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A Summer Spate of Sugar and Spite

By Andrew Sarris

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FILMS IN FOCUS

The best moments in "Satan's Brew" are characterized either by self-mocking sentimentality or hard-edged sexuality.



Kurt Raab: a touch of the demonic poet in Fassbinder's fizzled farce

SATAN'S BREW. Directed, written, and produced by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. A New Yorker Films release.

Satan's Brew, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's current concoction on display, strikes me as a minor setback in his career. While it does not make me reconsider my previous appraisals, it does suggest certain limitations to his talent. What he has attempted on this occasion is a form of savage screwball comedy, which descends irrationally and intentionally into depravity and disgust.

A "revolutionary" author (Kurt Raab) has developed a bad case of writer's block. His publisher will not advance him any more money; his mistress and her complaisant husband will no longer tolerate his sponging; his wife is dying before his unseeing eyes; his moronic brother has made it his life's work to torture passing flies and molest visiting females. The author murders a ridiculous woman, and a whimsical detective becomes suspicious. An adoring, though nearsighted and hysterical, lady admirer is systematically humiliated by the self-absorbed author, who proceeds to assume the persona of a dead,

homosexual poet. In the guise of the dead poet, he bribes effete young men to assemble at his salon for his poetry readings.

Fassbinder quotes Artaud as his guide, but one is reminded instead of the Cocteau of *Les Enfants Terribles* and the Chabrol-Gegauff of *Les Cousins*. Unfortunately, Fassbinder is unable to furnish any behavioral conviction to his players, and, as if to admit this deficiency, he allows his plot to fizzle out in a fit of Pirandellian playfulness. These are not real bullets, as it turns out; only the wife's death in the hospital is absolutely irrevocable.

Regrettably, Fassbinder displays no flair for farce, and he is never really overtly funny. Indeed, Fassbinder should never actively seek humor but allow it to lurk in the background of his dark lyricism. The best moments in *Satan's Brew* are characterized by either self-mocking sentimentality (with gliding camera movements to match) or hard-edged sexuality (in which exposure is indecorous, if not indecent, because of its casual integration with the dramatic action). Fassbinder's cynicism about power on all levels of human intercourse finds ample expression here, but this cynicism is more nakedly schematic than it ever has been before. ■