

# “A Sin against the Cinematic Arts”: East German Review of *Die Sünderin* (1951)

## Abstract

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This article in *Neue Zeit*, a GDR-based paper, describes the scandal that *The Sinner* unleashed in West Germany and attributes the film's making and subsequent success to a deep moral rot present in West Germany. The article takes particular issue with the depiction of women in the film, touching upon an anxiety that motivated the campaign against *The Sinner*. The war had forced many women into non-traditional gender roles, which they continued to occupy in Germany well into the 1950s. In 1950, one-third of the fifteen million German households were headed by divorced women and widows, and even in households where a man was present, the man was often physically or psychologically scarred, and therefore unable to take on the traditional role of head of the household. The Church was determined to re-establish traditional gender roles and “re-domesticate” women after the war. *The Sinner* was emblematic of the threat that non-traditional gender roles posed to German society: the film depicts a woman outside of a traditional family arrangement who had attained some economic independence and controlled (and sometimes marketed) her sexuality. The debate the film incited was not just about the film, but in fact about the role that women would take on in postwar Germany.

## Source

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### Willi Forst's First Outing Since 1945, and a Harlot Film, of All Things

Bel Ami's Sin Against the Cinematic Arts

*West German film woes reach a nadir—life as seen from the gutter*

Frankfurt, late January

If we were talking about some average director, then the controversy that has erupted in West German cities over Willi Forst's first film since 1945, *The Sinner*, would hardly be objectively justified. Willi Forst is, however, not any old director; for 17 years, he has been on the very short list of top German and Austrian film directors.

### Willi Forst's Beginnings

Willi Forst has been a “good name” since the silent film era. Back then, as an actor, he was the irresistible heartbreaker, the elegant squire, but also the gentlemanly villain, who used his charm to slip through the net of the law. And then there was the Viennese insouciance, with which a young Willi Forst served up the hit songs of the day—“My lass is just a salesgirl in a shoe store, making 20 francs a week ...” It was hard to feel angry even with Peter Voss, who stole millions, because Willi Forst played him with so much charm.

But it was not until the advent of sound film that Willi Forst first garnered international attention. The actor directed his first film in 1932, *Lover Divine*, about Franz Schubert, and in his very first turn at the helm displayed the individual signature of a marked talent for directing.

### The Film of his Life

One year later, Willi Forst produced the film of his life, an artwork with a psychological cohesion and

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dramatic simplicity such as has seldom been achieved since. *Masquerade* was an unforgettable story set in Vienna and starring a top trio of actors with Paula Wessely, Adolf Wohlbrück, and Peter Petersen.

Forst tried to repeat the style and success of *Masquerade* with the Pola Negri film *Mazurka*. While he did not entirely succeed, *Mazurka* was still a film far above the artistic average. That was followed by the serious, lovely *Burg Theater* starring Werner Krauss. Then came the sage and calm film *Serenade*, which sent Hilde Krahls star into the German movie firmament. That was followed by the flop *Tomfoolery*, a screwball comedy that taught Willi Forst how much harder it is to get it right with lightweight and vivacious than with the weight of a tragic storyline.

### **Success upon Success**

But, in the end, the great director did manage to score international success with comedy. There was *Operetta* (with an unforgettable Leo Slezak as Franz v. Suppé, composing the hit song “You are Crazy, my Child,” on a shattered piano).

Then came *Vienna Blood* and additional films in that genre, but first and foremost the light and lively Guy de Maupassant adaptation *Bel Ami* with the delightful Lizzi Waldmüller—an entire series of cheerful films that heralded a new heyday of the rather faded operetta film. And with almost every one of his films, Willi Forst proved to be a successful fisher of men, with a keen eye for the future of young talent. Willi Forst put Paula Wessely, Hilde Krahls, Maria Holst, Lizzi Waldmüller, and many more under the klieg lights. Yet he always still had the time and inclination to take on the odd meaty part for himself. He was Wessely’s noble partner in *So Ended a Great Love*, and in a sensational double role as twins with completely differing characters in a thriller centered around art fraud.

### **He Took his Time**

After 1945, Will Forst turned up back in Vienna, but did not get back in the saddle right away. He took his time. He did not want his new beginning to be some mass-market film, he wanted to offer something special, something unique. He searched for the right material and star for a long time. Within a year, Forst showed up in Hamburg, where he signed Gustav Fröhlich and Hildegard Knef, who was eager to work after returning home in disappointment from her sojourn in “Dollar-ica.”

Forst pled no comment when reporters showed up, and threw himself into the work on closed sets in a Hamburg suburb. Now we have the results—*The Sinner*. The film premiered recently in Frankfurt and is now showing in numerous West German cities. It is a dubious film that got people in a furor from the very first minute, with the sole result so far that the lines at the box office are even longer ...

