

# SINGING AND DANCING FOR SOCIALISM

By Andrea Rinke

During the 1960s, West German film studios produced an abundance of *Schlagerfilme* (popular music films). In contrast, over the entire forty-five years of its existence the East German DEFA Studio for Feature Film released only about a dozen full-length musical films, ranging from stage adaptations, such as opera and operetta (e.g., *Figaros Hochzeit* [*The Marriage of Figaro*], dir. Georg Wildhagen, 1949), a musical pantomime (e.g., *Der junge Engländer* [*The Young Englishman*], dir. Gottfried Kolditz, 1958), a backstage musical (e.g., *Meine Frau macht Musik* [*My Wife Makes Music*], dir. Hans Heinrich, 1958) and a musical revue (e.g., *Revue um Mitternacht* [*Midnight Revue*], dir. Gottfried Kolditz, 1962) to youth musicals (*Heisser Sommer* [*Hot Summer*], dir. Joachim Hasler, 1967; *Nicht schummeln, Liebling* [*No Cheating Darling*], dir. Joachim Hasler, 1972). *Hot Summer* was one of the few DEFA musicals to be shown in the West, including at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, where the British press commented favorably on “the refreshingly different fare from the GDR”<sup>1</sup>—i.e., a light musical comedy rather than a film about political or social issues. Actress Karin Schröder, the female lead in *Geliebte weisse Maus* (*Beloved White Mouse*, dir. Gottfried Kolditz, 1964), recalls that viewers expressed their surprise that there was any “laughter behind the Iron Curtain” at all.<sup>2</sup>

*Midnight Revue*, a self-referential genre film set in the milieu of DEFA’s own feature film production studio, addresses the dilemma of GDR filmmakers—who were urged to produce popular entertainment films, only to be criticized when they actually submitted such projects for approval, on the grounds that these were not sufficiently realistic and meaningful—in a clever, tongue-in-cheek manner. A backstage musical, it tells the story of three DEFA employees—a dramaturg, composer and set designer—and a young songwriter and musician who has insinuated himself into the group. These men are taken and held hostage in a villa by a male stage manager and a female assistant producer, who have been tasked with making them create a successful musical revue film. *Beloved White Mouse*, a musical comedy, is a love story about a traffic policeman—the eponymous white mouse, a nickname referring to the white uniform these officers wore—and a female motorist, which celebrates consumerism and a modern lifestyle in the GDR against the backdrop of beautiful Dresden locations. *Hot Summer*, the first DEFA attempt at a youth musical, revolves around the adventures of two groups of youths—eleven girls from Leipzig and ten boys from Karl Marx Stadt (now Chemnitz)—during their summer holidays at the Baltic Sea. In an allusion to the film adaptation of *West Side Story* (dirs. Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961), perhaps the best-known Hollywood musical about two warring youth gangs, *Hot Summer* has been called by film journalists an “East Side Story.”

All these contemporary musicals, set in the GDR and made in the late 1950s and 1960s, proved to be immensely popular with domestic audiences. Why, then, did DEFA produce so few musical films? One explanation lies in the status of the musical film genre in the history of German cinema. After taking over the UFA Studios in Babelsberg at the end of WWII, DEFA was anxious to make a clean break with the tradition of glamorous spectacles and escapist entertainment films that had been tainted by association with the Third Reich. Another explanation lies in the constant rivalry with West Germany; as each German state strove to define itself in contrast to the other, the GDR wanted to distance itself from the West German emphasis on light entertainment films in the 1950s and 1960s.

In East Germany, cinema was perceived as a key player in the country’s cultural self-definition because of its ability to evoke a distinct national identity and socialist way of life. In contrast to mainstream western cinema, DEFA films often tended to be set in unglamorous workplaces, such as factories, chemical plants or construction sites—the “centerpieces of the construction of socialism” and “battlefields of radical ideological change,” as Alexander Abusch, the Deputy Minister of Culture, called them in 1958.<sup>3</sup> In West Germany, light entertainment films like the *Schlagerfilme*, with their

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in documentary *East Side Story*, (dir. Dana Ranga, co-scripted and produced by Andrew Horn), premiere broadcast on Westdeutscher Rundfunk TV (WDR) on 11 January 1997; DVD release with English subtitles, Kino on Video, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See Alexander Abusch’s keynote speech at the Second National Film Conference (1958). *Kulturelle Probleme des sozialistischen Humanismus. Beiträge zur deutschen Kulturpolitik 1946-67*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1967. 349.

