

“You won’t get my remorse”
Laila Stieler Talks with Maxi Leinkauf¹
Translated by Peter Barton

This interview with screenwriter Laila Stieler appears here in English for the first time. It features Stieler’s contribution to Andreas Dresen’s film on Gerhard Gundermann (2018). She talks about her research into the life and work of Gerhard Gundermann, the worker, husband, father, SED member, Stasi collaborator, and, most crucially, critical song-writer. Stieler worked closely with both Gundermann’s wife and daughter, among others, in order to portray him in all his contradictions. The film adapts 18 songs from Gundermann’s vast repertoire, updating them for an audience who might not be familiar with his music. The songs for the film have been adapted and played by the West German musicians of the band Gisbert zu Knyphausen’s, and interpreted by actor Alexander Scheer.

Keywords: Gundermann, Seilschaft, Stasi, Hoyerswerda, Conny and Linda Gundermann, *Walk the Line* and Johnny Cash, Petra Tschörtner.

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How did you come across Gundermann?

I had seen him once in concert, in a small club. That must've been before '89. People were talking about him, he had a reputation; there was a certain expectation behind it. He knows what he's singing about, it was said. Because he worked in a brown coal mine, right at the pit face. I don't know what I imagined, I'd never seen a picture of him. So I arrive at the club and there's this thin man with a long nose and braces and a butcher's shirt on the stage. The image I'd had of him was definitely something else. I had imagined something heroic. But after I listened to him for a bit I actually found him very attractive. He had power and passion in the way he sang. It was a real experience. Almost erotic.

Was he aware of the effect he had?

Perhaps not while he sang; he was completely immersed in his songs. But he had certainly put on that butcher's shirt deliberately.

How did you get the idea of making a film about Gundermann?

In the mid-nineties I met my friend Mario Ferraro again. He was a musician, had already played in several bands with funny names like 'Make up', and now and again he'd taken me to concerts with him. Then we lost contact with each other for a few years. Where are you playing at the moment? I asked him. Oh, he said in his modest way, in 'Seilschaft'². What?! In THE Seilschaft?! I asked back. Of

² = clique; insider relationship; climbing team

course, I'd heard of the band – you remember a name like that. 'Gundermann and Seilschaft'. Then Mario lent me 'Engel über dem Revier' ('Angel over the coal pits'). The record had just been pressed. Take a listen, he said. And so I did. Somewhat hesitantly, because he wanted me to say something about it. But then I was amazed by the music and the lyrics. There was a feeling there that I recognised. A melancholy as though it had come directly out of the ground, out of that lignite, that had something coarse and delicate about it at the same time. And then I heard 'Und musst du weinen' ('And if you must cry'). Even today it's my favourite song. That refrain 'with hard hands and hard hearts', ('harte Hände und ein hartes Herz') how Gundermann does that, to create an association with three words. These working women he describes, with their hard hands – I could picture them.

It plugged into my perception of reality. I've never worked in an opencast mine, but I could picture how they looked. I said to Mario straight away: Someone's got to make a film about this.

Have you ever come into contact with such working class lives?

Like many of my generation I worked in factories during the school holidays to earn more pocket money. On top of that we had our Practical Work classes in a factory where once a week we'd learn stuff like how to solder, stamp, operate a lathe. And then for a year I was in the VEB Elektrokohle Lichtenberg.³ I learned a trade there and in

³ A large factory in Berlin-Lichtenberg during the GDR era that produced carbon products such as graphite. VEB = volkseigener Betrieb i.e. a publicly owned enterprise.

fact I am a trained specialist in sintering, that is: in carbon technology, which wasn't my dream profession and didn't quite happen voluntarily either. It came about because in Year 11 I had applied to study journalism. There was a suitability test, which I passed, and to really be able to study journalism they wanted us to work for a year in a production plant before we started. To get to know the grassroots, the things we were supposed to write about later on. Good. So in Berlin-Lichtenberg, where I lived at the time, I got into a tram travelling to the industrial area and three stops further on I went into the next best plant and said: I want to work here. We can't use you, was the answer. I came out and was already eyeing up the next factory, when the lady from the political section came running after me. What is it you want to study again? Journalism, I say. Wonderful. You can start here, we need somebody for the company newspaper. But I'm supposed to work in production, I say. No problem, you can. And I'm supposed to do my trade training as well. You can, you can. Suddenly, everything was no problem. The background to this was that a colleague on the company newspaper had gone on maternity leave and they were desperately seeking a replacement for a year. I came just at the right time – that's what they said, at least.

