany; the DEFA Studios produced the short documentary on commission for the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. The goal was to spread awareness about and campaign for tolerance and equal rights for homosexuals in the GDR. How did you get involved in this film?

DK: It was a weird coincidence. I was already involved in many initiatives and events for the emancipation of gays and lesbians in East Berlin in the late 1980s. After Gorbachev came to power, there was a huge wave of open-mindedness and tolerance towards minorities. That is how *The Other Love* got made in the first place. I already knew a lot of people in the East Berlin scene and knew director Helmut Kissling. My familiarity with the scene was also why DEFA and Heiner Carow made me the second assistant director for *Coming Out*. It wasn't even planned for me to become an actor in *Coming Out*.

In the documentary, you speak openly and boldly about your own sexual experiences as a teenager. This might be too personal a question, but can you tell us a bit about those experiences? How did people around you react to your coming out? The documentary, after all, made it pretty well known. Did you experience any form of discrimination?

I had my personal coming out in 1984, during my last year in high school. I went to a school in Prenzlauer Berg and was acting in a youth theater group in Berlin-Mitte; and East Berlin's nightlife had shown me that I wasn't alone. Sadly, I had to commit to enlisting in military service for three years after graduating. That was a requirement if you wanted to apply to study certain majors, and I wanted to study at the film academy. There they'd blackmailed me into thinking I'd only get accepted to study directing if I completed my military service. In 1984, this prospect of my future in the military made me panic. I had to deal with my final exams, which also scared me. And my parents had no idea about my coming out. All of this culminated in a tragic blow. When he learned of it, Heiner Carow incorporated my story into the opening scene of *Coming Out*. It was important to him that movies depict reality. He was relentless about that. After the documentary was released, there was no direct discrimination—none that I experienced firsthand.

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How would you describe the situation for gays in East Germany at the end of the 1980s, when these two movies got made?

The scene was really taking off back then, especially in big cities like Berlin or Leipzig. In Berlin, it wasn't hard to live one's life as a homosexual. Sure, the Stasi was also operating in those areas, but we were already used to their presence from other parts of life. In East Berlin, there were a few pubs and nightclubs that had an amazing atmosphere. AND: There was no porn, darkrooms or drugs! We were clean, not just physically but also mentally. I miss that today.

Heiner Carow chose you as assistant director for *Coming Out*. You also ended up playing the role of Matthias, one of the three protagonists of the film. Was that the plan from the start? How did it come about?

As I already said, Carow hired me as his second assistant director. My task was to make the extras, locations and East Berlin gay scene appear as authentic as possible. I showed the film crew the places in East Berlin that were part of the gay scene. As an assistant, part of my job was to stand behind the camera to prompt the actors during auditions. Carow had observed how I interpreted the text over the course of a few days. When I arrived at the studio on my birthday, I asked Carow why there were no auditions scheduled. He grinned and said: "Because today you're standing in front of the camera!" He was full of tricks like that. It was my birthday, I was really relaxed, and it worked—the audition tape won everyone over. It was really exciting! Two jobs under one of the best directors. What a time. Nobody suspected back then that the movie would become a classic.

Did you have the opportunity to incorporate your own ideas into the role? If so, which ones?

Yes, many opportunities. After many conversations with us, the scene of the first night with Philipp was entirely rewritten. Many of our ideas were incorporated. I was also the one to name my character Matthias. The script just called him "Jeans boy." I was shocked. I told them: "How can you set out to make a movie about love and then reduce one of the characters to the jeans he's wearing."

The movie was made in quite a short period of time. Shooting started in November 1988 and a year later the film premiered. How did the collaboration with Heiner Carow and the rest of the team work? After all, you all knew that this movie was addressing a taboo topic that had barely gotten any public attention in the GDR until this point.

Do you think that's a short amount of time?? I've just finished my first mini-series: Shooting wrapped up in December and it premiered in April... THAT's what I call fast. *Coming Out* had over 70 days of shooting and was supported by something that was already an undercurrent in East Berlin: The revolution. Artists, intellectuals, the church, teachers, celebrities—because of Gorbachev, they all felt empowered to rebel against the party. Since there were so many and it was taking place across the country, it was hard to repress this euphoric atmosphere. Five years earlier, this movie wouldn't have been made.

