

# Wenzel, Mensching and the Latest from the Da-Da-R

by David Robb



*There are times when one has to be a fool or a clown to survive unscathed.*

- program for the Schweriner Filmfest, October 1990

The East German poets Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and Steffen Mensching together formed a theatrical clown act that successfully spanned the 1980s in the GDR [East Germany] and the 1990s in the newly united Germany. Described by the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* as “Brecht plus Goethe, times Weill, to the power of Eisler, divided by Valentin, equals Wenzel and Mensching!”<sup>1</sup>, they did indeed constitute a mixture of literary cabaret, political song and clownesque comedy. Mensching and Wenzel were originally members of the East Berlin *Liedertheater* [song-theater] group *Karls Enkel* [Karl's Grandchildren], which built up a following in the GDR among students and intellectuals between 1976 and 1985. In this same period, they also carved out careers for themselves as poets and political singer-songwriters. But while their respective poetry volumes<sup>2</sup> and Wenzel's recordings<sup>3</sup> always sold out immediately, *Karls Enkel Liedertheater* productions and the offshoot *DaDaeR* clown revues of Wenzel and Mensching were never published and, to this day, have remained a secret among the initiated. Other than Jörg Foth's 1990 film, *Letztes aus der DaDaeR* (Latest from the Da-Da-R), and the 1994 release of the *Hammer=Rehwü* [Hammer-Revue] on CD, their only legacy resides in video recordings and manuscripts collected in the 1980s by the Song Center of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin.

In the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Wenzel and Mensching continued to perform mainly for their loyal East German audiences. Nonetheless, increasing forays into West Germany won them accolades, such as the *Kleinkunst* prize of the city of Mainz in 1991, and the German Cabaret Prize in 1995. Since the duo broke up in 2001, both artists have had successful careers in Germany. Wenzel has won numerous national prizes as a singer-songwriter for his CDs, which include his German adaptations of Woody Guthrie songs (*Ticky Tock*, 2003) and Christoph Hein texts (*Masken*, 2009). Mensching has won critical acclaim as a poet and author for works such as the novels *Jacobs Leiter* (2003) and *Lustigs Flucht* (2005); since 2008, he has also been the theater manager at the Theater Rudolstadt.

*Latest from the Da-Da-R* was made in the last months of the German Democratic Republic. According to DEFA director Jörg Foth, it only became possible to make the film due to the special circumstances of this period: between the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 and German unification on October 3, 1990, public funds were still available for filmmaking, but political constraints in the arts had been lifted. Suddenly Foth had the freedom to embark on a pet project. During the months of the so-called “peaceful revolution,” Wenzel and Mensching had performed their show, *Altes aus der DaDaeR* (Old News from the Da-Da-R), in theaters, student clubs and cultural centers around the GDR. It was their latest installment of their Da-Da-R clown cabaret series, which had begun back in December 1982 as *Neues aus der DaDaeR* (News from the Da-Da-R). The title exploited a word-play between Dada and DDR, the German acronym for the GDR. After the fall of the Wall, it was renamed *Letztes aus der DaDaeR*, which can be translated as either *The Last of the Da-Da-R* or *Latest from the Da-Da-R* and from which the film title came.

During the turbulent autumn and winter of 1989-90, the texts of the sketches and songs were continually adapted to correspond to rapidly-changing political realities. The atmosphere at live shows in this period was highly charged. Starting in September 1989, before every concert

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performers read a statement of political demands drafted by the new civil rights organization, *Neues Forum*; a type of political action that was unprecedented for artists in the history of the GDR. Prior to a concert in Hoyerswerda, amidst widespread unrest surrounding celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the GDR on October 7, 1989, Mensching and Wenzel were arrested, held in *Stasi* custody overnight and instructed to leave the region.<sup>4</sup> A video in the Academy of Arts archive shows a performance of *Latest from the Da-Da-R* shortly prior to the fall of the Wall in November: sensing political change, the crowd is euphoric—it hangs on every word of the songs and sketches, listening for every innuendo. After the Wall fell, the duo continued to perform the show into the early months of 1990. Its success as a satirical, grotesque reflection of the GDR in its death throes prompted Foth, Wenzel and Mensching to attempt the film adaptation.

To fully understand the artistic significance of *Latest from the Da-Da-R*, let us look at the origins of the Wenzel and Mensching clown phenomenon in East Berlin's *Karls Enkel Liedertheater*.<sup>5</sup> *Karls Enkel* was formed in autumn 1976, around the time of dissident singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann's expulsion from the GDR, which caused a storm of protest and heralded a new clampdown in the arts. In this touchy period, political song groups, such as *Schicht* and *Brigade Feuerstein*, were exploring new theatrical techniques as a means to express taboo subjects. As students at Humboldt University in East Berlin, Wenzel and Mensching researched theatrical forms such as *commedia dell'arte* and, in the following years, perfected their mastery of masked role play and robust slapstick comedy, which they incorporated into their literary political song act with *Karls Enkel*.

