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Go West!

Christian Schwochow on East Germany, immigration, Americana and his new film.

by Anne-Katrin Titze



Refugee Nelly in pursuit of 12 stamps: "The reality was that people either came out of the camps after one or two weeks."

I met with director Christian Schwochow in the lobby of the Malton Hotel, a couple of days before *West* (*Westen*), starring Jördis Triebel with Tristan Göbel, Alexander Scheer, Jacky Ido and Carlo Ljubek, opened this year's edition of KINO! Festival of German Films in New York at the Museum of the Moving Image.

Over coffee, I found out that Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three* from 1961, starring James Cagney as a Coca-Cola executive, and [Christian Petzold's Romy Schneider costume research](#) for [Barbara](#) cannot even start to compete with a candy wrapper as inspiration for an East German boy. See Stephanie Soechtig's vital documentary [Fed Up](#). I was reminded that Pierre Richard and Gérard Depardieu were a successful comedy team and that the stigma of day care is not merely a thing of the past in Germany today.



Christian Schwochow, director of *West* (*Westen*): "Every Eastern boy would collect those Western

Schwochow wrote the script with his mother, Heide Schwochow, and included concrete childhood memories of his own to add to the novel *Lagerfeuer* (*Campfire*) by Julia Franck, which is the basis for their screenplay.

We talked of his choices in making a film about an East German mother and son arriving in a West Berlin refugee camp in the late Seventies. In *West*, Triebel plays Nelly Senff, who together with her 9-year-old son Alexej (Göbel) wants to start over. The boy's Russian scientist father (Ljubek) presumably died in an accident, yet, even three years later, his shadow looms large. In the camp, Nelly has to go through the maze of collecting 12 stamps from the Allied Forces and the bureaucratic machinery to become a citizen. Ido plays John Bird, an American German-speaking agent, who could be friend or foe, whom she has to please.

Anne-Katrin Titze: Let's start from the beginning. You decided to show the goodbye from across the street, in East

items." Photo: Anne-Katrin Titze Berlin. Then we go into very close close-ups of the family. This first scene becomes important later on. Can you talk about these choices?

Christian Schwochow: It's a very interesting first question. Nobody has asked this before. I wanted the spectator to feel the importance of the first scene. It could have been just an ordinary scene of a couple saying goodbye. By choosing this first very static wide shot, then going so close, you can feel there is something special about this moment. It's also the beginning of a cinematic style. Of course, there is a very clear main character but it also has changes in perspective quite regularly. It's part of the feeling of being observed, the atmosphere of who can I trust? Who is my friend or my enemy? It's already set at this very first beginning.

AKT: We see the mother and child through the window, running down the stairs before they come out into the snow.

CS: There's some sort of symbolism - we have in the beginning a mother and a child and a man coming down the stairs. The last image of the film is a man going up the stairs. The frame is similar in the last shot. Of course, it's the other side of the wall. It's a metaphoric use of image.

AKT: You use quite a few markers to symbolise the West of the title. One of them is the boy's red western kerchief. He is asked if this were his East German Pioneer uniform kerchief and he has to explain that his has white dots.

CS: This scene exactly happened to me when I came from East to West Germany. I showed the costume designer pictures of me when I was little.

AKT: Is the little boy a copy of you? The time frame for you was different, no?

CS: When we left from the East it was 1989. We had an application for an exit permit that was accepted on the morning of November 9. So, the wall was open and my parents had packed everything already and they didn't feel like unpacking. So we moved to West Germany when I was 11. The boy in the film is nine.

AKT: The film is based on a novel.

CS: Yes, Julia Franck's book Lagerfeuer. The book is different from the film because I wrote the script together with my mother. Mother and son are maybe not copies of ourselves but we gave quite a lot of personal moments to those characters.

AKT: Was your mother a filmmaker in the East?



CS: No, she became a filmmaker when she was 50. She was a journalist. When I went to film school, we started working on a short film together. We wrote a script and realised how well that worked.

AKT: Another red and white object you use prominently is



Christian Schwochow on Jördis Triebel as Nelly: "The costumes and production design are more inspired by memories that I have."

Alexej and Nelly with Hans (Alexander Scheer): "If you stayed there longer, you would stay for very long."

the Coke can.
CS: Every Eastern boy would collect those Western items.
AKT: With Coca-Cola and a divided Berlin in a film, you can't help but think of Billy Wilder's One, Two, Three.

CS: It's more simple than that. In East Berlin we were able to get Western television and had images of the West from films, from the news. We didn't have any Western products, or just very, very few. Collecting cans or even papers of chocolate bars was such a huge thing for us. It was like having a piece of a dreamland. This Coke can has a very emotional meaning for me and many others. And also for the little boy in my movie.

