WOLFGANG STAUDTE (9 October 1906, Saarbrücken, Germany—19 January 1984, Maribor, Yugoslavia) directed 73 films, acted in 40, and wrote 27 screenplays. From 1969 on, his films were almost all made-for-tv, the last of which was "Tatort-Freiwild" (1984). Some of his theatrical films were Heimlichkeiten (1968), Ganovenehre/Crook's Honor (1966), Herrenpartie/ Destination Death/Stag Party (1964), Die Dreigroschenoper/Three Penny Opera (1962), Der Letzte Zeuge/The Last Witness (1960), Madeleine und der Legionär/Escape from Sahara (1958), Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (1955), Der Untertan/The Kaiser's Lackey/The Underdog (1951), A Tale of Five Cities (1951), Ins Grab kann man nichts mitnehmen (1941), and Jeder hat mal Glück (1933).

HILDEGARD KNEF (28 December 1925, Ulm, Württemberg, Germany—1 February 2002, Berlin, lung infection) acted in 54 films and appeared frequently on German television. "Even before the fall of the Third Reich she appeared in several films, but most of them were only released after the war. To avoid being raped by Soviet soldiers she dressed like a young man and was sent to a camp for prisoners of war. She escaped and returned to war-shattered Berlin where she played her first parts on stage. The first German movie after WW II, Die Mörder sind unter uns (1946) , made her a star. David O. Selznick invited her to Hollywood and offered her a contract - with two conditions: Hildegred Knef should change her name into Gilda Christian and should pretend to be Austrian instead of German. She refused both and returned to Germany. In 1951 she provoked one of the greatest scandals in German film history when she appeared naked on the screen in the movie Die Sünderin (1951) . The Catholic Church protested vehemently against that film but Hildegred just commented: 'I can't understand all that tumult - five years after Auschwitz!' With the support of her first husband, the American Kurt Hirsch, she tried a second time to launch a Hollywood career, changed her family name from Knef to Neff (because Americans couldn't pronounce Knef), but the only worthwhile part she got was a supporting role in the Hemingway adaptation of The Snows of Kilimanjaro (1952). She became a leading lady in German, French and British films. Finally America offered her another chance, this time on the stage. She achieved a kind of stardom as Ninotchka in the very popular Broadway play, "Silk Stockings." In 1963, she began a new
career as a singer and surprised the audience with her typical, deep, smoky voice and the fact that many lyrics of her songs were written by herself. In 1970, she wrote the autobiographical bestseller Der Geschenkte Gaul. She got sympathy from all over the world for her fight against cancer, which she defeated several times. After the German reunification, she moved back to Berlin.” (IMDB.com)


German director, scenarist, and actor, was born in Saarbrücken, the son of Fritz Staudte and the former Matilde Firmans. Both parents were actors and their careers took them in 1912 to Berlin, where Wolfgang Staudte grew up. His first interest was not show business but engineering, and he began studies in the subject at Oldenburg. He disliked theoretical work, however, and after two years took up apprenticeship, first with Mercedes in Berlin, then with Hansa-Werken in Varel.

Staudte’s mother died when he was fifteen, but Fritz Staudte had become well-known as an actor at Berlin’s left-wing “people’s theatre,” the Volksbühne. Having made up his mind to resume his engineering studies, Wolfgang Staudte first visited his father at the Volksbühne—then under the direction of Erwin Piscator—and was immediately fascinated by what he saw. Instead of returning to Oldenburg he went off to a theatrical agency and was soon hired by a manager who apparently mistook him for his father. Staudte survived his debut at a theatre in Schneidemühl, but flopped in a second play, and was fired.

In 1926, returning to Berlin, Staudte joined his father at the Volksbühne, appearing during the next few years in productions directed by Piscator and Max Reinhardt, among others. Beginning in 1931, he also secured his first small movie roles. During this period his father, a committed socialist, founded his own politically oriented theatre company. Staudte appeared in two of his father’s productions and through him had contact with radical circles in Berlin. Though sympathetic to his father’s views Staudte did not really regard himself as a radical artist. Nevertheless, these contacts, and his involvement with the Volksbühne, were enough to cost him an actor’s permit when Hitler came to power in 1933.

