

An interview with German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff

Prairie Miller
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The following is an interview with well-known German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff, director of The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, The Tin Drum, Swann in Love and numerous other works. His 1999 film, The Legends of Rita (Die Stille nach dem Schuß), chronicled in fictional form the fate of certain members of the Red Army Faction (the Baader-Meinhof group)—radicals responsible for terrorist attacks in West Germany—who sought refuge in the Stalinist GDR (East Germany).

A review of this film Putting his finger on a wound: Rita's Legends (Die Stille nach dem Schuß) 3 March 2000] and an interview with its lead performer The big idea that everybody has: An interview with Bibiana Beglau 5 June 2000] have already appeared on the WSWWS. The Legends of Rita is an attempt to deal with the failure of the Baader-Meinhof terrorism and East German Stalinism from a generally left-wing point of view.

The interview raises a number of critical historical questions, in particular the character of the Soviet Union and East Germany (GDR). It suffers from the widespread, but false identification of these regimes with socialism. A response to the interview with filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff: A clarification of essential historical issues was posted on February 6.

For Volker Schlöndorff, the ending of *The Legends of Rita* not only concluded his film, but closed a chapter in his own life as well. Schlöndorff described to me during this interview how he was drawn to create this fictionalized account of a Red Army Faction member who goes into hiding in the GDR, as a way of sorting out his own confused feelings about what befell the Soviet Union and eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century. It was not always easy for the German director to revisit the complexities of what he sought to shape on screen, and he told me that he regarded many of my questions as difficult but “very soul searching.” — Prairie Miller

Prairie Miller: Why did you want to make this film at this particular time in history, and in your own life?

Volker Schlöndorff: Well, I was in New York when the [Berlin] Wall came down and I thought, what I am doing here? I was doing *The Handmaid's Tale* and I said to myself, I should be in Berlin. And indeed I moved back there.

And one of the first stories I came upon was in the newspapers, about eleven West German terrorists arrested in East Germany where they had been in hiding with the help of the Stasi [East Germany secret police]. So I felt, that's a story to tell. How did they survive say, to live the life of the working classes. And what

would motivate a young West German woman of anarchic character to go to the East.

But at the time, nobody wanted to do the story. It was all too recent. So now, ten years later with the historical perspective, all of a sudden the funding was there.

PM: You've said that this is a story that could only have taken place in Germany. Why is that?

VS: First there is this very idealistic character who loses touch with reality, and she in a sense becomes a fanatic. But mostly because at the time, we had these two systems in Berlin.

Half the city was capitalist, and the other half was socialist. And you could just take the subway and move from one system to the other. Which was a great escape for them. When they robbed a bank in the West, they just jumped into the subway and up they were in the socialist East, home free.

East Germany also had a special meaning for us. It was the Germany that after WW II was going to build a state that would never be fascist again. And it was a very honest attempt right after the war by people like Brecht who emigrated from the U.S., and others from elsewhere, to build a truly pacific, never again fascist state.

Then due to the Cold War and the impossibility to realize a socialist economy, everything seemed to have gone wrong. But the founding fathers of that state really meant well.

PM: How does Rita's ideology compare and contrast with your own political views?

VS: I have a sympathy for rebellious characters. Their politics were wrong, terrorism didn't lead anywhere. But the basis of the rebellion, and their urge to build a bridge to the Third World and bring that struggle to the urban West, well, in the '70s that sounded like a valid idea.

So I identify with Rita in her rebelliousness, and her openness towards other people. Yes, she's really someone that I care for very much. And I still have a curiosity for this kind of character, because they just go against the general tide. And they fail, but you know sometimes the best swimmer drowns first.

PM: How were your own political ideals affected by the end of the Soviet Union?

VS: There is a feeling of a loss for me. We had the end of socialism in Europe, and we had the winner. The winner, that was the market. And you had the loser, that was all these ideals of the left for which so many people had sacrificed for 150 years.

So I had a feeling of loss. We know the Soviet Union didn't

work. And yet when these ideals first came up in the 19th century, there was a lot of injustice in the world. And people felt, we have to do something against this. You know, the famous surge for a better world.

