



THE ACTRESS

The Art of Corinna Harfouch – A Multifaceted Performance

By Victoria I. Rizo Lenshyn

Central to the 1988 award-winning DEFA film, *Die Schauspielerin (The Actress)*, is a nuanced and versatile performance by the East German theater and film actress Corinna Harfouch. By the time Harfouch was chosen for the lead in *The Actress*, she was already established in both the theater and film. Though she had been performing on stage since childhood, in 1981 she graduated from the Hochschule für Schauspielkunst “Ernst Busch” in Berlin-Schöneweide, where her education was influenced by the methods of Bertolt Brecht and Constantin Stanislavski. Her training in these acting methods, with their respective emphases on social criticism and an actor’s active analysis,¹ were evident in her performance in this film. When Harfouch won Best Actress at the 26th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in summer 1988, the jury recognized her outstanding performance in an incredibly demanding role: the transition from the Nazi’s up-and-coming theater star, Maria Rheine, to the Jewish woman Manya, the wife and unknown actress of Maria’s lover, Mark Löwenthal (André Hennicke). The transition does not happen in a single moment of change, but rather through stages, as the actress and person Maria-turned-Manya is compelled by her forbidden relationship with Mark and shaped by her embodiment of several female protagonists from the literary canon.²

Corinna Harfouch was known for playing powerful and well-known female characters, for example: Juliet, in *Romeo und Juliet* (dirs. Peter Schroth and Peter Kleinert); Helena, in *Faust Part 2* (dir. Piet Drescher); Lady Macbeth, in *Macbeth* (dir. Heiner Müller); Margarethe, in *Urfaust* (dir. Horst Sagert); Cressida, in *Troilus and Cressida* (dir. Manfred Wekwerth); and Polly, in *The Threepenny Opera* (dirs. Manfred Wekwerth and Jürgen Kern). With these various roles, Harfouch further diversified her acting repertoire by performing at different theaters and under the direction of several well-known directors. After her studies, Harfouch held a two-year engagement at the Berlin Theater im Palast. In 1983, Harfouch moved to the Städtisches Theater in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz), with a guest appearance at the Volksbühne in Berlin. One year later, she finally landed at the famous theater of Bertolt Brecht, the Berliner Ensemble; there she gained both national and international recognition, as the engagement afforded her the ability to travel abroad.³ At the same time, she began working in film, debuting as the young woman Michaela in the 1983 episode film, *Verzeihung, sehen Sie Fußball? (Excuse Me, Are You Watching Soccer?)*, dir. Gunther Scholz). Her next career milestone was in 1986, when she appeared alongside the high-profile actresses Katrin Saß and Jutta Wachowiak in Roland Gräf’s *Das Haus am Fluß (The House on the River)*—a director-actor ensemble that audiences would see again two years later in Gräf’s *Fallada – letztes Kapitel* (1988, *Fallada: Last Chapter*).

In 1988, Harfouch’s film career took off. Though the East German press had consistently covered her career developments from 1980 onward, in 1988 there were four times as many references and articles about her—in three of the major East German newspapers—compared to in 1987.⁴ In 1988, Harfouch appeared in two DEFA films (with another one in production for release in 1989), and held a minor role in one West German production.⁵ But it was her award-winning role as Maria Rheine in *The Actress* that transformed her

¹ See Corinna Harfouch’s page at the school’s website: <http://www.berliner-schauspielschule.de/>

² The film begins with her role as Friedrich Schiller’s Mary Queen of Scots (*Mary Stuart*, 1800), but she secretly covets the role of Mary’s antagonist, Elizabeth. In her first production with Mark, they perform Heinrich von Kleist’s *Amphitryon* (1807), with an emphasis on the forbidden relationship between Alkmene (Maria) and Jupiter, King of the Gods (Mark). Once in Munich, she again performs Schiller, this time as Joan of Arc (*The Maid of Orleans*, 1801). At the end of the film, Manya reprises the role of Joan of Arc with George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* (1924).

