

Director Willi Forst and the Making of *Die Sünderin* (1951)

Abstract

Willi Forst, the director of the controversial 1951 film *Die Sünderin* [*The Sinner*], declared the film an innovation for both his own personal style of filmmaking and within the institution of German cinema. Forst's portrayal of German realism based on postwar experience was a rejection of the UFA style of escapist filmmaking that had reigned during the Nazi period. Forst himself had directed musicals for UFA during the National Socialist regime. For him, *The Sinner* was a labor of blood, sweat, and tears, and one that he considered deeply important, both personally and professionally. This review is far more sympathetic than most and tries to explain Forst's motives for making a film that was breaking several taboos to its readers.

Source

The Sinner: Death in Eighty Meters

"Vice and love, guilt and atonement," says proficient press man Ritter, head of PR for the distributor, Herzog Verleih. He even adds a superlative: "The most unusual film of the year."

At issue is *The Sinner*, Willi Forst's first film after being away from the helm for six years. The premiere is Thursday, almost a year since Forst began three months of work with Gerhard Menzel to put the story of Sinner Marina into screenplay form.

After that, he shopped *The Sinner* around in Munich. He was nervous about finding financing. Answald Krüger, a script editor at the Young Film Union (JFU), heard on the grapevine about his Forstchen-esque irritation ("they want seven scripts, and then it still takes six or seven months!"). Twenty-four hours later, the basis for the financing was in place.

Günther Matern, the managing director of Rolf Meyer's JFU, looked at the screenplay and immediately bought it. But as a savvy businessman, he whittled the Munich budget from 1.5 million down to slightly more than half of that. And it was made for that.

The financing went smoothly—Herzog Verleih distribution ponied up the biggest share, while JFU and the Austrian company Styria provided the rest. Willi Forst's name had the draw of an established going concern. Forst was promised 50,000 to direct, plus 50 percent profit participation and an extra 10,000 German marks.

In the JFU studio in Bendestorf, Forst kept strictly to the shooting schedule and budget. "They considered me a star director with diva tendencies. We started shooting at 11, and had a full extra-curricular program," he remembers with amusement. But he belied that by rehearsing at night for the next day, and shooting 20 set-ups a day.

And he did it without complaining. He did not even lose his cool when a pond built in the studio leaked, causing a delay in shooting. Director Forst's gentle manner affected even a man as feisty as Gustav Fröhlich, causing him to become mild-mannered in his personal doings as well. In addition, Fröhlich had to lose a strict amount of weight for his lead role.

Aside from Hildegard Knef and Fröhlich, Forst dispensed with familiar film faces in front of the camera. The reason, he says, "Nobody can stand it anymore! If you see Albert Florath, you know you are in for a

jovial time, if it's Oskar Sima, it'll be roguish-hectic, and with Franz Schafheitlin, the cops are almost always on their way."

In *The Sinner*, too, there is a segment that features two secret policemen. Forst cast a Young Film Union office employee as one of them. He looks not like an actor, but like a "regular fellow" and acted that way too, just as Forst had written in the script.

The film was not originally called *The Sinner*; the working title was the much less provocative and thrilling "Monologue." Because that is what it is: A woman, Marina (Hildegard Knef) narrates what is happening onscreen, namely her life, with a few real sections of dialogue in between. Forst called it a "thinking out loud film."

He had been planning to make something like that for years, and the idea stayed with him, "although the film landscape at this point is plagued by narration and the inner voice."

What Forst allows his sinner Marina to recount—the plot, for one, and feelings and thoughts—is a film story that gives cinema what cinema is. In abundance.

Marina starts out as the daughter of a respectable family, but she strays from the path early on, when the unsettling times loosen all the family's bonds. The stepfather, who has just kicked out his wife for earning money by stepping out on him, catches Marina at it and banishes her from the house. She cold-heartedly starts trading with her body. Until she meets Alexander in a gleaming bar. True love.

Alexander is a painter. He knows that a growing tumor in his brain will blind him and then lead to an agonizing death, and he numbs his fears with alcohol. Marina puts his life and her own in order. She will be a *Sinner* one last time, when Alexander, whose vision is failing, begins to despair. She wants to sell one of his unsuccessful paintings to bolster his mood. But she can only get rid of it by offering herself into the bargain.

She is prepared to do so to motivate a doctor to operate on Alexander. The doctor proves to be a noble man and operates without Marina's sacrifice. Alexander is cured, he becomes famous, and he and Marina are happy.

Then The Ending – Alexander goes blind, he will soon die an extremely painful death, Marina dumps a fatal dose of the carefully husbanded barbiturates into two glasses of sparkling wine.

Forst and co-writer Gerhard Menzel do not present these events in chronologic order. They have turned into a sophisticated tapestry of past imperfect and pluperfect. It begins just before the end, and then they fade to the past and, from there, to the past perfect.

Forst wrote about what he was ultimately driving at with his less than demure story. "Marina's fate appeals to our hearts. The song of songs of a woman attests to the power of love to outshine everything; that close by filth and darkness, there can also be purity, brightness, and beauty."

In order to make that clear to those who might otherwise have missed it, a subplot was originally planned along the lines of "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone at her." The scene was written and re-written three times. In the end, it was omitted.

Altogether, there is a lot of sweat invested in *The Sinner*. Even recently, Forst spent four hectic weeks post dubbing, trimming dialogue, and editing down the film.

Words had to be erased from the audio, the text had to be tightened up. Hildegard Knef spent days post dubbing her *Sinner* narrative.

In one bar scene, the name of a character was changed. This was a man, an old acquaintance of Marina's, whom she asks for several thousand marks for Alexander's operation. When confronted with the large sum, the man, initially very obliging, turns disaffected and loses interest. In the script, the character was originally called Baumgartner. He was renamed out of respect for a member of parliament with that name.

The final, death scene turned out to be too long. Marina and Alexander died for eighty meters of film. That was shortened to 46 meters.

A scene that was cut completely was one in which Alexander asks Marina for the barbiturates that she has hidden from him for safety. "He chokes Marina, completely out of his senses," the screenplay said. "Too brutal," the distributors said. They had a lot to say when they first saw the film, in its initial full length and without sound.

After seeing the final version, Günther Matern was optimistic. He paid back Erich Pommer the 1,250 dollars he had advanced for Hildegard Knef's flight, in Swiss francs, from advance revenue for *The Sinner*. He sold rights for *The Sinner* to Finland for 7,000 dollars. They plan to wait with any additional foreign distribution, hoping that the expected German success will have a ripple effect.

"Forst films have always done good international business," says Matern happily. Forst tamps down expectations with, "let's wait." But he is not entirely pessimistic. "I got choked up myself during the death scene. In my own film—I felt pretty stupid."

He modestly gives the credit for that to composer Theo Mackeben.

Source of original German text: "Sünderin – Achtzig Meter lang gestorben," *Der Spiegel*, January 17, 1951, p. 27. Accessible online at: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-29191907.html>.

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