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'Erwin had been a man...' Fassbinder's latest study of the strong and the weak hangs on a Casablanca sex change. Richard Roud reports



Volker Spengler as Elvira

FASSBINDER's new film, *In a Year with 13 Moons*, is one of the freaky ones — like *Satansbrew*, *Marta*, or *Chinese Roulette* and not like the hyper-realist favourites like *Ali*, *Merchant of Four Seasons* or even *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*.

It also is one of the best.

One hesitates to say the "latest" Fassbinder, because at the rate he makes them and the way he makes them, some that are started earlier are finished later than others which were started later (if you follow me). It is very difficult to know which is the newest Fassbinder film.

Like *The Bitter Tears*, the new one has a homosexual subject. But the difference in the way this subject-matter is treated made it the most exciting event at the Rotterdam Film Festival.

First, I should explain the title: given the difference between our solar calendar, with its 30/31-day months, and the lunar calendar with its 28-day months, every so often there is a year with 13 moons: 1978 was one of those years. According to Fassbinder, people whose existence is based mainly on their emotions are likely to suffer severe depression and even catastrophe during such years.

One has no way of knowing if this astronomical/astrological statement has any validity: sensitive readers can check it for themselves: the years with 13 moons during this century were 1908, 1929, 1943, 1957, and 1978. The next one (thank God) will not be until 1992.

In any case, it is no secret that the man Fassbinder has been living with and whom we saw in Germany in Autumn, committed suicide in June of 1978. Although there are a few resemblances between Erwin, the hero of

this film and Armin, this is not Armin's story. But the psychological climate of his suicide has permeated the film.

It begins at dawn; on a riverside park in Frankfurt, a man has come to cruise the Polish immigrants; he gets beaten up. Why? Because they discover that he is not a man, but a woman. What they don't realise (and nor do we, for a while) is that Erwin had been a man, but he has had the drastic Casablanca operation and is now, to all intents and purposes, a woman: Elvira.

When Elvira, black-eyed and bruised, gets home, her boyfriend is furious. He has had enough of her whoring, and he packs his bag and leaves for good. Elvira tries to stop him, stands in front of his car, almost gets run over and is finally left lying on the street. Red Zora (Ingrid Caven), the friendly neighbourhood prostitute, picks her off the ground, fixes her face, and buys her a drink. And Elvira tells her story.

She/he was raised in an orphanage, and apprenticed to be a butcher. She/he had married his master's daughter Irene and they had a child. But she/he had fallen hard for a fellow apprentice, one Anton Saitz, and one day he plucked up enough courage to tell Anton that he loved him. Anton jokingly replied: "Well, if you were a girl..."

Without stopping to think, Erwin takes the next plane to Casablanca where he has his total sex-change. But on his return, Anton just laughs at him. Although the operation may have been technically a success, Erwin (Volker Spengler) is too tall, too muscular, too big. He may be a woman, but he is

not a very attractive one.

There are no flashbacks in the film: this story is recounted by Elvira to Red Zora: what we see on the screen however is the most horrifying depictions of a slaughterhouse (in colour, of course) that I have ever seen. The pretext is that Erwin was a butcher, but its emotional effect goes much further, preparing us for the slaughter that is to come.

Not physical slaughter, however; what we are about to witness is the destruction of a human being. Elvira, in an effort to find out more about her past, goes with Zora to the orphanage where she was raised and asks Sister Gudrun (played by Fassbinder's mother) for more details. She tells her/him that when he was eight, a woman and a man came to see about adopting him.

From the way the woman spoke, Sister Gudrun got the idea that she was in fact Erwin's real mother. She also seemed to perceive that the woman was very afraid that her husband would discover that this child was really hers. So finally, after living for months in hope, little Erwin was not adopted.

The next station of Elvira's Calvary is a visit to Anton Saitz, the man who, all unknowingly, was responsible for his sex-change. Times have changed, however; Saitz has become one of those incredibly rich and incredibly corrupt real-estate speculators who abound in Frankfurt.

She/he has been urged by her/his ex-wife to make this visit, because the previous week, in a magazine interview about trans-sexuals, Elvira had mentioned Saitz as the cause of her operation and Irene is afraid that Saitz, now grown all-powerful,

might be offended. But when Elvira finally gets in to see him (the pass-word is Bergen-Belsen) he is not all angry. He couldn't care less, he says, what people say about him as long as they spell his name correctly; Saitz with an "ai," and not the usual "ei."

Saitz is presented as a total megalomaniac and, during his interview with Elvira, he and his henchmen are watching an old Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis film on television. Suddenly Martin and Lewis go into a parade routine, and Anton and his cohorts follow suit; even Elvira joins in. It is a fantastic scene, quite grotesque and quite mysterious: a kind of grisly triumphal march of the German economic "miracle."

The meeting with Saitz so unhinges Elvira that she begins to grow really desperate. She cuts her hair short and, ridiculously dressed in borrowed men's clothes, she goes to her ex-wife Irene and asks her to take her/him back again. Irene and her Kafka-reading daughter are both sympathetic, but Irene tells him gently that it is really too late for anything like that.

Elvira rushes off, and the only person left who might be willing to listen to her, perhaps to help her (but how?) is, she thinks, the journalist who had interviewed her. But when she gets to his home, the journalist's wife reminds him that he has to get up early next morning, that it really is a little late, and perhaps Elvira would care to come back some other time?

Elvira leaves, but the journalist, switching on the tapes of his interview with Elvira, begins to have a funny feeling, as he puts it, that they should have let Elvira stay.

Listening to the tapes again, he now hears the undercurrents of despair of which he had been previously unaware.

He decides to seek out Elvira, but when he gets to her house, she has already committed suicide. She is found, lying on her bed, next to Saitz who is busy screwing Red Zora, totally unaware (or uncaring) that Elvira is dead.

There will be some, I am sure, who will say: this is too special a case. There cannot be more than a tiny number of men in the world who have had this operation; why should anyone be interested? But they would be wrong, I think, because, as so often, Fassbinder uses the extreme example, the frontier situation, as a metaphor for emotions and problems that are much more general.

Nor do I think the interest of the film is restricted to homosexuals of either sex, although Elvira's constant role-switching has an obvious application. No, like most of Fassbinder's films, this is an allegory about the strong of this world and the weak; what the strong do to the weak; and how the weakest go to the wall. Even a real woman who had fallen in love with one of the Anton Saitzs of this world would probably have come to a similar end.

Actually, we have to go back to the moon which has its pernicious effect, as Fassbinder maintains, on those whose existence is based primarily on their emotions. And herein lies the perhaps the ultimate meaning of the film: those who live principally by their emotions are vulnerable, and there will always be enough people of the other kind to prey on them, to exploit them. Armin/Erwin/Elvira: Rest in Peace.