



THE ACTRESS

The Transformations of an Actress

Director Siegfried Kühn in conversation with DEFA dramaturg Dieter Wolf about Die Schauspielerin (The Actress) in 1988.

Our conversation is a little tricky. The last scenes for *The Actress* have been shot, the film is edited and the mix is done. Nothing more can be changed at this point. However, the critics have not yet shared their views and the audience has not yet passed its judgment on the film. Would it be better to keep quiet until then, until we are asked or are punished with silence? Let us choose to reflect out loud on motives and impulses, about how and when something is created and why in this way and not another way, rather than discuss conceptions and intentions.

Kindheit (Childhood), a true “auteur film,” still being screened at cinemas (when it is screened at all), a poetic and subjective reflection on the final days of the war, soon followed [in *The Actress*] by a second coming to terms with fascism. Others of your generation already concerned themselves—sometimes rather controversially—with this period, including Wolfgang Trampe and Ulrich Weiss in *Dein unbekannter Bruder (Your Unknown Brother)*, Günter Mehnert and Egon Schlegel in their adaptation of Peter Abraham’s novel *Die Schüsse der Arche Noah (Shots from Noah’s Ark)*, Manfred Schmidt and Michael Kann in *Stielke, Heinz, fünfzehn... (Stielke, Heinz, Fifteen...)*, and Roland Gräf in *Das Haus am Fluss (The House on the River)* and *Fallada – Letztes Kapitel (Fallada: Last Chapter)*, for which Gräf co-wrote the scenario with Helga Schütz. Why now?

I had a bitter but instructive realization that I can only get something across convincingly after experiencing it myself. I mean this in terms of both biographical and spiritual (but not only rational) experience. When both merge into one, like in the film *Childhood*, I feel the most confident and can tell the story the most freely. Stories like *The Actress* are challenging because of their artistic sophistication, but at the same time they are hard work for me.

I experienced fascism only indirectly in my grandparents’ remote village. When the front came closer, we were evacuated, then overtaken, and finally returned to a village that looked like it had been devastated by an earthquake. Then came postwar experiences that stay like bad dreams in one’s memory forever. I would like to tell the story of the years I lived through in West Berlin in the 1950s in one of my next films, a kind of sequel to *Childhood*. It would also involve fascism, which did not end in 1945. There was no analysis of this period in my schools. I remember my teacher in Zehlendorf, who told us his personal experiences as a member of a submarine crew like a fascinating adventure story.

Later I tried to approach an event whose human power is overwhelming: the performance of Verdi’s Requiem by prisoners in a death camp. Unfortunately, the film idea could not capture the dimensions of the event. I made another futile attempt to tackle this topic based on Fred Wander’s [novel] *Der siebente Brunnen (The Seventh Well)*. An existing scenario tried to deal with the difficult adaptation of the prose, but in vain. I was fascinated by Regine Kühn’s idea to concentrate the expansive story on the crossing of the Giant Mountains. In the film, I wanted to show the ascent to the summit like the Stations of the Cross.

What was the specific attraction, the compelling challenge of this thematic and imagined first step into the very rich and intimidatingly successful DEFA film tradition?

For me *The Actress* is not solely a historical, antifascist story. It has several layers. This is the root of its quality and what necessitates being in agreement with the scriptwriter. As soon as I feel that my intentions will

The Transformations of an Actress

not interfere with a project—whether as an idea or scenario—I let go. All the Regine Kühn stories that I have directed so far function as allegories, but are also realistic. This is especially clear in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) and *The Actress*. For the scriptwriter, *The Actress* is, above all, the story of human decency. Certainly, this is how I see it as well; but I made the film because it depicts a human metamorphosis of positively classic scope and simplicity. In only one other film, *Das zweite Leben des Friedrich Wilhelm Georg Platow* (*The Second Life of Friedrich Wilhelm Georg Platow*), did I find a process of transformation of such exemplary importance.

Only few directors would commit to such an inner central theme. Can you describe in words or encapsulate how something like this emerged, where its roots lie? Possibly in one or more formative experiences?

My grandparents raised me a strict Catholic. Only *one* book was read in their house: the Bible. For eight years it was Sunday and evening services, religion class, and daily rosary prayers. The story of the Bible was not only familiar to me, I reverently experienced it in my life. The idea of resurrection thus became a natural part of my feelings and thoughts, and I was deeply fascinated by the idea that the soul continued to exist after death. As long as men exist there will be a desire to extend life. The religious form of this dream is a legend, but the longing for immortality continues.

I am interested in the question of how people go about it, how they create their illusions, how they suppress their fear of death, and how this fear is expressed in other ways. Do people need a substitute for religion today and what would a “religion of the modern era” look like?

The heroes of my most important films are pilgrims searching for their place of worship. These are not people who have been hounded, but rather people who are agitated, disgruntled and want to break out. They cannot bear stagnation, nor predictable, fixed goals or safe channels. Their productivity and “heroism” lie in putting things into question and being concerned.

