

## Whose studio is it anyway?

The future of the studio where Lang's 'Metropolis' and post-war East German films were made hangs in the balance. Jennine Lanouette reports on its prospects

● Just outside western Berlin, in the town of Babelsberg, is a studio complex with seventeen sound stages and twenty-five acres of backlots that has had an impact on film history dating back to 1919, when *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* startled the world. In 1926, the studio's largest stage was built to accommodate the sets for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*; in 1930 it saw Marlene Dietrich portraying the seductive vamp Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*. Ernst Lubitsch, Alfred Hitchcock, Greta Garbo and Billy Wilder all began their careers in this studio, which was known at the time as UFA and was the dominant film producer in Germany.

After the defection to Hollywood of many of its greatest talents during the early 30s, UFA became a factory for Nazi propaganda films, including Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1936). At the end of the war, the studio found itself in the Soviet-controlled eastern zone. The site was renovated to become the home of DEFA, the East German state-run production company, and directors, writers, actors and technicians were required to work within the ideological limits of socialist realism in return for a monthly pay packet. Meanwhile, East Germany's lack of hard currency for upgrading technology kept the technical facilities frozen in time at about 1945.

With the recent move towards privatising all former East German state companies, the future of the Babelsberg studio complex, rich in both history and resources, has become the subject of lengthy debate. For the average West German, it is the illustrious pre-war history that has the most meaning, and the rallying cry 'Save the DEFA Studio!' has become a call for landmark preservation. On New Year's Eve 1990 a popular television talk show host did his part by interviewing Marlene Dietrich by telephone in Paris as she reminisced about UFA's 'golden years'. A few weeks later a similar programme featured Billy Wilder speaking from Hollywood. Unsurprisingly, former East Germans become irritated by this slanted perspective. In the words of a recently laid-off DEFA worker: "All they talk about is Fritz Lang, Fritz Lang, Fritz Lang. But there is also the history of the studio in the past forty years which should not be forgotten".

When DEFA took over the Babelsberg site in 1946, the lights and cameras of the studios

were immediately put to work on anti-fascist films aimed at purging the German consciousness of National Socialist dogma. Today, East and West Germans alike express great respect for the work of this period, in particular Wolfgang Staudte's *The Murderers Are Amongst Us* (1946) and Kurt Maetzig's *Marriage in the Shadows* (1947). Attempts to chart the artistic development of the studio's forty years in the German Democratic Republic reveal an oscillating pattern between tight party control and degrees of openness. One of the most notable points is 1966, when after a period of relative openness an entire year's production of about fifteen films were 'forbidden' because of their perceived radical viewpoint, ruining several careers. Even today, DEFA directors find it painful to speak about this period.

For former DEFA directors, the preservation of the studio is seen as the means of being able to tell the story of what went on in the GDR's forty-year history. They fear that the price of the removal of the party influence will be to become a service facility for western product. In response to questions about the degree of censorship to which they were subjected, many former East Germans seem to support commonly held western preconceptions by expressing a simultaneous admission and denial of censorship's existence, as if drawing the words from a standard party line. Even those who do not adhere to this line often fail to articulate the nature of their earlier life, as if not enough time has passed for them to achieve the necessary distance.

An exception is Roland Gräf, whose film *The Tango Player* (1991), shown at last year's Berlin Film Festival, has received much international attention. According to Gräf, "There were some people who did adapt and then there were others, who I think were better directors, who resisted and did what they wanted. Sometimes it would cost tremendous amounts of time. For example, a few years ago I made a film about Hans Fallada, one of the greatest German writers of this century, who didn't emigrate during the Nazi period, which meant he lived with the same conflict between conforming and resisting that we lived with in the GDR. It took me three years to get through all the ideological hoops, but in the end, through personal courage and stubbornness, I was able to insist