The deal was that I should work on the production line in the morning, in the grinding shop on the conveyor belt, and I was to look after the newspaper in the afternoon, plus work on my further education qualification twice a week. I could hardly believe my luck. Until I met the editor, my work colleague for a year. An older man who only had one arm. The other one had stayed in Wismut.⁴ It should have made me suspicious that he had seven schnapps to drink in

⁴ A uranium mine in Saxony.

the hour we sat in the ice cream parlour on Alexanderplatz. It turned out that he was a periodic alcoholic. So there were times I had sole responsibility for the paper. But in his sober phases I learned a lot from him.

What were the women like at the plant?

More women worked in the grinding shop than men. Young women, sometimes single and with three children, who were the best workers. I always admired them. They almost certainly had hard hands as well.

What was the motivating factor to work on Gundermann as a character?

It was the Stasi story. In 1995 it became known that from 1976 to 1984 Gundermann was IM⁵ 'Grigori'. Naturally I had heard about it. In an interview he later told of how an acquaintance came up to him at a concert. This guy said to him: Hey, I found your name in my file – your cover name. You are Grigori, aren't you? And at first, Gundermann said, he could hardly remember. There was something with the Stasi, sure, he had met with them but not often. He told them things, but nothing of importance. Later, so he said, he was shocked at himself. I could picture the situation well. This shock at something that seemed to be so far in the past, something you would like to have forgotten because it didn't seem so important for what came after. The way he was then treated, even in articles and reports about him, that aroused my antagonism. It was the same thing with Christa Wolf who was also an IM in her younger years and

⁵ = informeller Mitarbeiter i.e. informal staff member. A term used to describe informants for the Stasi.

was reduced to being just that after it became public. Suddenly it wasn't a matter anymore of what a great writer she was, how courageous, and what she had had to put up with when she was being spied on herself. For a time it was just a case of Christa Wolf being the same as IM 'Margarethe'. How would one feel? How did Gundermann feel? These were questions that suddenly affected me. At that time if there was any story about the DDR it was mainly the negative aspects. And I became really incensed when people who, from my perspective, had no idea, passed judgement on my heroes. And by extension on me and my life as well. I had the feeling I had to offer a defence.

A couple of years later, in June 1988, Gundermann died.

So our idea of making a film was out for the time being. Contemplating a Gundermann film felt irreverent to me – like grave-robbery. Nevertheless we kept talking about it over and over again, Andi Dresen and I. It was a continuous conversation with long interludes. At that time I was working as a producer, mainly writing TV shows for ZDF so I had my living. Everything was going well. But still, there was an empty space. I needed a while to find out what it was, what was making me unhappy. I kept asking myself what I really wanted. Maybe I had fitted in too well, perhaps even living according to the wishes of others. Maybe I wanted to write about something that had more to do with me. Genuinely with me. And so Gundermann was there again, and the idea of writing a film script about him. I spoke with Andi Dresen – and found I was pushing at an open door. Do it, he said. Of course it was clear to us that it would take a long time. But such a long time ...?

Gundermann lived a full life: excavator driver, songwriter, political activist. Did you know which story you wanted to tell? What was it that grabbed you?

He was also someone who was loved, someone who was rejected and ridiculed. A labourer, a tradesman, a hero. Those are already great stories, you could make a film about each one of them. But whenever I'm interested in people, it has to do with a certain intimacy. And with him I turned again and again to the question: what feeds all this melancholy? Where does this sadness come from? At the outset I thought it had to do with the Wende⁶, with the loss of one's home, of the meaning of life. He was an activist in the GDR, he wanted to change things. He loved and hated the country, and then all of a sudden it was gone. That's how I explained it. Later on I discovered that his sadness had quite different roots, that there was a profound guilt eating him up from the inside and that caused this isolation. This loneliness, this always-being-on-the-outside.

