

Rediscovering a

LOST GENERATION of East German Film Directors

BY BOB SKIPPER



Dr. Laura McGee's interest in Germany goes back to high school when she spent time in Berlin as an exchange student.

Photo by LaDonna Harmon

EAST GERMANY IN THE LATE 1980S WAS A COUNTRY SURROUNDED BY CHANGE. A FAILING ECONOMY AND CALLS FOR REFORMS LED TO THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL AND A UNIFIED GERMANY.

"There were protests. There were demonstrations. There were groups that met and tried to speak with the government and get things changed, and those are part of what made the peaceful revolution possible in East Germany," said Dr. Laura Green McGee, assistant professor of German at Western Kentucky University.

Of particular interest to Dr. McGee is a group of film directors who were educated in the former German Democratic Republic. "I was looking specifically at the very last generation of film directors educated in East Germany, people who were born between 1949 and about 1963. The majority of them were approximately as old as the country itself," Dr. McGee said.

the materials for her current project, "Eastern Identity in Post-Unification German Film." In 2002, she received a Fulbright Research Grant.

"My project really starts in 1988 when the politics in the film studios changed a little bit, with the precursors to the fall of the wall when things were beginning to shift in the GDR," Dr. McGee said. "A number of very interesting films were approved in 1988, things that would not have been allowed before then. These were critical, and at the same time artistically innovative films. People weren't paying much attention to them because by the time they came out, the wall had fallen and people in East Germany were suddenly interested in something else."

Her research revealed that films produced by that generation at that point in time were largely overlooked. "When the films were made, they were supposed to be contemporary



Photos by Robert Laatz

Directors Maxim Dessau, Evelyn Schmidt, and Andreas Kleinert. Dessau was directing a film, "Schnauzer," until the project was interrupted in 1984 and the film stock destroyed in the late 1980s. Schmidt now directs youth theatre in the former East Berlin.

"These artistic people — film directors — wanted to show certain things and wanted to say certain things in the state, but East Germany took an approach of slowing them down, of making them compromise," she said. "While the state didn't just outright forbid things, it required revisions and sent scripts back and it took forever to complete a film. These directors were in their mid thirties and approaching forty, trying to make their first films," explained McGee.

"They thought it was terrible that the energy and the imagination of the youngest, brightest next generation was being wasted. They wanted to see change. They didn't necessarily want East Germany to go away altogether, which is what happened, but they wanted change," she said. "So you can see the film studios as kind of a microcosm of the same thing that was happening in East Germany."

Dr. McGee's interest in Germany goes back to high school when she spent time in Berlin as an exchange student. She has returned many times, including a six-month stay in 1995 on a German Academic Exchange Service fellowship. In 1999, she received a junior faculty research grant to begin gathering

films, but by the time they were finished, they were historical documents, you could say, and for young film makers trying to establish themselves in their careers, this was a very unfortunate thing to have happen."

The first phase of her project looks at a group of twelve directors from that generation. "I conducted the research by reading about and viewing the films that these directors had made," she said. "I looked at their entire careers to try to get a feel in the case of each of them about what types of films they made before the fall of the wall, so that I had a better understanding of what types of films they made after the fall of the wall."

Later phases of the project examine what this generation has done in the way of film production since the fall of the wall. "I see a number of phases," Dr. McGee said. There are those directors who look back at the past in East Germany to try to understand who they are in the present, and to explore their identities in film.

"The films represent east and west getting to know each other and they represent some of the problems of Western

society — capitalist society — coming to the east," she said. "Things like unemployment, poverty or homelessness, some of the negative sides that were not visible to them in the socialist society. In the east they just didn't have those things to that degree."

The unification of Germany changed the landscape for the directors, Dr. McGee said. "A number of the directors I'm working on didn't make any films after the fall of the wall. It's true of all of them that they had to adjust to different conditions for the production of film because the film industry in the east became dominated by the traditional systems that existed in the west. In the east things were very different. They had film studios with a process for putting stories through. The film studios employed thousands of people on a regular basis.

"With the fall of the wall, all of a sudden the film industry in the east looked more like the film industry in the west where a director who has an idea has to go to different sources to secure funding, just like it is in the United States. In Germany there is also funding for cultural projects, such as film, that runs through the state. And that money is awarded by committee, and many people who sit on those committees are established in the western film industry and they might not know people who have established themselves in the eastern film industry. So there is a perception, at least on the part of the easterners, that a bias exists."

Dr. McGee did much of her research at the Academy for Film and Television in Babelsberg, which sponsored her during her stay and provided her an office. The school's resources included both secondary literature and the films themselves since the directors studied at the school.

She also interviewed the directors, using a digital video camera and working with a cameraman, Robert Laatz, who had graduated from the school. Excerpts from some of those interviews may be used in a documentary about the school, which turned fifty in 2004.