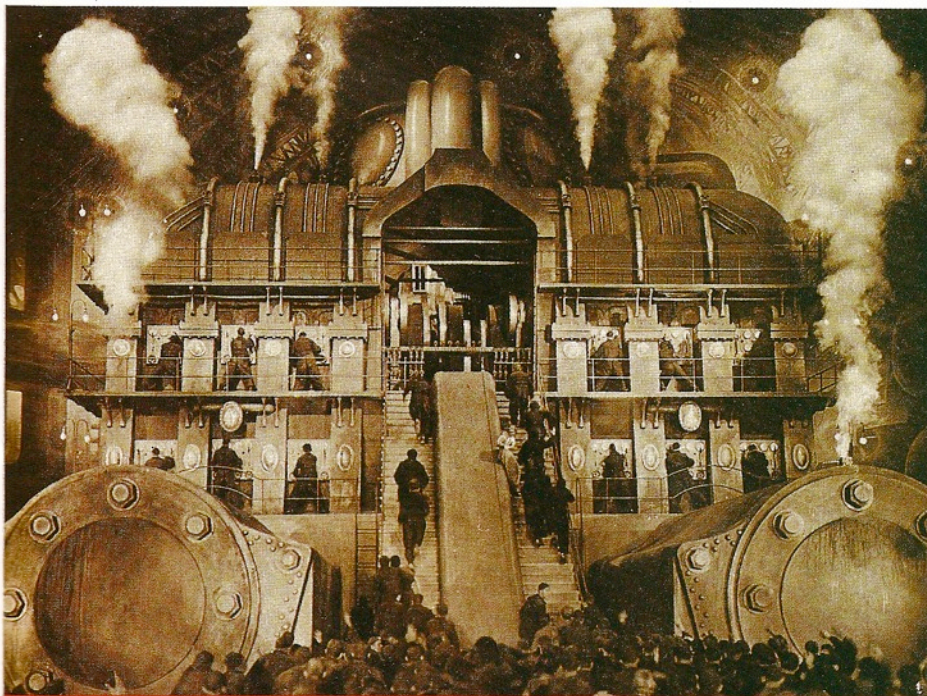
on what I wanted". A similar ambivalence is expressed by director Dietmar Hochmuth: "Of course in East Germany it was always a very difficult process to get the party signature for a film. But once we got this signature, we could get the money and make what we wanted. Now we are free from this stress, but we find we must think instead for the first time about the question of market".

Gräf is the head of the Artistic Committee, set up by former DEFA directors to advocate the studio's continuation as a producer of films and to respond to the west's ongoing accusations of collaboration and entrenchment. "The irritation with all these questions from the west about to what extent you were involved is very strong. For example, when we say we want to keep DEFA because we think it is valuable, the people in the west say, 'You just want to maintain your source of income. You've been coddled by this government for so many years and had this guaranteed salary. Isn't this your just desserts, the proper punishment for this activity?' The idea that all the people at the top have Stalinist backgrounds or philosophies is one of the over-simplifications we are trying to work against. Of course there were Stalinists at DEFA, but there was also a large variety of people who weren't Stalinists. There were people who were trying to effect change and to work on reforming the system".

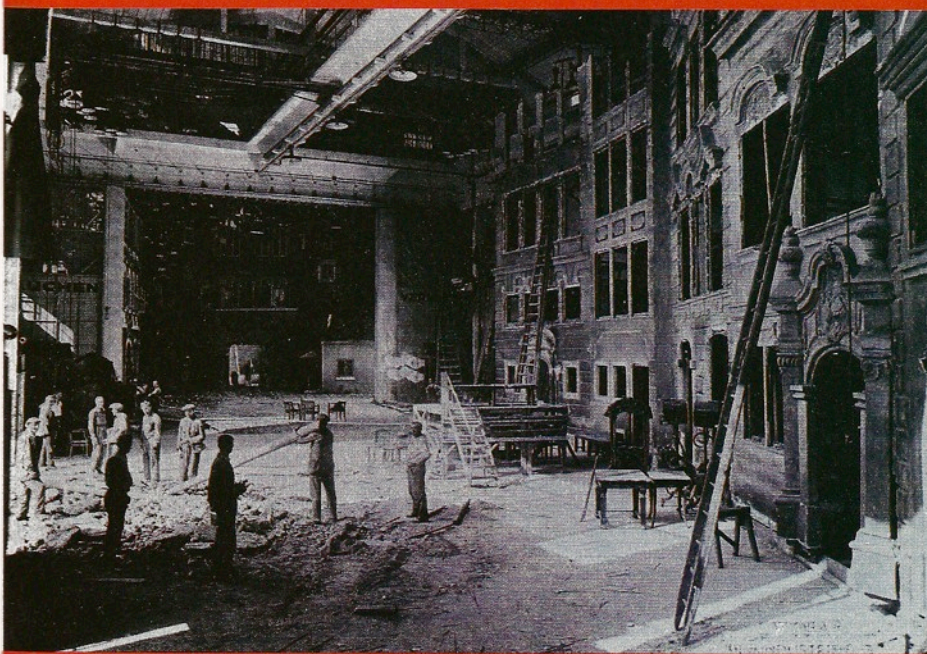
Unfortunately, not all were as successful as Gräf in making the films they wanted. Hannes Schönemann began working at DEFA just after the 1966 crackdown. He spent several years as a scriptwriter but all his proposals to direct were rejected. By the early '80s he was beginning to be aware of a blacklisting effect and concluded that his opportunity to direct at DEFA would never come. He applied to leave the country with his wife Sybille, a documentary filmmaker who has chronicled their experience in *Locked Up Time* (1991), which has been shown at many international film festivals over the last year. The Schönemanns' high profile as filmmakers caused the state to make an example of them. They were subjected to six months of harassment in order to incriminate them and then were imprisoned for over a year before finally being expelled to the west.