Guilt?

He always wanted to be a hero. Ilya Muromets⁷, Che Guevara, Tamara Bunke⁸ – there were names that resonated with him. As a child he's said to have got onto a train with a suitcase to head off to the fighting – to Cuba, I think. And now I don't quite know any more if somebody told me that or if I thought it up myself? Whatever, that's

⁶ = lit. "the turning point". The collapse of Communism in the GDR and German reunification.

⁷ A knight from Russian folklore.

⁸ 1937 – 1967. An East German Communist revolutionary active in Cuba and Latin America. Ambushed and killed in Bolivia by the army during that country's insurgency (1966-67).

just what he was like. Just like that story that really did happen: as an eleven-year old he found a pistol in the basement. From the Second World War. His father had kept and hidden it. That was illegal. But what does a child know about that? He was so enthralled that he stuck the pistol in his tracksuit pants where it bulged right down to his knee and then he went off to the playground. He was the outcast. The little pasty kid from the schoolyard with the big teeth and glasses. If you've got a pistol and you can show it at the playground then you are someone. Of course someone squealed on him, the police were at his front door and arrested his father. He was charged and convicted of possessing a weapon. Got probation. Now you could say they got off lightly. But the father must've been a hard man. What's more, the parents' relationship broken down completely shortly after. And Gundermann senior blamed his son for it. The divorce, the shame, the loss. He never spoke with his son again.

And the boy blamed himself.

Yes. There was a mother, but she probably didn't get on well with her children. At least not with him. I only know her from documentary films. To me, she seems hard, as if she's wearing armour. While Gundermann was such a highly sensitive person. Did she understand that? I don't think so. How could you leave a child alone with that massive guilt otherwise? Responsible for the misfortune of his father, for his parents' separation, for the misery he brought them. Gundermann was uprooted by the family's subsequent move, transplanted to a completely new environment. Separated from his father, he dragged these guilt feelings around with him from which no one could set him free. Later, in an interview, he said that happiness for

him meant the world getting quite close to him. When he felt joy – which seldom happened – then just for a moment the curtain was pulled back; the screen that separated him from others, and through which he watched the world, was lifted. And he saw everything up close.

“I’m just a poor dog, but who, who would let me off the leash ..” he sings in one of his songs.

Yes, perhaps that’s it. He’s thinking about who he really is if he’s just chasing after everything. He wanted to be a second Che Guevara. I mean, he was an officer cadet, he had seriously thought he could become an officer or even an army scout. Perhaps he wanted to compensate with heroic deeds for whatever he thought was inadequate about himself.

What role does the Stasi theme play in the script? And how do you approach whatever lies beyond the cliché of the victim – perpetrator?

There’s a concept that Klaus Koch from ‘Buschfunk’ once used: red stuff.⁹ That’s it, exactly. We had that in chemistry class. It’s a substance, potassium permanganate I think; if you put one drop in a barrel of water the whole barrel goes red. And it’s the same with the Stasi. As soon as you touch the subject the dye rubs off onto everything else. This

⁹ The first indie-label from East Germany, founded on 13 December 1989. Actor Axel Prah, who has played in several films by Andreas Dresen, is often to be seen in the label’s founder’s studio. Cf. Gunda Bartels, „Wir machen es trotzdem,“ *Der Tagesspiegel*, 12 December 2014. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/ost-indie-label-buschfunk-wird-25-wir-machens-trotzdem/11112672.html> Accessed on September 17 2020.

dyeing effect proved difficult for me in the process of writing. You can't just talk about it in passing. You have to be thorough, you have to really go into the depths. Narrate his inner struggle. Then I talked about it for a long time with Conny.

His wife.

And Gundermann's story with the Stasi became a kind of mirror image in the script. A core around which you can arrange sections of his life. In the first version it was already clear a man would speak to him and say: Hey, I read your cover name in my file. This scene is the starting point. From there a dialogue develops with his past. This is the arc I wanted to narrate: from the moment Gundermann says "I can't remember anything, I don't have anything to apologise for" up to "Shit, what have I done." And during that period when he's trying to reconstruct something, when he's questioning all his old friends and chasing up his Stasi files of course he remembers much more than just his contact with the Stasi. His love story with Conny comes to life again, his long courtship, and also his unhappy 'love' for the SED.

