

SEBASTIAN KOCH

by Silvia Bombardini / photography Bryan Adams



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Silvia Bombardini: Let's start from the very beginning: you were born in Karlsruhe, West Germany, a few months at best after the Berlin Wall was built. If you were to describe, say, to someone like me — born only a few months after the fall of the Wall — what life was like back there and then, where would you start? How did the GDR, so close and yet so far away, influence your childhood or teenage years, perhaps your career path, and eventually your decision to move to Berlin?

Sebastian Koch: I grew up near Stuttgart in the south of Germany. As I had no relatives in the Eastern part of Germany I had no contact at all — the GDR was behind the Iron Curtain. Right about the time when the Wall fell, I signed a contract with the Schiller Theater in Berlin. I was suddenly thrown into the center of this changing city. In the beginning it was a nightmare — sleepy Berlin suddenly pretending to be a world capital. The whole place was a huge construction site, immense investments were made to rebuild and reunite the city. At that time I completely retreated into my work. I was living on my own little island — the theater — and that was it. At the theater more than half of the actors came from the GDR and I heard their stories, the betrayals and disappointments they had encountered and suddenly I felt very close to understanding some aspects of life in former East Germany. In my opinion, the first time when Berlin really became international was the wrapping of the Reichstag by Christo and his wife. I will never forget the wonderful atmosphere of those two weeks. That was in 1995 — I was thinking then that if Berlin could be like that for the next twenty years it would be wonderful. Now, twenty years later Berlin has changed into this international, easy, tolerant, and creative city. Artists from all over the world started arriving in Berlin because it was cheap and cheerful and created a very special atmosphere. That's why I decided to make Berlin my permanent home.

SB: Like you said, you were playing in theaters back then: distinguished Weimar classics, Goethe as well as Schiller of course. What kind of audience sat in the parterres of this newly reunified Berlin, what made you switch to the screen, and what do you miss the most about the stage?

SK: Unified Berlin all of a sudden had ten very well known and famous theaters, so the competition was enormous. The reason why I went into theater

and kept at it for almost ten years was because of this family-like atmosphere, the fact that you could discover and invent under these protected and close circumstances. During the '80s there were great directors like Zadek, Peymann, Stein, Nolte, and they were all constantly surrounded by these groups of wonderful actors. So the results were absolutely fantastic. During the '90s the shows became loud and colorful. Making a big noise was suddenly more important than the content, the emotions, and the message. Moreover, the directors from the East were all at once free to say what they wanted to say. In the former East they had to hide their messages, because they were controlled by the state apparatus, which set free a tremendous potential of creativity, really like Molière in front of the French court. The moment this threat disappeared they seemed a bit lost. In 1993 I left the Schiller Theater for these reasons and started filming. Nowadays it's quite rare that I return to the stage. As a substitute I do book readings with classical or jazz music so that I don't lose contact with the audience. So I perform programs like Schnitzler's *Dream Story* with a jazz quartet, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* with a classical orchestra, or Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler* with a bandoneon.

SB: A great many of your most acclaimed small-screen roles, those which I guess were originally thought to mostly target a German audience, show a singular, quasi-cathartic preoccupation with historical figures of more recent and sensitive times — from Albert Speer to Claus von Stauffenberg. Personalities we read about in our textbooks, but often abstain from trying to grasp: what is the appeal of these characters for you as an actor, and why do you believe it's important for us all to see more of them?

SK: I was always very interested in talking about Nazi Germany and its consequences. As an adolescent I felt strongly that this horrible period was still in the country's system because so many Nazis were part of the reconstruction of postwar West Germany. Naturally they didn't want to speak about what they had done and what they had believed in. Their dream had become a nightmare and they were part of it, so it was hard for them to admit that they dreamt the wrong dream, and even harder to admit that they didn't have the courage to fight against it. That's why the '68 movement was so popular with the younger generation. They threw Molotov

cocktails to break the paralyzing silence. I felt that playing historical figures, often Nazi figures, could help Germans to come to terms with their own history.

SB: "If ever there were a Sisyphean image of hopelessly heaving weight upward, it is the German with his burden of history. Damned if you do; damned if you don't," writes author Tom L. Freudenheim in his paper "Confronting Memories and Museums." In movies, National Socialism is still a wary and delicate subject, that nonetheless German cinema could never in good conscience elude — film is, after all, the very substance of memory. But besides remembering, what service exactly can cinema provide history, in your opinion?

