

Lang's Dragon

by Jürgen Fauth

While Ufa geared up for the biggest production in its history, the situation in Germany was deteriorating. In June of twenty-four, a gang of assassins shot the foreign minister on his way to the chancellery, and, just to be sure, lobbed a hand grenade into his car. All confidence in the new republic went to hell, and the mark began falling against the dollar. The government ordered the newspaper presses to print more money in ever higher denominations. Workers got paid at noon and ran out to spend their wages before they became worthless.

I never went hungry. I was Steffen's friend, and Steffen knew people with dollars. His latest benefactor was Ray, an American art dealer who hosted a never-ending party at the Belvedere, a fantasy castle on the western shore of the Grosse Wannsee, looking out across the sailboat-studded bay to the Lido. Ray proclaimed that he'd fallen madly in love with Steffen; there was always enough to eat and drink and snort.

Steffen had a new prosthesis handcrafted for me by the best manufacturer in Berlin, with real hair and a flexible ankle. My limp practically disappeared. He took me shopping for smart clothes, and when I began to dabble in writing, he bought me notebooks, leather-bound beauties from Italy.

When the French invaded the Ruhr, prices went up further. When winter came, my landlords, like everybody else, began heating the building with buckets of last week's money. Germany's undernourished children died of tuberculosis and war veterans dragged themselves through the streets begging for a bite of stale bread or a ladle of cabbage soup. You could have an entire *Kneipe* dancing naked for a few coins. A billion marks bought you a cigarette. People were sniping from the rooftops out of hunger and desperation. Demand for drugs was on the rise, and there was more pussy to be had than ever. Can you blame me for helping to move a little bit of both? A few deliveries here and there, the exchange of a

package at Zoo station, picking up a few *Tauenziengirls* and boys to join us out at the Belvedere -- jawoll, I did my share of drug dealing and whore mongering, but I had dollars, and if you had dollars, you could live like a king.

In Neubabelsberg, the studio was stockpiling food for cast and crew. Inside the Grosse Halle, there was only one law, one rule, one thing that had to be done: whatever Fritz Lang wanted.

Fritz Lang. Even before I ever met the miserable son of a bitch, with his monocle and superior airs, I hated him. Hot off *Dr. Mabuse*, Lang had been all over the papers with his marriage to his screenwriter bride, Thea von Harbou. In bad times, a little bit of celebrity goes a long way, and the public was eating up every idiotic rumor about the master and his muse. I had heard things, too: that the suicide of Lang's first wife had been anything but, that he couldn't climax unless he had the taste of blood on his tongue. On set, Fritz and Thea were aloof and unapproachable, like King Gunter and his Queen in the German legend we were filming, a turgid saga without hope or love.

I detested Lang's histrionic style, the ghastly overacting and oppressive angles. In person, he was an insufferable asshole. He bellowed orders and treated people like puppets. He made his actors repeat scenes for twenty, thirty, fifty takes and directed by assigning numbers to gestures and facial expressions. Then he'd count them off while the camera rolled: one, two, turn your head, smile, six, seven, faint, nine, ten. He had nothing but disdain for actors; he was a bully and a bore. And yet I watched him closely, learning as much as I could.

On the day Lang shot Siegfried's arrival in Worms, I was coming down from a three-day bender, still hung over, having trouble standing up straight in the heavy knight's chain mail and helmet. Holding the shield before me, I stood shaking where Lang had placed us on a tiled floor, lined up symmetrically. By the time we

redid the scene for the twentieth time, I was itchy in the ill-fitting costume and had loosened the strap that held my leg in place. Just when Kriemhild was descending the staircase again, I could feel my leg slip until, with a slight thud, it fell flat on the ground before me.

"Cut!" Lang barked through his bullhorn, his monocle dropping out of his eye. I had ruined the take. "We are hiring cripples now? All I needed was somebody to *stand* there, and you get me a guy who's missing a leg? The warriors of Worms don't suffer from runaway limbs!"

Out of the darkness behind him, Thea von Harbou appeared, cradling her lap dog like a baby. She was always on set, wearing the same green outfit every day. She knitted sweaters and dictated novels to an assistant.

"Fritz," she said, putting a calming hand on his arm. I had witnessed this before, Thea smoothing over Lang's rough edges. "Everyone's good for something."