How can you forget about, just cast off, such things as working for the Stasi?

I think he was ashamed of it. Of course the story with his father gets dredged up again as well. His alleged guilt, that wound. Where does shame come from? It's only felt by people who are wounded in their souls. People who have a clear conscience don't feel shame. He was ashamed and he tried to make up for it through a lot of other things. Until he thought he had a clear conscience.

What did his reports look like?

You shouldn't think that he just chased after people and spied on them. As if he was given a contract and then worked it off. Instead he reported quite voluntarily, on things that seemed important to him. But, as Conni said to me, some of that was information that the birds were singing from the rooftops in Hoyerswerda. He wasn't really so close to people that he could've got them to talk about their great secrets. I've met a few 'Flintstones' on whom he reported (members of a band that grew out of the 'Hoyerswerda Song Club'). Most of them are fairly relaxed about it, perhaps because they knew him: the guy who wanted to change the world.

There was certainly something militant in his desire for heroism. The reports he either wrote or recorded on tape for the Stasi didn't disturb me individually. I just asked myself now and again, why he even noted this trivia, why he thought it important to tell the Stasi about it. But the sheer mass of it, that did shock me. That he blethered on so much. That he was so diligent. At least at the beginning. He also reported on himself, by the way – in the third person, which is again rather odd.

Because Gundermann was “fundamentally wilful” and had criticised party functionaries, he was thrown out of the SED in 1984. That meant an end with the Stasi as well.

Yes, and I see this Stasi theme as one facet of his idealism, one which runs through all areas of his life. Not just in the sense of something visionary, but rather because he always had a certain goal. At band practice, in love, in the excavator, in the party. He had an image of how he wanted

his ideal world to look. And he wanted Conny to be his companion in life. The woman was married with two children, but so what? He came to the mine as a simple labourer and wanted to become an excavator driver, a highly qualified position. Along the way he had to put up with quite a lot, but he made it. And he knew, of course, what Socialism is supposed to look like: no fat cats. And no one enriching themselves. He assumes that was doable as well. And defending Socialism meant getting involved with people who were there to defend it. And whom he imagined according to a certain ideal.

Cool agents?

Heroes. Like in the series *Das unsichtbare Visier* (*The invisible visor*)¹⁰ or the novel *Wie der Stahl gehärtet wurde* (*How the steel was tempered*).¹¹ He had a particular image of agents who only served the good. At school we were always told: for the good to succeed, there will also be victims. You can understand that, theoretically. But practically? It all starts to get a bit grey: what happens when you know the victims? If they're close to you? He hadn't counted on that. He just had this ideal image of the Stasi. At the same time he overestimated the possibility of exercising some influence.

At some point he just didn't turn up any more. Why not?

At first he was quite committed because he had a particular idea of what he could achieve with the help of the Stasi. At first it was about getting the band – that is, the 'Song

¹⁰ A spy series that ran on East German TV from 1973 – 1979.

¹¹ A Socialist Realist novel by the Soviet writer Nikolai Ostrovsky. Serialised in 1932 and published as a book in 1934.

Club' – to travel as a group to the West and perform there. Not just individuals but everyone together. They explained to him that that was possible if an IM went along with the group – a role that he more or less took on himself. They wanted information for that, which he gave them. Later he wanted more. And then it turned out that the Stasi was a one-way street for him. He came with information and wanted something in return. He reported on corrupt functionaries or problems at the mine. For example, how workplace accidents were dealt with. That they didn't appear in the statistics. If someone died, their wages continued to be paid and he suddenly disappeared from the statistics. He uncovered some strange things. And he brought them along so that the Stasi could change something. But nothing happened, nothing at all. He was slow. He needed a while to understand that they weren't interested in helping him. They just wanted to use him. And that disillusioned him.

Was he brave?

