2000 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 6

The big idea that everybody has

An interview with Bibiana Beglau, actress in The Legends of Rita, directed by Volker Schlöndorff

David Walsh
5 June 2000

One doesn't know how much luck veteran German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff (*The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* [1975], *The Tin Drum* [1979]) will have finding a North American distributor for his year-old film about radical terrorists in the 1970s and 1980s. He's already suffered a blow, in my view, with the English-language translation of its title. The German title— *Die Stille nach dem Schuß* (*The Stillness after the Shot*)—points to the film's central concern: the fate of the remnants of the Baader-Meinhof group after the "excitement" of the 1970s died down. (See our review from the Berlin film festival, *Putting his finger on a wound* [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/mar2000/bff4-m03.shtml])

The Legends of Rita, the somewhat insipid English title, emphasizes the different identities adopted by the film's central character, Rita Vogt, as she attempts to hold her life and psyche together in East Germany (GDR), where she and several other former radical activists have been given sanctuary by the Stalinist regime. As a factory employee in the GDR Rita comes up against the cynicism and disillusionment of workers in the "socialist paradise." Something about her draws the attention of a fellow worker, Tatjana, who drinks in her desperate boredom and frustration. For Rita the eventual collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has only tragic consequences.

One hopes that the film, whatever its title, will find a North American audience. It takes a relatively clear-eyed look at a recent historical period and some of its trends and moods. Moreover, Schlöndorff's work at least touches upon one of the central truths of our time: how decisive it remains to hold on to the perspective of social change in the face of the failure of various demonstrably false paths to socialism.

Bibiana Beglau is the film's leading performer, playing Rita Vogt. She is charming, enthusiastic and "theatrical." We spoke at the San Francisco film festival.

David Walsh: This is a complicated historical and political subject. How we view the substance of the film perhaps depends on how we see the present situation. One of the strengths of the film, I think, is that it shows that individual terrorism was wrong and Stalinism was wrong, but that it's not wrong to want to change the world.

Bibiana Beglau: I think this is important, that Rita's idea, the idea that "we want a better world," continues. And not simply to say that terrorism is bad, or this or that is bad. This is a German story. It could only have happened in Germany this way. Terrorism was only possible after Hitler's period, and the GDR too was only possible after the Nazi era. This is a woman from Germany, in the 1970s and the 1980s.

DW: The group in the film seem to have a low level of political consciousness, courage and impatience. You say it's specifically German, and I'm sure there's some truth to that. The young people also at the time looked to France and Italy where things were "happening," and they looked at Germany and the population seemed passive. Also, because of the history, perhaps some of these middle class youth felt they had to make up for something, to atone for something because of the Nazis.

BB: The young people didn't have that much experience with politics, they didn't know how political processes worked, but they had one great idea.... In all countries it's the same, I think, it's very important that young people continue to say, "This is not right, we have to change *everything*!" But how? This is the big question.

Many of the terrorists are still in prison, many are dead. But what happened in the GDR with Rita is also important. Terrorism is only the background for the character. She went to the GDR to follow her ideals. Wolfgang Kohlhaase, the screenwriter, used the expression "a small, sincere country" to describe the GDR. I think he's right. He's from there, he lived there for a long, long time.

Then Rita's character changes in the GDR. She wants to continue with her ideas, and she comes to understand that she has to make her big ideas fit a smaller space, and then she goes into the private, more intimate realm with this big idea.

DW: I'm interested in Wolfgang Kohlhaase's attitude toward the GDR. You say it was a "small, sincere country." Perhaps the population was sincere. The leadership, the bureaucracy was not. People made many sacrifices. The GDR was not the product of a revolution. The Stalinist regime suppressed the spontaneous strivings of the population after the collapse of Hitler.

BB: The people of the old GDR, this is 10 years after the collapse of the country, are still frightened by "big brother."

DW: With good reason ...

BB: Everything was on paper. The Stasi had so much paper. Even the cars were made of paper. We went to this prison, we shot in a prison in the east. The prison is a big stone building. It was an old Nazi prison. Under the Stasi system everybody controlled everybody, and you didn't know who was your friend and who wasn't your friend. This is what Kohlhaase tried to explain.

DW: The GDR was not socialism, in my opinion, but the opposite of

socialism.

BB: Oh, I agree.

DW: I was in east Berlin in 1991 and I saw those horrible statues of Marx and Engels, and I thought, if this were socialism, I'd cut my wrists.

BB: Yes. But this is what's beautiful about Rita. She believes deeply in her heart that you can have genuine socialism. And I think that everybody in all countries of the world has this instinct, intuition.

