

Transcript

Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 64

Hildegard Knef

(Dead Ladies Show Music — 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I am Susan Stone.

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against the odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond. Then, we bring you a special selection of these stories here on the podcast.

I am joined once again by DLS co-founder Florian Duijsens, who I just saw at our first live show of the year in Berlin. Hello!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hello, Susan. It was magical to be back. We were in fact back at the studio, which is downstairs, more of a bar vibe, at ACUD where we just felt a little bit like disco queens which is always nice. And our audience was into it! We had a little giveaway, we went outside, we had some beverages in the late late sunshine. It was lovely.

SUSAN STONE: It was in fact very fabulous. And in this episode, we have a fabulous story for you, of a Deutsche Diva, an iconic German actress and singer and eventually best selling author, known for her glamor and scandal, her smoky voice and sweeping false eyelashes. Hildegard Knef was also an unreliable narrator and a serial fabulator who was alternately loved and hated in her homeland. Luckily, we have a reliable narrator to tell her story.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: We do. It's our own wonderful Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire, an award-winning translator who was recently on the longlist for the Booker International Literature Prize for her translation of Clemens Meyers book *While We Were Dreaming*, out with Fitzcarraldo. In fact, just like a previous one that they did, which was also longlisted for this very same prize. Katy is a champion, not just of German literature, but today, on this very podcast of German Dead Ladies. Here she is, Katy Derbyshire onstage at Berlin's ACUD.

KATY DERBYSHIRE FROM ACUD STAGE: I am indeed, I'm talking about Hildegard Knef, who was a woman with at least three, if not four careers - acting, music and writing, followed by twilight years as a celebrity diva. If you haven't heard of her, that's because she was mostly famous in Germany and the Netherlands.

I first thought about sharing her story, after talking about her with a random German transvestite/Secret Service agent [PAUSE. AUDIENCE LAUGH]. The short version is: it was at a bar. So, this drag queen was seriously into Hilde, as she's known affectionately here in Berlin, which is no surprise really. As a professional diva, Hildegard Knef was always popular with the transvestite scene and was guest of honor at Berlin's drag ball way back in 1979. I also already

had one of her books, *The Gift Horse: Report on a Life*. What I'm showing you here is not only the cover with her face on it, but also the front page of the award-winning translation into English by her second husband.

As we Dead Ladies presenters know, autobiographies are often tricky, and most of Knef's biographers have acknowledged this is not exactly the truth and nothing but the truth. But some of the untruth she wrote in this book, she repeated and exaggerated off the page too. She was constantly reinventing herself and adjusting the narrative to fit. This book has a lot to answer for. The biopic, which was made fairly recently, and the English Wikipedia article, basically swallow it whole. But let's hear a little taste of her telling her own story, in some lyrics, she wrote herself translated into English again by her husband.

[RECORDING PLAYS]

HILDEGARD KNEF (SINGING):

I came to the world on a cold winter's day
Sneezed three times, there must have been hay
My father was livid, he wanted a son.
I took a look around and said to the nun
From here on, it gets rough

KATY DERBYSHIRE: That was 'From Here On It Got Rough'. The German title is 'Von nun an geht's bergab'. I've taken it from a compilation of the best of her English recordings. But she also did a few songs in French and gazillions in German. In the '60s and '70s she sold more than three million records. She made 20 albums, countless EPs and singles. And of course before, during and after her music career, she was acting and IMDb lists 90 appearances as an actress and 163 as herself. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

We'll go back to the beginning. She was born in 1925 in Ulm in southern Germany, where her parents were trying to start a business. Her father sadly died six months later, probably of the after effects of syphilis contracted during World War One. Hilde later said she was "vatersüchtig," a "dad-aholic," and she did indeed have many close friendships or romantic relationships with significantly older men.

Her mother returned to live with her own parents in Berlin who looked after Hilde. You can see them here, Hilde as the center of attention, holding on to her grandfather's tie while standing on the swing. She would spend idyllic summers with beloved grandfather outside the city. She said he was from an aristocratic background, but his father had gambled it all away and he moved to Berlin. This grandfather committed suicide in July 1945, which was very upsetting for her. She said he was against the Nazis, which is fairly credible, so that wasn't why he committed suicide at that point.

