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MOVIE REVIEW

Another Gem From Fassbinder

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"Jail Bait," which opens at the Monica 2 today, demonstrates that unusually conventional-seeming material serves merely to show off R.W. Fassbinder's remarkable gifts all the more. In regarding a commonplace predicament with cool yet compassionate detachment, the prodigious young West German film-maker has created yet another film of stunning impact.

With his customary economy and precise imagery, Fassbinder acquaints us with a truck driver (Jorg von Liebenfels), his wife (Ruth Drexel) and their 14-year-old daughter Hanni (Eva Mattes) who live in drab quarters outside a small town. The mother is content with her lot, the daughter is the apple of her father's eye, and neither wants Von Liebenfels to take on long-distance hauling that would bring in extra money.

On the way to school, the pigtailed but overripe Hanni is stopped by a youth, Franz (Harry Baer), with slick-backed hair, and an embroidered Korean souvenir windbreaker, astride a motorcycle. (The time of the film seems to be the '50s.) Moments later, Hanni has willingly, eagerly lost her virginity to Franz in a hayloft. So much for the significance of the religious paintings that adorn the walls of her parents' humble home—or the heavy crucifix around Franz's neck; she has responded to Baer's overtures as casually as if he'd offered her a glass of water.

We don't know how—nor does it matter—but Hanni's parents find out about her "seduction" and Franz goes to prison for nine months. Not surprisingly, the kids take up where they left off when Franz is freed, despite dire threats from Hanni's father. Predictably, Hanni becomes pregnant.

At one point, her father tells Hanni that she is not ordinary and he's right—but not in the prideful way the father means. Like Brigitta Mira in "Mother Kusters" and "Ali: Fear Eats the Soul," Hanni is one of those people who are reflexively, stubbornly themselves no matter what. But Hanni is really more—or, more accurately, less. For she is an utterly amoral creature, much like the Sissy Spacek character in "Badlands."

"Jail Bait" isn't really a generation-gap picture, although that phenomenon is illuminated thoroughly, nor is it actually a protest against Hanni's parents and their conventional values and predictable responses. It is rather about the individual for whom the rules simply don't exist. Hanni is essentially a young animal, exuding sexual power over her poor Franz, who lost his cocky, in-control attitude while in prison.

Eschewing passing judgments—although he does comment on the hatred parents can feel for their offspring that can pass from one generation to the next—Fassbinder, in adapting a play by Franz Xaver Kroetz, tries to comprehend rather than merely criticize.

"Jail Bait" has the texture of everyday life, and its cast, which includes a number of members of Fassbinder's stock company in small parts, seems to be living rather than acting parts. It is one of Fassbinder's most beautifully articulated films, featuring those eloquent signature long shots. It is also one of his starkest expressions of human nature at odds with society.