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## Jurek Becker: Wir sind auch nur ein Volk. Drehbücher der Folgen

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Becker, Jurek. *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk. Drehbücher der Folgen 1-3*. Frankfurt/M.: suhrkamp taschenbuch, 1995. 183 pp.

Becker, Jurek. *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk. Drehbücher der Folgen 4-6*. Frankfurt/M.: suhrkamp taschenbuch, 1995. 194 pp.

Becker, Jurek. *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk. Drehbücher der Folgen 7-9*. Frankfurt/M.: suhrkamp taschenbuch, 1995. 196 pp.

Suhrkamp taschenbuch has published in three volumes the screenplays for Jurek Becker's 1994 television series *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk* (Dir. Werner Masten). The ARD production is divided into nine episodes: *Die Serie der Einheit, Der erste Arbeitstag, Der Rest der Familie, Der empfindliche Bruder, Stasi für Anfänger, Der zweite Sekretär, Die Westparty, Streik und andere Scherereien, and Der kurze Abschied*.

Manfred Krug stars as Benno Grimm, an insolent, unemployed East Berliner, and Dietrich Mattausch as Anton Steinheim, a West Berlin author who has agreed to write a television series whose goal is "die Vorurteile zwischen Ost und West zu überwinden" (12). By producing the series the eleven board members (perhaps reflecting the eleven "old" federal states) of the state-run TV station have agreed "das gegenseitige Verständnis der Menschen im Osten und Westen zu fördern" (11). The main focus of the series is Steinheim's attempt to get to know a "real" East Berlin family in order to write as authentic a screenplay as possible.

*Wir sind auch nur ein Volk* is set in newly united Berlin. Much of the action takes place in the modest East Berlin apartment inhabited by Benno Grimm (Krug), his wife Trude, their son Theo, a variety of Theo's girlfriends, and Grimm's father-in-law Karl Blauhorn. The reader/viewer is also taken to Steinheim's bright, modern West Berlin apartment, to dark East Berlin bars, to a seedy nightclub run by former GDR cultural ministers, and to the boardroom of the TV station.

As part of his contract Anton Steinheim arranges with the TV station to pay a "typical" East Berlin family for letting him come into their home to observe them and their daily life. The authenticity of this "real" family is called into question by Grimm's opportunistic behavior. Since his greatest concern is the 1000 DM per week that he is being paid, Grimm attempts to familiarize Steinheim with the East German lifestyle he believes Steinheim expects. In *Stasi für Anfänger* Grimm goes so far as to hire an unemployed actor to play the role of a former *Stasi-Mitarbeiter* who is willing to talk with the author from the West.

Through the course of the nine episodes a unique relationship based on an attempt at mutual understanding

develops between Steinheim and Grimm. At the beginning of the series Benno Grimm is an eccentric curmudgeon who constantly plays with his Anker building blocks instead of seeking employment. Steinheim is a wealthy divorcé who lives with his second wife in a flashy West Berlin apartment. He reluctantly accepts the assignment to write his first screenplay, not because of his wife's great interest in the money he stands to make, but because of her rhetorical question implying that it would be more valuable to write a TV show for a few million people than a novel for a few thousand.

The reader can surmise that Becker offers this individual example of friendship as a model for the more far-reaching understanding necessary between the East and West. In order to achieve such understanding Becker, however, chooses stereotypical attitudes about the East and West which are traditionally not the way to forge community. Most of the East Berliners are unemployed except for Trude who, unlike other GDR teachers, has been allowed to retain her position. Westerners are portrayed as being ignorant of East German lifestyles. They do not know what happened on November 9th; they interpret a "Wartburgenmeldung" as being a wish to visit the fortification made famous by Luther and Walther von der Vogelweide instead of an application for an automobile.

Perhaps more helpful in achieving compassion and understanding is the way that the intricacies of East German life are mentioned and explained. Grimm tells Steinheim how he belonged to the party so that his children would be allowed to study (and so that he could receive a good vacation spot). Grimm's sister explains how the choicest vacations were awarded to those who belonged to the Party. Trude explains to her "republikflüchtiger" brother about the hardships she endured as a result of his escape to the West.

In addition to the motif of play-within-a-play, or series-within-a-series, the strength of this series lies in the character portrayals of Grimm and Steinheim. Each learns from the other. In the last episode Grimm sells his Anker building blocks and dons a tie in order to interview for a job and Steinheim takes Grimm's advice to fight for the series instead of allowing the station to stop production.

Unfortunately the series has few other strengths. Becker's attempts to use humor to convey life in the GDR are mainly unsuccessful. Grimm's relationship with his father-in-law, who is always at home snoozing in front of the television unless he has been sent out to buy groceries, should provide a certain degree of comic relief, but the dialogue between them is often petty and lacks any real provocation. The plot is shallow and limps along as slowly as the Trabi Steinheim observes pattering down an East Berlin street. Lucie Steinheim, Anton's wife, epitomizes the spoiled woman from the West. She quits her job because she feels she is not being paid enough. Steinheim, with growing

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sympathy for the “einfach normale Leute, [deren] Situation alles andere als normal [ist]” (vol. 2, 15), chastises her for doing so: “Diese Leute suchen sich dumm and dämlich nach Arbeit, die kennen überhaupt kein anderes Thema, und du wirfst sie einfach weg!” (vol. 2, 154). Slapstick events, such as individuals being caught peeping through keyholes or a mother-in-law being caught picking food out of her teeth, probably work better on a television screen, but are difficult to enjoy in print.