The family home, until her mother remarried, was a small flat... Any Schönebergers here in the audience? [A YES FROM THE AUDIENCE, KATY LAUGHS] ...At Number 33 Sedanstraße (now Leberstraße). You can see the house is not particularly glamorous even now, but it does have this plaque honoring her with titles of her songs and stuff.

Does anybody know who else grew up in Sedanstraße, Number 65? [AFFIRMATIVE SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE] Here it is, Marlene Dietrich! She gets her own plaque too, just down the road, obviously not at the same time. The two of them met during Hilde's very first day in Hollywood in 1948. They got on really well because they came from the same background. Marlene unfortunately introduced Hildegard Knef to two bad things. First of all, prescription meds, which she would just hand out in a basket to her friend, and later send in the post. [INCREDULOUS LAUGHTER] And second of all, her celebrity astrologer who Hilde consulted for many, many years about all major and some minor decisions, wedding dates, job offers and health matters. This is the same guy who advised the Reagans when they were still in the White House. Do you remember that? [GROAN FROM THE AUDIENCE] Yes. Very good groan!

So, as you can see from these two pictures, Marlene supported Hildegard with publicity, often showing herself with her in public, and with very honest advice. Until the two of them fell out, over Hilde's uncomplimentary 1982 biography of their fellow German actress, [Romy Schneider](#). Which, just isn't that lovely Dead Lady triumvirate? Marlene, Hilde and Romy. Anyway, Hilde grows up in Berlin. She was seven when the Nazis came to power. She leaves school at 16 to start an apprenticeship as a cartoon artist at the film studios, but quickly decides that drawing the same thing over and over again is a bit dull. So she uses the access that she has to the film studio canteen to talk her way into an acting apprenticeship. Now her application had to pass Goebbels's desk because he was in control of all aspects of the arts under the Nazis. He approved her screen tests, but said she needed a nose job. Look at this photo. Does this gorgeous teenager need a nose job? No. And she didn't get a nose job for several decades. [LAUGHTER]

Speaking of Goebbels, here he is in a 1938 film premiere attended mainly by men apparently. And the back right, let me see if I can work this... That guy there was his pal Ewald von Demandowsky, who later was made boss at Nazi Germany's second-biggest film company Tobis.

So during the war, Hildegard Knef's mother was evacuated with her half-brother, and Hildegard was determined to make it in Berlin, essentially, without parental supervision. She was bombed out twice in a row and struggled to find housing. So after she had a couple of other older lovers, when she was 19, she moved in with this guy Demandowsky. Conveniently his wife and children had also been evacuated. Apparently, she got on with his mother.

So I'm showing you some shots from the biopic from 2009, *Hilde*, of Anian Zollner as Demandowsky and Heike Makatsch as Hilde. Can't really recommend it. [LAUGHTER] Mainly because the movie was adapted verbatim from *The Gift Horse*, and it shows Hilde dressing as a boy to fight alongside her Nazi lover in the Battle of Berlin. Eventually they desert and they're separated by Polish soldiers. Hilde is taken to a prisoner of war camp, where she reveals her secret to a doctor. She also claimed she'd been in the Soviet camp for three months. Biographer Jürgen Trimborn concluded this was highly unlikely. She probably didn't join in the defense of Berlin, because she never mentioned it in the '50s. But the couple probably did decide to escape Berlin at the end of April, bearing in mind the war ended on the 8th May. It is quite

credible that she feared violence and rape by Soviet soldiers so she may well have disguised herself as a man. There's a letter to her mother that she wrote in September '45 that also gives us some pretty big clues. So they probably did join a group of Wehrmacht soldiers heading northwest towards the Americans, away from the Red Army. They probably were apprehended by Polish soldiers, but Hilde was released immediately on arrival at this Red Army camp. She wrote that she traipsed merrily back to Berlin in two days. And she was in fact back in time to start work in the third week of May so no three months in a camp.

Interestingly, she then registered at Demandowsky's villa in June 1945. In Germany you have to tell the authorities where you live at all times, still. And even more interestingly, Demandowsky was arrested in November 1945 by American military police hiding in either his own or the next door neighbor's cellar. Who knows whether they saw each other during that time?

