

Berlin Film Festival, part 4

Putting his finger on a wound

Rita's Legends (Die Stille nach dem Schuß)

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Rita's Legends (Die Stille nach dem Schuß), directed by Volker Schlöndorff, screenplay by Wolfgang Kohlhaase

In his excellent film *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1975), filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff dealt with terrorism—the attacks carried out in Germany by the group of former student radicals known as the Red Army Faction (the so-called “Baader-Meinhof gang”)—and the state repression it provoked. At the age of 60 he has returned to the theme in his new film *Rita's Legends*, in every respect a worthy follow-up to the earlier work.

In the 1960s and 1970s Schlöndorff was to some extent overshadowed by the other major figures of the German New Cinema movement—R.W. Fassbinder, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders—but he nonetheless produced two of the outstanding German films of that period, *Katharina Blum* and *The Tin Drum* (1979). Schlöndorff has had mixed fortunes with his past few films, in particular his ambitious *Der Unhold* (*The Ogre*, 1996), but *Rita's Legends* represents a return to form.

In collaboration with veteran East German screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase (*Berlin—Ecke Schönhauser* [1957] , *Solo Sunny* [1979]), Schlöndorff has turned his attention to an episode of contemporary German history which became fully known to the public only after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The conduct of the Red Army Faction (RAF) and the violent response by the West German state are well documented. The RAF emerged from the student movement in the late 1960s, the “generation of '68.” Inspired by an unhealthy mixture of anarchism and Maoist-Stalinism (“Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”), the group gave expression to their feelings of frustration at the relative stabilisation of the Bundesrepublik in a campaign of terror—including bank robberies and a number of assassinations.

What emerged after the fall of the Wall and the opening up of Stasi (East German secret police) files, however, was the fact that some members of the RAF had been provided a safe haven and new identities by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the GDR (East Germany). At the heart of *Rita's Legends* is the fascinating question of how a section of the most supposedly radical “left” elements were able to make their peace with the arch-conservative bureaucracy of the GDR.

In preparing the screenplay Kohlhaase undertook extensive research. The end result draws heavily on the biographies of a number of RAF members, some of whom Kohlhaase interviewed. The film begins with a slow pan of an apartment of one of the fictional RAF members. Posters of Che Guevara and Jimmy Hendrix adorn the walls, political texts by Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse Tung lie on the table, a bust of

Karl Marx sits on the mantelpiece. The opening scenes deal with a bank robbery undertaken by the RAF led by Andreas (Andi).

A group of four men and women (no masks) burst into a bank with a chorus of “Down with Capitalism!” In the course of robbing the bank and bagging the money they exchange pleasantries with an old lady who happens to stroll into the premises. As they flee from the bank, Rita stops by a beggar in the street and pours a considerable amount of stolen loose change into his hat. The beggar is overwhelmed, Rita puffs up with pride—the redistribution of social wealth is already under way. In conversation Rita admits that she only got involved with the group because of her infatuation with Andi, the leader.

The German state cracks down and the terrorists are forced to flee to France. Having gone underground, Rita and the others must learn the tricks necessary to avoid detection and stay alive. Following an incident in which a French policeman is shot, they are obliged to take off once more. Rita redeems a previous promise from a member of the East German Stasi who has offered to help the group.

The four are offered the chance of remaining in the GDR by the Stasi who regard the RAF members as potentially useful pawns in their own game of “cat and mouse” with Western intelligence services. A Stasi officer prepares a suitable welcome for the group—a barbecue with East German sausage and West German beer—the best of both worlds! The two male members of the group get their first taste of everyday life in the GDR—and already have enough! They prefer to go to Beirut and continue with their weapons training. The two women stay behind but are forced to separate and assume new identities and jobs in the “Socialist Homeland.”

In a number of scenes the film effectively conveys the all-pervading stagnation, resignation and conformism that characterised daily life in the GDR—particularly in the period immediately prior to the fall of the Wall. As part of her cover Rita takes a job in a local factory. We are introduced to her workmates in the factory canteen. The walls are adorned with posters dedicated to the fulfilment of the factory plan and extolling the virtues of solidarity in the “workers state”. In fact there is not the least trace of solidarity amongst the workers, who quarrel over everything. Rita's fellow workers gaze in astonishment when she donates DM10 to the solidarity fund for Nicaragua organised by the factory boss. “Do you really believe the workers in Nicaragua will get any of that?” one of them exclaims. The unspoken reaction of the workers to anything organised by the factory head is stubborn indifference.

But opposition to the system is inarticulate and more likely to take the form of alcoholism and deep frustration, as it does in the case of

Rita's closest friend. Of all the figures in the film it is Rita, in fact, who most vigorously defends the GDR system with its omnipresent police apparatus. After all, did not the GDR conform to a number of the most important priorities of the RAF radicals? There were no "Konsum-Tempels" ("temples of consumption") in the GDR, no "Konsumterror" (consumption terror) and only the most basic commodities on sale. Everybody seemed to be living in more or less the same deprivation (and misery)—did this not correspond to notions of "socialism" adopted by the RAF from Maoism and Castroism?