It was never the Schönemanns' intention to be activists against the system. Hannes des-





'Metropolis': the studio's largest stage was built to accommodate Fritz Lang's sets



Striking sets: is the fate of a once great studio to be sold off as real estate?

cribes himself as critical of the state, but "with solidarity". However, he learned later that the individualistic nature of his student films and feature scripts had led the secret police to keep a file on him labelled 'The one who is in doubt'. Although Schönemann is careful to cite Gräf as one of his mentors, he takes a considerably harsher view than Gräf of the value of DEFA. "I don't think that it will be economically possible for DEFA to maintain itself. The old structure of employee artists is against the spirit of art; they *bought* the artists. Anyone who made a career at DEFA during the last thirty years had to sell himself out unconsciously. There were people who remained sincere, but they were the exception. Now there are people who say, 'We want to keep our workplace so we can tell the stories which in former times we were not allowed to'. But someone else has to do this - the young people who did not sell out".

At the end of June 1990, with the West German government's careering drive towards reunification, the DEFA studio was privatised, necessitating the immediate lay-off of almost half of its 2,300 workers. Scrambling to adapt, the studio administrators went to look for help in the west. But according to Andréas Scheinert, DEFA's director of marketing, the German banks they approached offered neither investment nor advice, with the attitude that East German concerns were not a worthy business risk. Instead, a consultant from the Frankfurt branch of Chase Manhattan was brought in to help develop a business plan whereby the studio's facilities for providing services to international film and television productions would be exploited to create a financial foundation which would allow DEFA to continue to produce films. DEFA was to serve as an umbrella organisation for several commercial entities - a production company, a sound mix studio, a special effects company, a set construction company, prop and costume companies, a catering service, a studio tour, and so on.

Although the proposal was a good one - and laid the groundwork for the plan currently being pursued - this attempt at self-privatisation is bound to fail without the tremendous amount of investment capital that will be necessary to modernise the facilities. Between 150 and 200 million DM are required to upgrade basic services alone: the telephone system, ►

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◀ notoriously bad throughout former East Germany; the heating system, which dates back to the 20s; air conditioning; wiring; the installation of photocopiers and computers. The Treuhandanstalt, the federal agency assigned the task of privatising all former East German state-run companies, has now been brought in to look for investors.

The Treuhand executives charged with deciding the future of DEFA are four former West Germans and one former East German with no previous knowledge of the film industry. The greatest fears in the western film community are that substantial portions of the lot will be sold off for real estate development and that the remaining studio will become dominated by television. Under pressure from a disparate group of lobbyists including the European Directors' Union, French culture minister Jack Lang and the governments of Berlin and the Brandenburg region, the Treuhand has now come round to the idea that DEFA should be preserved as a place of European media pro-

duction. But no formula has yet been devised to determine how much of the studio should be devoted to television and how much to film.

The Berlin Film Commission strongly advocates resisting television domination at DEFA because of the unusual opportunity for film production the studio provides. "Our interest is to make DEFA a site with some television, but not just television", says Hartwig Wilbrandt, deputy film commissioner, "because to make television production you don't need all these big studios. If the DEFA studio were used for film production, it could put Berlin back into the international business of film-making. The best thing for Berlin would be a sort of brain drain from Hollywood, a reverse of what happened when all the talent left here to go there. But this is only a dream".

The more likely reality is that DEFA will become a profit-making corporation consisting of a combination of private and government ownership. The Treuhand hopes to attract a large international media company – the hot

favourite at the time of writing is a joint venture between the CGE/Schaeffers Franco-German consortium and media giant Bertelsmann – to function as a leading partner in the corporation and provide investment funds. To demonstrate its interest in having international participation, the Treuhand has retained a non-German bank, Credit Swiss/First Boston, to evaluate the investment proposals. Meanwhile, the Berlin and Brandenburg governments are working out a co-operative agreement for joint control of the 25 to 30 per cent government share that will assure the studio's future as a film and television production centre. Decisions are expected in early to mid-1992.

The disproportionate number of former West Germans holding decision-making positions at the Treuhand means that former East Germans tend to be distrustful of this body. This is not an entirely unjustified perception: the remaining 800 craftsmen and technicians could easily find themselves out of work when the new owners arrive. ■