For the next two years Staudte earned his living dubbing foreign films for the Rythmoton Company. By 1935 the situation had eased a little; he was able to get a radio job reading children’s stories and commercials, and the same year he entered the film business, making advertisements to be shown in movie theatres. Staudte is said to have directed and edited (and often scripted as well) about a hundred of these commercials, each between 80 and 130 seconds long, in this way mastering the rudiments of his craft and in particular learning how to present the essentials of what he had to say with maximum economy and clarity. He was also able to resume his work as a bit-player in films by other directors, including Veit Harlan’s Jud Süss (1940). (It should be said that, according to Harlan himself, “virtually every actor” in this disgusting work of anti-Semitic propaganda was “performing under duress.”)

Staudte’s experience as a director of commercials finally brought him an invitation from the Tobis production company to make his first fiction film. This was a satirical short called Ins Grab kann nichts mitnehmen (You Can’t Take It With You, 1941). Other shorts followed, and in 1942, when Tobis hired the circus clown Charlie Rivel and needed a vehicle for him, Staudte submitted a synopsis and was assigned to direct his first feature.

...Staudte went on to make four more films for Tobis, which by that time was wholly under government control. A romance called Ich hab' von Dir geträumt (I Dreamed of You, 1944) was followed in 1944-1945 by Der Mann, dem Man den Namen stahl (The Man Whose Name Was Stolen). A satire on bureaucracy, it was banned by Goebbels’s propaganda ministry, which reportedly wanted Staudte sent to the front by way of punishment. Thanks to the intervention of the actor Heinrich George, Staudte was given another chance and made Frau über Bord (Woman Overboard), also known as Kabine 27. He finished shooting this film before the end of the war but apparently never completed the editing.

After the war, film production in Germany resumed in the various zones. In the zones occupied by the Unites States, Britain, and France, licenses were issued to individual production units, while in the East the Soviet Union established DEFA, a state-owned monopoly based on the old UFA studios. Though Staudte lived in the West, he first worked for DEFA, writing and directing its first postwar feature, Die Mörder sind unter Uns (Murderers Among Us, 1946).

Like a number of subsequent East German films, it is a study in war guilt. A former army doctor (Ernst Fischer) is wracked by agonizing memories of a civilian massacre in Poland. He has become a self-pitying alcoholic, haunting the ruins of Berlin obsessed by the desire to murder the officer who had ordered the massacre, now a prosperous businessman with a devoted family. The doctor’s sanity and self-respect is restored by Susanne, who has survived years in a concentration camp determined to make sense of her life and the lives around her, and who is still capable of love.

Manvell and Fraenkel write in The German Cinema that the film “was remarkable not only for its subject, a significant one for the period, but also for its use of the ruins of Berlin, its sparse music score by Ernst Rotors, and perhaps above all for the performance of a young actress new to the
screen, Hildegard Knef, who played Suzanne. The film is full of imaginatively visualized moments, created out of a deep experience which the filmmaker shares with his characters. At the opening, a piano plays light jazz as the camera covers the ruins of Berlin, the crowded dance-halls, the overladen trains, the derelict railway station. Gradually the girl is singled out of the crowd until she is in close-shot; she is absorbing the pure pleasure of her freedom, her eyes full of tears. The doctor, finally seen in a haze of tobacco smoke poring in a drunken trance over a chessboard, has also been first glimpsed in the crowded streets. Suddenly the words 'mass grave' are followed by a spinning shot of the legs of ballet dancers and then a scene of rain-drenched streets. The ruins themselves are the recurrent motif of the film; in some shots the rubble seems like a landscape from the moon."

The success of Murderers Among Us encouraged others to produce what became known as Trümmerfilme ("rubble films"). These portrayals of the physical and psychological wreckage of postwar Germany, resigned and often self-pitying in tone, were shot on location rather than in the studio and seemed to some critics to promise a German realist movement comparable to Italian neo-realism, though without the latter’s use of nonprofessional actors. No such development in fact occurred, and Staudte’s own next DEFA film was Die selbstsamen Abenteuer des Herrn Fridolin B. (1948), a much-revised version of Der Mann, dem Mann den Namen stahl, the satire on bureaucracy banned by the Nazis.