³ Ines Walk, “Corinna Harfouch.” DEFA-Stiftung website: Biografien. Sept. 2013. www.defa.de/harfouch-corinna; Marlis Linke, “Stärke und Schwäche. Corinna Harfouch.” *Film und Fernsehen*. 23 (1988): 9.

⁴ Using the Staatsbibliothek online archive of two GDR national daily newspapers, *Neues Deutschland* and *Neue Zeit*, and the regional daily, *Berliner Zeitung*, a keyword shows her name appearing at least one time a year beginning in 1980. By 1986, there are eleven mentions of her name, and there are seven more in 1987. The number increases to 34 hits in 1988 and 33 hits in 1989. <http://zefys.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/ddr-presse>.

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from a popular actress in the GDR into an international star. Journalist Marlis Linke, writing for the East German journal *Film und Fernsehen* in 1988, followed the moment of recognition when Harfouch was poised to win Best Actress at Karlovy Vary: "In the *Wochenpost* it said: 'She won't make a champagne toast afterward. She'll go up to her hotel room to put her two children to bed, while their grandmother reads them a story.... Who can know that the next day a star will drive away in a canary yellow Trabant car.' A star..."⁶

The Actress

While *The Actress* made Corinna Harfouch an international celebrity, her protagonist's stardom was destined to become a casualty of the greater and more righteous love story. The star aspirations held by Harfouch's character, actress Maria Rheine, are evident from the film's opening sequence. Locked in her dressing room, Maria recites lines belonging to Elizabeth, the antagonist to her Mary Queen of Scots. She plays with the intonation of her voice, studies herself in the mirror, gestures with her body and hands, and wears a costume to slip into character.



On the mirror in front of her, a black and white photograph of the international superstar from Weimar Germany, Marlene Dietrich, seems to observe this private performance. Aside from the camera, Dietrich's image and Maria's own reflection are her only audience. Maria performs in front of her idol in this scene, but her reflection as framed in the mirror keeps her placed behind the star, foregrounding Dietrich, but centering Maria and her aspiration to reach Dietrich's heights.

Maria's stardom is decided after she moves to Munich and is assigned the title role in Schiller's *Joan of Arc* (*Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, 1801). Her rendition of the protagonist speaks to the nationalistic times, finding inspiration one day in the assertive gestures and intonations of a group from Hitler's League of German Girls (Bund Deutscher Mädel, BDM) doing drill practices outside Maria's apartment window. While Maria chases stardom in Munich, Mark, unable to work in state-subsidized theaters after the rise of Nazi power and the passage of the anti-Semitic Reich Civil Service Law in April 1933, moves to Berlin to work in the Theater of the Jewish Kulturbund.⁷ The two attempt to keep a long-distance relationship over the phone

⁵ *Fallada: Last Chapter* (*Fallada – letztes Kapitel*, GDR); *The Actress* (*Die SchauspielerIn*, GDR); and *Yasemin* (FRG, dir. Hark Bohm). In April 1989, Michael Gwisdek's directorial debut, *Rendezvous in Travers* (*Treffen in Travers*, GDR), premiered with Harfouch playing the lead female role, Therese Forster.

⁶ See: Linke, 9. All quotes used from newspapers and journals are my translation from German into English.

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and with secret visits when the distance came to be too much. Talking on the phone one day, Maria, looking very much like a 1930s star in her marble and gold apartment and wearing satin and feathers, tells Mark, “I think I’m becoming somewhat of a star.”



The film makes clear, however, that Maria’s stardom will inevitably be short-lived. For example, at one point, after telling her about the Jewish Theater, Mark berates her for being so quick to accept his fate while turning away to make a career for herself. Mark’s accusations home in on the distasteful egocentrism associated with such individualistic aspirations of both making a career (*Karriere machen*) and becoming a star, which were not acceptable and enduring character traits for a hero of socialist cinema. Moreover, though Maria’s apartment demonstrates the lavish lifestyle associated with stardom, it is remarkably empty. With the phone in her hand, Maria stands alone in front of a marble fireplace and empty bookshelves. The setting suggests that the individualism she gained in her stardom has resulted in loneliness, and that Maria has yet to discover how to turn this individualism into something useful for herself and the person she loves. In the end, Maria will leave these luxuries behind to instead follow a different path. More important than her professional success is her love for Mark, and she chooses a life with him rather than becoming an icon for the racist Nazi state.

