

# It's a Long Fall

An interview with Thomas Wilkenung



Excerpts from an interview conducted by film journalist Ralf Schenk with Thomas Wilkenung, head of the *DaDaeR* production group at the DEFA studio. The complete interview appears in *Film und Fernsehen* (issue 4-5, 1994).

**You [Thomas Wilkenung] began as production assistant at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films; later you studied production at the Film Academy in Babelsberg; and, as your last job at DEFA, you led the *DaDaeR* artistic production group. Now you are the business manager of your own company. What made you take the leap into the market economy?**

I have to clear that up a little – because the history of our company goes back to fall 1982. Back then, young DEFA and TV people had tried to found their own studio – with the help of the *Filmverband* (Film Association) – similar to the Balázs Studio in Hungary or “Debut” in Moscow. Not until spring 1989, as the first ominous signs were already visible, did we succeed in forcing a concession from the *Hauptverwaltung Film* [Film Department at the Ministry of Culture] . . . with compromises, of course. These included: no independent studio, but rather a group within the DEFA Studio for Feature Films; we would have ten percent of its annual budget – so around three-and-a-half million marks – at our disposal. Second, it was agreed that the group would choose the manager from within its own ranks, and that a council of participating artists would be created and would decide about upcoming projects. The production decisions would be made by the group leader, because someone had to be responsible for the money at our disposal. Among the main initiators were Jörg Foth and Tony Loeser, then came directors Peter Kahane, Andreas Kleinert and Peter Welz, camera people like Dieter Chill and Peter Badel, and producers like Andrea Hoffmann and Alexander Gehrke. I was elected leader. After a lot of formalities, the group was finally established on January 1, 1990 – and, along with all other DEFA production groups, was terminated on March 31, 1991.

**Until that point, you called yourselves the *DaDaeR* artistic group – a name which was then replaced by the more formal *Thomas Wilkenung Filmgesellschaft mbH* [the Thomas Wilkenung limited liability film company]...**

First the group had the neutral name “Nachwuchs” [Younger Generation]. But when our first DEFA-film, *Letztes aus der DaDaeR* (*Latest from the Da-Da-R*) by Jörg Foth, premiered in October 1990, we found the name a little silly – Jörg, for one, was already 41 years old – and we agreed quickly on *DaDaeR*. This name signaled, on one hand, a certain closeness to the GDR [the German acronym is DDR] – but, on the other hand, a considerable distance as well, through the analogy to Dada, the symbiosis of silliness and seriousness.

**The third and last DEFA project of the *DaDaR* group was Herwig Kipping’s feature film debut, *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (*The Land beyond the Rainbow*, 1991). The director, born in 1948, had gotten attention for his brooding and optically brilliant thesis film, *Hommage à Hölderlin* (1983) that you produced. He was then pushed aside, because of his artistic and political non-conformity. DEFA General Director Mäde never gave him another chance. It was rumored you also had difficulties getting him accepted as a director by the DEFA studio in 1990-91.**

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There was consensus among the studio management that one of our group's productions was to be financed from the 18 million marks that the GDR Ministry of Culture under Herbert Schirmer put at the disposal of the Feature Film Studio. The studio was now, by law, a private company with limited liability and, was no longer obligated to the ten percent under the original agreement with the Film Department. After consultation within the group, I decided in favor of *The Land beyond the Rainbow*. Then, ominously, when I was gone for only a couple of days, the project disappeared from the studio's planning documents. It is primarily thanks to the support of the chief dramaturg, Rudolf Jürschik, that it was put back into the production plan. And studio manager Gert Golde also stood by his word. It was aggravating that the casting of Armin Mueller-Stahl didn't come to fruition. I had met with Mueller-Stahl in Hamburg and he wanted to take the role of the grandfather. His fee was unfortunately outside of our range. As we were trying to find further funding sources, the studio management announced his rejection, without consulting me. Those kinds of occurrences strengthened my resolve to seek independence, even as I was being offered further permanent employment at the studio.

**While you were working on this project, you and your group took the risk and founded an independent, private company – and you were the only “old” DEFA group to do so. How did this process work?**

We saw pretty quickly how the tides were turning and thought about what might happen if DEFA could not continue as a whole, like as a Feature Film East company or something. If it had come to that, the *DaDaeR* group would have presumably taken part. At the same time, however, we searched for alternatives, one of which was independence. While a few of our members hesitated, Helke Misselwitz was open to the idea. On the evening of the parliamentary election in March 1990 – right after the first count at 6:32 pm – it was clear that things would now move quickly towards a free market economy. I called Helke, told her that we couldn't afford not to take the bull by the horns. A few days later we sat at the notary's and Helke and I became shareholders.

**Did that mean the automatic exclusion of other *DaDaeR* co-workers?**

No, the company contract included opening options. Co-workers in the group also had offers from elsewhere: Kahane filmed with Wendlandt; Foth and Kleinert worked for ZDF television; Peter Welz for MDR television; and so on. While many older colleagues were paralyzed, like rabbits staring at the DEFA-snake, the younger ones were getting offers. I liked that. It was a shame that the group fell apart so quickly. At the same time, the fact that production companies like Ost-Film, Ö-Film and others were coming in and wanted to produce feature films meant that we now had the variety of producers we had been lacking for years. Since '82 our demand had always been for an alternative studio – to get away from the monopoly. Diversity as concept.

**You started off your independence with Helke Misselwitz's feature film debut, *Herzprung*. What problems did you face?**

At the start, the project was still called *Illusion des Erwachens* (*Illusion of Awakening*) and was a completely different film. Once we had gotten the funding together for the production, the di-

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rector realized that she couldn't film the original material because the times had overtaken the story. We were told: you'll never survive that; you'll get in trouble with the funding agencies. And as the committees indeed did withdraw their support bit by bit, only the Filmfonds Hamburg [Hamburg Film Office], from which I had received production preparation support, turned out to be sympathetic. They said that it was better to realize ahead of time that you can't make a film, than to say afterwards, "If only we hadn't shot it." The money from Hamburg secured our survival in this period. When the final script for *Herzprung* was done, we submitted it anew and secured the financing through the Brandenburger Filmförderung [Brandenburg Film Office], and DEFA contributed its ten percent again. And something really remarkable happened: first I couldn't sleep because I didn't have the money at my disposal; then I couldn't sleep because I had it and suddenly felt the burden of these two-and-a-half million [marks]. That was really different from at DEFA: really independent, without a net safety.

Translated by Delene White, DEFA Film Library



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