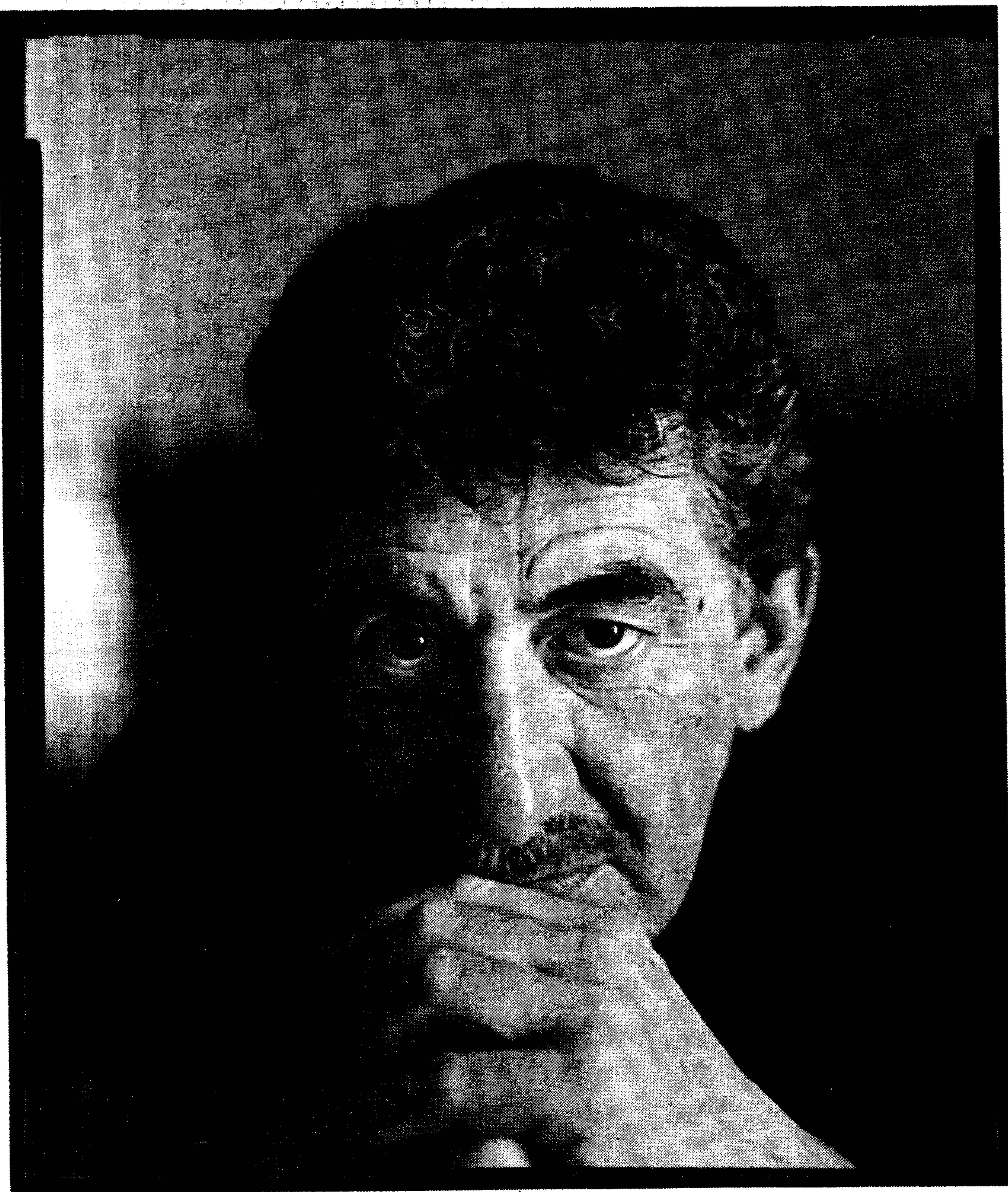


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TOM MCGOVERN

Fantasyland

By Amy Taubin

For Daniel Schmid love is ultimately the projection onto the other of one's own fantasy. No wonder then that cinema is his medium or that his most haunting film, *La Paloma*, is the story of a man (Peter Kern) who, while watching a singer (Ingrid Caven) in a nightclub, imagines his future as her lover: That she's dying of tuberculosis; that he saves her and nurses her back to health; that although she doesn't love him she becomes dependent on his love; that she tests him by taking his best friend as a lover; that when he reveals the imperfection of his love she sickens, dies, and takes revenge from beyond the grave. The film is purposely constructed so that not until it's over does one realize that everything between the opening and closing five shots is happening inside the man's head. In other words, for 90 minutes, we've been duped into thinking that this is a film about a woman when, in fact, it's about a man. The woman is obliterated in the very instant that she becomes a catalyst for his fantasy.

La Paloma, therefore, is like most Hollywood movies, except that it exposes the fetishism that Hollywood naturalizes. Exposes it only to embrace it more passionately. It's not incidental that the teenage Schmid decided to become a filmmaker after seeing a revival of *Gone With the Wind*. Like Fassbinder (his closest col-

league) and Tennessee Williams (whom he loves to quote), Schmid defines desire as identification and gender as masquerade.

Schmid attended film school in Germany and was part of a close-knit group of directors and actors, which included the directors Fassbinder and Werner Schroeter, the actors Caven and Peter Kern, the editor Ila von Hasperg. Aesthetically, he belongs to the New German Cinema of the '70s and '80s. As a Swiss national, however, he's no less an outsider to German film than, for example, the Canadian David Cronenberg is to Hollywood. Artistically liberating though such alienation can be, it has certain practical disadvantages, among them that, in the U.S., Schmid's films are less well known than they should be because they've been excluded from the history of German cinema, the context in which they're best understood.

