

The German films of Edgar Wallace

by Cora Buhkert

A personal view of the German Edgar Wallace film adaptations

I still remember the first time I heard of Edgar Wallace. I must have been about ten, an age when being allowed to stay up late and watch a movie on TV is still a special treat. One evening I was allowed to watch a film called *Der Gruene Bogenschuetze* (*The Green Archer*, 1961), a crime movie.

For a child whose idea of crime movies had been shaped by Inspector Derrick and his rather mundane investigations, *The Green Archer* was a

Below: Video cover for *The Green Archer* (1961)



revelation. Here police inspectors were dashing young gentlemen, murderers were mysterious hooded figures, crimes were committed in ancient haunted castles and on fog-shrouded quays, bodycounts were huge and the unfortunate victims were dispatched by means such as poisoned arrows and chambers slowly filling with water. This crime movie was anything but mundane, and at the age of ten I was convinced that it was the scariest thing I had ever seen.

Even the very beginning of the film signalled that this would be something entirely different from anything I had seen before. Twelve shots fired at the screen. Twelve drops of blood, slowly forming into letters. A scream. And a ghostly voice with a British accent saying the magic words, "Hallo! Hier spricht Edgar Wallace." (Hallo, Edgar Wallace speaking).

Later, I found out that Edgar Wallace was a British author of crime fiction and that he was definitely not the person speaking at the beginning of the movie, since he died in 1932. I also learned that the movie I had seen was part of a whole series of films, based on the works of Edgar Wallace.

In Germany, Edgar Wallace is still a household name, though he is far better known for the films based on his works than for the books themselves (even though they were still available in the mid eighties and might even be today). 32 Wallace films were produced by Horst Wendlandt and his Rialto Film company between 1959 and 1972,

making it the longest running series in German cinema. Other producers tried to cash in on Wendlandt's success, thus some sources list up to 40 German Wallace films. Not even all of Wendlandt's movies were true Edgar Wallace films, however. Especially the later ones tended to stick the Wallace label - at that time an almost certain guarantee for box office success - to films that had nothing to do with Edgar Wallace's works.

Key to the economic success of the films was the fact that they were cheaply made. Sets, props, stock footage, even sounds were all recycled, which gave the series a very distinctive look. For example, *Die Toten Augen von London* (*The Dead Eyes of London*, 1961) and *Der Gorilla von Soho* (*The Gorilla of Soho*, 1968) did not only have roughly the same plot, but exactly the same murder device (a glass-topped tank in which unfortunate millionaires were drowned as part of an insurance scam) was used in both films.

But the recycling did not stop at sets and props, it also extended to the crew and cast. Often the same directors and screenwriters were employed for several films. The most notable of the Wallace directors are Alfred Vohrer with 15 films to his credit and Harald Reinl with 5. The most renowned screenwriters are Herbert Reinecker and Wolfgang Menge, both of whom went on to successful careers in German television. It is ironic that the rather dull and mundane German TV series I watched as a child in the early 80s were often made by the same people who had worked on the Wallace films 20 years earlier.

Most notable to the viewer is the fact that the Wallace films seem to use

the same cast over and over again. The most famous of the recurrent Wallace film actors is certainly Klaus Kinski. He starred in 17 of the films, mostly playing madmen and killers, though he was only rarely the mastermind behind the crimes. The only actor to star in more Wallace films than Kinski was Eddi Arent, who was in 21 films altogether. Eddi Arent usually played comic relief roles, mainly butlers, though he was the murderer in *Der Unheimliche Moench* (*The Mysterious Monk*, 1965) *Das Raetsel des silbernen Dreiecks* (*The Mystery of the Silver Triangle*, 1966).

