



In 1999, high school students Andrea Oberheiden and Svenja Lau had the chance to interview German actor Ulrich Mühe ("The Lives of Others"). Andrea had been thrilled by his performance in the DEFA production "Der kleine Herr Friedemann", based on the novel by Thomas Mann. Using dramatic acting devices, this film was an outstanding film production during the last year of the German Democratic Republic.

*I remember very well the moment when we were sitting in that Berlin restaurant waiting for Ulrich Mühe. I couldn't believe he actually said 'yes' to our interview proposal. When he rushed in, he apologized for being a little late (he had craftsmen in his apartment). I idolized this actor so much! He was very successful and well-known but humble and very much down-to-earth. I'm happy that he later became a worldwide recognized actor with 'The Lives of Others' that won an Academy Award in 2007. It's a shame that he couldn't enjoy his success any longer since he died only a couple of months later. His talent is certainly missed. And he was a wonderful human being, too.*

AO: *When and why did you decide to become an actor?*

UM: I already had an unconscious feeling of it during elementary school. I always wanted to be the prince. Later on it developed to an exclusive feeling. But I always wanted to do this right. I do understand the needs of unprofessional acting groups, but that would have been nothing for me. I think, you have to do this professionally. But I never dared to tell anyone because it was such a different wish in my environment.

AO: *Did your parents later support your wish?*

UM: Yes. I secretly applied at a Drama School, and when they accepted me, I told them. It was irritating for them at first but they encouraged me.

AO: *How do you choose your roles?*

UM: The scripts are sent to me. I work as a freelance artist, so I'm not belonging to a theater ensemble anymore. Then I read the script and inform myself about the director and all the others who will take part in that project. When I'm convinced, I accept. The financial background is not unimportant as well. When a project sounds great but there's not much financial subsidies, you know that it's going to be bad. Then I mostly turn it down. There's a bunch of criteria, but the most important are script and director.

AO: *What are your favorite roles?*

UM: Here I think of theater. It's both the good and the bad characters, because both of them reach their limits within a story or a play. That's very interesting to play.

AO: *What kind of roles/characters didn't you like to play in the past?*

UM: Hamlet and Peer Gynt. They are so far away from our reality. We had created connections between the play and the political situation in Germany around 1989 during Heiner Müller's production of "Hamletmaschine", but during rehearsal I often thought 'Why am I supposed to be interested in Hamlet's problems when I can hear the people outside the theater yelling 'We are the people?'' And Peer Gynt, I have no idea how this should be staged in order to make him relevant for today. I wouldn't

even know how to play this character in order to do that.

AO: *What characters would you like to play?*

UM: Here I think of the theater again. Macbeth and Faust would interest me. Because of the great lines. Kleist also has a great, difficult language. That's very tempting. When it comes to Shakespeare, it's all about power and politics. It's always the question: 'Who makes the next step first?' I find that very interesting. That's drama. Two people want something from each other, and then certain problems occur. That allows you to deal with all kinds of human questions about morale, friendship, etc. When do you really know a person? You never do, that's interesting.

AO: *You recently started to play in a TV series (Der letzte Zeuge). Was that tempting?*

UM: Not really. I never wanted to be an actor who is actually present in people's livingrooms and who kind of belongs to the family. But it was a possibility to get some attention from young directors. I was also involved in cast and direction. Gregor Edelmann is an excellent writer, and Bernhard Stephan is an excellent director. I'm also working with many actors I have known for years. I need a nice atmosphere at the set, otherwise I'm not comfortable and can't work properly. Normally I would say that the character of Kolmaar, who is actually an easy guy, is some sort of boring when it comes to acting.

AO: *Will the series be continued?*

UM: Yes. In fall of 2000 we will shoot the next season, and then we'll see. If everything remains how it is, and if everybody wants to continue, we will.

AO: *How did you get from stage to TV?*

UM: Well, I didn't plan it. I consider acting a political art. In the GDR, that had to be staged. You had much more freedom on stage than anywhere else. And you had direct contact to the audience who hung on the actors' lips. Every single word was so important. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, I experienced a crisis. The old audience was

gone, now there were people who wanted to be entertained. I had nothing to say to them. Then I went to Salzburg, Austria and did other things. Not so much theater anymore. I do a lot of audio books at the moment, what I also like. I recorded Heiner Müller the last three days. It's a project I'll probably bring onto the stage [Einen Dichter denken – LAUT, Patmos Verlag, 2000].

AO: *We have seen you in Thomas Mann's "Der kleine Herr Friedemann" first, at school. How was it to play that character?*

UM: Difficult. It was an extreme guy. We tried to work with dramatic devices. I liked that a lot. Extreme guys are always interesting.

AO: *You once said you liked director Frank Beyer with whom you worked for "Nikolaikirche" together. What qualities do you think should a director have?*

UM: I need confidence. I don't like to work with dictators who you can also find. As an actor, you invent something with the director. I prefer equal working conditions. Frank Beyer was just like that. He granted you space.

AO: *Your wife is an actress, too. Do you criticize each other?*

UM: Yes. It's honest but sensitive. It's necessary in our business because it produces so much superficiality.

AO: *Do you have favorite directors?*

UM: When it comes to film, I immediately think of Michael Haneke.

AO: *What do you like to watch on TV?*

UM: The news at 10.30 pm.

AO: *Can you think of fellow actors you like?*

UM: When it comes to film, I like Heino Ferch and Ben Becker. On stage I like myself (laughs).

AO: *What character you played is mostly similar to yourself?*

UM: I don't think about this at all. I think, others would be able to perceive that more than me, family or friends. I do put something personal in a character, my body, my experiences, etc. But I never think about

the question whether or not the characters are similar to me.

AO: *What kind of roles are more difficult to play, comic or tragic ones?*

UM: I think the comic ones.

AO: *What would you recommend someone who intends to become an actor?*

UM: He (or she) should only become it when it's an exclusive intention. When he (or she) can't think of anything else. If he doesn't know whether to become a baker or an actor, he should become a baker.

SL: *Are you a perfectionist?*

UM: Yes. During my 15 years of constant theater work, I learned how my own body functions. You can lead this to perfection. But being too perfect is not good because life isn't perfect. The GDR wanted to be a perfect state. It believed that the world is explainable, but it's not, that's a sophism.

SL: *What kind of personality would you like to meet?*

UM: Bill Clinton. But only in a moment when he is able to let loose, not as a politician.

SL: *What do you think is the sense of life?*

UM: I'm very comfortable with that question now. I wasn't when I was younger. Self-acceptance is important, and passing on. Knowledge grows but human knowledge often gets lost. My ideal is to provide my children with an attitude.

AO: *Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Mühe!*

UM: My pleasure.