Yes, sure. You have a case officer and he makes an appointment with you and you don't turn up. He didn't know what would happen. He had got involved with them, given himself up to them. The files show that his first case officer must have been a fatherly, understanding person. And Gundermann was lonely, he had this father complex. Then the case officers changed. Suddenly he had to deal with these technocrats, these blockheads. They didn't want to understand him. They looked at him and listened to him and said: He's an enemy. We have to keep an eye on him. "He's gone down the wrong path", that's what they said. And he had the confidence to stand up to them and to put a name to this unease that, more and more, was festering

away in him. And he only sporadically went to the appointments they had arranged. He looked for a family. And that's what Conny became for him. When he got together with her he finally stopped going to the meetings altogether.

Then they put him under massive surveillance.

Yes. And he was chucked out of the Party. Even though he believed in the GDR, in Socialism. He wanted a just society. That quote from Marx, that the free development of the individual is the condition for the free development of all was the idea he lived by. At the same time he wanted a Socialism without dogmatism, without corruption, without functionaries who behaved like feudal lords. An ideal Socialism in other words. He strongly criticised the way it was practised in the GDR, the way the theory was only partially applied. One could love life in the GDR and hate it at the same time.

This contradiction was part of Gundermann.

Yes, he doubted, he questioned. He wanted to set something in motion and improve things and at the same time, in doing so, he wrecked it.

How did you approach Conny? She plays an important role in the screenplay.

She was my guiding star. She was open. I really didn't have to fight very hard. When I first rang her bell in Berlin-Pankow in 2004, I was pushing at an open door. She liked the idea of the film from the start and said: "I'm all for it, you can ask anything. And you can try everything out." She

was generous in a way I have seldom come across in other people. It was her pain, it was her great love. And she could have said: I'm not going to show you that, I'm going to keep it for myself. But she started to talk straight away. She had an openness that you perhaps have to protect her from sometimes. But she's clever and modest. At some point she said: You shouldn't just ask me all the time. You have to talk to so-and-so. They can tell you even more.



Both Photos: Laila Stieler with Conny and Linda Gundermann. Uckermark 2017. Courtesy of Laila Stieler and Ch. Links Verlag.



She opened all the doors?

Yes, she took me everywhere and introduced me to everyone. We went to Hoyerswerda, we were at the 20th celebrations of the 'Brigade Feuerstein'. Conny showed me where they practised, where their house was, and in which hospital Linda was born. And there's a Gundermann Archive in Hoyerswerda. It's a cupboard. Quite well stocked with interviews and old plays. I also spoke to his old mates and people who knew him. For example, I had a long conversation with Andrej Hermlin¹². And he came out with this momentous sentence: You can be a Communist and you don't have to be an arsehole. He completely rejected Gundermann's collaboration with the Stasi, though

¹² Andrej Hermlin is one of writer and poet Stefan Hermlin's children. He was the founder and leader, in East Berlin, of the 1986 Swing Dance Band, which was renamed Swing Dance Orchestra in 1995. He is politically active, and a member of die Linke.

he basically really liked Gundi.

Did your picture of Gundermann become clearer, the more you spoke with people who had known him?

I heard from lots of people that he was a powerful motor, a motivator. That he had a certain singlemindedness in getting what he wanted. At the same time his passion must have been inspiring. His poetry, his intelligence, his radicalness – I heard a lot of admiring things said about him. But at some point during the research and in these conversations I had the feeling: I'm losing myself in all these different perspectives. I'm going to concentrate now on Conny! She was the person who knew him best. She was the key.

What were both of them able to do for each other?

She must have been as open with him as she was with me. As generous. She accepted him as he was. She had to overcome a lot of obstacles for him, to really go above and beyond. And she did it: with two children she left her husband, she left a relationship to be together with Gundermann. To be with someone with whom she didn't think everything was rosy, but whom she accepted as he was. She was devoted to him, loved him dearly and admired him as well. Although he obviously always rejected that: she shouldn't admire him so much, he said. So she had to do that as well. Conny was his partner with all her strengths and weaknesses. She grew by his side is what she says about herself. But, most of all, her love helped him accept himself. He was his own sternest critic.

She helped him to like himself as well. And he, for his part, brought a depth into her life which she had perhaps missed previously.

They had a daughter, Linda, together. How was the meeting with her?