After the success of *Liebling Kreuzberg*, one hopes for the same in *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk*. However, the periodic insightfulness of some of the characters and the friendship that develops between Grimm and Steinheim are overshadowed by lethargic characters, a humdrum plot, and irksome dialogue. One cannot help but wonder, especially in light of the series’ poor ratings in Germany, if the board director’s prophesy in the first episode that the series would be a “Flop” (21) has come true.

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**Berbig, Roland, and Erdmut Wizisla, eds. “Wo ich her bin...” Uwe Johnson in der DDR. Berlin: editionKONTEXT, 1993.**

**Gansel, Carsten, Bernd Neumann, and Nicolas Riedel, eds. Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum. Beiträge zum Werkverständnis und Materialien zur Rezeptionsschichte, vol. 3. Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1993.**

Since German unification and the ensuing re-evaluation of German post-war literature, Uwe Johnson has emerged as a towering figure, as “*der DDR-Autor*” (Günter Grass) against whom others are bound to fail to measure up. Besides several monographs and countless articles, this new post-GDR interest has spawned regional and international conferences, various anthologies, a series of *Schriften des Uwe Johnson Archivs*, a *Johnson-Jahrbuch* and, six volumes thus far of the *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum*. Recognized as a perceptive critic of both Germanys, a new Uwe Johnson has been created, namely the one who knew too much to be accepted in his own time.

The reception of Johnson’s work concentrates primarily on two (interrelated) topics: the development of his modernist writing style and his relationship to the GDR. Berbig and Wizisla dedicate their compilation mainly to the latter field of research and produce—quite intentionally—a mixed bag for the general as well as the more specialized audience. Despite their title, the volume is not comprehensive on the subject of Johnson in the GDR but, rather, is meant to provide pieces of a future mosaic. The implication of “*Wo ich her bin*” needs also to be qualified: except for a short

and not-too-informative letter by one of Johnson’s schoolmates, there is little material about Johnson’s childhood and youth in the GDR. His life before he studied at the University of Leipzig remains largely uninvestigated. The other and at least equally important gap derives from Berbig and Wizisla’s decision to omit the topic of Johnson and the *Stasi* until more source material has surfaced.

These limitations notwithstanding, Berbig and Wizisla make good on their promise “den Menschen [Uwe Johnson] wieder kenntlich zu machen” (12). They conduct an insightful interview with Günter Grass, reprint Günter Kunert’s reminiscences of his tragicomic encounters with Johnson, and publish for the first time letters that Johnson exchanged with Johannes Bobrowski, Lotte Köhler, Christiane Jansen, and Helen Wolff. Several of those letters do not warrant publication on their own merit but, read together, this chorus of divergent and sometimes marginal voices renders a complex portrayal of a generous, inventive, but suspicious writer who suffered intensely from the loss of his *Heimat* Mecklenburg and who harmed his life and that of others with his deep-set fear of persecution by the *Stasi*. A whole cluster of texts surrounding Johnson’s falling out with one of his best friends, Manfred Bierwisch, underscores this impression. A German translation of Johnson’s article written for a *Festschrift* honoring Bierwisch is followed by a speech Bierwisch delivered after Johnson’s death to explain why, out of fear of repression in the GDR, he rejected this text for his *Festschrift*. Eberhard Fahlke then recounts Johnson’s furious and bitter reaction to this rejection and the traces it left in *Jahrestage*.

In another speech included in this collection, Bierwisch provides an account of the importance of Leipzig for Johnson, an account that Bernd Neumann expands in his article “Leipzig, oder: die Schule der Modernität.” Neumann portrays the Leipziger atmosphere in which Johnson and his student friends existed as saturated with readings in and discussions about Benjamin, Sartre, and Faulkner. Because of Johnson’s familiarity with Western literary discussions, Neumann interprets Johnson’s writing style as a truly modernist one. Greg Bond, however, argues in his article implicitly against Neumann when he suggests that the new standards Johnson set with *Mutmassungen über Jakob* “müssen nicht das Produkt von Johnsons Modernismus gewesen sein” (236). Instead of continuing to narrow the focus solely to Western influences—thus following a cold war logic that tried to claim Johnson’s work for the West by distancing it from the East-German literature and its theory—Greg Bond argues that Johnson’s response to Lukacs’s theory was far more complex than his negative published comments would suggest.

Further insight into Johnson’s relationship to the GDR is provided by the first-ever publication of a radio essay in which Johnson presents his edition of Brecht’s *Me-ti* book. An accompanying article by Erdmut Wizisla investigates not