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## Berlin: Beyond the Wall: Screen Dreams; A new home for European film

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The Babelsberg film studios survived under East German control, turning out worthy tales of everyday socialist life, and creating its own, state-sponsored stars. Renate Krossner, also known as Solo Sunny, owed her success, it was said, largely to the devotion of Erich Honecker. East German film-making continued, but didn't enjoy an international following.

There was a time, though, when Babelsberg was the centre of the European film industry; perhaps even a rival to Hollywood. In the early years of the century, under the influence of the pioneering cameraman Guido Seeber, Babelsberg became a centre for European Expressionism and both artistic and technical innovations.

Many of its stars were drawn from the Deutsches Theater, then under the directorship of Max Reinhardt. In this period Babelsberg produced films as timely and as timeless as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and, in 1925, Fritz Lang's pioneering *Metropolis*.

Marlene Dietrich played her first major role at the studios in *Blue Angel*, directed by Josef von Sternberg. That was in 1929. Last month, the Hollywood director Stanley Donen went to Babelsberg to discuss making a film about Von Sternberg's discovery of the star; the French singer Patricia Kaas is expected to play Dietrich.

With Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s, the studios became a tool for his propaganda. Freedom of artistic expression was further hindered after the studios were occupied by Soviet tanks in early 1945 and strict controls were adopted by the East German government.

With Germany reunified, the studios could again become, as they once were, the centre of the European film industry. Many of the great names of that first blossoming of the German film industry were lost to Hollywood. The idea this time round is to keep such talent on board.

This renaissance, should it materialise, will owe a good deal to the film director Volker Schlöndorff, an artist of impeccable international credentials - he was the first German director to win the Golden Palm at Cannes for his Oscar-winning screen adaptation of Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. He is now engaged in creating, over the next decade, a purpose-built media city, where artists can live and work. Initial costs are expected to be about DM2bn (pounds 839m). A further DM510m (pounds 214m) is being invested in the studio's six-year modernisation programme. At present studio activities and film production are running at a loss; the new owner, the French investor Compagnie Immobilie Phenix, has had to replace out-dated equipment and retrain East German studio workers. But 20 films have been produced here since privatisation in 1992, and it is hoped capacity will triple, moving the venture into profit.

The studios have already attracted stars of the calibre of Anthony Hopkins and Isabella Rossellini, and an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Victory* has gone into production.

It is still too early to say whether unification will pave the way to a renaissance for European cinema. But many must feel, as Schlöndorff does, that a situation in which 95 per cent of world cinema is produced in Hollywood cannot be allowed to continue. Babelsberg may represent Europe's last chance.

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