When I met Linda she was still at school. In the meantime she's become a teacher. She's like him. Not just in her appearance, but also in a certain uncompromisingness. She is self-confident. But when we talked about her father she was very reticent and said: You really shouldn't ask me, I only knew him a little. That's so far in the past. She read my second version of the film script and said: "Yes, quite nice, but you know what I think is missing? We had a lot of fun! Don't make it so sad! I can still remember him running along a road with my older brother, Steffen, and they were kicking each in the arse as they went." That image was such a catalyst. And I thought: She's right. There has to be some fun!

Was there anything bourgeois about Gundermann's life?

There was something about him that liked to cling to things: to his excavator, to the terraced house out there by the forest, but also to his working life and everything that belonged to it. He couldn't throw anything away. In one of our last research conversations Conny told me that his mother had shoved things on to him that she wanted to get rid of. And he was such a hoarder. So he kept a lot of stuff, including a tracksuit of his mother's. Pink and fluffy. And he wore it at home! There was once an interview and there he was with Conny, dressed in their tracksuits and sitting on one of those Hollywood swing chairs being questioned

by a reporter. Later, he watched it on TV and a light must've gone on for him, because he said: "They could've told me how crappy I looked." I incorporated that straight away into the screenplay. The tracksuit then becomes more than just a costume the actor wears in that scene. When I was writing it I was imagining Gundermann and Conny speaking, this somewhat difficult, serious conversation about the Stasi and his possible guilt – while wearing a pink tracksuit! Were they *petit bourgeois*? It's just not something they thought about.

How long did research for the film take?

I researched for three years, longer than for other films. I watched both documentary films by Richard Engel ¹³and listened to a lot of music, including while I was writing. It certainly wasn't intended to be a classical biopic. I had amassed a tremendous number of dates and times without any inner relationship, without a theme, without any causal connection. I get bored by all this: and then and then and then, just because the chronology sets it out that way. I always try to break out of these sorts of dramaturgical patterns.

It's also the biography of a musician. What films did you watch beforehand?

The main one was *Walk the Line*.¹⁴ And *Walk the Line* again. I was in love with that film, though I only saw it the first time quite by chance. I was never interested in Johnny Cash

¹³ Richard Engel directed two documentaries with and about Gundermann: *Gundi Gundermann* (1981) and *Ende der Eisenzeit* (1999).

¹⁴ James Mangold, 2005.

and went to the movies with my daughter where we actually wanted to see another film but there were only tickets for *Walk the Line*. We wondered why there were so many fat men in leather with beards and tattoos in the theatre. And they got into it, singing along loudly to the songs and roaring out over the top of the film. There's this one scene where Johnny's lying in bed recovering from the drugs. June comes along with a little basket and says: "Look what I found in the woods: berries." And these guys in leather shout out: "And mushrooms!" That was quite a memorable occasion. Both actors, Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon, played this love story incredibly well. Their inner turmoil. How they long for each other but are still frightened of coming together. Desire and pain.

Another wounded soul.

Yes, Johnny Cash dragged this father complex around with him as well. So there are obviously similar aspects. I saw the film and thought: great. But it has a more classical narrative. I watched it another three or four times and thought: My God, that is so well constructed. In the audio commentary, the director, James Mangold, describes how he staged the situations, how he tried to embed the songs in the dramatic action. So that something personal is associated with every scene. For example, at an early stage when there is no relationship between the two, June looks on as he performs. Or right at the end when Johnny proposes to her on stage in front of the audience. Or when he's drunk at the microphone because she's rejected him. It's often a situation in which he has to prove himself. I found that really interesting. There was a lot I could learn technically. It's the first film about music I've written.

Were other films inspiring?