So I'm just flummoxed, why on earth would anyone make this story up? And my personal opinion is that she desperately wanted to be liked. She was writing this book in the late '60s, when West Germany was only just beginning to face up to the Nazis' crimes. A German friend who was born in 1948 told me that her parents and all of their friends hated Hildegard Knef; they saw her as a traitor for speaking badly of Hitler, for leaving for the USA and taking American citizenship, and then making scandalous films, as we'll hear later. I think that she wanted to appear more loyal to Germany than people thought she had been. But of course, it's a tricky situation, because you don't want other people to think you were full-on Nazi. And it did have effects on her career. The Cold War was in full flow. And she probably drew on testimonies of real events in Soviet POWs camps to write her account.

Anyway, so she's back in Berlin, and she starts getting acting work in theaters. Unlike all the other actors starting back, she'd never been on screen under the Nazis so she was a fresh face. And she was cast in the first post-war film: *Murderers Among Us* (*Die Mörder sind unter uns*), which was made in the Soviet Zone in 1946. It's remarkable for the backdrop of devastated Berlin, but it's a bizarre waste of her acting, which is really not bad. The plot completely sidesteps her character's past in a concentration camp, and just focuses on this good German doctor, and his guilt and rage against a former Army comrade who'd ordered a massacre during the war. Hilde's pure love saves him and he doesn't shoot the Nazi bastard.

So you'll see on the poster here that this completely unknown actress got top billing, which was because her male co-star had lied about his Nazi past. They didn't want him on the poster. So the movie made her a star. She was photographed for *LIFE* magazine in 1947. And she also appeared in the first films made in both the American and the British occupation zones.

By now she was with an American soldier, Kurt Hirsch, who probably gave her that fancy fur coat you can see in the photo. He was a US film officer, which meant he granted or refused permission for all cultural events in the American occupied zone and despite what she says in her biography, she may well have met him when she needed papers to work in the theater in the American sector. He was Jewish. He grew up speaking German and Czech in Prague, and emigrated to New York with his parents in 1939. He lost 16 relatives in the Holocaust. His friend the actor Willy Tremper wrote in his later autobiography: "Only a 19-year-old had the right back

then, to love a Nazi in the spring and a Jewish film officer by autumn.” [WRY AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

So as you can see in the photo, she's really getting her first taste of relative luxury here, browsing the black market with her furs and fancy handbag, nice gloves, and she really never lost the taste for it. So she marries Kurt Hirsch and accepts a contract from a Hollywood producer. When she gets there though, it turns out the studio will pay her a monthly wage to learn English and film screen tests. But it doesn't put her in any movies. German actors and accents, as we heard at the beginning, weren't exactly popular in Hollywood in 1948. But she did meet many exiled German writers, actors and intellectuals in Los Angeles and of course, Marlene who became important mentors for her. And I like to think that those first three years in Hollywood were a kind of anti-fascist education for her. She also learned the art of putting on a show for the press, something she never forgot. [KNOWING LAUGH FROM AUDIENCE MEMBER]

She took US citizenship in 1950 – [SPEAKING TO AUDIENCE IN AN ASIDE] somebody's met her in the audience, those laughs are particularly bitter! [LAUGHTER] She took US citizenship in 1950 and adopted the stage name Hildegard Neff – N E F F – in the States, enraging Germans as we heard. But with no work coming up and fearing the gossip about her old Nazi lover would spread to the States, she started looking for roles in Germany and took pretty much the first one that came up. Here we see the poster and a shot from *The Sinner*. Great title! In which Hilde plays a prostitute with an interesting backstory, whose love once again, saves a good man, this time an artist. You see she's magnificently sexy all the way through the film. We watched it, it was good-ish! Ish! [LAUGHTER] It's not quite clear to me why she did this nude scene in 1951. You can see her posing in the garden as an artist's model. You get about a second and a half in the film. Could have been because she was having an affair with the director. Anyway, it was a big no-no, the Catholic Church was not happy. She was just too sexy for Germany! [LAUGHTER] It didn't help that both characters commit suicide at the end. Oops, spoiler! So there were riots outside cinemas, which of course made everyone want to see and it was a major commercial success.

