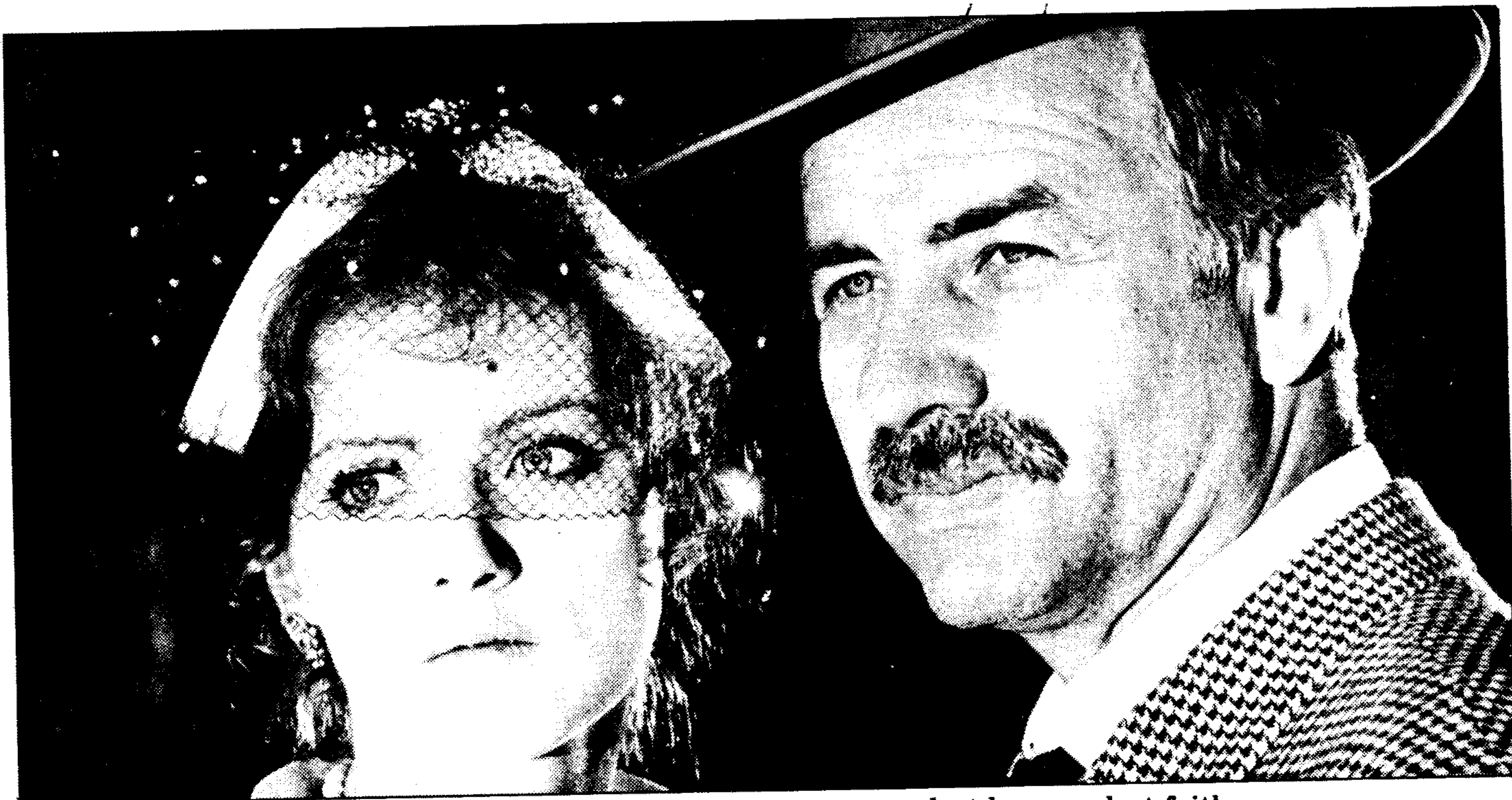


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Barbara Sukowa and Armin Mueller-Stahl in *Lola*: a lost grace, a lost honor, a lost faith

# The Lola-Lulu-Lilith Complex

By Andrew Sarris

**LOLA.** Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Screenplay by Peter Marthesheimer, Pea Frohlich, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Produced by Horst Wendlandt. Released by United Artists Classics.

**AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN.** Directed by Taylor Hackford. Screenplay by Douglas Day Stewart. Produced by Martin Elfand. A Lorimar production released through Paramount Pictures.

The late Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lola* has been described as the second in a trilogy on the German "economic miracle" of the '50s, the first being *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, and the third, the as yet unreleased *Veronika Voss*, which is scheduled for this year's New York Film Festival. Like all Fassbinder films, however, *Lola* stands on its own to an appreciable extent, and one does not have to weave it into a larger tapestry in order to understand or appreciate it. Moreover, the temptation to treat it as an ultimate work should be resisted as strongly as possible. One can detect the symptoms of terminal despair in *Lola*, but such symptoms were present even more strongly in *Fox and His Friends* and *In a Year of 13 Moons*. *Lola* seems, if anything, both more intuitive and more pragmatic than much of Fassbinder's previous work. Actually, I was somewhat surprised by the film, and yet it helped me understand more clearly the distinctive qualities of Fassbinder's art. The title itself is curiously misleading in its apparent emphasis, though I don't know what other title would be more appropriate.

Lola (Barbara Sukowa) works in an establishment that makes Josef von Sternberg's Blue Angel cabaret look like a monastery. Yet, as we gradually perceive through Fassbinder's heavy filters, here is an establishment of the Establishment in that all the town's bigwigs gather there to celebrate their corrupt deals. One of Fassbinder's early scenes is staged in a men's room, half flirtatiously gay bohemian, and half forceful Bohemian Grove. The political text and the sexological subtext of the film jockey for position around the urinals, and the viewer is relatively free to go in one direction or the other. Mario Adorf dominates these early episodes with his sheer bulk and muscular cynicism. As an outsider to the Fassbinder stock company, he projects the massive power of money in the New Germany.

Barbara Sukowa's Lola, however, does not dominate either the decor or the narrative in the classic manner of the Lola of Marlene Dietrich in Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* and the Lulu of Louise Brooks in Pabst's *Pandora's Box*. Miss Sukowa, an intelligent actress so memorable in Margarethe von Trotta's extraordinarily affecting *Marianne and*

*Julianne*, remains a cerebral, petit-bourgeois creature with none of the demonic, self-justifying sensuality projected in Fassbinder's films by Hanna Schygulla. Whether the casting of Miss Sukowa influenced the conception of Lola or the conception influenced the casting we may never know for sure. What does become clear is that the emotional weight of the film shifts to Von Bohm, a middle-aged idealist played by Armin Mueller-Stahl, an East German film star who emigrated to West Berlin in 1980. This comparatively unfamiliar actor proceeds to give a performance as spectacularly and beautifully flamboyant in its way as those of Emil

## FILMS IN FOCUS

Jannings himself in *The Blue Angel*, Raimu in *Marius*, Nicolai Cherkassov in *Ivan the Terrible*, Laurence Olivier in *Henry V*, Ralph Richardson in *Outcast of the Islands*, and Ake Groneberg in *Sawdust and Tinsel*.

Again, the relation of casting to conception must remain conjectural, but it is interesting to speculate what Armin Mueller-Stahl's walking poem of purity that is Von Bohm actually meant to Fassbinder. The actor's incredibly clear blue eyes suggest oceans and oceans of moral remembrance and regret. Hence, the cuckoldry inflicted on the character he plays possesses a cosmic dimension. In the Germany of the early '80s he does not represent the respectable late '20s German bourgeois projected by Emil Jannings's tragically roosterish professor in *The Blue Angel*. Von Bohm is not the representative of a class at all, but a magical return from exile of a lost grace, a lost honor, a lost faith. He is the haunting ghost of something or other Fassbinder must have imagined with a vague sense of mystical nostalgia. *Lola* must be seen for the performance of Armin Mueller-Stahl. *Lola* must be seen also for its confirmation of Fassbinder's place in the very problematical pantheon of the '70s. Curiously, *Lola* suggests a certain mellowing in Fassbinder's attitude toward himself and toward a society he viewed as crassly materialistic and ruthlessly cynical. What new corners he might have turned as a consequence of this apparent mellowing we will now never know.