Ray,¹⁵ of course. I watched *The Doors*¹⁶ again, *All That Jazz*,¹⁷ which is more to do with choreography but also about a crisis in the life of an artist. I watched *Control*¹⁸ about Joy Division and *Dreamgirls*,¹⁹ a story about Motown. *Hilde*²⁰ occurs to me – Heike Makatsch²¹ did that well. I already knew *The Commitments*²², *Spinal Tap*²³ and *The Blues Brothers*.²⁴ Really inspiring was the film *I'm not there*.²⁵ The idea of narrating a biography episodically and with the various episodes told in different genres and featuring different actors – the freedom of this approach to time and dramaturgy was really exciting. For a moment Andi Dresen and I even considered telling the Gundermann story in a similar way. But we weren't quite so radical in the end because Gundermann wasn't Bob Dylan after all and we would have had to provide a lot of background. Yet all this thinking about narrative forms meant that material found its way into the screenplay which interrupts the dramatic action – documentary stuff, but also commercials and out-takes from TV shows from the years 1975-78 and 1992-96, the periods I was writing about. And a film like this needs sound. That's why I was

¹⁵ Taylor Hackford, 2004.

¹⁶ Oliver Stone, 1991.

¹⁷ Bob Fosse, 1979.

¹⁸ Anton Corbijn, 2007.

¹⁹ Bill Condon, 2006.

²⁰ Kai Wessel, 2009.

²¹ b. 1970. German actress and singer.

²² Alan Parker, 1991.

²³ Rob Reiner, 1984.

²⁴ John Landis, 1980.

²⁵ Todd Haynes, 2007.

constantly listening to music as I was writing. Gundermann's songs.

How were you able to immerse yourself in the mood of the Wende years?

During one of the last re-workings of the script I watched the film *Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg* by Petra Tschörtner, which is set in 1990 in the Schönhauser Allee. That was a shock. I had forgotten how everything looked back then. On the one hand I was horrified at how grey everything seemed – the houses, the colours, the shop window displays. And, on the other, how my memory functions so that I could forget all that and get used so quickly to the new, bright facades. And, of course, I spent many days in the BStU (Behörde des Bundesbeauftragten für Stasi-Unterlagen / Stasi Records Agency). There was a staff member there, an amazing woman, who was really helpful. She handed the documents on Gundermann over to me, these fat files which she had previously reviewed to black out the real names. And she said: "The poor man." "The poor man"! She had understood Gundermann in his desperation.

When you get so close to a person, how do you keep your distance so you can regard him as narrative material?

To be honest I was first of all concerned about getting close because I didn't know Gundermann personally. I had a particular idea of what I wanted to write and how the figure should appear: because it's not him, the real Gundermann that is, that I want to write about, but a character: my character. Not a person, but a construct. I had this character in my head. And then there's the real Gundermann. And I laid the two on top of each other and checked them. So to

that extent the distance occurred almost automatically. It's the intimacy I had to create.

Through his work, the songs?

There were different stages. At the start I thought of him as impish, as someone who liked to joke around. But then I thought: Nope, he took it all quite seriously. This is not someone who makes jokes. The comedy came from the fact that reality was always rubbing up against his ideas. That became my working method: to draw the character in – that is, to get close to him in emotional moments – and then push him away again with laughter. It's through comedy that you create that distance.

What's funny about Gundermann?

Obviously this contrast between his perception and reality. Or how he was always getting distracted, entering into his own world and then sometimes saying things that were completely irrelevant for others. Various people told me about this aspect of him. And ultimately for me there was something funny in the way he initially downplayed this Stasi story. "I only met with them a few times. I didn't do anyone any harm." And you sense that a lot is being repressed, you don't know why, but that this self-confident front he's putting on won't stay up for long and he'll find out things about himself that he won't like.

So at first he constructed an imaginary world?

Yes. Again, he had this picture of himself. This heroic picture. But the viewer's thinking: Mate, that will come back to bite you. I found that funny. And, of course, tragic

as well.

Were you able to do justice to Gundermann?

This fear of not doing justice to him accompanied me through the years. I often thought: What would people say who really knew him? Then I always thought: a film like this could have been made by someone else. But it wasn't. And so now it's got stuck with me. Whether I was able to do justice to him, I don't know. That's up to others to judge.

Again and again there were postponements, cancellations, a lack of financing. How were you able to keep the project alive over such a long period and keep motivating yourself?