She followed it up with more movies where she played women who use their bodies for success or survival. And more affairs with married directors and actors. Her marriage failed at some point. At last though, she got offers from Hollywood. So she plays opposite Tyrone Powers and Gregory Peck. And she gets to sign the concrete outside Grauman's Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard. Very exciting for her, she was the first German to do so after 1945. She made one more movie in the States but the studio bosses dropped her, probably after too many affairs with her co-stars, who were married. She moves back to Europe and makes movies there instead. So she was still wildly successful, as you can see from these very glamorous '50s magazine covers all over Europe. But she wasn't cast in particularly good films. She plays temptresses. So there's a hypnotized singer, a sexy circus artist, an accidental bigamist, and the perfect result of an artificial insemination of a prostitute with a murderer's semen. [LAUGHTER] Florian's favorite!

Eventually she was offered a Cole Porter musical on Broadway, *Silk Stockings*, where she was taught to sing, standing her in good stead. It was a huge success but very exhausting. She played 675 shows in a row before taking her first break in the years back in Europe. After that her career kind of starts to wane and she starts accepting roles in TV shows. But in 1959, this handsome fellow is her co-star. [AUDIENCE WHOOPS] I agree! This is the actor David Cameron, not the one with the pig! [LAUGHTER]. His name was actually David Palastanga. He came from the East End of London. He had an Italian-Greek dad and a Scottish mum.

So she does the best seduction ever. It's the last day of filming. She's been ignoring him that whole time. And then she invites him to a party at her place. And surprise! He's the only guest! [WRY AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] And she plays her Frank Sinatra records. Unfortunately, he's also married. Nevermind, he still moves to Germany to be with her. They were together for 17 years with many ups and downs. And rarely apart during that time. He essentially managed her career, translated her work, took care of her money. You can see them here in a very fancy airport setting and he is carrying her valise, so she only has to hold her flowers. He also put up with her increasingly appalling behavior. She was horribly jealous and treated him very badly indeed.

So in the '60s, her music career soared. She does torch songs and jazzy numbers, musical numbers, Cole Porter... And then she started writing her own lyrics. She was hugely popular on record and live. But she had crippling stage fright, which never got better. It was always a horrible battle. I'm going to show you her two top hits on one single from 1968: 'Für mich soll's rote Rosen regnen' and 'Von nun an ging's bergab.' I don't know if anybody remembers Angela Merkel's last day on the job? [KNOWING SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE] When she gets a military band and they give her three requests. And one of the songs that they paid for her was this one: 'Für mich soll's rote Rosen regnen' It's a very rousing tune, you can see her tearing up. It's also very popular with drag queens. [LAUGHTER]

1968 is a good year all round. Little baby Christina was born and glues the marriage together for a little while. After a difficult birth and recovery, Hilde decides to write because she's talented, she can do it. She has a literary agent, who negotiates a book advance, coupled with a fee for excerpts in a magazine, totaling 630,000DM up front! [IMPRESSED SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE] All the writers in the audience going "I get that, yeah!" So *The Gift Horse* was published in autumn 1970. It was selling up to 4000 copies a day in Germany. All together one million hard covers, 900,000 book club editions, 600,000 in paperback. It's actually very well-written. I really enjoyed it. Well, I didn't read it all... But her humor, intelligence and character really shine through.

So she was addressing this post-war period openly, for the first time – well for the first time that was widely read in Germany. And the book caused a lot of discussion. It was translated into 17 languages. Here she is at a book signing in Amsterdam. It's actually, I think it's a later book, but never mind. I like it because you can see she's thronged with less glamorous people than herself buying, and surrounded by books with her photo on the cover and photographers, it's great. She toured the states in 1971 with her husband. If you're interested, there's a really

fascinating interview she did on the radio with Studs Terkel you can listen to online, it's an hour long and worth it. Especially when you know the truth.

So the family is now fantastically rich, as you can see from this photo of them in a fur-lined sleigh, wearing fur coats and hats. They lead a life of luxury in multiple homes and hotels. They moved out of Germany, because who wants to pay tax?! But they couldn't hold on to money – they should have just given it to the taxman. And through various illnesses and operations, Hilde ends up getting addicted to methadone and later plain old morphine, and becomes increasingly erratic, paranoid, and nasty. And eventually the marriage breaks down.