SK: I think cinema can help a lot to overcome prejudices. Bringing issues like racism, women's rights, injustice, and suppression of human rights onto the screen can educate viewers and thus create a more tolerant and critical society. Besides that, cinema incorporates all forms of art and the screen is like a magnifying glass.

SB: As playwright Georg Dreyman in Henkel von Donnermarck's Oscar-winning Stasi-drama *The Lives of Others*, it was the sheet music for "Sonate vom Guten Menschen" that meant a pivotal change for your character and the story. Have you ever experienced such an instance in real life, when a work of art, be it music, film, or a play perhaps, has inspired you so radically as to shift your perspective?

SK: There is no doubt that art in any form has influenced many people since the very beginning of humankind. I became an actor because of a theater ensemble in Stuttgart. The director was Claus Peymann and he gathered a wonderful group of actors around him and thrilled the whole city with his political, poetic, and humorous theater. As a youngster I was so intrigued by this artistic group that I wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to live in an artificial world with artificial light and tell important stories, political or emotional. The theater is a self-sufficient place, a protected playground with given limits. And there is a recording of Chopin's nocturnes played by Rubinstein in the '70s that I heard for the first time when I was twenty-one. It's one of the most beautiful piano recordings I ever heard. A defining moment for me, and it accompanies me wherever I go. I feel totally at home when I listen to it.

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SB: A modernized Berlin, one that licked its wounds and opened up to Hollywood productions and more current issues such as, say, illegal immigration, is instead the setting of *Unknown*. And yet Collet-Serra opted for it since the city, in his words, still “suits the film’s themes of amnesia and lost identity.” The search for one’s own identity has indeed been a recurrent trait of many of your roles; is it perhaps a feature of all Berliners? Or, has the capital come to influence the roles that you accept, in relation to those personalities you’ve grown to identify with the most?

SK: When I arrived in Berlin in 1990, I was still searching for my own identity and was confronted with a city trying to rediscover its soul. Berlin is still in that process and I think it will be very interesting to see how the city will continue to develop in the next few years. Historically, Berlin always modeled itself on other cities — Paris, London, Vienna — and always struggled to find its own identity. Berlin only became the capital of a united Germany in 1871 and has gone through unbelievable changes ever since. It was the capital of the German Empire, and after the defeat in the First World War it became the capital of the new and fragile Weimar Republic and the crazy and creative Roaring Twenties. Then came the Nazis and the madness of fascistic ideas, politically, culturally, and architecturally, followed by total destruction and division. Then came forty-five years of Soviet-style city planning in the East and capitalistic reconstruction in the West. Berlin has seen it all and the search for a new and permanent identity is the big challenge for my own and the future generations. It’s truly fascinating.

SB: Yet you mentioned that it was a relief somehow to be a German actor in *Unknown* and not be playing the Nazi or the bad guy — but then not much later you were a perfect villain in the fifth movie of the *Die Hard* franchise. Although, admittedly, you were much more typically Russian there. Komarov — what can you tell me about him, and what was the most memorable scene in the film for you?

SK: It was quite intriguing for me to be cast as the villain in one of the *Die Hards*... I accepted immediately because originally it was actually quite a good script. Komarov’s character was based on Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former Yukos CEO. While shooting in Budapest the FOX producers learned that they would lose the “Russian market” if they stuck with the script, so every day they came up with new suggestions to play down the character, which drove me almost crazy, considering that I had to learn my Russian lines phonetically because I don’t speak

Russian at all. It seems to be very difficult for the people involved in these Hollywood franchise movies to take a permanent stance, and it seems that everyone fears the consequences of their decisions — no one seems to have the courage to take responsibility. So the sentence I heard most often in those five months of shooting was: “Sebastian, within the next 24 hours we’re gonna make a decision.” So, ultimately I found the making of the movie more defining than the film itself.

SB: A *Good Day to Die Hard* was indeed shot in Budapest, and you’ve said that the city reminds you a bit of Berlin in the ‘90s. From an outsider’s point of view, what Berlin experienced at the time was unprecedented growth: while other metropolises dilate patiently above their suburbs, Berlin was split open and in its center, framed by a constellation of ruins, a newly emptied space unfolded on hypersensitive soil. But what was this like, for those who lived the change? How was the mood, what were the hopes and doubts, the responses of its people?