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catchy pop tunes and light-hearted, sometimes naughty lyrics, had become popular thanks to radio programs aired from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s; in 1960, these made up a quarter of West Germany's entire film production. In the East, such films were dismissed as unserious and of no help in raising the consciousness of working-class men and women. Christel Gräf, the dramaturg of *Beloved White Mouse*, declared in her proposal for a new approach to the musical film genre: "DEFA cannot follow the tradition of spectacular films such as *Broadway Melody*, [...] however, as a socialist film company, DEFA is grounded more firmly in reality than any capitalist company." Rejecting West German *Schlagerfilme*, she summarized a few of their plots without mentioning specific titles; then, as an alternative, she proposed that "the new [East German] musical comedy [...] places music within reality, makes reality poetic through music."<sup>4</sup>

Like Hollywood musicals, West German musicals were regarded as a particularly garish and offensive product of the capitalist pleasure machine, as purely escapist and therefore opposed to the most important aims of GDR cinema: to provoke thought and to provide *Lebenshilfe*—help for viewers on how to cope with their daily lives by addressing serious issues. As Hans-Joachim Hoffmann, Minister of Culture, pointed out in 1976, in his keynote speech for the studio's thirtieth anniversary: "The main objective of creative work at DEFA has remained unchanged since the day of its founding: film must provide answers to the existential questions [*Lebensfragen*] of our people."<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, East German filmmakers who specialized in entertainment films were at the lowest salary scale and had little chance of being awarded a national prize. The East German film academy offered no classes for directors or actors that focused on entertainment genres. Gottfried Kolditz, one of the GDR's most successful genre filmmakers, addressed this problem in a newspaper interview:

How are talented people supposed to develop if we shoot a revue film only once every five years?  
[...] What incentive do we offer actors to further qualify for entertaining genres? [...] We know that the audience wants to see entertaining as well as serious films. [...] But I cannot, for example, shoot a musical if I have no actors who can sing and dance.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of such practical and ideological constraints, it may seem surprising that DEFA was able to produce any musicals at all. If authorities in charge of filmmaking in the GDR frowned upon light entertainment films and considered them so ideologically dubious, why then did they tolerate—and even encourage—the few musical films that were produced in the late 1950s and 1960s?

Paradoxically, the erection of the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961—perceived as securing the GDR's borders—stabilized the country's political climate and awakened hopes for more freedom in the arts. Indeed, the early 1960s ushered in a brief period of experimentation and openness. As the (East) German film critic Erika Richter pointed out about this period, "Films repeatedly transgressed the spatial and temporal boundaries of the GDR; people were interested in lives and events in West Germany and other countries of the world."<sup>7</sup> These years showed the beginnings of a genuinely popular, home-grown cinema in the GDR, which featured an exceptional diversity of topics, styles and genres. A handful of popular stars—or *Publikumslieblinge*, audience darlings, as the DEFA stars were called—also emerged, such as Manfred Krug and Christel Bodenstein, the lead couple in *Midnight Revue*.

Another aspect of the rivalry between the two German states was also related to the emergence of DEFA film musicals at this time. GDR film authorities realized that if they wanted to compete with and counteract the attractions of movies made in the West, they had to respond to audience demand for light-hearted entertainment. Before the Wall was built, East Germans literally voted with their feet by crossing the border to see West German films, especially in the divided city of Berlin; afterwards, they flocked to the latest film imports from the West that were shown in East German cinemas.<sup>8</sup> For the DEFA Studios, this situation

<sup>4</sup> Neukonzeption des Schlagerfilms *Einmal mit Musik*, Exposé einer Neufassung unter dem Arbeitstitel *Geliebte weisse Maus*. BArch, DR 117/9768, unnumbered.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Joachim Hoffmann. "30 Jahre DEFA: Mit dem Film Antwort geben auf Lebensfragen." DEFA-Blende. Potsdam-Babelsberg: Organ der SED-Betriebsparteiorganisation des VEB DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme, 14 May 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Gottfried Kolditz. "Was braucht man zum Lachen." *Sächsische Zeitung*, 17 May 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Erika Richter. "Zwischen Mauerbau und Kahlschlag 1961 bis 1965." *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg 1946-92*. Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1994. 159.

<sup>8</sup> See *East Side Story* (1997, dir. Dana Ranga).

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was untenable from both a financial and ideological point of view. Importing films from the West was expensive; and socialist, not western art was supposed to be what moved the masses (*massenwirksam*). These pressures motivated DEFA management to advise its filmmakers to create their own specific brand of entertainment to win back the audience, while still conveying socialist values like caring and collectivism.