The Art of Metamorphosis

The multiple transformations in *The Actress* required Harfouch to perform the person, the actress and the character not as separate parts, but as parts of the same whole. Though the film is on many levels a story of transformation, the actress assigned to fulfill this role needed to offer both anticipation of the coming changes and coherence for her protagonist, which reinforced the singularity of the title while allowing both change and consistency to remain traits present through all iterations of the character. Scriptwriter Regine Kühn wrote the title role with Harfouch in mind, after recalling the actress’s performance of Lady Macbeth at the Volksbühne in Berlin. For her, Harfouch understood the depths of such a multi-faceted performance:

⁷ For more information about the Jewish Theater in Berlin, see Rebecca Rovit’s essay, “Cracks in the Berlin Wall: Identity, Remembrance, and the Jewish Kulturbund Theatre,” *The Actress* DVD essay, Amherst: DEFA Film Library, 2014. 1-15.

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I have the impression that when an actor puts on a costume, it either becomes the “skin” of the character – or it doesn’t. Corinna tried this fitting-into-the-skin through movements [...]. She moved in the costume. [...] I had the impression that she looked for the character in movement.⁸

Kühn’s comments are not surprising if we consider Harfouch’s training. As a student of the Stanislavski method, calculated movement on stage was an integral part of her performances. Indeed, Stanislavski’s system, “the Method of Analysis through Physical Action,” encouraged actors to “explore the play, the events as they unfold, in terms of what they would do in the various situations the author provided, using exercises and improvisations.”⁹

We can see Kühn’s observations of Harfouch’s style in *The Actress*. Maria and Mark’s first encounter on stage is during their rehearsal for Heinrich von Kleist’s *Amphitryon* (1807). Harfouch plays Alkmene, who has just unwittingly had an affair with Jupiter, the King of the Gods (Mark/Hennicke). During this scene we observe that the technique Kühn observes in Harfouch comes also from her use of the movement around her. While Maria and Mark face each other, she seems paralyzed by his nearness—whether because of Maria’s actual desire for Mark, or as part of the performance of her character’s desire for her lover. With her character rendered immobile, Harfouch lets Hennicke and the camera move instead. Slowly he moves into her space and the camera begins to circle them both close-up. This scene requires Harfouch’s ability to perform on stage and for the camera in her portrayal of a strong woman in an incredibly vulnerable moment. She places herself in the center and lets the other components—actor, camera, viewers—react to her understated body language and guarded facial expressions.



Beyond movement, however, Regine Kühn found something completely unique in Harfouch’s performative range:

To what extent the individuality of the actress and the role were pre-destined only became obvious to me from the end result. One of Corinna’s acting qualities is: she has mystery. The best thing to do with mystery is let it remain mystery. The interesting mixture of strength and fragility is transparent. The unpredictability, concentration and certainty. The complete, unreserved effort.¹⁰

⁸ Regine Kühn. “VerKÖRPERung. Erfahrungen mit Corinna Harfouch.” *Film und Fernsehen*. 9 (1989): 35.

⁹ Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski & the Actor*. London: Methuen, 1998; New York: Routledge, 1998. xiv- xv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Regine Kühn.

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Director Siegfried Kühn also shared his thoughts on the ideal actress for his protagonist:

With the incredible strength and aloofness that emanates from Maria, the actress must share herself very emotionally and be capable of quiet, differentiated tones. And it was important to find someone who always guards a bit of mystery, who never gives herself away completely, and doesn't reveal what might happen in the next moment.¹¹

Critics agreed that Harfouch was made for the role. Writing for *Film und Fernsehen* in summer 1988, the renowned GDR film critic Christoph Funke wrote:

Caution and quietude in the film are made possible above all by Corinna Harfouch's performance in the title role. Precisely because this actress works against the sweet and tender, she is capable of Maria Rheine's relentless struggle to make her embodiment of great female figures come alive on stage through a stirring process of human self-discovery. A face—characterized by curiosity, desire to know, and also mistrust of her own spiritual strength—gains beauty in aloofness and reticence. In a difficult balance between self-seeking, self-absorption and the desire to be effective, Corinna Harfouch asserts a surprising sobriety. The proximity of absorption and awareness is, of course, self-evident. The capriciousness accords with dreaminess, and the quiet, friendly conceitedness of the successful with the disarming humility of the lovers. This actress always remains singled out from her surroundings; she always appears unusual, unique, unfamiliar—at once close to and distant from the observer. Corinna Harfouch claims in a fascinating way a hint of the poetic in the defense of a life's dream.¹²

Maria's mystery is perhaps so well-guarded because Harfouch herself does not entirely know yet what it is. According to Funke, Harfouch seems to be in a process of "self-discovery" with her figure that is characterized by her "desire to know," and which happens in a seeming place of contradiction: self-absorption and awareness, conceitedness and humility, self-seeking and self-giving actions. It resides somewhere inside her and between these contrasting attributes, and its purpose is not the unraveling of her mystery but rather the anticipation resulting from that process that she undertakes with her character. The effect of this process on viewers is an actress who also exists in a place of contradiction, remaining both "close and distant," which describes a tension necessary for creating that public persona of a star. This is true not only in the sense of the "ordinary" and "extraordinary" paradox stars embody, as argued by Richard Dyer,¹³ but also under socialism, where a star's unique social and cultural function included the embodiment of an ideal—the socialist personality—which both set stars apart while simultaneously demanding they appear accessible and thus identifiable to an East German public.¹⁴ Harfouch balanced these competing expectations well, as is evident by the resoundingly positive reception of her performance. She does not discourage viewers with her mystery; she intrigues, challenges and invites audiences to follow in this journey of self-discovery with her.

In describing Rheine/Harfouch's journey, director Siegfried Kühn offered the term *Verwandlungskünstlerin*, describing an "artist of metamorphosis": "She transforms herself into the other person through a complicated process and lives in her [...]. Not in the sense of confusing one with the other, but rather that

¹¹ Quoted in: Klaus M. Fiedler, "Mit leisen, differenzierten Tönen. Die Schauspielerin Corinna Harfouch vorgestellt." *Neue Zeit*. 18 Aug. 1988. 4.

¹² Christoph Funke, "Wenn ihr mich brennen seht." *Film und Fernsehen*. 12 (1988): 2-3.

¹³ Richard Dyer, *Stars*. London: British Film Institute, 1998. Dyer identifies the "paradox" of the Hollywood star as representing what is "typical" in society while exuding a lifestyle that is beyond the means (in excess) of the ordinary person; thus, he explains: "the specialness of stars may be then that they are the only ones around who are ordinary!" (43).

¹⁴ In 1964, journalist Horst W. Lukas wrote a *Film Spiegel* article entitled "Haben wir keine Stars?" Lukas suggested the term *Publikumsliebbling* to distinguish between a celebrity in socialism from one in the West (i.e. Hollywood). Claudia Fellmer expands on this distinction in her article on the DEFA-turned-Hollywood star, Armin Mueller-Stahl. For Fellmer, *Publikumsliebbling* describes a public personality who represents egalitarianism and accessibility as typical socialist qualities and ways of behaving. See: Claudia H. L. Fellmer, "Armin Mueller-Stahl – From East Germany to the West Coast." *The German Cinema Book*. Ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk. London: British Film Institute, 2002. 90-97.