Schlöndorff has been criticised in some quarters for portraying the GDR and its secret police too positively. In fact Schlöndorff and Kohlhase have resisted the temptation to simply depict Stasi officers as wicked criminals. The principal Stasi officer, for example, (played by the outstanding Martin Wuttke) is no mere one-dimensional swine—instead, together with his boss, he reveals the cynical outlook with which the Stasi justified its own existence. He expresses total distrust in the broad masses of the people. "Because we are for you, we have to oppose you," he says. In fact his is an undiluted police state mentality: the greater the number of police and spies and the more powerful the state apparatus for suppressing the people, the farther the system proceeds along the road to socialism.

Rita's former life as a terrorist is uncovered by a colleague at work. Rita assumes a new identity and takes a new lover in the course of working on the East German seacoast. She runs into a former RAF colleague, Frederike, who also went undercover in the GDR. They are pleased to see one another, but Frederike does not have much time. She is visiting the seashore with her husband and young child and has to leave. As they depart Rita says she is pleased that her friend's life is so happy. We see Frederike's anguished and pained face as she declares: "What makes you think that!"

The film is not without its weaknesses. In general the film gives a convincing portrayal of the staleness of life in the GDR. But scenes in which, for example, an East German Trabi hits a tree, falls apart, with the female drivers then being given a lecture by a pompous GDR *Volkspolizist*, fall too easily into the category of "Ossi jokes" (jokes about the east Germans) and provide easy ammunition for the critics of the film. And at a certain point the film seems to stall, the story drags somewhat—as if the routine and predictability of everyday life in the GDR had overtaken the film itself.

In the run-up to the premiere of his film Schlöndorff acknowledged the problems he encountered with producers over his original script which they regarded as too political and contentious. The script was reworked and the finished film concentrates heavily on the fate of his main character Rita, well played by Bibiana Beglau. At the heart of the film are the experiences of someone whose life is directly dependent on the whims of the state, whose every move and every attempt at developing a relationship are followed by the secret police.

The film ends tragically for Rita, whose clandestine existence is once again and finally jeopardised by the fall of the wall and German reunification. Forced to flee she is shot down by police as she attempts to cross a police checkpoint. One of the closing lines of the film falls to a member of the East German *Volkspolizei* who, following the fall of the wall, now works seamlessly together with his West German police colleagues: "Order and security must apply everywhere."

Despite the concessions Schlöndorff was forced to make, the film remains a courageous attempt to tackle what is still an extremely sensitive area of recent German history. Schlöndorff has refused to follow the line of the official German political establishment which simply depicts the RAF members as demons. At the same time, his

portrayal of the RAF is by no means flattering. He accurately suggests the hollowness of its members' political conceptions, conceptions which above all led them to seek succour with some of the worst enemies of the working class—the Stalinist bureaucrats in the East.

It is worth dwelling on the reaction by sections of the media to *Rita's Legend*. Schlöndorff himself has said that he felt he had "been lynched" by some of the film's critics. At the press premiere at the Berlinale the film was greeted by considerable applause and some booing. The media reaction indicates that various vested interests feel themselves threatened. One element claims Schlöndorff has been too soft in his portrayal of the RAF; others, including sections of the German liberal and left press, claim that his portrayal is far too harsh. The film critic of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, for example, slates the film as cliché-filled and objects to its presentation of the RAF as simply "a load of romantics and dreamers—something which even the RAF themselves did not deserve".

Two lobbies are evidently at work. On the one hand there are forces close to the state concerned to preserve the image of the RAF as a serious political force which in the 1970s was close to bringing the Bundesrepublik to its knees. This was the line pursued at the time by the body politic and large sections of the media to justify a knee-jerk reaction and savage state repression.

On the other hand, there are those on the German left who still retain fond memories of the RAF. These layers continue to share the RAF's cynicism in regard to the broad layers of the working class as an instrument for progressive change. The most withering criticism of the film has come from the *taz* newspaper, which itself has its origins in the left-wing movements of the day, and a paper which has regularly come to the political defence of the RAF. One *taz* headline, which plays on the title of the film, is insulting and frankly obscene. Another film review in the paper compares the film to soap operas such as *Lindenstraße* (Germany) and *Baywatch*. One cannot avoid the conclusion that the *taz* film critic feels somehow personally offended by the film's depiction of the collaboration between the RAF and Stalinism.

In fact the collapse of the Stalinist states was also the final nail in the coffin of the RAF. In a number of declarations surviving RAF members, almost universally, have declared that their previous perspective was bankrupt and recognised the triumphant capitalist state.

With his new film Schlöndorff has put his finger on a wound and provoked an ugly response. That is not entirely new in his career—*The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* unleashed its own nest of hornets and *The Tin Drum* continues to unsettle reactionary forces. Those films powerfully reproduced the social climate in Germany preceding and during the Second World War and in the 1970s. With his new film Schlöndorff has added another further valuable chapter to his chronicle. *Rita's Legend* deals with a quite specific episode of Germany history—nevertheless the film deserves a wide international audience.



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