It was in the *Hammer=Rehwü* of 1982 and in *News from the Da-Da-R*, later that same year, that Wenzel and Mensching were to realize the full theatrical potential of the clowns Weh and Meh. The donning of masks has traditionally been a satirical response to the social masks of convention and etiquette; according to Rudolf Münz, its function is "to expose the masked-ness of life by using masks."<sup>6</sup> In thinking back to the *Hammer=Rehwü* in 1993, Wenzel commented on the institutionalized masking of the truth in the GDR:

It was as if the actors from [the *Hammer=Rehwü*], as masked realists, had set their *last hope* upon portraying an upside-down world. . . . The country that defined itself as historically advanced was, by means of an illogical historical "dualistic," in the process of re-interpreting reality. And it seemed that everything was masked, just like the actors on the old video recording had masked themselves. The "weapons of war" were called "peace weapons," the resolution to station rockets wasn't called the "Stationing Resolution" but rather the "Double Resolution." . . . Pacifism was given the mask of the "class enemy / opponents of war."<sup>7</sup>

The mask traditionally possesses a dualistic symbolism; the clown figure is never static. In the carnivalesque *commedia dell'arte*, this duality was often expressed in the unification of serious and comical figures in one character, as with Harlequin, renowned for his transformations. The large, red, painted mouth adopted by Wenzel is thus a carnivalesque symbol of death and destruction, but also of rebirth.<sup>8</sup> His character, Weh, is correspondingly fluid, moving between the roles of the rogue and the naïve fool. Mensching's Meh figure similarly mutates between an angry, Mephisto-like devil and a lost child.

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Other carnivalesque techniques include the absurd juxtaposition of contradictory phenomena, including the arbitrary, topsy-turvy use of props. This too is reminiscent of carnival, in which, according to Bakhtin, objects are “turned inside out, utilized in the wrong way. . . . Household objects are turned into arms, kitchen utensils and dishes become musical instruments.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the course of the *Hammer=Rehwü* Wenzel’s clarinet is used as a telescope, a gun, a stick and a microphone. In an absurd slapstick scene, the clowns are unable to piece a music stand together; Mensching clammers around Wenzel’s body, until he’s upside down with his legs wrapped around Wenzel’s neck. This traditional clowning motif is also symbolic of a world turned topsy-turvy. Again according to Bakhtin, the “continual rotation of the upper and lower parts suggests the rotation of earth and sky,” whereby “the buttocks persistently try . . . to take the place of the head and the head that of the buttocks.”<sup>10</sup>

In *News from the Da-Da-R*,<sup>11</sup> the upside-down motif supports a parody of the absurdities of GDR travel restrictions. Here the music stand is introduced as a “PIKO Model Railway.” The various legs and arms of the stand are given names such as “the locomotive” and “the adapter,” to which the clowns attach conspiratorial significance: “Get your hands off the adapter. If I catch you once more on the adapter, I’ll give you a panning!”<sup>12</sup> Playing on the power of association, heightened by the atmosphere of taboo—the clowns appear to be about to attempt to flee the republic—Weh and Meh increasingly draw the audience into a game of nonsense which ends in the clowns’ farcical entanglement with the music stand.

Word games and linguistic hybrids play a frequent role in *News from the Da-Da-R*. A trait of popular humor dating back to the Latin *parodia sacra*, Bakhtin describes a hybrid as “the repulsion of the foreign-born sacred word.”<sup>13</sup> A dialogic process takes place in which two styles—“the language being parodied . . . and the language that parodies”<sup>14</sup>—meet in the same word. In this way, official language is ridiculed as empty rhetoric. This also takes place in the scene entitled, “The Honor Is Mine,” which, along with the “PIKO Railway” scene, was a staple number in the Da-Da-R series up until *Latest from the Da-Da-R*. “The Honor Is Mine” is a parody of an official award ceremony, in which “Akademie” of Arts is transformed into “Epidemie” (epidemic) of Arts, as the clowns lavish one another with ironical distinctions, stabbing each other with medals and feigning agonizing deaths; the audience, for whom participation in mind-numbing official ceremonies is a necessary part of professional life in the GDR, roars with laughter.<sup>15</sup>

By 1988, *News from the Da-Da-R* had mutated into *Old News from the Da-Da-R*. In the scene “Tenor in a Divided World,” from August 1989, a hybrid is constructed from the ambiguity of the word *Stimme*, which means both “voice” and “vote” in German. Wenzel hasn’t seen his *Stimme* since he was last at the polls—a reference to that year’s election rigging in Dresden. In the ensuing slapstick, Mensching performs an operation on Wenzel’s throat, eventually locating his “voice”; exploiting the word-play, the clowns find an aesthetic solution to a political contradiction.