I firmly believed in it. But there were desperate moments when I asked myself: will it happen? The shooting date was postponed several times. But then there was another discussion again. And I sat myself down and did another revision. You want it to get better as well. I couldn't imagine that this film would not be made. There were cancellations. During discussions it was often said: no one knows him, no one will watch it. For several years we worked with a production firm that really wanted to make a film with Andi Dresen. That it was this Gundermann project – they just went along with it. They were friendly, but not exactly enthusiastic. And for me as author not terribly encouraging. There were so many doubts. We somehow got stuck in this constellation. We kept talking about how we would tell this Gundermann story in such a way that everybody would understand it, even those who hadn't heard of him. How we would make it so that it wasn't just a film for Gundermann fans. And always

there'd be this question: how would we do this 'arc of remorse'? How would we credibly manage to get him into a hair-shirt at the end?

Hollywood?

Yes, well, in any case a certain kind of dramaturgy which ends in purification, catharsis. The much-used three act structure. That comes from the ancient Greeks when catharsis had something to do with the omnipotence of the gods and with insight and humility. That meant something to the ancient Greeks but in the meantime there are other ways of telling stories. For a long time I thought we'd have to do that with our story as well. Or I didn't trust myself to think differently. But more and more I had the feeling: No! I have to tell it in a different way. And then I hit upon this phrase: You won't get my remorse. That became something like a guiding principle, an attitude of the Gundermann character. Andi Dresen saw it that way as well. We both worked towards it. Now it seems logical to me. But at the beginning it was only clear to us that, in his enquiry into his own past, Gundermann would at some point have to stand at the edge of an abyss and experience a profound shock.

And then we knew that he would also have to rise up again: "So, now I'm back. I'm the same person as before, I'm not here as someone who's been defeated. I'm not going to wear sackcloth and ashes. That was my life, and all of that was part of it and if I have to apologise to anyone then I'll do it. But my remorse – a complete apology for my life – you won't get that."

It is as it is.

And he knows: the worst is what I did to myself. This

sorrow in many of his songs, that's really a sorrow about himself. We then changed production firms and everything got going again. We found very encouraging, energetic producers who saw everything in the material that we had seen as well.

The anniversaries are coming: 30 years after the fall of the Wall, then reunification. Is the film coming at the right moment?

We'll see. There'll certainly be a lot of films about the East again, in which the East will have to serve as the background for all sorts of crime or love stories. That wouldn't be so bad if there were other films as well: dramas, tragedies, everyday stories. I have the feeling that our country is changing in a strange direction. You're again given a strong direction about how you're supposed to see things. And it's often very simplified. Russia is bad, the Arab Spring is good, and the GDR is a story of repression. So, if someone collaborated with the Stasi then he must have regrets. These never ending exclamation marks! I would really like it if our film contributed to seeing things in a more differentiated way. Without this black and white. That would be nice. At least, there hasn't been a film like that on a topic such as this one and using a specific East German life story. About a person who was so contradictory.

It's a film about the East.

And we are the ones who are narrating it. I have the impression that stories from the GDR are mainly being told from a West German perspective today. Many of my West German colleagues still find it surprising that we have

other experiences and, of course, other perspectives. In any case, I hardly ever see a film about the GDR that feels right and in which I find my own experiences and my own views reflected. We were initially rejected by a film promotion fund when we sought financing. They argued that Gundermann was just about the fate of one individual: It wasn't possible to generalise. People wouldn't understand it. Andi Dresen countered by saying: "But if I were now to tell a story about Rio Reiser²⁶ you would understand it, wouldn't you? Even though that's just one individual's fate as well."

Anyway, we got the funding on the second decision. I thought: we ought to be more self-confident in our manner, like Andi was in this case. Maybe there are certain things those of us born in the East can't present so as to make them understandable to everyone. Perhaps empty spaces remain and there are open questions. So what? We can talk about it. The same thing happens to me when I see films about the West e.g about West Berlin in the 70s or 80s. There are blanks there for me as well, there are codes I don't understand. That's exactly what we should use to start a conversation. Interestingly, it was precisely from North-Rhine Westphalia that we got most of the funding for our film. They thought it was good.

Perhaps they were thinking of the miners and the pits.

Yes. Perhaps that's a level on which we could generalise. That would be good.

²⁶ 1950 – 1996. West German musician and lead singer of the band 'Ton Steine Scherben'.