

The Prisoner

By Jennine Lanouette

Long before Sibylle Schönemann decided to make a documentary film about her political imprisonment in East Germany, she had felt a compelling need to someday revisit the prison where she was held. "I didn't think to go there with a camera," says Schönemann, speaking the broken English she learned on the festival circuit this year. "I only wanted to stand outside and watch the working people come out and know that they have to go back in again the next day. And then know the feeling that I can decide to go now and they can't hold me anymore."

Schönemann's ordeal began in 1984 when she and her husband, Hannes, both film directors, submitted an application to emigrate to West Germany, having detected within the state-run DEFA studio where they worked what appeared to be blacklisting of their proposed film projects. Immediately, the state security, Stasi, went to work compiling evidence of treason and conspiracy that would justify a prison sentence, a tactic, the Schönemanns later learned, designed to dissuade other dissenting directors from also trying to leave. After a year of incarceration, the couple were bought by the West German government (for roughly \$150,000), a common practice with political prisoners, and then reunited with

their two children.

Life in the West was not unkind, but the trauma lingered. Questions persisted for Schönemann on why she and Hannes were harassed by the Stasi, incriminated by their coworkers, and then suddenly separated from their daughters. The East German government's prohibition against their return denied her access to information that might bring answers, in effect prolonging the punishment. Almost five years would pass before she had the option to perform her oft-imagined ritual of psychological liberation.

When the once-formidable gates of the Berlin Wall burst open in the fall of 1989, Schönemann's initial euphoria was soon overshadowed by distinctly mixed feelings as she began to see that the same bureaucrats who had imprisoned her were now shopping for scented soap and strawberries in West Berlin. "I saw that all these interrogators and judges wanted to forget very fast what they have done," she says, "that people were shot and put into prison only because they wanted to cross this border. And I knew that the people in the East still knew very little about what happened inside the prisons, and inside the souls of the people who were victims. So I had the feeling it's time to speak about this, now, before it's too late, before this new situation becomes normal."

OFF SCREEN



LINDA ROSIER

Sibylle Schönemann: confronting the accusers

In July 1990, five years to the day after her release, Schönemann returned to East Germany with a camera crew to retrace the story of her persecution. The result is *Locked Up Time*, a cogent look at the convoluted and destructive motivations of East German communism, lyrically framed in a highly personal account. The film, showing at the Walter Reed Theater May 8 to 14, affectingly mixes a gently probing documentary style with an occasional touch of dramatic re-creation. Schönemann was also able to locate an extraordinary piece of West German television news footage showing an East German tour bus that happened to be carrying her and 40 other disposed political prisoners, careening through the border while the guards looked away. The reporters doing the run-of-the-mill segment on border

crossings were completely surprised. That night, Schönemann's daughters came upon the news report, while tuned to West German television and said to each other, "Someday our parents will be on such a bus."

Much of the film is taken up with Schönemann's relentless attempts to bring her former persecutors in front of the camera. Although the prospect of once again facing her tormentors was not a comfortable one, her fears were eclipsed by a fervent need to comprehend what exists in the conscience of a person who commits the kind of psychological abuses she suffered. In the first weeks after the wall opened, her conversations with former prisonmates revealed a common feeling of unease toward the opening of the wall, and supported her sense of mission. "It was also important,"

says Schönemann, "what Hannes said. He knew I still had so much pain and anger and despair because I couldn't understand. He said, 'I think you can do it and you should do it. I don't want to do it.' He had the feeling he had finished with it."

As she began to pursue her subjects, many of them proved to be elusive and the eventual encounters, although appearing quite civilized onscreen, were often filled with tension. "I could write a book about all that happened before and after every one of these meetings," says Schönemann. "In the film I could have told much more terrible things about each person. But I trusted that they would give a picture of themselves." Sometimes the picture they give is remarkably guileless, even buffoonish, as with a prison administrator who has obviously dressed up and put on makeup in preparation for her interview. "It was a moment when these people didn't know what will happen to them," Schönemann explains, "how society will judge them. So they wanted to play a good part. If I tried now, they wouldn't talk to me. It would be impossible to make this film today."

"The most important thing," Schönemann concludes, "is that the film should transport the feeling. The audience should have the possibility to feel that it could have happened to them, and what it would mean to be so helpless. This is what will give the statistic of 35,000 political prisoners a human dimension. It can no longer be only a number." ■