

FILM

It's difficult to think of a more original queer cinema voice than that of the late, great German auteur Rainer Werner Fassbinder. He directed 41 films before his untimely death (related to drugs and stress) in 1982 at the age of 37, during post-production on his adaptation of Jean Genet's "unfilmable" novel *Querelle*.

Fassbinder was a notorious personality—demanding of himself and others, prone to excess in all areas of his life and a sexual radical who galvanized and offended. Although a very publicly self-described gay man, he married women. (His boyfriend was best man at his second wedding.)

The director's reputation and influence are far-reaching. In the '70s, canonical feminist film critic Laura Mulvey wrote many an ecstatic word on Fassbinder's juicy narrative style and astute social observation (class, race, gender, age and sexuality are omnipresent factors affecting every relationship and interaction) and the profound influence upon '50s melodrama-meister Douglas Sirk.

Mulvey and her academic colleagues fused their admiration of Fassbinder and revisionist appreciation of Sirk, joining the two names forever in the annals of film history. More recently, from a very different point on the cinematic spectrum, well-respected mainstream filmmaker Michael Mann (*The Insider*, *Ali*) has said, "Fassbinder was everything."

Bitter tears

New DVD releases of the late, great Rainer Werner Fassbinder

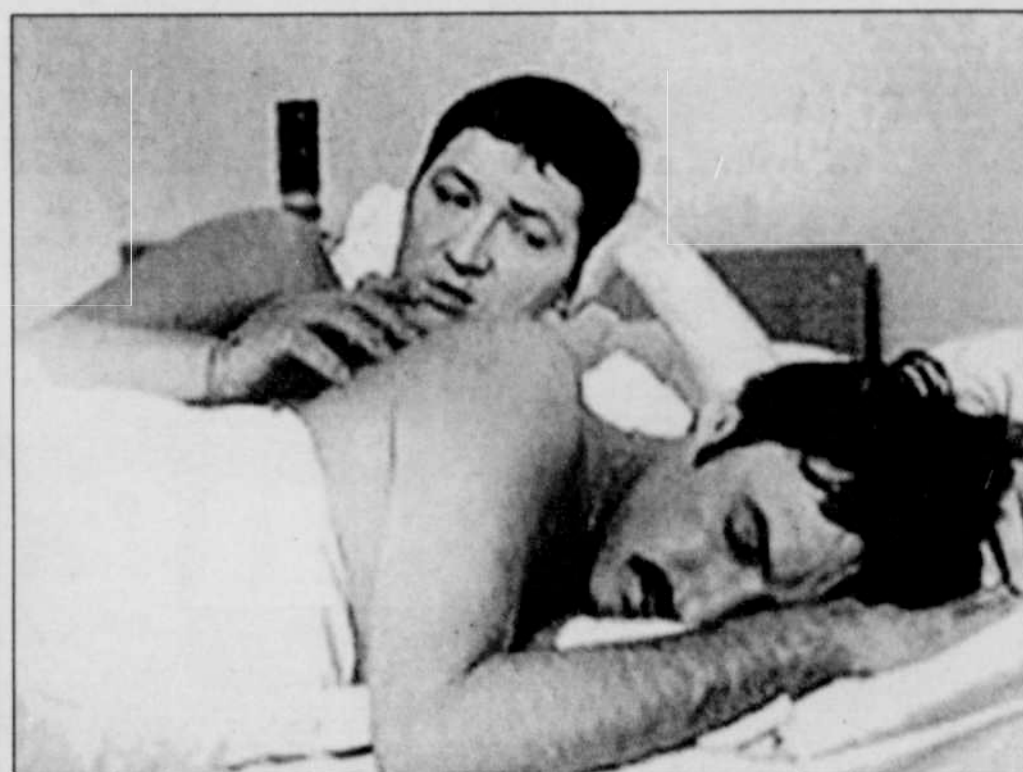
BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Fassbinder has, of course, been a perennial touchstone for our best queer filmmakers. John Waters declared him "the most talented director of his time," and both François Ozon (*Swimming Pool*) and Portland's Todd Haynes (*Far from Heaven*)—two of the most interesting gay directors working today—are clearly Fassbinder devotees.

Ozon's *Water Drops on Burning Rocks* was from an unfilmed Fassbinder script, and Haynes' exposure to Fassbinder as a college student had a profound and recurrent impact upon his work.

In 1976, queer film scholar Thomas Waugh

"It's so hard to change the world": Rainer Werner Fassbinder's (above left) 1970s queer films were astute social commentaries about much more than being gay. Above right: *Fox and His Friends*. Right: *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*.



wrote, "It's clear that the gay activist community must extend its solidarity to all oppressed groups within society... Fassbinder's films, with their perspective of a whole range of society's outcasts, victims and exploited classes, are an inspiring affirmation of this principle."