The Public Theater is about to remedy this situation by presenting a long-overdue retrospective of Schmid's work (February 28 through March 19). In addition to *La Paloma*, the must-sees are *Tosca's Kiss*, an absurdly moving documentary about the inhabitants of an old-age home for former opera singers, and *Shadow of Angels*, an adaptation of a Fassbinder play, which stars Caven as a prostitute and Fassbinder as her pimp. Like the play, the film was labeled anti-Semitic, which it is not.

Overflowing with melodramatic

emotion and Belle Epoque architecture, with flowers and furs, veils and velvets, Schmid's films verge on kitsch, only to be rescued by an ironically modernist intelligence that acknowledges the Freudian construct of the unconscious but refuses its rationalization of desire. For Schmid, that obsession is absurd doesn't lessen its transformative power.

The following interview took place in Switzerland last summer.

AMY TAUBIN: *The fantasy of the Peter Kern character in La Paloma seems very Catholic—that the lover must make himself both indispensable and martyred. Then I read somewhere that you were brought up in a Protestant family.*

DANIEL SCHMID: My family was Protestant but we had a Catholic maid who had all these madonnas and incense in her room. I convinced her to take me to mass. My grandparents found out and they were furious. My grandmother came and dragged me out of the church and then they fired the maid. She went mad and would hang around outside and scream curses. It was upsetting because I knew it was my fault.

TAUBIN: *Another big question is about the depiction of sexuality in your films. You're openly gay and you're working in a situation that doesn't impose a closet on you in the way that the American theater of the '50s did on Tennessee Williams so why are the objects of desire in your films always played*

by women?

SCHMID: It's because of *Sunset Boulevard*, because of Lulu [in *Pandora's Box*]. I prefer actresses to actors. They're more expressive. All the great screen performances are by women. Marlon Brando is an exception but he's more like an actress than an actor. I've always connected to women, maybe because I grew up in a matriarchal family.

TAUBIN: *But those performances and Ingrid Caven's in your films seem like women impersonating men impersonating women—a masquerade of femininity, totally complicit with male fantasy. Are you interested in drag performers?*

SCHMID: If they're really good, if they're based on love, not just parody. Like in the Kabuki.

TAUBIN: *So we've done religion and sex. What about death? In the films you made during the '70s, the image of death is so 19th century, like in Gothic romance. Has that changed for you now that so many people you know have died so young?*

SCHMID: I was born in a hotel, my grandparents were hotel-keepers. When I was five, my father died. My grandmother told me that he had gone to heaven and when I asked what heaven was she said it was like the hotel only bigger and it went on forever. It was the idea of eternity that frightened me, not my father's death. So death was present when I was small. Then it wasn't present and this eternal life started and it seemed like it would be forever. Then Rainer [Fassbinder] died. We had talked just two hours before. So now it is different. If Rainer were still alive he would have made 12 movies about AIDS by now.

TAUBIN: *Tell me about the film you're planning.*

SCHMID: The so-called autobiography. I told myself no more excuses, I'll do the story of my childhood—the way the little boy imagined it, the way the adult remembers, and the way it might have been. The boy is grown-up and he comes back to the hotel the night before it's to be torn down and all the ghosts appear. It should be a comedy. Let it be light. Behind it all was my grandfather, he went blind at 30 but he didn't want pity so he developed a system so no one would know.

Just before he died, he told my mother, "I never saw you." My grandfather got kisses from Sarah Bernhardt—I didn't know who Sarah Bernhardt was but just the sound of it was incredible.

We'll shoot it in Portugal because it's the only hotel left that's like it was—very Belle Epoque. The real hotel still exists but it's too close. It's been in my mind all my life so I need some place that's different to act as a prism.

Six months later Schmid comes to New York. The film is completely shot, there's already a rough cut, he hopes it will be finished by June and it now has a title—*Off Season*. He takes out a box of 4 x 5 production stills and spreads them on the table:

"Look, here's Sami Frey. He plays the boy grown up who comes back to the hotel and then all the ghosts come out. Here's Ingrid Caven as the cabaret singer. Here's Geraldine Chaplin as the anarchist who hoots the wrong man and then gives a speech all in Russian. That's Andréa Ferréol as the lady who ran the kiosk in the lobby. I used to think that she drew the comic-book books herself during the night. And Arielle Dombasle as the nymphomaniac. She slept with all the men in the hotel when her husband was away. Look, Marisa Peredes, she's in *High Heels*, giving the father the kiss of Sarah Bernhardt."

I start wishing the whole movie would be like this—just these ravishingly shadowed stills and Daniel's damaged stage-whisper voice suffused with a five-year-old's excitement telling fantastic stories. Even if he does use old-fashioned words like *nymphomaniac*.

"Look, that's Maddalena Fellini, the sister of Fellini. It was a week before the shooting and I hadn't gotten anyone to play the super matriarch. Not my mother exactly, I couldn't deal with my mother in this film, that's for another one, so I made the grandmother and the mother into one character... and Bertolucci suggested Fellini's sister... she's 66 and she'd never been in movies... and Fellini had seen *Tosca's Kiss* so he said to her, 'Do it if it amuses you, it's good that someone in the family is working.' She makes the greatest pasta... *La Fellini*."



Off Season's La Fellini