

HARBOURFRONT'S FREE SCREEN
 Harbourfront will present a retrospective of
 30 films of German director Rainer Werner
 Fassbinder from July 6 to August 2. Through-
 out the summer, screenings of the films
 Fassbinder loved and was influenced by will
 be shown at Harbourfront's Free Screen.
 Excalibur's MIKEL KOVEN spoke with Har-
 bourfront's film co-ordinator James Quandt
 about the retrospective.

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the wizard of babylon

One of the most prolific directors of the '70s, Fassbinder's remarkable career (40 movies in 13 years) was cut short when he died of a drug overdose in 1982. Quandt has developed the Fassbinder retrospective specifically to see if the "delirium that built up around Fassbinder in the late '70s and early '80s with many major critics saying he is our hope for the cinema, he is the greatest director working now" is justified.

Quandt explains that "we've really not heard anything about him in the last five years. His films don't show up on the rep circuit, we haven't had a chance to look at the cannon of his work in a very long time and I'm just wondering what it is going to look like."

Fassbinder is a fairly well known filmmaker. People will know his name if not his actual work? But what is it about Fassbinder that draws their attention?

There are many different things, according to Quandt. "He is considered by many critics to be the most important director of the '70s and they were convinced that he would have been the most important filmmaker of the '80s if he had lived longer than he did."

"There are many different approaches to Fassbinder. You can deal with his subject matter, or you can deal with his style. I think the two are, obviously, inseparable. But you will find people who like his work, or people who hate his work (there are many of those as well), talking about one or the other. You typically get very strong opinions about those things."

"(As a stylist), Fassbinder drew together a number of seemingly disparate influences. That's partly what the series we're showing at the Free Screen is designed to illustrate. Directors like Douglas Sirk, who fled Germany during the Nazi period, ended up in Hollywood and made a number of "women's pictures" that have become very famous, classic "weepies," melodramas of the '50s.

"*Imitation of Life* is probably his most famous film with Sandra Dee, which we are showing with *All That Heaven Allows*. His work was looked down upon for many years, people sort of sniffed at it because they were very popular melodramas.

"And Fassbinder absolutely loved Sirk's films and had a great

deal to do with championing his work and reviving his reputation. What Fassbinder took from Sirk was a certain visual style, which is a very sumptuous *mise en scene*, lots of use of camera movement, the swirling camera, a lot of mirrors (the camera is always focusing on mirrors and people looking into mirrors), a lot of bric-a-brac and people framed in windows and doors. You get this overwhelming sense of constriction, of people in their houses, of being trapped, not being able to move.

"And the big theme of Sirk, and the big theme that carries over to Fassbinder, is a lack of freedom in peoples' lives. People think that they're free, people think that they can make choices, people think that they can make independent actions but they can't because of the way society is constructed."

A standard theme of the German New Wave of the '70s and early '80s is memory: the event that the film centres on is not nearly as important as *why* the people are the way they are. The directors of this movement seem to dwell on the "why" of every situation. There is, in some of Fassbinder's films, the underlying Nazi theme suggested that the young German filmmakers are not going to forget what happened in the '30s and '40s.

"One of the most famous components of Fassbinder's work is what is called the Economic Miracle Trilogy which began with his most famous film, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, carried on with *Lola* and completed with the second last film he made before he died, *Veronica Voss*," says Quandt.

"And in this trilogy he explores the end of the Nazi period, moving into the '50s; the period in which Germany rose out of the ashes and, with international help, became a major economic power, and a lot of people grew rich," adds Quandt.

"He deals with a really unsparingly acidulous vision with that miraculous transformation and how easily that happened; how easily it was all forgotten. The horrors of World War II, the horrors of the concentration camps, how people just suppressed all of that and became, in fact, exploited. He shows in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* how people made profits from the war and they continued on into the '50s and became incredibly rich, because of the

investments they had made during the war."

The use of these German "carpetbaggers," as well as Fassbinder's "unsparingly acidulous vision," has led *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby to call Fassbinder "one of the cinema's greatest satirists." Quandt disagrees.

"No, I don't see him as primarily a satirist, at all... Although he is, there is no doubt about it, a great satirist of certain social institutions: marriage, first and foremost. A film like *Lola* can be considered a great social satire. He is most definitely a social commentator, there is no way around that, but satire, I don't think, is his strong suit."

Fassbinder was gay, as the press material never seems to tire of pointing out. However, his films do not seem to be specifically geared towards the homosexual audience.

