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FILMS

by Donnell Stoneman

It may be stretching the definition a bit, but at the age of 29, with 27 films to his credit, Rainer Werner Fassbinder can be rightfully considered a legitimate *Wunderkind*. His latest entry, which he co-authored and in which he plays the leading role, is called *Fist-Right of Freedom*, an idiomatic translation of the original German, *Faustrecht der Freiheit*. Part of the New York Film Festival, arrangements are underway for national distribution.

With contemporary Germany as the setting, specifically the cities of Munich and Berlin, Fassbinder explores the world of the homosexual. At the beginning of the film, Fox, the "talking head" of a travelling carnival, is separated from his male lover when the police shut down the show for tax evasion and take the owner away to prison.

Aimless, Fox allows himself to be picked up outside a public toilet by a handsome, sophisticated furniture dealer, debonairly played by Karl-Heinz Bohm (son of orchestra conductor Karl Bohm). At a formal dinner party, the leather-jacketed Fox is introduced to the elegantly dressed guests, who find the newcomer's off-the-street innocence irresistibly charming. Eugen, the wealthy son of a prominent book publisher, discards his young lover and takes Fox home with him.

At first, Fox has the upper hand in the relationship, but Eugen soon tires of his new lover's apparent lack of interest in learning the proper rules of upper-class society. Impatiently Eugen lectures Fox on his table manners, chooses his wardrobe, introduces him to the finest restaurants. Reluctantly, he continues the task of grooming Fox toward an acceptable appearance as his lover. For his part, Fox invests a large amount of the money he has won in the official lottery in the failing family book-binding business.

As time passes, the relationship between the two gradually shifts until Fox becomes the weaker partner, continually humiliated by Eugen's taunts and gibes at his lack of savoir-faire.

Unhappy with his prolonged idleness, Fox offers to work for Eugen's father and spends long, contented hours at the giant presses. Finally, when the relationship has reached a breaking point, Fox asks for the return of his investment and is told that he has already been repaid by the weekly salary he earned as a laborer. When Fox returns to the apartment to collect his old clothes, he finds he is locked out. As the film ends, Fox, deserted by his new friends and forgotten by his former associates, takes an overdose of drugs and is left motionless on the floor of an underground garage as two young thieves rifle his pockets.

Fassbinder's film is a conglomerate of styles which reveal a wide variety of other director's influences. A dinner party with Eugen's parents, for example, with Fox the awkward, ill-at-ease guest, suggests Bergman's light satiric touch. At times, a whiff of Truffaut or Chabrol can be detected. Various other scenes depicting the lifestyle of the German gay person are interesting, not partic-

ularly due to the director's style, which is strangely stilted and formal, but because of the information they contain. An extended scene between Eugen and the character played by Bohm which takes place in a gay bath is shot with disarming honesty.

The filmmaker's decision to play his parable of the innocent victimized by the opportunistic capitalist against a gay background will be met with dismay by many gay filmgoers. The feeling of degradation which Fox experiences seems inevitably exacerbated by the director's choice of setting. But viewed from another perspective, a valuable lesson can be learned from the film: oppression does not necessarily always come from the outside, and in matters of class differences there is the same struggle for individual rights in minority groups as in any other social group.

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The day following the press preview of *Fist-Right*, I met with Fassbinder and his co-star, Peter Chatel, who plays Eugen.

Why did he choose the homosexual milieu as the setting for his film?

"I think that society's mechanisms," Fassbinder began, "are the same in all extreme groups, such as homosexual groups. For normal audiences it becomes more clear. They pretend there are differences, but, after all, society works as well there as in other sections."

What has been the reaction to the film in Germany by the gay population?

"The left gay group didn't find the film radical enough and fighting enough for their problems. Because they thought the homosexuals should absorb themselves, close themselves off, separate. I think that's wrong. The right wing of homosexuals found it not romantic enough. All of the homosexual groups agreed that too much of homosexual behavior was revealed to a big audience. It was a kind of betrayal."

"On the other hand, they were shocked at the fact that, after all, the life of homosexuals generally is not that much different from normal life. They always see themselves as something special. If they're gay they must be something special."

How true is the film to today's world in Germany?

"The story is true," Fassbinder said. "It happened. Except that Fox did not die in reality. The milieu is exactly what you will find in that class in Berlin and Munich. It was shot in gay places."

Is there discrimination against gay people in Germany?

"It exists. There are big factories and firms that give you questions when you apply for work. Tricky ones. They read them psychologically and if they find out a corner which might be gay, you don't get employed. But it's not official. You can't do anything about it. They don't hire you because they say you're gay; they invent another reason."

What is your next project?

"A film about a poet who can't get along with the left. The film shows a period in his life when he tries to live to the contrary, when he tries to be a fascist, and at the end of the film he is going to try to find his own way. This is a new theme for me. It will try to make a resume of all the other works I did with a new point of view."