In 1948 Staudte directed the German episode in the international coproduction released four years later as Geschichte von fünf Städten (A Tale of Five Women/a Tale of Five Cities). Staudte wrote or coauthored most of his films, and in the case of his next film Rotation (1949), conceived the original ideas as well. It tells the story of an ordinary German worker from the late 1920s to 1945. Hans Behnke (Paul Esser) reluctantly joins the Nazi party during the depression because he will lose his job if he does not. It seems an understandable decision, but the rest of the film illustrates the appalling costs of such a compromise, and makes clear that Behnke’s son—and all of us—face equally crucial choices.

Rotation was generally admired as “a powerful technical and artistic performance,” and there was high praise for Der Untertan (The Underdog, 1951). Based on a novel by Heinrich Mann, and set in Germany at the turn of the century, it shows how a timid and obsequious boy, through blind loyalty to the social hierarchy, rises to a position of great power and authority. Some critics found it turgid and clumsy in its didacticism, but many others did not. The French director Chris Marker wrote that “one is presented, with a power and cruelty which recall von Stroheim, with German society as it was at the end of the Empire....But the most interesting part of the story is the furore which the film has caused in West Germany; because old pre-1914 Germany had disconcerting similarities, on essential points, with that which is reviving under Adenauer.”

Another notable film of the period, also made for DEFA, was Die Geschichte des kleinen Muck (Little Muck, 1953), a children’s film in Agfacolor about an unloved hunchback boy who achieves influence at the Sultan’s decadent court and uses it for the good of the people. Ciske de Rat (1955), dealing with the rehabilitation of a boy who accidentally kills his mother, was based on a Dutch bestseller and made in the Netherlands. It won the Silver Lion at Venice. Work then began on a DEFA adaptation of Brecht’s Mutter Courage, but this project fell through and the film was later completed by Peter Palitzsch and Manfred Wekwerth.

By this time, according to Manvell and Fraenkel, “Staudte was becoming restive under the increasing controls in East Germany and, without actually breaking with DEFA, began to direct films in West Germany.” The first of these was Rose Bernd (The Sins of Rose Bernd, 1956), starring Maria Schell and derived from Hauptmann's grimly naturalistic drama about an unmarried mother driven by a heartless society to murder her baby. Madeleine und der Legionär (1957), with Hildegard Knef having to choose between love and patriotism, was followed by Kanonen-Serenade (Always Victorious/Il Capitano, 1958), a West-German-Italian co-production in which Vittorio De Sica plays the captain of a banana boat who is dragged reluctantly into wartime politics. After Der Maulkorb (1958) another literary adaptation—this time from a novel by Heinrich Spoerl—came one of the most notable of Staudte’s West German films, Rosen für den Staatsanwalt (Roses for the Prosecutor, 1959). In the chaos of Hitler’s last days, an SS prosecutor (Martin Held) condemns a feckless soldier to death for a trivial crime. The soldier escapes to become an equally feckless peddler. Some years after the war, he runs afoul of the laws of a theoretically different regime, but is confronted in court by the same Himmler-like prosecutor (who finds the encounter considerably more embarrassing than he does). Dilys Powell called it a “satire with...political teeth” that is “directed and played with a kind of wry grace,...Suddenly one thinks hopefully of the prospect of a reviving German cinema.” This ironic and intelligent film took the first prize at Karlovy Vary as well as a West German award.

The return of former Nazis to positions of power in West Germany is also the theme of Kirmes (Fairground, 1960). The erection of a carousel in a small town involves the excavations which reveal the body of a wartime deserter. It emerges that he had been hounded to his death by an SS official—a man who has since become the town’s mayor....

In 1963 Staudte made a new version of Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera, 1963), starring Curt Jürgens, Hildegard Knef, and Gert Fröbe....None of Staudte’s later movies had added much to his reputation and, beginning in the late 1960s, he concentrated mainly on television, directing numerous episodes of Der Kommissar, Der Seewolf and other series, as well as individual television films, until his death in 1984.