I think Rita is a classical heroine. Her story is fictional, it's not a real story. She has to die at the end. Her idea is so large that normal people can't contain it.

DW: That's the most positive feature of the film, it does communicate that feeling.

BB: I think it's also important that the film doesn't dictate to the audience at which parts it must laugh, or cry. There's a distance between the audience and the screen and you have to bring your own thoughts, and not merely say, “This is a sad scene, this is a funny scene.” You have a certain freedom when you watch the film. Maybe it seems like it's unemotional, but it's really not.

DW: How do you see the dynamic of the relationship with Tatjana?

BB: She is this wild young person in the east, like Rita was years before in the west. There was no group in the east organized against the government, it was not possible in the GDR. So she drinks. Tatjana's big idea is “I want to get out only one time, so I can at least see what's on the other side [of the Wall]. Maybe I'll come back ...” Rita feels this. Tatjana wants her individuality, her uniqueness. Rita is older and she can help her a little. And there is this really strange love, friendship.... Both of the characters are really alone. Tatjana has no contact with her family, she has no boyfriend or anyone with whom to share her feelings.

Rita is in the same position. She is alone with her political, terrorist past, she has nobody that can she talk about this past to. She can contribute a little from the big social idea of her life to Tatjana, in a personal way. Tatjana gives to her like a child. It's like when you watch a child grow up. When Tatjana is happy, the sun is shining.

DW: Whose feelings are stronger in that relationship?

BB: Rita knows, because of her political experience, how to keep her feelings under control. Tatjana is very emotional. In the east friendships and relationships are very big. People in the west can control this better, I think. We can handle this. “My heart is breaking, but I sit here and laugh,” or whatever. And the terrorists were trained to do this, when somebody recognized them, to say, “No, I'm not so-and-so,” quite coolly. Rita has done this for years. So it's part of her training.

DW: The film covers 20 years or so.

BB: Yes. We changed details, we compressed time. It starts at the end of the 1960s, the 1970s, goes right to 1989, the fall of the Wall.

DW: There have not been many, if any, successful films about this subject. What do you think of Fassbinder's film, *The Third Generation*?

BB: I saw many films about terrorism and looked at other materials. I gained some understanding of what it feels like when you want something to change, and you cry and shout and nobody listens to you. Then you take a gun and you shoot somebody, and everybody suddenly pays attention to you.

The “third generation” was made up of wealthy people, without the ideals of the original people. This was not my interest in approaching Rita. Her activity was different, with different ideas. The last scene of the terrorists in Paris, this is a little like Fassbinder's “third generation.” They really use strange language. Nobody can understand this, except the five or six people in the circle. We compressed the time to show the beginning of the terrorism, the last period of terrorism and then the change in the east; it's very complex.

DW: How do you feel about the German films of the 1970s?

BB: Very good. This was a time when the films were very powerful. The political processes in the country were very tense, very emotionally charged. So the artists came out and they had an enemy. They wanted to make a picture of this situation in Germany.

In Germany today the situation ... you don't have any real enemies, you don't know what's going on. People live okay, there aren't so many poor people, you have a big middle class. In the 1970s a great deal changed, something in the minds of the people, because young people asked their mothers and fathers, “Where were you during the Nazi era?” It was a hard thing to do, painful. You needed a lot of strength to do it. It was a good time for artists. They created a good picture of the society. The films were very aggressive.

DW: What do you think about German filmmakers today?

BB: It's really a problem. I'm sorry, but I come from the theater. I'm used to doing my work for not much money. In films, this is a problem, I think—there is *so much* money. You work one day and you can live for three months.

We Germans too, we look so much at America. We need our own identity. And of course the Nazis damaged this identity too. My generation is the first that is not so involved in the Nazi era and I have to find my own authentic way. We have to find out what German identity really is.

There's so much money for really young people in films. I have my own thoughts, all over the place. I want to express something. But they come along, with money, and say, “We're going to make a film about ... nothing.” There are so many stories to tell in Germany. And in the theater we do this. The German theater is so strong. In films they have too easy a time. No one pushes them down, so they have to fight back.

DW: The situation in the film industry is a crisis everywhere. It will change.

BB: I hope so. Because it's a wonderful medium, film. And now with the Internet ... there are great possibilities. And in the stories about people, people are so interesting ...

DW: Why are you an actor?

BB: It doesn't matter if I'm an actor or not. I wanted to be a sculptor. It's the same feeling whether I'm working in stone, or painting a picture, or standing on stage.