Siegfried Schuerenberg holds a special place among the recurrent Wallace actors, because he was not simply playing similar roles over and over again, he played the same character, Sir John, head of Scotland Yard. Sir John is best remembered for his stupidity (he came close to arresting his own inspectors several times) and for the way he lusted after every young and attractive female that came along. In his last Wallace film, *Der Hund von Blackmoor Castle* (*The Hound of Blackmoor Castle*, 1967), Schuerenberg's Sir John character was finally allowed to solve a crime on his own, assisted by his secretary (played by Ilse Pagét, another Wallace regular). Schuerenberg starred in 14 Wallace films and probably would have made more, had he not died shortly after *The Hound of Blackmoor Castle* was released. In later films, the role of Sir John was taken over by actor Hubert von Meyenrink who starred in 5 more movies.

Other Wallace regulars include Joachim Fuchsberger (11 films) and Heinz Drache (8 films), both of whom played mainly heroic police inspectors. The best known of the Edgar Wallace



Above: Poster for *The Red Circle* (1959)

heroines is Karin Dor (5 films), who was married to Wallace director Harald Reinl. She went on to star in the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice* in 1967, making her the second Wallace cast member to play in a Bond film (the first was Gerd Froebe who played memorable villains in *The Green Archer* and in *Goldfinger*).

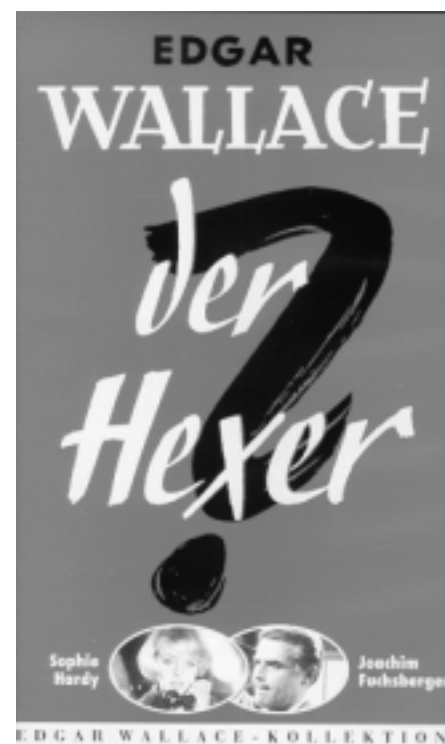
Another notable Wallace actor is Ady Berber. He was only in a handful of films, most notably *Die Toten Augen von London* (*The Dead Eyes of London*, 1961). Berber usually played deformed servants and dumb but devoted killers. His grotesque apelike appearance makes him unforgettable.

But although the casting was often stereotypical, the Wallace films did manage to break the mold from time to time and really surprise the viewer.

Thus, usual suspect Klaus Kinski was allowed to play a policeman once, while the eternal comic relief Eddi Arent and perennial victim Karin Dor both were revealed as murderers. And two of the best known Wallace villains, *The Red Circle* (1959) and *The Squeaker* (1963), were played by Klausjuergen Wussow and Guenther Pfitzmann respectively, two actors best known for playing kindly doctors in long-running soap operas.

The most famous of the German Wallace films seems to be *Der Hexer* (*The Ringer*), made at the height of the series' popularity in 1964. The plot has a mysterious vigilante known as the Ringer return from his Australian exile to avenge the murder of his sister. Three police inspectors, played by Wallace regulars Joachim Fuchsberger, Heinz Drache and Siegfried Lowitz, are stumbling over each other's feet while the Ringer kills off criminal after criminal, assisted by his lovely wife (Margot Trooger) and faithful butler (Eddi Arent). The story is pure pulp, in which the Ringer, a master of disguise using latex masks (two years before *Mission Impossible*), is finally revealed to have been posing as one of the three inspectors all along.

The identity of the Ringer was kept absolutely secret during the filming. In a move reminiscent of the secrecy surrounding blockbuster projects such as *The Phantom Menace*, the final pages of the script were kept locked up in a safe in producer Wendlandt's office to prevent the secret from leaking to the press prematurely. The Ringer's real face, seen only in the last few minutes of the film, belonged to Luxemburger actor René Deltgen. Deltgen – short, stocky and in his mid 50s at the time –



Above Video cover for *The Ringer* (1964)

seems an unlikely choice to play Edgar Wallace's most famous vigilante, proving that even in the 1960s pulp heroes did not have to be young and handsome.