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she doesn't separate them any more."¹⁵ The media soon replicated this sentiment, as several headlines suggest: "Wandlung und Verwandlung" (Voß, *Berliner Zeitung*); "Die Wandlung der Schauspielerin Maria Rheine" (Hannuschka, *Märkische Volksstimme*); "Von der Wandlung der Maria Rheine" (Fichtner, *Neuer Tag*); and "Verwandlung einer Schauspielerin" (Wolf, *Film und Fernsehen*).¹⁶ Film critic and author Renate Holland-Moritz wrote more specifically about Harfouch rather than about her role as Maria Rheine: "The *Verwandlungskunst* [art of metamorphosis] of the actress Corinna Harfouch is positively eminent [...]."¹⁷ Indeed, Harfouch's performance introduced characters who were at times tender and strong, vulnerable and indomitable, inhibited and unrestrained, reserved and unhesitating; yet, such contradictions were interwoven into the whole developing performance rather than set against each other. At the core of Harfouch's *Verwandlungskunst*, then, is also a consistency of character. Many could not exist without Maria, though Maria officially ceases to exist. If the performance of transformation—or conversion—challenges Maria to be Many, it must be that she already contains qualities inherent in Many when she is Maria.

Maria is able to call on the pantheon of female figures as literary devices that help her find Many and bring her out. Her characters prepare her for the incongruities that emerge. Her love for Mark poses a challenge to the strength and independence she seeks inside herself, and it is no mistake that their first performance together is that of a forbidden love affair. As Jupiter seduces Alkmene, he exposes all of her vulnerabilities. Harfouch repeats this performance again, when Mark tells Maria he cannot join her in Munich, but that he is moving to Berlin instead. Harfouch must first demonstrate this vulnerability before she reconciles it with Maria/Many's incredible strength.



Strength of character is established in the first moments of the film during Maria's repetition of Elizabeth's—not Mary's—lines: "Woman is not weak. There are strong souls in the sex, and, in my presence, I do forbid speak of a woman's weakness!" Here, Elizabeth is refuting Talbot's argument (Mary's advocate) that Mary's transgressions leading to her impending death sentence happened in a moment of weakness; that she was susceptible to her mistakes not because she is bad but because she is woman and woman is fragile. Maria's rejection of Mary in favor of Elizabeth is due to her own identity with the character, who is a decision-making woman striving for independence and self-determination. Both Elizabeth and Joan of Arc play on this

¹⁵ Siegfried Kühn, "Verwandlung einer Schauspielerin. Siegfried Kühn im Gespräch mit Dieter Wolf." *Film und Fernsehen*. 10 (1988): 8-12.

¹⁶ See: Silvia Fichtner, "Von der Wandlung der Maria Rheine." *Neuer Tag*. Frankfurt/Oder. 26 Oct. 1988; Klaus Hannuschka, "Die Wandlung der Schauspielerin Maria Rheine. Siegfried Kühns Film 'Die Schauspielerin' in unseren Kinos." *Märkische Volksstimme*. Potsdam. 26 Oct. 1988; Renate Holland-Moritz, "Kino-Eule." *Eulenspiegel*. 18 Nov. 1988; Margit Voß, "Wandlung und Verwandlung. Der neue DEFA-Film 'Die Schauspielerin.'" *Berliner Zeitung*. Berlin. 19 Oct. 1988.

¹⁷ Both the words *Wandlung* and *Verwandlung* can be variously translated as metamorphosis and transformation—as well as conversion.

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through the idea of the maiden—the self-proclaimed Virgin Queen Elizabeth and, as Schiller’s title reminds us, *The Maid of Orleans*—who stands alone and needs only her own strength for the challenges ahead. Yet, after meeting Mark, Maria finds that she does need him, but rather than allowing their relationship to weaken her, she decides to make it her cause.

A Multifaceted Performance

When Maria, desperate to be reunited with Mark, finally finds a solution and decides to stage her own suicide and re-emerge as Manya Löwenthal, it is clear that costume, mimic and gesture are not enough. Her success has stemmed from her ability to *be* the role, not *play act* it, a difference that becomes a matter of life and death when Maria assumes the identity of Manya. As an elderly Jewish man tells Maria when she seeks his council, “One does not become a Jew, one is a Jew.” Once Maria becomes Manya, she finds that she does struggle with being this person, which means incorporating Maria into Manya, not leaving her behind. But Maria’s identity is tied to the theater, and Manya no longer feels safe enough to appear on stage and in front of an audience. Though she has chosen life with Mark over life in the theater, she struggles to cope with the loss until Mark finally convinces her to audition at the Jewish Theater.