AKT: There is a scene in which he tries to get into the vending machine, together with the little girl in the camp in West Berlin. It's the candy house to their Hansel and Gretel?

CS: These very simple items meant such a big world for us. Still, when you walk through Berlin today and you see children of refugees who came from other countries, they stand before things like a chocolate bar that are so easy to get. I remember when I was still in school in East Berlin, we had a girl who left the country and she would send a letter to a friend in our class with a sticker from a Hanuta candy bar of Asterix. The whole class would gather around this thing and stare at it for minutes. Unbelievable nowadays.

AKT: I just read yesterday about a study on product recognition in children, when they really get hooked on brands. The most recognisable ones were sweets and junk food. Once you brand them, this remains desirable for the rest of their lives.

CS: Wow. That's horrible.

AKT: No need for a wall - the dreamland branding is going on here as well, as most children can't have candy 24 hours a day. I [spoke about the effects of getting children addicted to sugar](#) with the filmmakers of the recent documentary Fed Up. Please tell me about the location in your film. I was actually unaware of these refugee centres for East Germans.

CS: Nobody knows. Even though there were 5 million people going through those centres.

AKT: Where did you film?

CS: We built it ourselves. The camp Julia Franck went through still exists in Berlin. But it is a centre for refugees now from Iraq or Syria, so you cannot get in. Of course, I went inside for research. We had two army barracks from the British Army which had been empty for five or six years. We put in a lot of effort to build and reconstruct the set. The outside is a sports facility in Berlin. We combined the three.

AKT: The protagonist's last name is pronounced the same as mustard in German. Did you give that as a colour clue to your costume designer?



Nelly with US agent John Bird (Jacky Ido): "It's part of the feeling of being observed, the atmosphere of who can I trust?"

CS: A little bit.



Tristan Göbel as Alexej with Jördis Triebel as Nelly in West:
"Mother and son are maybe not quite a lot of personal moments to those characters."

AKT: The little boy's costume works really well. He has a lot of accessories he is always wearing. The hat, the glasses and the kerchief. He looks like this little alien pilot equipped for a big adventure.

CS: The whole film is historic but I don't like a film where you feel it's historic all the time. So we tried to be correct in terms of physical reality and find something that makes you able to forget that you are watching a film from the past. I think the costume designer did very well.

AKT: What is her name?

CS: Kristin Schuster. She's been working with me for ten years now.

AKT: When I spoke to Christian Petzold about his costumes for Barbara, he told me about the creative loop they went through and that the clothes were inspired by Romy Schneider. [She was living in France then and the style icon for East German women].

CS: That's very different here. How can I put it without insulting Christian? His approach to this time is completely different. Although I was so small, I am so full of images of the time, I have so many photos at home. The costumes and production design are more inspired by memories that I have. Feelings of claustrophobia. It's a very different approach.

AKT: Talk about the "Lagerfluch", the curse of the refugee camps.

CS: The reality was that people either came out of the camps after one or two weeks. They had done all their interviews and got a passport and then could somehow start a new life. If you stayed there longer, you would stay for very long. It was in the book and I spoke to many people who went through this camp and they said that's how it was. This film is about the unknown aspect. How many people were having a hard time to start a new life? Whenever someone wants to start a new life, not everybody manages right away.

AKT: This is how I read Nelly's anger. She has escaped nothing. She will be followed for the rest of her life. And the father of her child, possibly, escaped everything.

CS: Exactly. That's it.

AKT: You have them living at the end above a cinema where there's a Pierre Richard movie playing, of all things. I couldn't see the title.

CS: "...Und Jetzt Das Ganze Nochmal Von Vorn" ["... and now once again from the start" would be the translation - the original French title is: "Je Suis Timide... Mais Je Me Soigne" from 1978 - "I am shy but in therapy"] It was a film of this time.

AKT: I know him from comedies I saw on TV. The blond guy with the black shoe?

CS: Right. It's a little footnote. Her new life begins the way the old one ended. The film title is a small humorous commentary. I wanted to lift some of the weight at the end. It's part of the idea

that a new beginning is possible. Pierre Richard made films with Gérard Depardieu; there were like a couple.





AKT: Differences between East and West are revealed in some of the asides. For example with the issue of day care. There was a stigma in West Germany of the "Hort Kind", the day care child with a mother who had to work. How did German audiences react to this scene?

CS: With humor. People laugh a lot, especially in moments like this. Either they come from the East and feel like "oh yes, that's what I experienced." I have a small daughter who's three and still if you tell people that my child goes to day care... it still can happen. Many people know that in the East things went differently and that it was very normal for women to work two months after the birth.

KINO! Festival of German Films in New York runs from June 12-19 and includes the theatrical release of Sabine Lidl's *Nan Goldin: I Remember Your Face* at the Quad Cinema.

West will have its theatrical release in the US from Main Street Films later this year.

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