Quandt is quick to point out that "he did make a couple of specifically gay films, *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* which has been described as a "tragi-comic love story disguised as a lesbian slumber party in high-camp drag" (Molly Haskell) and the male counterpart to that, *Fox and his Friends* which I think is one of his three best films. A widely hated film, *Fox* is set in an exclusively gay milieu, and Fassbinder plays the central figure in it.

"Sprinkled throughout his cinema are gay characters. For example, in *Veronika Voss*, the physician who keeps all of these people under her control, by getting them addicted to morphine, is a lesbian. Fassbinder is not well loved by the gay community and in many ways that is not surprising, partly because of his unsparing vision.

"This carries through to another controversy. He considered himself a feminist, and many essays have been written about his films as being feminist. *Nora Helmer* is a version of Ibsen's famous feminist play, *A Doll's House*. But he has also been more frequently considered a misogynist; a woman hater.

"Similarly, there have been many attacks upon him being anti-semitic. And again, we see that in some of the films. In *I Only Want You to Love Me*, a great deal is made of a character who is very rich and powerful and it is pointed

out that he is a Jew. There is also the Jewish couple in *Veronika Voss* who after having survived Treblinka, commit suicide together.

"The answer to all of those criticisms from people who love Fassbinder, who attempt to defend him, is that it all comes down to his unsparing vision that he saw in every single person; the potential for being a victim and victimizer. He saw everyone as a potential monster. And he refused to sentimentalize characters even if they were from minorities. He argued that he was not anti-gay, that he was not anti-semitic, that his feelings were totally on the side of the victim.

"Another famous case is the crippled girl in *Chinese Roulette*. The villain (one of many villains in that movie) is an eight or nine-year old girl who is physically disabled. That is very objectionable to most people."

The big event of this retrospective is the showing of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, his 15½-hour epic film based on Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel. This is one of the greatest films ever made, an epic film that does not drag its feet once across its incredibly massive canvas. Yes, it takes some stamina, but the result is well worth the event. *Berlin* will be shown over five nights on two weekends so if you can't make the entire festival, at least see it.

Fassbinder "saw the central character (in *Berlin*), Franz Biberkopf, as an alter ego," says Quandt. "He was finally allowed to make the film in the late '70s and he made it for television because that was the only way he could make such a sprawling project, which includes, by the way, every single one of his actors.

"He is known, like (Swedish director Ingmar) Bergman, for having a very faithful troupe of actors who appear in many of his films. Irm Hermann, Hanna Schygulla, Eva Mattes, Volker Spengler, people like this, all have parts in *Berlin*, which is really the sum and summit of his work.

"The film showed in Toronto a couple of times, and the rights have lapsed, all prints were sent back to Germany, and it has been a real struggle to get this film here for this retrospective... It really is a once in a lifetime chance, I don't know when we'll get another chance to screen it here in Toronto again."

The Free Screen, running the "Fassbinder Favorites," has assembled an incredible selection of directors whose works are being shown, including Bunuel, Visconti, Sirk, Godard, Rohmer, Hitchcock, Chabrol and Bresson.

"Howard Hawks, Josef von Sternberg, Samuel Fuller, Raoul Walsh... it is a very eclectic mix," says Quandt. "And I've attempted to choose the films that show the strongest connection to his own cinema. He filled his cinema with homages to these directors by naming characters after them, or replicating various bits from their films in his films. I'm hoping that people will go to his films and go to these films and see all of the connections."

"I know a lot of Fassbinder obsessives," Quandt adds, "and they each have their own favourites, everyone has their own top three, and it really is hard to choose favourites — the man did make 40 films."

"My three favourite films are *Fox and his Friends* and I dearly love *Veronika Voss* and for a third, it bounces back and forth a bit. Sometimes it is *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* but I think *In The Year of 13 Moons* is an incredibly wrenching autobiographical film about a man who actually changes his sex.

"He is in love with another man, who wants to be in love with a woman, so this man has a sex change so his lover will love him, and is rejected by his lover even after he's had the sex change."

"Today, I was talking at lunch with a couple of critics, and they felt that the film is so wrenching that they couldn't watch it the first few times they went to see it. It took them a third try until they could get all the way through it. That's how powerful it is. Everyone has their own top three, but I think *In the Year of 13 Moons* is the one that shows up on the most people's Fassbinder pantheon."

Quandt wonders "if that was delirium or whether his work will live up to it. I think it will."

The Fassbinder retrospective runs until August 2 at Harbourfront's York Quay Centre, just west of the Queen's Quay Terminal. All films are in German with English subtitles unless noted otherwise, and all films are restricted to adult audiences only. For schedules call 973-3000. For tickets call 872-111 or 973-4000.