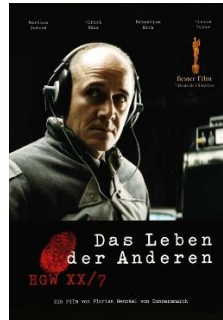




Ulrich Mühe and 1989: Beyond *The Lives of Others*



In 2006, the actor Ulrich Mühe became internationally renowned as a result of his role in the film *The Lives of Others*.

Mühe's own experiences in the GDR (German Democratic Republic) were very different to those of his character in the film though. As an actor in the GDR he starred mainly in theatre productions and worked together with some of the most famous and critical artists of the day, such as the dramatist and theatre director Heiner Müller. Rather than being a Stasi Officer, Mühe himself was under Stasi surveillance. In 1989 Mühe also played an important role in a large demonstration which took place on Berlin's Alexanderplatz and which was mainly organised by actors and theatre practitioners. A video-recording of this demonstration can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FhaBmT6zBI>. The same year other actors declared: "We are stepping out of our roles. The situation in our country compels us to" (Patterson, p. 263). Five days after the demonstration at Alexanderplatz, the Berlin Wall fell.

Here you can see a somewhat younger Ulrich Mühe at the demonstration. He is pictured here together with Johanna Scholl, the granddaughter of the director and author Bertolt Brecht.

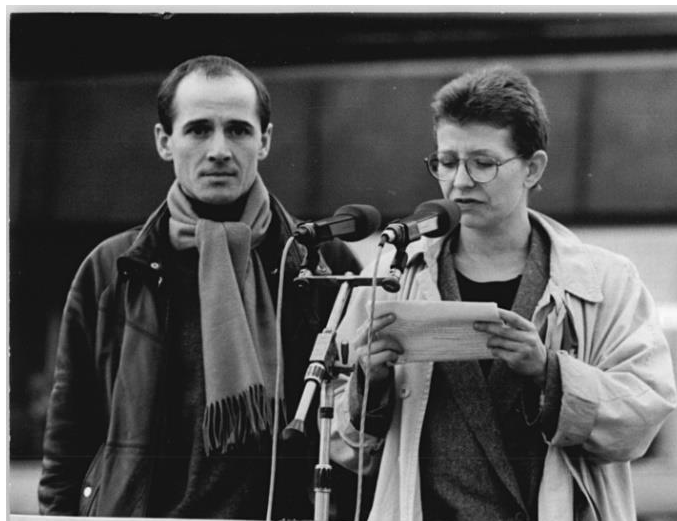


Image: Ulrich Mühe and Johanna Scholl at Alexanderplatz Demonstration, East Berlin, 4 November 1989.
Source: BArch Bild 183-1989-1104-034 / Hubert Link.



Discussion Questions for the Text and Image

What does 'stepping out of a role' mean in this context?

In the GDR, actors such as Ulrich Mühe were celebrities. What is the role of the celebrity today? Should famous figures take part in politics? Can you think of examples of contemporary stars who 'step out of their roles'?

Look at the photograph again. How might Ulrich Mühe and Johanna Schall feel at this moment in time? Do you think that taking part in this type of demonstration was dangerous?

Have you ever been on a demonstration? How was the atmosphere? Was it difficult to decide to take part?

Activities

- 1) Find information about Ulrich Mühe online and write a short biography of the actor.
- 2) Watch a few minutes of the YouTube-Video of the demonstration (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FhaBmT6zBI>). Imagine that you were at the demonstration on the 4th November 1989. Write a diary entry for the day. How was the atmosphere? What type of people gave a speech? Why did you go to the demonstration? Were you scared about anything? What are your hopes for the future following this demonstration?
- 3) Imagine that you are Ulrich Mühe. Ten years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and you receive a phone call from your agent. He offers you a role as a Stasi Officer in a film. How do you feel? Do you want to play this role? Write a dialogue in which Mühe and his agent discuss the pros and cons of the offer.
- 4) Find information on the website whoiswatchingwho.org and elsewhere online concerning the final days of the GDR. What were the key events in October and November 1989 which preceded the fall of the Berlin Wall? Create a timeline with facts and images.



Citizenship

Ulrich Mühe was one of many theatre practitioners who protested against the East German government throughout 1989.

This text, for example, was written by the ensemble of the Staatsschauspiel Dreden, an important theatre in the GDR, and was read aloud to the theatre's audience every evening from the 4th October 1989:

"We are stepping out of our roles. The situation in our country forces us to do so. A country that cannot hold on to its young people is endangering its future. The leadership of a state that does not speak to its people has no credibility. [...] We have invested our work in this country. We will not let our country be destroyed.

We are using this platform to make the following demands:

- 1. We have a right to information*
- 2. We have a right to dialogue*
- 3. We have a right to independent thought and creativity*
- 4. We have a right to pluralistic thinking*
- 5. We have a right to disagree*
- 6. We have a right to freedom of travel*
- 7. We have a right to examine the leadership of the state*
- 8. We have a right to think new thoughts*
- 9. We have a right to intervene.*

We are using this platform to declare our duty:

- 1. We have the duty to demand that lies and rose-tinted reports disappear from our media*
- 2. We have the duty to insist on a dialogue between the people and the leadership of the party and state.*
- 3. We have the duty to demand that both we and the state apparatus conduct this dialogue without violence*
- 4. We have the duty to define the word socialism in such a way that it once again becomes an acceptable ideal for our people*
- 5. We have a duty to demand of the leadership of our state and party that they work to regain the trust of the population."*

Translation: Laura Bradley.

1) Imagine that you are a citizen of the GDR. Which rights would be most important to you? Why?

2) You are a citizen of a modern European state. Which rights would you demand today? Are there also duties which relate to these?