Due to its success, *The Ringer* was the only Wallace film to spawn a direct sequel, *Neues vom Hexer* (*The New Adventures of the Ringer*) in 1965. The surviving members of the original cast returned to reprise their roles, but while still fun, the film was nowhere near the quality of the original.

The Edgar Wallace films are little seen outside Germany, though quite a few of them were produced with the international market in mind. Some of the mid 1960s films were actually

produced both in a German and an English version, partly with different actors. Others produced in co-operation with Danish and Italian film companies. However, the Wallace wave never quite seems to have caught on outside Germany.

In Germany, the Wallace films have long attracted a cult following. Video editions are available, and the films are perpetually rerun on TV (at the moment a cable station is showing them in prime time again). In the mid 1990s, three new Edgar Wallace films were produced for TV, but failed to reach the appeal and success of the originals.

Despite their success, the Wallace films are still largely ignored by film historians, dismissed as typical light entertainment fare, which dominated German cinema in the 1960s. Over 40 years after the series debuted, there are a lot of faults to find. Characters and settings are stereotypical, the plots often illogical and a lot of what is shown in those films (such as deformed villains and heads of Scotland Yard slapping their secretaries on the behind) does no longer fit into this age of political correctness. Of course, the Wallace films are entertainment fare, they were never meant to be anything else. But they are exceedingly well made entertainment, despite the low budgets. The cast lists read like a who is who of German actors of the 1960s, and many of the regulars went on to national and international fame.

In this age of serial killer and teen slasher movies, the Wallace films may seem hopelessly outdated to many, providing more laughs than chills. What are the Masked Frog, the Green Archer, the Black Abbot, the Ringer or the Squeaker when compared to

Hannibal Lecter or Freddy Krueger? But the Wallace films had something that so many modern day thrillers are lacking. Atmosphere.

The German Wallace films have a genuinely creepy, pulpy feel. Many of the films were actually shot on location, but the Britain they present is a strange otherworldly place, full of haunted castles, ruined abbeys, sinister reform schools, sleazy riverside inns and deserted docks, perpetually shrouded in fog. The squeaky, experimental music (courtesy of film composers Martin Boettcher and Peter Thomas), which often incorporates screams, whispers and other sounds, adds to the suspenseful mood.

Especially the early black and white films (the series switched to colour in 1966) are strikingly photographed. Light and dark contrasts are used to great effect. *Neues vom Hexer* (*The New Adventures of the Ringer*) for example shows the shadow of a killer, poison-filled syringe in hand, on a white wall, as he creeps up on a sleeping victim. A moment later, we see the shadow of the Ringer, gun in hand. The actual confrontation between the opponents is never shown.

The lack in graphic violence is another important feature of the Wallace films. Despite the many murders in each film, there is very little blood. The murders themselves are not even shown most of the time, instead we get the moment just before, generally with a close-up view of the victim's eyes opened wide in terror, or immediately after. Throughout the films, horror is suggested rather than shown.

Which film is the best of the series? There is no real answer, everybody has



Above: Poster for The Masked Frog (1959)

a personal favourite. For me it is *Der Frosch mit der Maske* (The Masked Frog, 1959), first of the German Wallace films. The main plot, something about a gang of criminals led by a safecracker thought long dead, is standard Wallace fare. But the scene where a hangman (impressively played by veteran actor Carl Lange) is almost forced to execute his own son is one of the most memorable moments I have ever seen on screen. It scared me to death at ten, it still manages to chill me today. Which is more than a lot of modern horror films have accomplished.

For more information on the life and works of Edgar Wallace please contact the Edgar Wallace Society at 84 Ridgefield Road, Oxford, OX4 3DA.