

# Sonja Ziemann, Star of West German *Heimatfilm* (September 3, 1952)

## Abstract

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Sonja Ziemann catapulted to fame with her role in *Schwarzwaldmädel* [*Black Forest Girl*], for which she won a “Bambi” award, but the success from the film came at a price: she found herself typecast. As the article mentions, she tended to play every role the same, in part because she was playing roles that were very similar to one another. Though she insisted in this article that she was happy playing these roles, and maintained that she would rather explore European studios than go to Hollywood, she began to shoot films in Hollywood and England in the early 1960s; she also said in a 1961 interview (before the release of her first American film) that all her roles in Germany had been kitsch, all alike, playing the sweet country girl in a dirndl skirt against a backdrop of flowers, mountains, and forests. Later developments in Ziemann’s career, combined with her assertion that her roles in Germany had been kitsch, suggested that the persona she presented in this 1952 article was a carefully constructed artifice designed to land her roles and profit off the lucrative *Heimatfilm* genre (a fact that this article from the West German magazine *Der Spiegel* touches on). Everything from her personal life and focus on family to her looks to her personality were designed to appeal to the West German government and public.

## Source

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### The German Spirit

[...]

Director Hans Wolff originally had big plans to create “an entirely new Sonja Ziemann as a grand lady.” But then he dropped them— “in the end, the young girl always emerges from her.”

But that “young girl” is precisely the type that guarantees her an audience. It is no accident that her popularity has risen in tandem with moviegoers’ demand for a sense of German spirit. So enterprising managers, producers, distributors, screenwriters, and press reps cultivate the signature Ziemann touch of finding everyday happiness with a song on her lips.

The fact that “Sonnie”—as her colleagues call her—with her mix of naivete, sincerity, and good cheer, found her sweet spot in post-war German cinema was officially confirmed in 1950. After a survey by the *Film und Mode Revue* magazine, Baden-Baden, she was awarded a “Bambi,” a kind of German Oscar, as the most popular German actress. (Rudolf Prack received the “Bambi” for men.)

The choice of Sonja Ziemann came as a surprise to many film connoisseurs, as she had hardly had a chance to shine as a true lead in the more or (mostly) less enjoyable, slight German films such as *Die Freunde meiner Frau* (*My Wife’s Friends*), *Nichts als Zufälle* (*Nothing but Coincidence*), *Nächte am Nil* (*Nights on the Nile*), *Um eine Nasenlänge* (*By a Nose*), *Nacht im Séparée* (*One Night Apart*).

But at least some new talent was rising to the top in the wake of Hildegard Knef and Maria Schell, although Ziemann could not compete with their beauty, artistic caliber, or sex appeal. Which is why many film folk were surprised when, despite that, the overwhelming majority of audiences opted for the anodyne mediocrity of her Average Jane type.

There can only be one explanation for her Bambi win—the little person in the cheap seats likes the fact

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that she is “one of us,” neither emotionally inscrutable nor distractingly erotic. She is a sprightly breath of fresh air in all her roles; all her films move inexorably toward a happy ending. Sonja does not die; at most, she gets the sniffles.

But for Ziemann’s tendency to play every role as if against an imaginary backdrop of a cozy German kitchen, it would be difficult to understand why she

- Is considered one of the best-paid stars in Germany today, with a salary of some 50,000 marks per film.
- Has already shot 27 films at the age of 27, and even has to reject projects due to time constraints.
- Was the first German actress summoned by J. Arthur Rank to work in London.
- Is a box-office draw that dwarfs even tried-and-true audience darlings like Marika Röck and Zarah Leander.

[...]

*At the Well in Front of the Gate* was the title of the color film that Sonja Ziemann submitted to the film self-regulatory body (FSK) in 1952. Within 14 days, the opening refrains of eight folk songs had been submitted as film titles, prompting Dr. Wassum, the official in charge, to proclaim that “There is an outbreak of folk-song-itis!”

Sonja Ziemann, who was named as the female lead and co-producer, stated that *At the Well in Front of the Gate* was set in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, which—unlike Old Heidelberg, the Black Forest, the Rhine, and Lüneburg Heath, had not yet been captured in a folk song.