"That was great fun to visit the directors in their homes," Dr. McGee said. "Usually when we did those interviews, we were there five or six hours at a time and recorded two to two and half hours of material." She is now busy transcribing, editing, and translating those interviews for publication. In teaching film courses at Western, she often uses authentic materials from her research project.

"I think it's exciting for my students to see that I received something like a Fulbright," she said. One of Dr. McGee's graduate students, Nicole Langley, recently received a Teaching Assistantship in Austria, administered through Fulbright. "I think it's been really empowering for my students to see that you can research your options and look for support for what you want to do."

She has had an article published in *Film History, An International Journal*, titled "Revolution in the studio? The DEFA's fourth generation of film directors and their reform



The historic entry to the Babelsberg Film Studios, the Hollywood of Germany, still stands — though it now marks the entry to a complex of many different film and television production companies. Before the fall of the wall, the studios employed over 2000 workers in the East German film industry. They now provide production capacity for German and international co-productions, and are attractive to major American film production companies, such as Universal Studios, which made Around The World In 80 Days, Beyond The Sea, The Bourne Identity, and its sequel The Bourne Supremacy here.



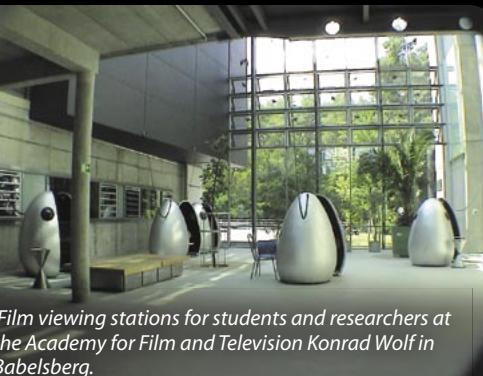
Director Andreas Dresen at a summer 2003 interview in Potsdam. One of the youngest directors in McGee's subject group, Dresen is also one of the most successful.



Cameraman Robert Laatz, a graduate of the Academy for Film and Television Konrad Wolf in Babelsberg, assisted Laura McGee by filming a number of her interviews with directors in Berlin.

Photo by Laura McGee

After German unification, the Academy for Film and Television Konrad Wolf moved into a new building directly adjacent to the Babelsberg film studios, outside Berlin. It is one of the premier institutions for the study all aspects of film and television production in Germany.



Film viewing stations for students and researchers at the Academy for Film and Television Konrad Wolf in Babelsberg.



The "Cinema International" in the former East Berlin premiered many of the most important of the nation's films. It is still a landmark in Berlin's cinema history.

efforts in the last decade of the GDR." The article details the political activities of the young directors at the film school that helped to define this group. The DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) refers to the state owned studios of the former German Democratic Republic.

"The group banded together in the interest of liberalizing film production at the film school," she explained. "They went to the studio administration and to the administration of the film school and said 'we want to be able to make films more quickly. We want to make films that show things the way they really are so the people will talk about them. We want to be able to see more international films.' They had quite a list of demands. So that helped defined who they are. It is quite interesting to note that this political action on their part in the 1980s runs parallel to the activities of intellectuals and of writers who were behind the political movement that pushed forward the fall of the wall."

A group of young filmmakers produced a manifesto in 1988 that was to have been read and discussed at the Fifth Congress of the Association of Film and Television Workers of the GDR. It was suppressed by government agencies before the event. The translation, which appears in Dr. McGee's article includes:

Motion pictures are a medium of society. Stagnation in the control of influence over our motion pictures and the social processes evident in recent years represents principally the surrender of our responsibility, but at the same time the expression of the social condition. Society must reveal itself in every aspect to the motion pictures. It must trust this medium and challenge and support it. We declare our willingness to actively and positively cooperate in the socialistic development of our society and to assume responsibilities.

She has also written "The End Phase of the GDR in Films by DEFA," which appeared in *German Studies Review*.

"There's very little out there in English about these individuals or about this particular phenomenon," Dr. McGee said. "I think this generation had something to say and due to the way that the culture industry has developed in the unified Germany, they have not been heard to an extent that could benefit people on both sides of the wall, but particularly in East Germany."

Eventually, Dr. McGee plans to produce a book on her research, but notes that is an ambitious project. "It was such a luxury to be in Germany and to be able to focus on just one thing," she said. "We do so many different things here at the university. We wear so many different hats, and it was a little tough to adjust to that when I got back."

She's grateful to Western for funding her early research and working with her on the Fulbright award, which took her away from teaching for a year. "I'm really thankful to Western for supporting me."

Dr. McGee has a Ph.D. in German literature from the University of Washington, a master's degree in German language and literature from Ohio State University and a bachelor's degree in German literature from Davidson College.



Director Andreas Kleinert with Laura McGee after the filming of an interview at his home in the former East Berlin.