A key socialist value—equality for all in a classless society—was expressed most clearly in measures taken to emancipate women by integrating them into the work force. The perceived importance of this in the competition with capitalism was expressed, for example, by Walter Ulbricht, the East German head of state, who proudly proclaimed: “If [the emancipation of women] were the one and only achievement of socialism, it would suffice to prove its historical superiority.”<sup>9</sup> The financially independent woman who participated fully in productive labor, as well as being mother, wife, lover, colleague and comrade, was seen as epitomizing socialism’s *neuer Mensch* (new human being). It is therefore no surprise that many DEFA musicals, including *Midnight Revue*, included strong female protagonists who not only advance the plot but are often also portrayed as superior to their male partners.

Most East German filmmakers involved in the production of musicals were keen to break with the generic traditions of the capitalist movie industry and adapt the genre for socialist society. At the same time, concessions had to be made to conventions of the musical genre, by providing—however modestly—moments of magic, dream-fulfilment and escape from reality. In the socialist context, this everyday reality would have included, for example, shortages of basic supplies, scarcity of luxury consumer goods, such as cars and home appliances, incessantly waiting in line for purchases and services, and restrictions on freedom of speech and travel. In contrast, DEFA musicals celebrated affluence, consumerism and mobility in a socialist utopia portrayed as a land of plenty.

In addition to appropriating the generic conventions of a backstage musical for the socialist context, the creators of *Midnight Revue* explicitly wanted to break with genre traditions by presenting something truly modern, in both form and content that would provide an alternative approach. As director Gottfried Kolditz explained: “There has been demand for a good revue film for a long time. What has been missing until now are new ideas that move away from the concept and pattern of the ‘old’ revue, from the notion of the revue as a ‘show of a thousand naked legs’.”<sup>10</sup>

Conceived in July 1961, when the inner-German border was still open, *Midnight Revue* set out to compete with western revue films in terms of scale, production values and spectacular visual style. In preparation for the film, production manager Erich Kühne ordered classic UFA revue films from the state archive.<sup>11</sup> Director Kolditz requested permission from GDR authorities to travel to West Germany to view contemporary musicals in Munich, Düsseldorf and Hamburg;<sup>12</sup> among the foreign genre films he viewed as part of this research were features by Grigori Aleksandrov, the originator of the so-called “red musical” in the Soviet Union, and the Hollywood musical comedy *Broadway Melody of 1936* (1935), by Roy Del Ruth. A considerable amount of this research into Hollywood classics clearly flowed into the production process. One of the working titles for *Midnight Revue*, for example, was *Keiner will's kalt* (*No One Wants It Cold*), a clear allusion to Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959); the opening song “Too Hot!” is musically very close to the Hollywood number “Too Darn Hot!”, performed by Ann Miller in George Sidney’s *Kiss Me Kate* (1953); and there are numerous visual references to Vincente Minnelli’s *An American in Paris* (1951) and Kelly and Donen’s *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952).

Within East German cinema, *Midnight Revue* is unique in being the only spectacular musical that aimed to compete with UFA and Hollywood productions by mounting a revue film with high production values. At the same time, the filmmakers repeatedly subvert these grandiose aspirations, motivated by financial and policy considerations, through the ironic, self-

<sup>9</sup> Walter Ulbricht. *Reden*. Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1968. 260.

<sup>10</sup> Gottfried Kolditz. “Revue Film dringend gesucht.” *Filmspiegel*, 4, 1962.

<sup>11</sup> See letter dated 17 August 1961, signed Mackrodt, in the BArch, DR 117/32559, unnumbered. These UFA films included *Ein Mädel vom Ballett* (*A Ballet Girl*, dir. Carl Lamac, 1937), *Und du mein Schatz fährst mit* (*And You My Darling, Will Go Along*, dir. Georg Jacoby, 1937), *Es leuchten die Sterne* (*The Stars Are Shining*, dir. Hans H. Zerlett, 1938), *Wir tanzen um die Welt* (*We Dance around the World*, dir. Karl Anton, 1939), *Glück bei den Frauen* (*Luck with Women*, dir. Paul Brauer, 1944).

<sup>12</sup> BArch, DR 117/32559, unnumbered. In July 1961, one month before the Wall was built, the head of the Artistic Production Team 60, Alexander Lösche, wrote to party functionary Lore Wulf, supporting Kolditz’s request for an inter-zonal permit in order to accept an invitation to Hamburg by West German director Hans Müller, who had also worked for the DEFA Studio for Feature Film.

