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Fitzcarraldo
(WEST GERMAN-COLOR)

Cannes, May 20.

A Werner Herzog Film in coproduction with Pro-ject Filmproduktion der Filmverlag der Autoren, Munich, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), Mainz; producers, Herzog, Lucki Stipetic. World rights, Cine-International, Munich. Features entire cast. Written and directed by Werner Herzog. Camera (color), Thomas Mauch; music, Popol Vuh, recorded arias of Enrico Caruso and Richard Strauss; editing, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus; sets, Henning von Gierke, Ulrich Bergfelder; costumes, Gisela Storch; sound, Juarez Dagoberto, Zeze d'Alice; operatic sequence, Werner Schroeter; production assistance, Wildlife Films Peru, Iquitos. Reviewed at Cannes Film Fest (out-of-competition), May 20, '82. Running time: 157 MINS.

Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald,
alias Fitzcarraldo Klaus Kinski
Molly Claudia Cardinale
Don Aquilino Jose Lewgoy
Cholo
(the mechanic) .. Miguel Angel Fuentes
Captain (Orinoco Paul) Paul Hittscher
Huerequeque (the cook) Huerequeque
Enrique Bohorquez
Railway station chief Grande Othelo
Director of the Opera Peter Berling
Campa chief David Perez Espinosa
Black attendant Milton Nascimento
Rubber baron Rui Polanah
Old missionary Salvador Godinez
Young missionary Dieter Milz
Notary Bill Rose
Prison guard Leoncio Bueno

With "Fitzcarraldo," the official German entry at Cannes, it's easy to cut the pic to pieces by citing notable weaknesses, such as patchy editing, inane dialog, exuberant romanticism, the pointless physical feat of dragging a passenger boat over a mountainous slope 500 miles from civilization. But life is such that magnificent failures are often more memorable than controlled rational accomplishments. That's why "Fitzcarraldo" is a very fine film to watch in a theatre large enough to measure its epic proportions.

This is a German fairy-tale. Director Herzog is as much a dreamer as the film's protagonist, Fitzcarraldo, whose feet barely touch the ground on which he treads. Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald (shortened to Fitzcarraldo) already has seen two pipe-dreams go down the drain — a Trans-Andean railroad through the jungle, an ice-factory without paying customers. Now he dreams of erecting an opera house in the Amazon jungle in order to welcome his idol, Enrico Caruso.

For the Herzog buff, none of this is strange or extraordinary. "Kaspar Hauser" (1975) and "Stroszek" (1977) featured dreamers cut from the same romantic mold, the only difference here being that "Fitzcarraldo" is a warmer, more sympathetic, and quite humorous character.

As for the plot, it's simplicity itself. Fitzcarraldo (Klaus Kinski), travels miles and for days up a river at the outset to see his idol, Enrico Caruso, in action on stage; the moment sets him on fire to build his own opera house in the Peruvian jungle. This said, he has to make a million somehow — only all his schemes have failed till now. But a lovely lady friend, Molly (Claudia Cardinale), keeps a house for orphaned girls off the streets, and she has fortunately set aside a nest-egg for just this emergency. With the help of a convivial rubberbaron, Fitzcarraldo takes an option on a stretch of land in hostile Indian country on a tributary into the Amazon — now all he has to do is prove that he can get in and out of the impenetrable jungle to market the rubber-trees.

The next step is to buy and convert a passenger ship for the expedition, financed by Cardinale. He then signs on a funky crew, and madman Kinski is surrounded by an equally quirky trio: A Dutch

captain, an Indian mechanic in the engine-room, and a drunken cook. This is where the humor really surfaces, for the rest is along the lines of a B-Western, and you can tell by the heavy foliage that this is dangerous country: James Fenimore Cooper's lurking Indian territory. By the time Fitzcarraldo has reached his destination, all but the trusty heroes have abandoned ship. Next on the scene are the Indians themselves.

The boat is some kind of "white magic" in the eyes of the redmen. When Fitzcarraldo explains his plan of wanting to drag the boat over a hill to a neighboring river (this point in the jungle can't be reached any other way due to an intervening rapids), the Indians go along with the crazy plan for their own reasons — the evil gods of the rapids have to be conquered by the magic power of the big white ship! What Fitzcarraldo doesn't know is that the good intentions on both sides cancel each other out in the end, but even here a hero is born by daring the impossible. The ship is dragged over the hill to reach the other river, and then secretly cut free to float safely down through the rapids to just about the point where the whole story began in the first place. But because Fitzcarraldo has in the process opened up new territory for rubber exploitation, his creditors celebrate his feats with an operatic shindig on board the Great White Ship.

Since the tale is set around the turn-of-the-century in a Never-Never Land of dreams and dreamers, just about anything is possible and all can be forgiven in the name of art. Forget the lame plot and the silly lines — the lensing is top-flight, and Kinski is delightfully mad from start to finish. In fact, Herzog's handling of the thespians, non-professionals in particular, is unique.

All said and done, this is a fun film. "Fitzcarraldo" is an adult daydream. A magnificent one at that. —Holl.