Staudte was not a particularly innovative or influential filmmaker (except as the originator of the short-
lived *Trümmerfilme*) but he was an extremely civilized, humane, and intelligent one, a craftsman of great professional accomplishment and resource, and a splendid director of actors. In the 1950s and early 1960s, before the advent of the New German Cinema, he and Helmut Käutner were almost the only West German directors who continued to make movies of quality. Staudte was awarded the German National Prize in 1951, the German Film Prize in 1975, and the Federal Cross of Merit in 1979.

from [http://www.umass.edu/defa/filmtour/sjmurder.shtml](http://www.umass.edu/defa/filmtour/sjmurder.shtml)

DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts
Amherst “Cinema of East Germany”

Shadows and Sojourners: Images of Jews and Antifascism in East German Film

Die Mörder sind unter uns

The Murderers Are among Us, the first German postwar film, for many years set the tone for the discussion of German guilt and atonement. Its lack of explicit references to Jews and their fate at the hands of the Nazis speaks to the state of the postwar German psyche....

The Murderers Are among Us was the first feature film to be produced in Germany after World War II, with script-writing already underway during the final weeks of the war. For this reason, and because many film studios were damaged by the bombings, *The Murderers Are among Us* does not require any documentary footage of the time it depicts. Although there are many scenes in which the landscape of urban rubbles serves as a backdrop, it is the “inner landscape” of the survivors, especially the traumatized Dr. Mertens, that was most interesting to Wolfgang Staudte.

At first glance, *The Murderers Are among Us* appears to have little to do with the issue of German-Jewish relations following World War II. It is striking, for instance, that the first German film depiction of a concentration camp survivor is not, as one might assume, clearly a Jew. The film, rather, remained ambiguous as to why Susanne Wallner was imprisoned by the Nazis. The final film version reveals only that it was “wegen ihres Vaters,” or “because of her father,” whereas the original script indicates that her father was a Communist (Shandley, 2001, 134). Presumably, viewers are left to question her father’s background. Was he Communist? Jewish? Or both? Other victims of war appear only tangentially, as with Monscheim, a kindly optician who survived the war and eagerly awaits word of his son’s well-being. Monscheim might be Jewish, although there is no explicit reference in that direction. A name such as “Monscheim” whose literal nature (meaning “moonlight”) was common to Jewish names, might have sufficed at the time to allude to German Jews who survived the war in Berlin in hiding. Indeed it is Monscheim who corrects Susanne when she declares, “It is so difficult to forget [the past]!” “No it isn’t, Fräulein Susanne. It is easy [to forget] if one has a worthy goal.” Another telling allusion to Jewish suffering is depicted in a scene in which Herr Brückner is leisurely reading a newspaper bearing the headline “Two Million Jews Gassed!” It is here that the filmmakers slyly reference Hannah Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil,” in which evildoers escape our notice because of their often tedious pretenses (Meyers 1997, 76). As the film closes, the war’s victims are represented by images of endless wooden crosses. In this manner, the predominance of Christian symbolism denies the existence and the uniqueness of non-Christian victims. Such imagery also denied audiences the opportunity to explicitly confront the fate of the Jews during the Third Reich. Yet despite the apparent absence of references to Jews and their sufferings under the Nazis, *The Murderers Are among Us* still established the context for later films which would consider such themes.

Where Murderers succeeds is in its generalized commentary, which proved widely significant to the victims and perpetrators alike. The character of Dr. Mertens, despite having participated in the Nazi regime, responds with horror to the memory of crimes he himself committed and to a society in danger of clearing away its responsibility with its rubble. The character of Susanne Wallner, who had recently returned from an unnamed Nazi concentration camp, also becomes a role model. Wallner, though an innocent victim of the Nazis, heroically maintains her optimism, [socialist] conviction, and capacity for forgiveness throughout the film. Together, the characters inhabit the emotional expanse between optimism and skepticism that many Germans shared.

The Murderers Are among Us self-consciously ignores the film style that had been fashionable during the Nazi period and returns to the genres and styles of the prewar era that had brought Germany international recognition and acclaim. As with antiwar films prior to World War II, *The Murderers Are among Us* promotes pacifism. Its *film noir* style, which focuses on dark themes such as melancholy, moral corruption and guilt, is reminiscent of German expressionism, as its figurative use of light and dark to reflect the characters’ emotions. The occasional use of extreme camera angles and perspectives, symbolic shadows and bright lights places this film outside the tradition of Nazi melodrama; its theme, however was quite timely, touching the nerve of its audience. Some scholars have even suggested a link between the structure of *The Murderers Are among Us* and the tradition of movie westerns and gangster films... Moreover, the *Lexicon of International Film* (1987, Vol.5, p.2656) declared, “Staudte’s work is one of the few German rubble films, that is committed to upholding an earnest contestation between guilt and conscience.”