With their entrance into a new life, Platow, Anna Maria Josephine, and now Maria Rheine are ready to take a huge risk: total uncertainty. Maria quotes a passage from *Ivanov* by Chekhov: “I cut every tie, as one snips the withered leaves from a tree. . . .” She discovers her “purpose” in these words. Following a restless man, Anna Maria Josephine finds the strength to leave hearth and home, as if gripped by invisible powers, because she longs for a new existence. Edward (*Elective Affinities*), Wischnewski (*Don Juan, Karl-Liebnecht-Str. 78*) and Platow are similar characters. They stop somewhere and begin anew. This drive lies deep inside these people and is only indirectly connected to outer circumstances. Certainly, Maria Rheine would not become Manya Löwenthal if she did not find the circumstances to make it imperative. Platow would not start his second life without external compulsion. Anna Maria Josephine would not set out into the unknown if she hadn’t met Nardine. Had they remained in their old circumstances for lack of an outer impulse, there would have been a terrible loss of personality, an unfulfilled life. The decisive factor is not whether the new beginning works out or not, but rather experience and gratification: “I tried it. . . .” For me these characters are all pilgrims looking for insight, which they will someday find in themselves. This insight reads: “Transform yourself as often as you can and as long as you have the energy.”

As a dramaturg, I have to ask more about the building blocks of the project’s genesis. Do you think that reading Hedda Zinner’s novel *Arrangement mit dem Tod* (transl. *An Arrangement with Death*) at an earlier point in time would have given the same impulse to create an adaptation? Or have there been positive or negative external impetuses in recent years—say, from reality, art, or international or DEFA films—that contributed to this impulse? Did respect for the film *Ehe im Schatten* (*Marriage in the Shadows*) represent a big hurdle? The doubts of colleagues about the legitimacy of such a thematic variation couldn’t be ignored, after all.

The Transformations of an Actress

My decision to make a film comes only from my own experience, including my experience with my own work. For this reason, it is rare that a scenario or idea I am offered coincides with my interests. I admire such masterful films as *Marriage in the Shadows*, but to my mind this film has very little to do with *The Actress*. I am touched and disturbed by the heroes of the Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis; Captain Michalis and Alexis Zorbas are men who discovered their own "religion." They have the ability to do the impossible. They exude power and prudence and give me the impression that they unite the quintessence of all human experience in themselves. They are able to grab a moment so intensely that it appears that death no longer matters. Their credo: If you fail to stand on the rim of life's abyss, you will grow no wings.

The novel has a wonderful central premise that is tailor-made for film: the transformation of one person into another. The identity change of the actress is fictional, while, though little known, there really was a Jewish Theater in Berlin under the Nazis that existed for some time. Where was the seduction and where the danger in such an unusual instance? With a little bitter irony you have Maria's friend ask the question "Isn't this a bit like trash writing?"

Basically, the central premise was the seduction. The danger, or better the challenge for me was to tell the story of the identity change in such a normal manner that the audience wouldn't immediately notice or be troubled by the fact that it is fiction. At the same time, the timelessness of the story had a special appeal for me.

The new title is an assertion of nuances in theme and subject, more than of the adaptation's autonomy.

I see it differently. Our title draws attention to the ambiguity of the story and the character of Maria. She is an actress in heart and soul. She experiences no separation between her profession and private life; they are intertwined. For this reason, her acting has an intensely persuasive power. Through a complicated process, she transforms herself into another person and lives within her, even off stage. The process of appropriation is achieved through her acute power of observation, her strong willpower, and an addiction to transformation. In this sense, she is less an actress than a quick-change artist. Play and seriousness mix during the transformation from Maria Rheine to Manya Löwenthal. But not in such a way that she mistakes one for the other; rather, she does not differentiate between them any more. This is also what makes her character so special and exceptional. Manya Löwenthal becomes her life's role.

The inhuman conditions Maria is confronted with cause her to take this step. She is not a politically engaged person, but a fundamental sense of decency and self-evident morality dictate that she takes a stand. If nothing else, she does it for the person she loves. At first a serious game of life and death, it becomes a true metamorphosis. With the crossing of inner boundaries, Maria does not realize the full extent of her decision's consequences. Only once she is confronted with a different life, with ghetto existence, and there is no way back does she completely identify with the other person and become ready to face it. When she steps onto the stage of the Jewish Theater, she is no longer Maria, but rather the Jew Manya Löwenthal. This transformation brings not only a change of identity, but also an enrichment of her personality and a kind of "resurrection." An old Jewish actor says to her: "To metamorphose means to renew oneself."

The original German interview was first published in the film journal Film und Fernsehen (10, 1988). We thank director Siegfried Kühn and Dieter Wolf for their permission to translate and publish this interview in English on the DVD release of The Actress.