Now that the Soviet Union failed, we are back in a world where there are still as many injustices, only there's apparently nothing we can do about it any more! The global market will fix it, they tell us. Well, I don't quite believe it.

PM: What were the problems you had with the producers regarding the script for *The Legend of Rita*, and how much did you concede to them in reworking the story and making it more personal, when faced with their objections that it was too political and too contentious?

VS: Nowadays they will tell you that nobody wants to see a political movie anymore, and that young audiences are not interested in political ideas. That might be true, but if you tell a story of someone who is inspired by political ideas and you approach it in an emotional way, then you can still tell the story. That's my conviction. This is not about political ideas, this is about people who struggle with political ideas. So it's about people and their relationships.

And in fact, producers always tend to underestimate the audience, and their curiosity. Because in the meantime, this movie has been shown in Germany, Poland, Hungary, Japan and Canada. So there is that curiosity.

Because we wonder, how can one survive without ideas at all? Is it just consumerism, just go shopping lifelong? Will that fulfill us? I don't think so. I think we always have a longing to give a meaning to life.

And that is just the kind of character we are showing in this movie. Rita is a young woman who has that longing and who maybe fails in her attempt, but she is still a larger than life character because of that longing for another world.

PM: Why did you make the decision to show these character acting on their ideals, without showing the struggles going on in the world that inspired them?

VS: We had the choice to either make a movie about terrorism, or about a terrorist who goes into hiding. And the former I thought I had already done in my other films. But the confrontation of their ideals with reality, that I found especially intriguing. So that's why I was not interested in exploring any historical background. I wanted to reflect the two societies of the East and West against each other, and put her utopian ideas to the test with reality.

PM: How do you feel about the possibility that this is a film that could be embraced by the political right because it is more critical of socialism than of capitalism?

VS: No. I don't think that right wing people go into an art-house movie in the first place. But secondly, the movie is very dialectic and remains very subversive, inasmuch as it has sympathy for rebellious characters. And the film has sympathy for their utopian socialist ideals. So no, I don't see how anybody can make use of this movie.

PM: Why did you decide to make the story about a female, rather than a male?

VS: That's a very good question. There's almost a saintly quality to Rita. She's very real, and at the same time she's not quite real.

And you believe that Rita is sacrificing everything for her beliefs, she has a very altruistic streak. She's not selfish at all, and she never thinks about herself. She is always giving towards others.

But I think that a male terrorist would always have some macho attitude along with that. So I feel that would be very different. I think the compassion there is simply more of a woman's quality.

With *Marianne and Juliane* [1981], which I produced and Margarethe von Trotta directed, that was really the first part to *The Legends of Rita*. That would be the beginning when Rita was still active. And now is when she has the possibility to live a totally new life, with a new identity. So this story is really the closing chapter to *Marianne and Juliane*.

PM: Then you don't anticipate any more sequels?

VS: No. I'm convinced that younger generations in the future will find new ideals. I think humans cannot quite live without utopian hope.

PM: Why did you decide to call the film *The Legends of Rita* in English, when the original title was *The Stillness After the Shot*?

VS: That title to me just didn't ring right. I was the one who changed it, because I couldn't find a proper translation. And I love the double meaning of the police term "legend," you know, as a false identity.

PM: Which of your films has meant the most to you?

VS: Well, you try to love all of your children, and I have done almost thirty films now. *The Tin Drum* [1979] stands out for me, because when I think of my own childhood now, I tend to think of Oskar's childhood in *The Tin Drum*.

And I think, strangely enough, that I have a special affection for this last film. Because I have the feeling that I've kind of found myself again. I don't believe in despair anymore. So I'm grateful to Rita!

A character like that comes knocking at my door, and asks that her story be told. And that is literally what happened with Rita. So again, I wait for the next character to come and find me.

PM: Do you feel that films can enlighten people and transform society?

VS: I don't really know whether films can change society. But I feel we need those films with a conscience to enrich our lives, that movies can do. To put things into perspective, and to all of a sudden see that in other places and in other times people had similar struggles as we have right now, is enlightening, is enriching and is encouraging. So we simply need that. I think art in general is a great help for us to survive.



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