Manya once again chooses Joan of Arc. In Munich, the press called Maria “the incarnation of Germanness” and “the ideal German woman,” an image she solidified with her role as Schiller’s Joan of Arc. Her performance of the figure coincided with the nationalistic, militaristic and racist Nazi state, and Maria Rheine—her name, Rheine sounding so much like rein (pure), also being significant for this ideological projection onto her figure—gloriously embodies the pure German woman and through her, the pure German nation. As Manya, she turns to George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* instead.¹⁸ Stepping onto stage in blue



slacks and a black button blouse, she is stripped of the heavy armor of the warrior Joan of Arc she embodied in Munich, armed now only with Joan’s words when facing torture and judgment:

¹⁸ In Hedda Zinner’s *Arrangement mit dem Tod* (Buchverlag Der Morgen, 1984), which is the literary source for the film, Manya auditions with Schiller’s *The Maid of Orleans*. However, her first role at the Jewish Theater was George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*. The book explains, “The Jewish Theater was still allowed to play Shaw / Das Jüdische Theater durfte Shaw noch spielen” (92). Shaw’s plays were controversial in Nazi Germany. While he supported Hitler’s dissolution of Parliament and Nazi Germany’s annexation of Austria, he condemned the rampant anti-Semitism and eugenics (Cuomo 438-439). His plays continued to be shown throughout the 1930s. However, Hans Hinkel, the Nazi official who oversaw the program at the Jewish Theater, did not allow the production of authors like Schiller, Goethe and Kleist (Rovit 33). For more information, see: Rebecca Rovit, *The Jewish Kulturbund Theatre Company in Nazi Berlin*. Iowa City: U Iowa P, 2012; and Glenn R. Cuomo, “Saint Joan before the Cannibals’: George Bernard Shaw in the Third Reich.” *German Studies Review*. 16.3 (Oct., 1993): 435-461.

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I am alone on earth. I have always been alone. Don't think you can frighten me by telling me that I am alone. My loneliness shall be my strength too. [...] I will dare, and dare, and dare until I die. [...] If you tear limb from limb from my body. Besides, I cannot bear to be hurt. If you hurt me, I will say anything you like to stop the pain. But I will take it all back afterwards. [...] I will go out now to the common people, and let the love in their eyes comfort me from the hate in yours. You will be glad to see me burn. But if I go through the fire, I will go through the flames for all eternity to the heart of my people. And so, God be with me!

In this closing scene, Manya hints at her own death, but like her Joan, she has chosen her path. She faces it with courage and with a clear conscience, and though she stands alone on the stage, she also finds support—in her love for Mark and in the Jewish community represented by the theater. On stage, her position is stoic, with her arms at her sides and her feet planted beneath her; she does not rely on movement, gesture or costume to show who she is or what she can do. As Siegfried Kühn explained, Maria (Manya) emanates an incredible strength. Harfouch once again relies on both stage and camera to demonstrate this in her protagonist. As she stands there unmoving, the camera begins a slow track outward and upward, its movement and path seemingly set by the energy radiating from the woman on stage. In this career defining performance, Harfouch undoubtedly capitalized on her past embodiments of powerful and central female characters, which she combined with her versatility as an actress of both theater and film to present a multifaceted woman held together by her own inner strength and determination.

Victoria I. Rizo Lenshyn is a PhD candidate in German and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she also received graduate certificates in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies and in Film Studies. She is currently writing her dissertation on film star culture and female actresses in former East Germany. She has published on East German cinema, most recently as a contributor to the second volume of *Directory of World Cinema: Germany* (Ed. Michelle Langford, 2014), and a forthcoming co-authored article with Evan Torner on Jörg Foth's 1988 East German/Vietnamese co-production, *Dschungelzeit* (*Time in the Jungle*). She is co-editor with Skyler Arndt-Briggs for the forthcoming anthology, *GDR Film and the Global Cold War* (Berghahn Books).