“We went through more or less all the folk songs,” says Sonja’s husband, Rudolf Hambach, 27, a stocking manufacturer from Wiesbaden, “but ‘At the Well in Front of the Gate’ was the best one. We first thought of ‘Sah’ ein Knab ein Röslein steh’n’ (‘Once a Boy a Rosebud Spied’). But you can’t really do much with it. Whereas with ‘Well,’ you can easily think of four different stories. You can a) tie into the village lime tree where everyone gathers after work, or b) the house on the mountainside, where an old man, possibly the village schoolmaster, sits staring out at the well and thinking of an earlier time.”

Rudolf Hambach is of the opinion that the story naturally needs a few modern touches. “Americans arrive in the village and the residents get the idea to stimulate tourism by putting the old well back into operation. Workers digging out the shaft suddenly find a ring knotted inside a handkerchief. And voilà, the question—how did the ring get into the well? The old man knows, he knows the woman who once wore it, and the handkerchief is his.”

But it is not her oft-cited “misty eyes” and “coy smile” alone that have allowed Sonja Ziemann to endure for seven post-war years in the film industry, and even slowly advance to the forefront. When it comes to business, the “sweet-natured naïve film child” Sonja Ziemann turns out to be a calculatingly prosaic woman. “I don’t have an ideal role, I play whatever audiences like. Anybody who can’t do that these days shouldn’t go into film in the first place.”

But the real key to her success is that she not only plays “one of us,” she actually is one. Husband Rudolf Hambach characterizes her as a “sweet, dumb, young girl.” And in fact, despite making dozens of films, she has managed to remain normal and unspoiled.

An illuminated pool in the garden of their Wiesbaden villa, and a custom-built red and white 3.5 liter BMW convertible appear to be the only adjuncts that the affluent Hambach family feels it owes film star Sonja Ziemann.

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Her strong sense of family is well known in movie circles. We know that she does not sign any contracts without consulting her father and her husband first. Old Mr. Otto Ziemann, an accountant in Berlin, is also her manager, taking 30 percent of her salary on every film. Nor is her mother Alice Ziemann a stranger around the soundstages. She appears from time to time in the background, gives a benevolent endorsement of the shoot, and suddenly says, "That's enough, Sonja, you need to rest for a half-hour."

Sonja Ziemann's touching conservative virtues of clinging to family and looking up to her lawfully-wedded husband, as one should, go down brilliantly well in an era when pretty much all the values of the civil-minded social order are going to rot. Thus the Hambach-Ziemann family does its part to drum up the necessary publicity for that phenomenon of respectable domesticity.

For instance, a recent three-page photo series in issue 17 of the magazine *Film und Moderevue*. In the text—entitled "At Home with Sunny Ziemann"—the reader gets a glimpse of, among other things, the marital banter in the Hambach household. "... the tender negotiations: 'give us a kiss, Darling!' with which he (Rudi Hambach) renders a modest apology. But Sonnie vigorously shakes her dark curls and glares at him: 'Darling gives kisses, but not on command!' Whereupon there is amused applause among the group assembled for coffee, which increases when Mother Hambach brings in a fresh apple cake that Sonnie swears upon all that is sacred she baked herself."

Also—"Five weeks, three days, and seven hours after their betrothal, the two went to city hall and the church to tie the knot forever. 'It was simple, but moving,' says Sonnie, with a slight twitch of her pert nose."

As often as he can, Sonja's husband, who is the same age as she, abandons his Ruham stocking factory (men's socks and nylon stockings, produced at the rate of 84,000 pairs a month) to follow her to the studio, where he does not like to let her out of his sight.

"I could actually make a film myself at this point," says Rudi Hambach proudly. "After all, I have to take an interest in my wife's career. In a good marriage, you have to have something to talk about in the evenings. She takes an interest in my socks as well," and adds philosophically, "although somewhat more of one in the nylons."

Directors who work with Sonja Ziemann can also consider themselves safe from love affairs, intrigue, and hysterical breakdowns. "She has unbelievably good habits," says director Hans Wolff, "she knows how to find her best light, and how high to raise her eyebrows to please the audience." (Whereby Wolff still has not proven with his films that he himself knows what will please an audience.)