With my leg in my hand, I went blank. She was buying me time, giving me an opportunity to speak up for myself, but I didn't know what to say. What *was* I good for? The only job I wanted was Lang's, but if I'd told him that, he would have pulled out his Browning and shot me on the spot. My career would have been over before it started if Gerhard Gruber, the set designer, hadn't explained that he was having trouble setting up Siegfried's epic battle with the dragon. He had constructed a huge beast, a monster of twenty-five meters that was operated from the inside, but the man who worked the tail complained there wasn't enough room for his legs.

Lang lifted the eyebrow that didn't hold the monocle and grinned.

Siegfried's fight with the Lindwurm was a marvel. The contraption was heavy as a tank and took ten men to move. Crammed inside, I had to kick my stump, which was attached to a lever that manipulated the dragon's crocodile tail. Us men inside the beast moved the creature's eyes, mouth, and legs, we made it breathe fire and smoke, we pumped the blood that gushed from the

wound where Paul Richter, the foppish son-of-a-bitch who played Siegfried, pierced the rubber skin with his sword. We damn near suffocated on the fumes. To this day, it is the most grueling work I have done in my life. The only way to bear these wretched, endless days was to stay perpetually high, and every morning, I doled out a generous allotment of cocaine for every man inside the monster.

Word got out. One person introduced me to three others, and soon I was providing Zement to the entire production. The cinematographer, the camera and lighting crews, and the costume designers bought huge quantities for their departments, and Steffen started coming to the set to make deliveries. I became the best friend of crew and cast. Thea von Harbou sniffed lines and dictated with such speed that white foam formed in the corners of her mouth. She was full of ideas, she was efficient. Thea was the one with talent.

As the shooting of the dragon scene dragged on, a peculiar bond formed between the ten of us who made the Lindwurm come alive from within. We were the bones of the beast, it was our blood that circulated through its veins, it was our breath that fanned the flames from its nostrils. We made the creature move and fight. Through the alchemy of Kino, we became the dragon. The dragon taught me that a film crew could come together like the craftsmen who built cathedrals in the middle ages. Inside the dragon, we all understood that.

But Fritz Lang couldn't marshal the powers he controlled. In my version of *Die Nibelungen*, the dragon would have killed that Arschloch Siegfried and eaten his entrails, but Lang was too stupid and too proud of his silly script to see. He didn't know how to let an idea flourish. Under his rigid dictatorship, everything turned into a grotesque, lifeless pageant. Can you understand why the dragon's preordained fate did not sit well with us? How unfair to stage this tremendous battle and not give the creature a chance! Paul Richter, prancing about in his sexy loincloth -- it was a lie the monster we had created could not abide. There wasn't a word spoken, but somehow, we reached a decision nonetheless.

Lang's counting method should have left no room for mistakes -- one, two, the dragon's eyes roll while Siegfried jumps left, three, a blast of fire as he strikes, four, five, a whip of the tail, and six, he impales the Lindwurm on his sword. It was during what seemed like the hundredth take of Siegfried jumping from rock to rock and striking at our vulcanized rubber skin that I flung the tail into Richter's leg, a move he didn't expect till four or five count more, and delivered a mighty whack that sent him flying backwards into the pond.

Inside the dragon, all ten of us cheered!

Curses from Lang, laughter from the crew.

A Dokter, so old he must have served under Bismarck, came along swiftly. Richter had suffered a contusion and would be unable to work for a week. The shoot was now delayed, the production would lose money, and Lang was furious. Gruber, who had saved me the last time Lang wanted my head, fingered me as the one responsible. But Thea was back at Lang's side, reminding him that I provided the Zement. I swear I saw him reach for the gun he kept inside his vest. But in the throes of hyperinflation, I was the one who kept the production going, and he knew it. Even Paul Richter, that oaf, couldn't hold a grudge when we sent Ute the Mole Girl to visit him in his hospital room. Siegfried recovered quickly.

The dragon beat Siegfried, but that's not what *Die Nibelungen* showed. I had learned something crucial: Lang's movies didn't allow room for the incidental; he imposed his will on every element on the set. He was a liar and a fraud. But I had felt the unleashed power of the dragon, the power of cinema to create something true and beautiful and dangerous, and I had to have more.