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referential remarks of the characters, which draw attention to the film's exceptionality in the East German context. For example, the narrative opens with a parody of abduction plots, in the style of the Edgar Wallace thrillers popular in West Germany, only switching to the musical mode once the four abductees are at the villa. When they are told to sign their contracts for the film revue project, they break into a comical song-and-dance number protesting that they cannot touch musicals:

It's easier to buy a Trabant car,<sup>13</sup>  
Or ice skate in the Sahara  
Than to produce a cheerful musical!  
[...]  
How and where?  
Why and wherefore?  
Maybe we get it wrong  
Or upset someone.  
(Chorus): Too hot! Too hot! Too hot!<sup>14</sup>

An earlier version of this song entitled "Der Eiertanz" ("Walking on Eggs")—found in an earlier version of the script, with the telling title *Die Prügelknaben* (*The Whipping Boys*)—made more openly critical allusions to censors and the banning of musical scores and elimination of jokes and provocative words, as well as to administrators meddling in the production process. In the final script and finished film, in contrast, the target of criticism has been changed from censors to critics in the domestic press.<sup>15</sup> In the number, the three captive DEFA employees sit in a row of armchairs, each holding a major national newspaper or film review before his face, and take turns peeking out at the camera, while singing:

And the press, that awful monster,  
Would go to town,  
Rip us apart and prove  
We did it wrong.  
The beginning may be realistic,  
But the middle's  
Nothing short of mystic!  
And the ending is formalistic.<sup>16</sup>

In an interview, Kolditz explained why it was so difficult to have comedy films approved by the state authorities: "Most institutions, professions or individuals fear [...] being the object of laughter. This means, for us, [...] fighting over every punch line. [...] But then again it proves [...] the formidable power inherent in laughter."<sup>17</sup> While the satirical side-swipes in *Midnight Revue* were toned down, there remain veiled allusions to several realities facing East German filmmakers: the rejection of controversial topics by censors ("It's risky as walking on a wire"<sup>18</sup>), policing of the filmmakers' political commitment ("Why and wherefore? And in the end for what?"<sup>19</sup>) and penalizing alleged ideological deviance ("Maybe we get it wrong. Or upset someone."<sup>20</sup>). Throughout the film such self-reflexive irony breaks the illusion of the spectacle. Nevertheless, the mise-en-scène celebrates the artificiality of the flamboyant musical fantasy by means of visual excesses and innovative camera techniques including: the candy-colored, six-tone Agfacolor Wolfen film stock; Totalvision format;<sup>21</sup> multiple split-screen editing; and dance numbers dissolving into a Busby Berkeley-esque world of kaleidoscopic planes and patterns.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to the lowbrow West German pop music films of the time, the song-and-dance sequences in *Midnight Revue* combine the appeal of contemporary GDR popular entertainment with the respectability of homegrown high culture. The voices

<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to the brand name of the most common East German car, for which people typically had to wait over ten years because of supply shortages.

<sup>14</sup> All English subtitles created by the DEFA Film Library for its 2018 DVD release of *Midnight Revue*.

<sup>15</sup> *Die Prügelknaben*, see BArch, DR 117/344; for the final script, see BArch, DR 117/345. I am indebted to Dr. Stefan Soldovieri for sharing with me his unpublished essay about the production history of *Midnight Revue*, where he discusses "The Whipping-Boys."

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from film's English subtitles.

<sup>17</sup> Gottfried Kolditz. "Was braucht man zum Lachen." *Sächsische Zeitung*, 17 May 1964.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from film's English subtitles.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Totalvision was the East German version of CinemaScope.

<sup>22</sup> In order to create the desired special effects to enhance the film's visual appeal, Erich Gusko, director of cinematography, drove to Prague to hire a Bi-Pack Mitchell effects camera from the Barandov Studio. Production manager Erich Kühne requested an international driving license for Gusko, valid from 25 October to 5 November 1961, BArch, DR 117/32559, unnumbered.

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of well-known GDR pop singers are accompanied by the DEFA Symphony Orchestra and the orchestra of the GDR's national recording studio, AMIGA, with music specially composed by National Prize winner Gerd Natschinski. The dance numbers are performed by the ballet ensembles of the Staatsoper and the Friedrichstadt-Palast in Berlin, as well as by athletes from the Leipzig Sports Academy. These dancers show their versatility and ability to compete with old and new varieties of shows on the much-invoked "world-class level," performing numbers ranging from fully costumed period and ballroom dances, to an exotic "Hawaiian" piece, to modern ballet and acrobatics.