She soon finds a new husband though, Paul von Schell, who's happy to look after her around the clock. She makes more films, writes more books, does more tours, despite repeatedly saying that she'd never do any of those things again. But it's ever less successful. She bankrupts a couple of publishers and tour managers with her huge demands. And she's still plagued by addictions and health issues. She starts to grow bitter and despises the press, but of course she's dependent on the press. At one point, she says she hates the Germans, and of course, she denies ever saying it. The upshot is that she moves to LA with Paul and Christina. And they just about survive on fame and loans, and ironically enough press exclusives, like these two 1980s home stories with them looking wealthy and happy.

After 1989, she and Paul moved back to Germany and she lives out a kind of modest dotage. She enjoys a lot of attention as a diva – “Germany's only diva” they say – but nowhere near her former riches and glory. She was a very popular chat show host. If you watch them, there's a lot of them on YouTube, it's fascinating because she does actually seem to have believed the stories that she was telling about her life. She was always immaculately turned out. I'm standing in front of this, I'll just move out of the way... Can you see that lovely outfit? No, I'm gonna move out of the way so you can see that pink frou-frou...?[IMPRESSED SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE] It is not a surprise that drag queens love her, exactly.

So despite the relative financial hardship (relative), she actually had some things now that she'd always desperately wanted, and that's a very devoted partner and popularity in Germany. She is again thronged by autograph hunters. She collects awards and accolades, some of them she just makes up. [LAUGHTER] She finally kicks the drugs and the cigarettes after many, many years. She lives an okay life, she likes being taken out to dinner, they read, they watch late night TV with a glass of red wine. And she puts on makeup everyday until she dies in 2002, at the age of 76. I think not always the fake eyelashes. Although she used to spend empty moments... she would peel the glue off and roll them around a pencil to get them back into shape.

So this isn't the “Katy's feelings show,” but I was kind of angry with Hildegard Knef for her dishonesty, and for the unpleasant person that ambition, money and addiction made her. So what I did was I asked German friends how they feel about her, and I got this quite overwhelming response. People of all ages, genders and sexualities told me how much they admired her, maybe because they didn't know the small print, but they admired her for her beauty and style, her acting, as a diva, as a musician who always moved with the times, and particularly as an independent woman who broke taboos in postwar West Germany. So that's

how I will try to remember her. And of course, for her eyelashes, which were so amazing that they inspired their own adjective “knefig.” Thank you very much.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Hildegard Knef, recorded live from the stage in Berlin’s ACUD with assistance from Thomas Beckman and Johannes Braun. Thanks for that. By the way, if you heard a weird little digital noise, a bleep or two, during Katy’s talk. That’s actually what happens when you don’t turn your mobile phone off or put it on airplane mode when you’re at an event that’s being taped. So even if it doesn’t ring, it does sometimes make an impact on the recording. Please don’t be a bleeping pain in my ears, do help us out and other event hosts by taming your phone.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: You can go see pictures of Hildegard Knef and her truly impressive Trixie Mattel-rivaling eyelashes, and have a listen to some of our music, watch some clips from her movies over at deadladiesshow.com/podcast. You’ll just love it, I’m sure. Now, if you love us, you don’t have to wear your heart on your sleeve, but you can wear our logo on your chest, or your tote bag or coffee mug, thanks to our new TeePublic shop. We will add a link for you in the episode notes so you can check them out.

SUSAN STONE: You know where else you can get some logo stuff? Over on Patreon! As a \$2, or €2 supporter, you get access to selected exclusive content we create for our Dead Ladies Book Club on Patreon, as well as those logo stickers sent just to you. And at \$5 or €5 or insert your currency here, level, you will receive access to all of our exclusive audio content and there’s something new every month. And we’ll send you a lovely Dead Ladies Show badge in the post. At the highest level, \$10 of your favorite currency units, you get all of our exclusive content, a sticker and a badge and a free book of your choice from our curated selection. Find out more at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast. And thank you so much to all of you who already support us on Patreon. It’s just really lovely to have you there.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And thanks to everyone who comes to our shows in Berlin and New York, and who follow us on social media via [@deadladiesshow](https://twitter.com/deadladiesshow) where we post all our updates and information, as well as fun pics. We’ll be back again next month with another episode on another fabulous Dead Lady.

SUSAN STONE: The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme tune is ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon. See you next time!

(Dead Ladies Show Music — ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)