Something that many film critics applauded on a dramaturgical level was the love triangle in the film, between Philipp, his partner Tanya and Matthias. Was this constellation in the script from the very beginning?

Yes, absolutely. Author Wolfram Witt, dramaturg Erika Richter and Heiner Carow worked on that amazing constellation for a long time. All three of them were absolute drama experts. They knew how to tell a story like that in an enthralling way. That's one of the film's merits: the amazing script. Only the everyday moments specific to gay people and the dialogs between Philipp and Matthias were a bit rough in the script.

Is there a specific anecdote about the shooting period that you'd like to share?

There's one I really like to tell. It was shortly before shooting began. People were planning the sets and the interior decorations. I was still asleep. At 6 am, Heiner Carow was suddenly at my door and then rushed past me into my

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apartment. I was in my pajamas, and my boyfriend was still in bed. Carow looked around and said: "I just wanted to see how the apartment of two guys looks in the morning." It was pathological. You couldn't get mad at him for it. It was devoid of ulterior motifs. He was just obsessed with detail.

Coming Out is historically important on different levels: it was the first feature film about homosexuality produced in the GDR, and it premiered on November 9, 1989, the night the Berlin Wall fell; then the movie won a Silver Bear and a Teddy at the Berlin International Film Festival and attracted international attention. You even attended screenings of it in the USA: It was the opening movie for the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, where it celebrated its North American premiere at the Castro Theatre on June 15, 1990. You also showed the movie at other American LGBTQ+ festivals. How did American audiences react to the movie? What were those screenings like?

It was San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles. And it was heaven on earth—if I may say so! I loved, discovered and drank up America the way it was back then. We spent four months in a row in this world that was so new to me. Everywhere that we showed the movie, we captured the hearts of the audience! The Americans had a lot of empathy for us East Germans, because we brought about the fall of the Wall. I will never forget the Castro, nor our time in New York. Amazing encounters. In Los Angeles, *Coming Out* screened on the evening before Christopher Street Day. On CSD, Carow and I were driving in the festival's golden Cadillac, while I held up a poster of our film. Everyone was screaming "We love Germany." I never again experienced anything like it. In Los Angeles, the *Stern* magazine correspondent Frances Schoenberger invited me to her house in Beverly Hills. That was great. We spent a beautiful evening together. She liked me and wanted to introduce me to some people in Hollywood. That was supposed to happen around the World Cup final game between Germany and Italy. A lot of fans of the German team were getting together for a public viewing at Arnold Schwarzenegger's house. I didn't have the nerve to go. That afternoon, I was aimlessly walking around Beverly Hills, torn about whether to go or not. I was also afraid in the face of this unknown grandeur. Maybe my intuition protected me that day—I might have been thoroughly disappointed.

opening night

Frameline's Opening Night Gala celebrates the start of the Festival and the kick-off of the 1990 Lesbian/Gay Freedom Celebration. The evening begins at 5:30pm with a champagne reception at the Castro Theatre followed at 7:00 with the North American premiere of Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* from East Germany. Afterwards, join the filmmakers and other guests of the Festival for cocktails, dinner and dancing at the dazzling San Francisco Mart. Tickets for the entire evening are \$50; tickets for the premiere of *Coming Out* only also available for \$7. For information and reservations call 415-431-9227. Opening Night sponsored by The Advocate.

Coming Out: North American premiere. The first significant gay movie from East Germany opened on an historic night last fall. Given its controversial subject and difficult production history, *Coming Out* was expected to excite its first night crowd in East Berlin; nevertheless, director Heiner Carow hadn't anticipated what happened next. The applause and party atmosphere continued out on the streets after the screening, where people were already shouting and celebrating. *Coming Out's* premiere had coincided with the night the Berlin wall came down. ♪ Even without this profound political backdrop, Carow's tale of socialist sexuality would seem extraordinary. Produced by the state studio DEFA (which kept discreet distance from the project), and clocked by the inevitable which-actor's-quest curiosity, *Coming Out* clearly had a struggle just to see it to the screen. ♪ It's a classic story: a sort of Marxist, modern-day Maurice. Schoolteacher Philipp finds himself distracted from his colorless romance with colleague Tanja by the attention of a teen he meets in a concert ticket line. Haunted by memories of his schooldays desire for gay pal Jakob - and his parents' plea to stay on the straight and narrow - Philipp becomes torn between his two lovers, and risks losing both. ♪ Philipp's predicament propels him into the city's gay scene. Heiner Carow shot *Coming Out* largely at real East Berlin bars and back alleys; outside of the Super-8 segments in Wieland Speck's *Weather*, this is a first and last look at gay locations and gay life before the wall fell. ♪ There's lots in *Coming Out* to be excited about. Yet, even separated from its historic circumstances, educational ambition and fascinating cultural tourism, *Coming Out* stands as a moving and passionate story, honestly told. We've paired its premiere with *Brinco*, a drab Brazilian short on the theme of an incriminating earring. ♪ Michael Lumpkin. ♪ *Brinco*: Brazil, 1989, Director: Flavio Moraes. With Flavio de Souza, Carlos Moreno, Raul Barreto, 35mm, 6 min. Source: Film Cinematografica. *Coming Out*: DDR, 1989, Director: Heiner Carow. With Mathias Franzl, Dagmar Marsal, Dirk Kummer, 35mm, 109 min. Source: DEFA. **Friday June 15 7:00pm Castro**