Embodying the new socialist personality, a female protagonist serves as a positive role model in *Midnight Revue*. The energetic assistant producer Claudia Glück (played by Christel Bodenstein) is not only placed in a position of authority over the three successful, middle-aged men, but also displays moral superiority over her male partner, the unruly musician Alexander Ritter. Played by Manfred Krug as a cheeky but endearing man-child, Ritter is scolded by Claudia for always acting on his whims, for lacking consistency, reliability and maturity; she tells him, "*Sie sind eine unfertige Person!*" (literally: you are an underdeveloped person). The significance of this remark—which is an allusion to the concept of the so-called fully developed socialist personality—is highlighted by its repetition (four times) during the film and by the effect it has on Ritter, who takes it to heart and sulkily disappears.

Much of the second half of the plot revolves around Ritter popping up and vanishing in the parallel world of the revue film numbers, while Glück and the dramaturg Gallstein (played by National Prize winner and Deutsche Staatsoper ballet dancer Claus Schulz) look for him there. This chase allows for elaborate hide-and-seek dance sequences (reminiscent of *An American in Paris*—here with reversed gender relations, as the woman is pursuing the man), while displaying the ostensible work in progress on the fictional musical revue. In true Brechtian fashion, the stage manager sings to the camera, addressing the audience in a song of complaint about his job's lack of recognition. Claudia's pursuit of Ritter leads her through the fantasy worlds presented by the sets of the fictional revue show, where she—in typical dream fulfillment—magically partakes in a life of affluence, fun and consumerism. These sequences include modern streets filled with traffic, a busy gas station, a nightclub showcasing Manfred Krug's talent as a jazz saxophonist, a fashion boutique where she gets to try on 1960s designer outfits and a dance café where real-life East German pop singers perform on a giant revolving record—with product placement for the state's AMIGA a record company! Meanwhile, this fantasy world of the fictional revue also enables the filmmakers to construct a socialist utopia, with modern buildings, stylish interiors and happy, hard-working collectives. In its appeal to modern design, leisure and consumption, *Midnight Revue* echoes the preoccupations of West German mainstream cinema of the period—both young countries being in the process of economic reconstruction.

At first glance, the regimented mass choreography in the style of Busby Berkeley resembles UFA or Hollywood revues, with their emphasis on synchronized female body geometrics. In *Midnight Revue*, however, the female bodies tend to be coupled with male counterparts in curiously asexual athletic ensembles. The sets and costumes deliberately contrast with the decadent display of half-naked women in the glitziness of UFA revues and their contemporary, western-style successors. The revue sequences here seem to aim to use a more functional style in order to convey a focus on technological innovation and economic achievement. For instance, a group of teenaged boys and girls in cheerful uniforms are shown "working" (i.e., dancing) at a busy gas station. This setting locates the narrative within a pseudo-realistic, yet utopian vision of a bright and happy socialist society, in which all men and women are equal. The finale, however—in which couples twirl around on gargantuan LPs, singing "Everything revolves around *amore*"—is no longer programmatically anchored in the GDR context, as it was in the earlier versions of *The Whipping-Boys*; instead, it is designed to have both international and universal appeal—as is underscored by the use of the Italian rather than the German word for love.

<sup>21</sup> Totalvision was the East German version of CinemaScope.

<sup>22</sup> In order to create the desired special effects to enhance the film's visual appeal, Erich Gusko, director of cinematography, drove to Prague to hire a Bi Pack Mitchell effects camera from the Barandov Studio. Production manager Erich Kühne requested an international driving license for Gusko, valid from 25 October to 5 November 1961, BArch, DR 117/32559, unnumbered.

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Upon the release of *Midnight Revue*, East German critics unanimously praised the film's technical perfection and the quality of the performances, welcoming it as a pioneering, truly socialist variety of the genre.

The bourgeois, fuddy-duddy revue, represented in Germany by films with Marika Rökk, was not copied. Rather it was about applying their formal perfection, their technical refinement, their musical appeal and flamboyant spectacle to new subject matter, [...] thus avoiding all the kitsch, sentimentality and lies, as well as the distorting, seductive elements of the old revue.<sup>23</sup>

Some GDR critics, however, deplored the absence of any musical smash hits or catchy melodies that people could hum on the way home, as well as the rather unmotivated love story at the center of the plot. Despite such reviews, *Midnight Revue* was a great success with contemporary audiences and sold a million tickets in just two months.

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<sup>23</sup> Christoph Funke. "Verurteilung zur Heiterkeit." *Der Morgen*, 26 August 1962.