The recent spate of Fassbinder DVD releases affords the home viewer an excellent opportunity to be so inspired. The most deluxe of these is The Criterion Collection's two-disc release of 1974's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, which concerns the marriage of Emmi, a sexagenarian German cleaning woman, to Ali, a much younger Moroccan immigrant, and its consequences at the hands of xenophobic and ageist neighbors, children, co-workers and "friends."

This romance of the frowned-upon variety, revealing the hypocrisy and prejudices of an apparently benign milieu, mirrors Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, a film mirrored in turn by Todd Haynes in last year's *Far from Heaven*. In fact, one of the best supplementary features of the *Ali* set is "From Fassbinder to Sirk and Back," a 20-minute video introduction by the always-erudite Haynes, which, along with a BBC documentary on German cinema and other extras, makes this extensive, meticulous release something of a film school course in a box.

Of the many less deluxe (but still very nicely restored) Fassbinder DVDs released by the Wellspring company, two are of particular interest for their probing explorations of queer lives: 1972's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* and 1975's *Fox and His Friends*.

Fox is probably Fassbinder's "gayest" film. The director himself stars as the title character, a poor, carefree carnival worker who, when the carnival is shut down and his boyfriend is jailed, falls in with a group of upper-class gay men. When Fox realizes his dream of winning the lottery, his new boyfriend, Eugen, proceeds to teach him how to emulate his superiors by shopping for antiques and wearing tailored clothes; he also allows Fox to purchase them a posh apartment and financially bail out Eugen's family's bankrupt business.

Fox is trapped in the mutable, status-dependent acceptance of his lover and his community, but Fassbinder doesn't paint him as an entirely passive victim or the bourgeois gays as mustache-twirling villains; they're merely participating in a power structure that encompasses everyone.

The filmmaker knew that the oppressed are, sadly, quite capable of oppressing others; there's always a hierarchy, and his illustration of that inevitability through Fox's experiences is riveting, provocative (particularly in the understandably defensive post-Stonewall climate of 1975, when his complex worldview was often mistaken for muckraking by queer viewers and press) and heartbreaking.

In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, it's the love between two women—Petra, a brittle, vulnerable, ultra-successful fashion designer, and Karin, her beautiful runway-model protégé—that's shattered by underlying social structures.

Petra seduces Karin by offering her career opportunities and the trappings of wealth; Karin conceals, with cruelty and infidelity, her disgust with herself over using Petra. Elsewhere on the class food chain, Marlene, Petra's personal secretary, is obviously in love with her but, as a servant, is persona non grata.

Marlene is treated badly by both Petra and Karin and suffers all literally without a word. (The dialogue-free Marlene becomes a spectral Greek chorus figure in Petra and Karin's tragedy.) *Bitter Tears* is highly stylized, is one of Fassbinder's most visually stunning films (Michael Ballhaus, cinematographer on both *Petra* and *Fox*, now frequently works for Martin Scorsese on films like *The Age of Innocence* and last year's *Gangs of New York*) and has an entirely unexpected liberating ending.

Fassbinder espoused the idea that a film itself cannot change the world—it can only, in a spirit of hope, present the audience with a recognizable world in need of changing. His need to show us, through consummately entertaining stories, the mechanisms of society as they affect individuals is best summed up in something he wrote in an essay on *All That Heaven Allows*, saying of its unhappy lovers: "You can understand both of them, and both of them are right, but no one will ever be able to help either of them unless, of course, we change the world. We all cried over the movie, because it's so hard to change the world." □

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REVIEW



Demonstrators protest the South African government's AIDS policies in *State of Denial*

Shadow of AIDS

Economics, culture and politics collide in *State of Denial*

BY LISA BRADSHAW

In South Africa, 4.7 million people are HIV-positive. There are 2,000 new infections a day. By 2010, 7 million will have died of AIDS. President Thabo Mbeki does not believe HIV causes AIDS, and he holds the key to widespread use of antivirals in the country.

This cultural and political clash of wills and theories is expertly documented in *State of Denial*, part of public television's POV series. South African New Yorker Elaine Epstein, whose direction usually takes the form of public service and HIV education videos, traveled throughout her native country during a period of two years, recording the lives of various HIV-positive children and adults, their inability to pay for AIDS drugs and the president's refusal to fund the distribution of these drugs, insisting "more study" must be done.

Meanwhile, Epstein interviews doctors and

aid workers desperately striving to find ways to improve and lengthen the lives of their patients. Leaving no stone unturned, she covers activist Zackie Achmat's Treatment Action Campaign, visits HIV support groups, eavesdrops on arguments in Parliament and interviews white South Africans who can afford drug treatment.

Epstein also explores how South Africa's cultural and political history has partially enabled widespread infection. Notes the former director of AIDS Policy, "This shadow is just going to undermine everything that so many millions have sacrificed their lives for."

State of Denial, which will air at 3 a.m. Sept. 17 on OPB, is truly a comprehensive look at South Africa's plague—one that is spreading through many developing nations at an alarming rate. □