SK: The reunification of Germany in 1990 was an historical chance for Berlin to redefine itself. Everything happened at immense speed and this speed prevented a slow and harmonious coming together. The former GDR lost its sovereignty practically overnight and its Western sibling took over but it overstretched the imagination and patience of its people. Years of division had created two very different systems and people with opposing attitudes and prejudices. The average West German probably had more in common with an Italian than with a citizen from the former GDR. Subsequently, the moods swung from euphoria to total desperation. Do we belong together or not? It took us years to overcome these problems and in many ways they are still there today. It all went far too quickly.

SB: I’ve also heard that you’ve written a script where Budapest plays the part of 1930s Berlin, is that right? Can you give us a little clue as to what we will see, and do you have any plan for production yet? Is this something you’d be interested in pursuing, a sideline behind the camera, or will this be more of a one-off story?

SK: I’ve optioned the rights for the novel *The Einstein Girl* by Philip Sington. It’s a wonderful story about lost identity, the first steps of psychoanalysis, Einstein’s theory of relativity, and a highly sensitive, poetic love story set in ‘30s Berlin. The script is in development... too early yet to talk about it. In general I can definitely imagine a future as a writer or producer. So

much mass-market trash is produced nowadays. It’s quite tough to get “real cinema” financed, however, because it’s only about profit.

SB: What else are you currently working on, or what does your schedule look like for the months ahead? Is there anything you’re especially looking forward to, dreaming of, or hoping for?

SK: I just came back from Paros in Greece, where I spent my holiday — finally a month without doing anything — just relaxing, reading, enjoying the sun, the sea, and the wonderful Greek people. Now that I’m back I’m starting to prepare for a French movie with Daniel Auteuil — a justice thriller based on a true story. It’s been ten years since I filmed in France and I’m very much looking forward to it. After this I’ll be part of a Steven Spielberg agent thriller set in Berlin and Poland.