Without a hint of stage fright, Sonja Ziemann knows how to use her actorly capital—her green-grey, childlike eyes, her dark curls, and her rosebud mouth—so precisely that even after eight hours of concentrated shooting, the flutter of her eyelids and her whimpers are still timed to perfection.

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In her early studio days, it was Ziemann's unvarying good mood and helpful nature that drew in gaffers, grips, set decorators, soundmen, and editors, long before producers and directors were paying her any attention. Growing up in Eichwalde near Berlin, the Ziemann family were simple folk—father Otto worked overtime well into the night as a bookkeeper so his son Werner could study math at university, and Sonja could go to ballet school.

When she made her first stage appearance after graduating from Tatjana Gsovsky's class, she was just 18. Her father took her to the theater every evening and picked her up after the performances, a security measure that soon proved unnecessary. Sonja kept her male colleagues and admirers at a friendly distance, pursuing her ambition to dance her way from the corps into supporting roles.

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Her first forays into film were somewhat underwhelming. Even after a perfectly nice early success with *Die Jungfern vom Bischofsberg* (*The Maiden of Bischofsberg*), nobody predicted that the 18-year-old would ever get anywhere on the big screen. Still, Sonja uncomplainingly played one minor role after the next, was friendly to everyone, and soon became part of the Berlin studio's living inventory.

The end of the war destroyed any hopes for a larger role. She was unknown in the new film mecca of Hamburg. One day when she wasn't on the schedule for her first film, *My Wife's Friends*, she was sitting in her hotel, freezing, when she realized she would have to start all over again from scratch.

Even today, Sonja Ziemann respects that virtue, born of necessity, of widening her horizons from small beginnings, when agents fight to get her on the phone. "Hollywood? Nah! Why should I risk being put on ice for two years over there, when I have plenty to do right here?"

For the time being, she wants to explore the European studios, preferably a different one each year. And that's why she spends evenings in her Wiesbaden apartment intently listening to and repeating French sentences after the Linguaphone records. Her English is already polished enough so that she was able to sync her own voice in her first role for J. Arthur Rank.

She actually has Member of Parliament Captain Field to thank for the popularity she achieved over there in a remarkably short time. His inquiry to the British Minister of Labour as to why a German actress of all things should be granted a work permit for England triggered a press campaign that made Sonja Ziemann famous overnight.

Producer George Brown originally wanted to give the role of the Hungarian housemaid in his color film *Made in Heaven* to Margot Hielscher or Angelika Hauff. But then he saw *Die Frauen des Herrn S* (*Two Wives for one Husband*) and discovered the Hungarian touch in Sonja Ziemann. Her victory over actual Viennese-Hungarian Hauff created a furor in the industry.

At Pinewood Studios, Sonja Ziemann learned that the personal scope of action for a film star over there was largely limited to saying "how are you" with a well-heelled smile. Everything else was done by the publicity manager.

Although Sonja Ziemann is very open to the press (Rudolf Hambach: "when reporters come, she'll interrupt dinner"), German journalists do not really know what to make of her. After the initial questions, the interviews descend into platitudes. "She has a repertoire of ten standard answers," moans one journalist from Cologne, "but I wasn't familiar with the order of them, so we were talking at cross purposes."

Thus she was not joking when a reporter from Düsseldorf's *Film Illustrierte* asked her about her upcoming marriage to Rudolf Hambach and she requested that he "first write that I have gotten engaged, so the public has time to get used to the idea."

Or: "Which film role did you like the best?" Answer: "I liked all my film roles, otherwise I wouldn't have taken them."

[...]

As astute as a horse trader, Sonja Ziemann also knows what needs to be done when a winning streak takes a sudden dive. Following the big hit *The Heath is Green*, audiences were significantly cooler in response to her next film, *The Thief of Bagdad*, which Hamburg's film press dubbed "the most flawed film of the month," whereupon Sonja defected from leading man Rudolf Prack and surrounded herself with three younger acting partners at once in *I Can't Marry Them All*, to give her popularity a boost. But Sonja is also no stranger to the tactic of efficient film industry image management, choosing the right moment

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after a series of films to categorically turn down every offer in order to make yourself a rare commodity again. It's a tactic she's using right now. But then, her soon to be released film *Made in Heaven* should be good for at least six months of plaudits.

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