Directors Wolfgang Staudte was motivated by personal experiences to begin writing the script while the Nazis were still in power,—a fact that could have cost Staudte his life had his drafts been discovered. In 1933, Staudte was banned from performing on stage “because of his association with progressive political theater circles” (Silberman 1995, 101). Ironically, his career was limited to minor roles in propaganda films, such as Veit Harlan’s *Jew Suss* [Jud Süss, 1940]. Following the war, the Allied forces exercised control over the German media as a means of ensuring that Germans relinquish all ties to Nazism. By that
time, Staudte was working steadily in a synchronization studio dubbing Russian films into German. In 1945, he presented his film script for *The Murderers Are Among Us* to the various occupying forces. The story was rejected by American, British, and French officials, but accepted by Soviet officials. “[...] I took my script first to the British, then to the Americans and finally to the French. Nobody wanted the material. Peter van Eyck was the Cultural Officer for the Americans and he gave me to understand, in broken German... ‘that we Germans could forget about films for the next twenty years’” (Mückenberger 1999, 60). In a later interview Staudte commented, “only the Russian Cultural Officer [Major Alexander Dymschitz] was interested in my project.”

Staudte was required to make some changes to his original script, which —describing Dr. Mertens’ intent—was originally entitled *The Man I Want to Kill*. Major Dymschitz, fearing an outbreak of vigilantism, required Staudte to alter the original ending, in which Dr. Mertens kills his former commander (Pflügl 2001, 163). In the final version, Susanne Wallner prevents this arguable anarchic act, leaving Brückner proclaiming his innocence while comically and monstrously distorted by the camera movement and his off-screen voice.

Prior to the film’s premiere, Ernst Wilhelm Borchert, the actor who played Dr. Mertens, was arrested by the American occupied forces for making false statements regarding his past on an official questionnaire. As a result, Hildegard Knef, who played Susanne Wallner, is the only person to appear on the promotional posters for *The Murderers Are Among Us*. Wolfgang Staudte’s original choice for the role of Dr. Mertens had been Carl Raddatz. Raddatz declined the role because he did not want to be involved in a film that, in his opinion, was critical of German soldiers. Hildegard Knef, meanwhile, who was plucked from obscurity by Staudte to plat Susanne Wallner, was “a product of her time, and with her the war—and the postwar landscape came to the screen: nighttime bombings, fallen cities, hunger, cold, chaos, the black-market. She appeared as the symbol of a defrauded yet not defeated youth.”

*The Murderers Are among Us* was ranked the sixth most important film in the history of German cinema in a survey conducted by Deutsche Kinemathek of Berlin and circulated among film critics, historians, film scientists, and directors. During the immediate postwar years, the film was screened in over twenty-three countries. It was not until almost two years after the making of *The Murderers Are among Us* that a comparable film regarding the immediate postwar experience was produced in the Western zones: Helmut Käutner’s *In jegen Tagen (In Those Days)*. Coincidentally, positive reviews of the film following its premiere on October 15, 1946, appeared in German newspapers alongside accounts of the executions of Nazis condemned in the Nuremberg trials. Thus, however unintentional, Germans were doubly reminded of the importance of civil order during such chaotic times.

**Coming up in the Buffalo Film Seminars XII, Spring 2006**

- Feb 7 Akira Kurosawa *The Seven Samurai* 1954
- Feb 14 Stanley Kramer *Inherit the Wind* 1960
- Feb 21 Gillo Pontecorvo *The Battle of Algiers* 1965
- Feb 28 John Boorman *Point Blank* 1967
- Mar 7 Fred Zinneman *A Man for All Seasons* 1966
- Mar 21 Robert Bresson *Au hazard Balthazar* 1966
- Apr 4 Ousmane Sembene *Xala* 1974
- Apr 11 Wim Wenders *Wings of Desire* 1987
- Apr 18 Andre Konchalovsky *Runaway Train* 1985

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