### **Marina on a Downhill Slide**

The script written by Gerhard Menzel tells of these events: barely a full-fledged adult, Marina becomes a prostitute. It turns out Mom (in the Nazi era) set her a bad example. Marina is seduced by her stepbrother just after her stepfather falls into the hands of the Gestapo ... After reaching the lowest rung of the social ladder, Marina meets a fatally ill painter, who is going blind. At that point “true love” takes over, with which a mixed-up Marina can—theoretically—climb out of her predicament.

Meanwhile, that becomes a two-tiered approach. The catharsis is portrayed only in the motif of her willingness to sacrifice for her love of the sick man, not, however, in the methods that Marina uses to prove her love. Because in order to make the money to pay for an operation on her beloved, she once again takes the path of least resistance into prostitution. The end of the story is killing on demand, joint beautiful suicide, loosely based on E. Marlitt ...

If *Masquerade* was once the acme of Willi Forst’s artistic expression, *The Sinner* is its indisputable nadir, a

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point below which it would be impossible to fall.

Must our German girls and women, who have bravely, assiduously and optimistically created a new existence, new homes, a new purpose in life, be presented with, of all things, this intimate, blasé, grubby story of prostitution? Of course, a streetwalker can be the heroine of a film, as long as it really shows that and how she breaks free of the swamp and, in the end, finds new courage to face life with a job or with love. But Willi Forst's film discharges the audience without any hope, without any compass, without any solace. It is a depressing documentation of nihilism and, as such, a typical symbol of the cultural decline, the decline in intellectual standards in the German West in the wake of the total infiltration of American crime, sensationalist, and song-and-dance films. Because anyone who wants to keep their head above water as a film producer in West Germany these days must at least follow suit. Solid, artistic, serious, quality work has long since become insufficient in the West of our fatherland to assert oneself against the massive competition from America.

### **Peculiar "Board of Examiners"**

The only thing left to discuss is the reaction that *The Sinner* has so far evoked. The board of West Germany's "voluntary ratings board of the film industry" (FSK) let the film through with no cuts by majority vote, once before the premiere and once afterward, while at the same time stating that "the film comes close to the limits of what is permissible." So the film is now showing in 60 West German cities, with no modifications, including the scene in which an adolescent Marina is seduced by her stepbrother, and also including numerous nude shots of Madame Hildegard Knef.

### **I'll Have my Cake ...!**

The chair of the FSK board, Fritz Podehl, launched a wordy explanation that beat around the bush no end. Each of the sentences "elucidating" the film could begin alternately with "on the one hand," or "on the other hand." He explicitly calls Willi Forst's sorry effort a "prostitution tragedy of a long-since lost pseudo-literature" that delivers a violent blow to common sense. And yet, the board saw no reason to intervene!

His ecclesiastical colleagues on the board, Protestant pastor Werner Hess and Anton Kochs, representative of the Catholic church, resigned from the board in protest after the premiere, but have since rejoined. But now journalism professor Walter Hagemann has stepped down instead ... So the confusion of the minds could not be more complete.

### **Herr Forst Remains Adamant**

Willi Forst himself, meanwhile, is still occupying the moral high ground. He high-handedly decreed, "This film is a work of art, it will not be cut!" He went even further during a press conference, saying "This is about saving German cinema; if you savage *The Sinner*, I will withdraw completely from film work."

In Frankfurt, 20,000 people saw the film in the first few days after its release. While in Osnabrück, there were catcalls of "Phooey! Smut! Stop it!," Hildegard Knef travelled especially to Vienna for its grand premiere there.

Admittedly, a few cuts would not make *The Sinner* either better or worse. Herr Forst has taken a protective stance towards his "baby," but who can hold that against him? But precisely such a clever man as Willi Forst must himself realize that this cinematic cult of the sordid, the morbid, squalidness, and hopelessness is the exact opposite of what our people need today.

### **The Gloomy Bottom Line**

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But this is the worst:

A young German actress, a naturalized American by marriage to a US officer, is presented to the German people in the role of a young woman who becomes a murderer and a suicide, as representative and typical of the current fate of German women.

If that is the truth in West Germany, then the film is a flaming indictment of the Bonn cabal that neither will nor can eradicate that truth.

If it is not the truth, then the film is a disgraceful vilification of all respectable and hardworking German women and girls. They refuse to tolerate being represented onscreen by West German Marinas and Veronikas.

In either case, we've had enough.

Source of original German text: Sebastian Ott, "Bel Amis Sünde wider die Filmkunst," *Neue Zeit*, February 1, 1951, no. 26, p. 47.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

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