In *Old News*, renamed *Latest from the Da-Da-R* after the fall of the Wall, the clowns and their audience lay the GDR to rest in a chorus of laughter. Weh and Meh constantly change roles, manipulating the perspective of the audience. Clowning enables them to do this because, once again in the words of Bakhtin, clowns have a “metaphorical significance, . . . one cannot take them literally, . . . they are not what they seem, . . . their being coincides with their role, and out-

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side this role they simply do not exist.”<sup>16</sup> Weh and Meh can reflect any standpoint they choose, be it that of the humbled leadership, the betrayed “old communist,” *Stasi* or Party members who have changed colors overnight, disappointed left-wing intellectuals, or reemerging nationalist lynch-mobs. The audience, seeing their own reflection in the parodied characters, are drawn into the unfolding comedy and tragedy of the GDR. “Do You Remember the 1980s?” for example, is a parody of the aging state leadership. Sprinkling powder on each other’s hair, the clowns simulate two old men who reminisce about a glorious past. It emerges, however, that neither can remember the 1980s. Weh has an idea: “Weren’t you the aged Security General who celebrated his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in the ‘80s?”<sup>17</sup>

This reference to *Stasi* chief Erich Mielke was extremely risky, all the more so as this scene was first performed on August 11, 1989 in the Theater im Palast in Berlin.<sup>18</sup> With ironical self-pity, they sing of the personal tragedy unfolding for the old guard: “I never put on the brakes for my state/ Governed a lot, partisan, day and night/ Now I’m old and harvest the lettuce./ The scrap heap is now a joke./ It’s my own fault. That’s what I get/Ingratitude is the wages of the world.”<sup>19</sup> In December 1989 a new song, “Don’t Wake Dead Dogs,” was added to satirize the opportunism of *Stasi* turncoats who tried to destroy all traces of their crimes. With gay abandon, the clowns dance in the style of Rumpelstiltskin, singing “Take the discs and the German mark/ Come, let’s burn the files in the park.”<sup>20</sup>

After the fall of the Wall, the euphoria began to wane. By January 1990 the peaceful revolution, originally led by artists and intellectuals demanding reforms within socialism, was overtaken by the population at large. The scene “The Clowns Should Be Shot”<sup>21</sup> was added to reflect this new twist. Wenzel and Mensching—feeling themselves, alongside other members of the East German cultural elite, accused as court jesters of intellectual collaboration with the old order—ironically offer themselves up to the audience for execution. In a typical inversion, however, the clowns turn the situation upside down to reveal its absurdity and, in doing so, invite contemplation on the mood of revenge which dominates the media. In the film this scene was expanded: a paying crowd in carnival attire storms the prison where Weh and Meh live. With emotions whipped-up, the mob pursues the clowns through the streets, shouting “String them up!” Reminiscent of Oskar Matzerath in *The Tin Drum*, the clowns flee to Paris, but are unable to escape the clutches of an invisible authority. Howling like abandoned dogs, they reflect how the master-servant relationship, unresolved in the communist era, is still in place today. But now there is a twist: in 1990, on the threshold of a new era and political system, Weh and Meh are back where they started—as court jesters—but in a system that perceives no need for them.

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- <sup>1</sup> Berlin *Tagesspiegel* quoted in concert programm of the *Hammer-Revue* (Potsdam: December 11, 1993).
- <sup>2</sup> Hans-Eckardt Wenzel, *Lied vom wilden Mohn. Gedichte* (Halle/Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1984). *Antrag auf Verlängerung des Monats August. Gedichte* (Halle/Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1986). Steffen Mensching, *Erinnerung an eine Milchglasscheibe. Gedichte* (Halle/Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1984). *Tuchföhlung. Gedichte* (Halle/Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> Hans-Eckardt Wenzel, *Stirb mit mir ein Stück. Liebeslieder* (Amiga, 1987, Buschfunk, 1995). This received a gold disc for sales. *Reisebilder* (Amiga, 1989, Buschfunk, 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> Personal interview with Mensching (21 Feb. 1994). See also Ständer, 25.
- <sup>5</sup> It was always unclear whether the Karl referred to Karl Marx or Karl Valentin. The ambiguity, however, could be exploited by the group wherever it suited them.
- <sup>6</sup> Rudolf Münz, *Das 'andere' Theater, Studien über ein deutschsprachiges teatro dell'arte der Lessingzeit* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1979) 87.
- <sup>7</sup> Hans-Eckardt Wenzel, "Die Unschärfe alter Aufnahmen." In *Hammer-Rehwü 82 Dokumentation*, ed. Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung (Potsdam: 1983) Unpaginated. All translations from the original German by David Robb.
- <sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 317.
- <sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 410-12.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 353.
- <sup>11</sup> Wenzel and Mensching, *Neues aus der Da Da eR*, unpublished video, collected by Karin Wolf (Berlin: Akademie der Künste der DDR, 1983).
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 77.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 75.
- <sup>15</sup> Wenzel and Mensching, *Neues aus der Da Da eR* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste der DDR, 1983).
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 159.
- <sup>17</sup> Wenzel and Mensching, *Allerletztes aus der DaDaeR/Hundekomödie*, edited by Andrea Doberenz (Halle/Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1991) 29.
- <sup>18</sup> The theater in the *Palast der Republik*. The intendant of the theater was horrified and later told Wenzel and Mensching she was absolving herself of all responsibility for their performance.
- <sup>19</sup> *Allerletztes*, 31.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 31-32.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 53-54.

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