Coming Out celebrated its US premiere on June 15th, 1990 at Castro Theatre in San Francisco. It was the opening film of the 14th San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

©1990. Program of the 14th San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

What did *Coming Out* mean for you during its initial run? Is your perspective on the movie different after 30 years?

Back then, I couldn't understand all the dimensions of its importance. I enjoyed the limelight, it opened doors for me. But it also closed a lot of doors. For many years, I was just "The guy from *Coming Out*," because that movie was hard to outdo. I didn't want to keep being an actor; I wanted to be a director and had since I was 14. Sometimes that was hard because that role still clung to me. There were also years when I didn't like the film's dramaturgy, found it too long, too frumpy, not wild enough. Now, 30 years later in the original movie theater, they have a giant anniversary screening every five years

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that is sold out in the blink of an eye. There's a huge fan base, and every time it's a happening. For the 30th anniversary of *Coming Out* in 2019, one of the female fans had actually sewn a replica of the clown costume I wore in the carnival scene. And I was finally entirely at ease with the quality of the movie. Since I became a director myself, I understand how timelessly Heiner shot that movie and why it became a classic. And obviously, when I watch the movie today and see my 20-year-old self on screen, it is a wonderful reminder of a time that the movie has taught me to understand better.

You worked on multiple feature films and TV series with director Heiner Carow; and he was also your master teacher at the Academy of Arts. Now you yourself are working as a director and screenwriter. How has this collaboration influenced your own work?

Heiner is still an important influence on my work, even today. In the beginning, he helped me overcome my fears. By the time I was producing my first short film, he had already been dead for several years. In my mind, I often asked him for advice. And he gave it to me. Funnily enough, after many movies, I am now just as impatient as Heiner. For me that came only with aging. I don't like long detours, endless discussions or halfway measures. I want people to subordinate themselves to the story. That doesn't always go over well. Discipline isn't always in fashion. Heiner always had his own director's chair. At the start of every new production, he got it out of the trunk of his car; it was a talisman for him. When the production team got me a director's chair for my directorial debut, it was clear that I'd copy Heiner's idea. I still have that chair today; it's 20 years old. I've never had to get it repaired.

You were born and raised in East Germany. In one of your last movies, *Zuckersand* (*Sugar Sand*, 2017), you revisit this topic by showing the GDR from a child's perspective. Do you think it's still important to make movies about the GDR? What movie with what East German topic still needs to be produced?

Yes, of course, East German stories are still interesting! All the cinema and television productions on that topic prove that. *Gundermann*, *The Brasch Family*—those are really successful projects. I wrote a children's book from *Sugar Sand* that premiered at the Frankfurt Book Fair—the second edition was just released.

A story that I would really like to tell is about the Geschlossener Jugendwerkhof Torgau (Torgau closed juvenile detention center), a place of terror. In this prison for adolescents with behavioral problems, 4,500 teenagers were abused, imprisoned and incapacitated under inhumane conditions. 4,500! In Torgau alone! There were countless less brutal juvenile detention centers in the GDR as well. All those children and teenagers suffered severe psychological damage. Nobody has ever produced a major feature film about that. You would have to treat that topic like in *Life Is Beautiful*. With a lot of hope.

Is there anything else you want to add?

I just want to thank you for the interview!

—Translated by Jan Jokisch (DEFA Film Library)