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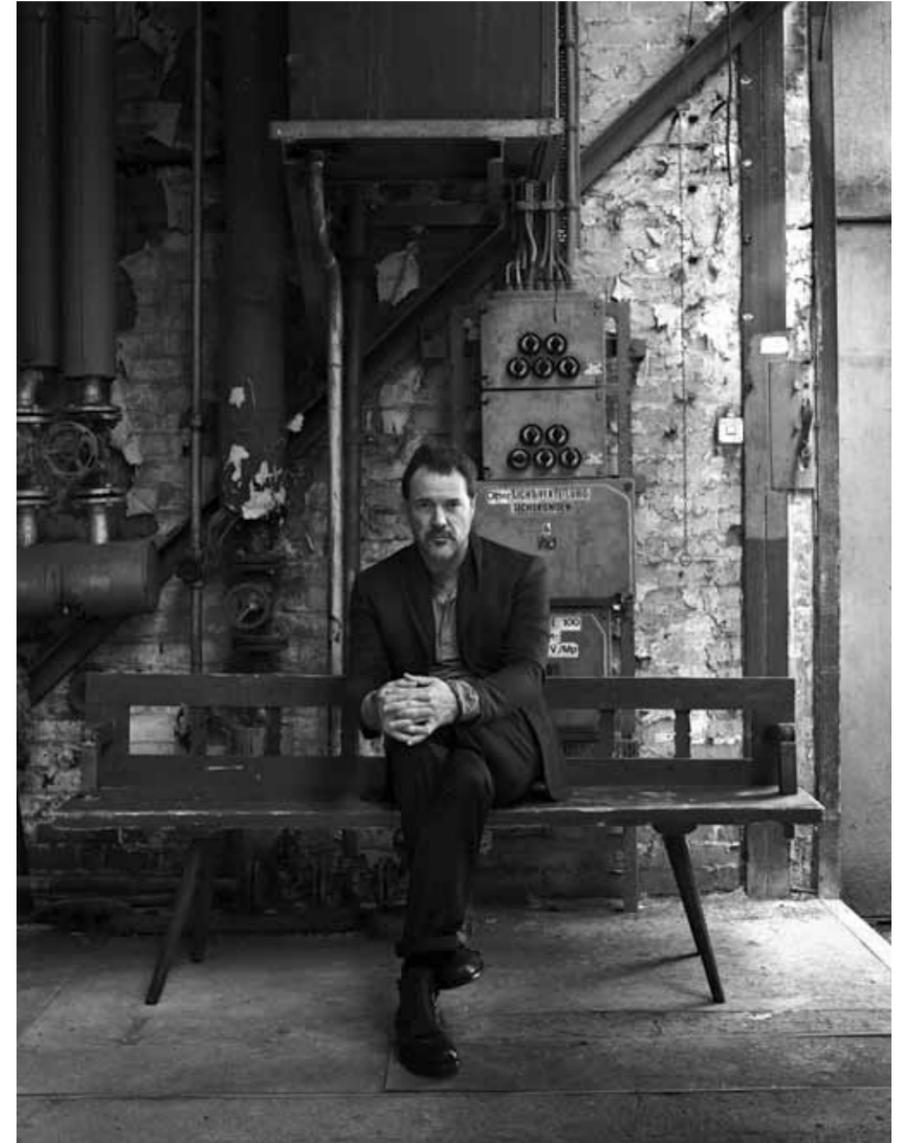
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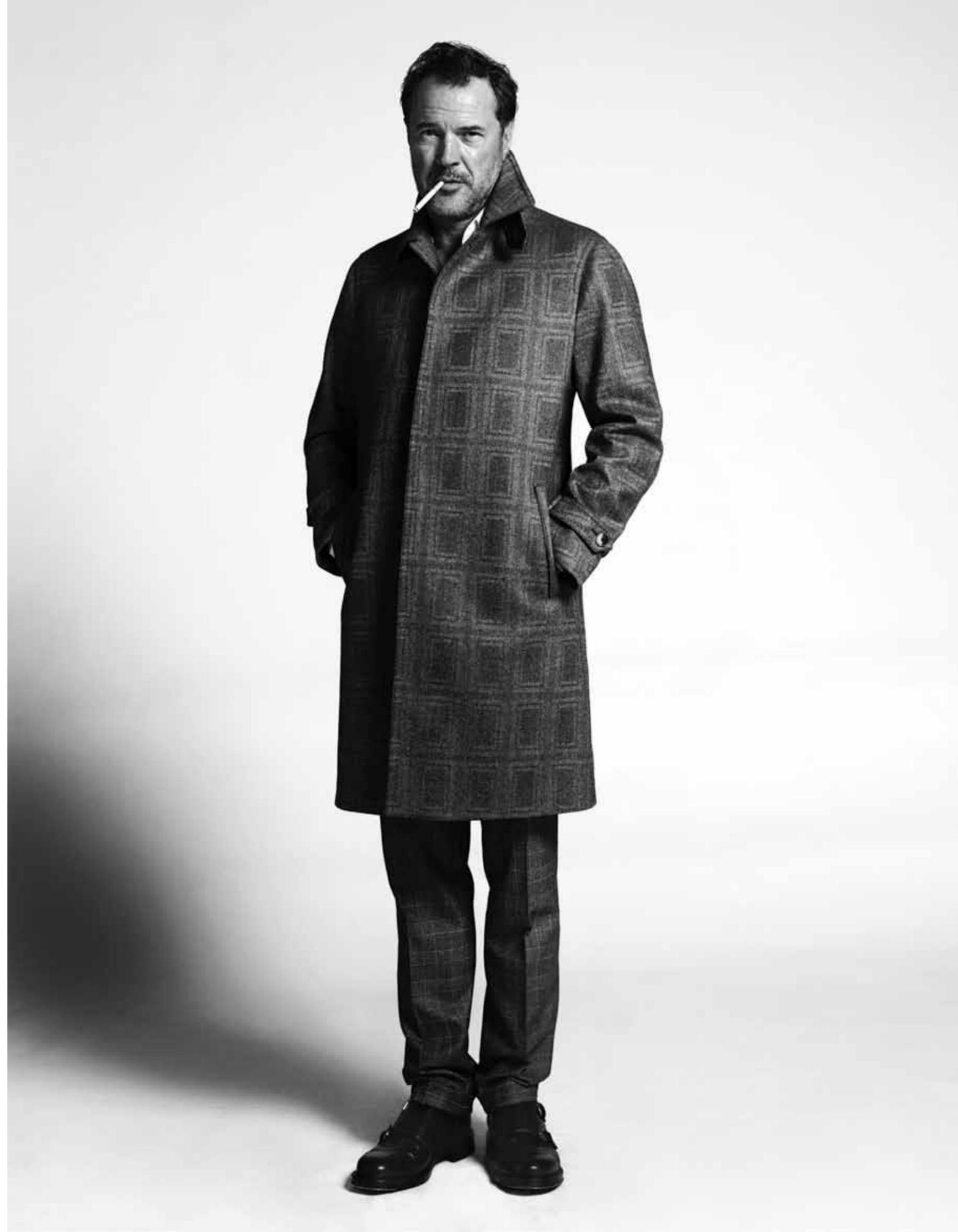
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