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The Wizard of Babylon

Fassbinder, Rainer Werner

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MOVIE REVIEWS

A RAMBLING PORTRAIT OF FASSBINDER

By KEVIN THOMAS,
Times Staff Writer

Hours before his death at 36 last June from a drug overdose, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the prodigious West German film maker, was interviewed on camera for a documentary called "The Wizard of Babylon" (at the Los Feliz and the Monica starting Friday). It was made by Dieter Schidor, the producer of "Querelle," an adaptation from Jean Genet that was to be Fassbinder's final film. ("Querelle" is slated to open in a German-language version at the Cineplex April 29.)

Aired on German TV late last July, it was blocked from further showings by Fassbinder's mother—who often acted in her son's films under the name Lilo Pempeit—until Schidor reportedly agreed to cut one minute from his now 84-minute film that showed Fassbinder looking particularly unwell.

Fassbinder does look in poor shape in the interviews that open and close "The Wizard of Babylon," the rest of which is devoted to recording the making of "Querelle," which stars Brad Davis, Jeanne Moreau and Franco Nero. His sizable paunch overhanging his jeans, his eyes hidden by dark glasses and wearing a hat, Fassbinder seems totally exhausted, his speech slurred yet coherent as he patiently answers his producer's somewhat less-than-inspired questions. In this not particularly illuminating film, Fassbinder on the set emerges as the painstaking, intensely concentrated craftsman we would assume him to be.

Davis, cast in the title role as one of Genet's typically

sexy killers, hasn't much to say. Nero praises Fassbinder for the freedom he gives his actors, but German actor Burkhard Driest flatly contradicts him on this point. Not surprisingly, Jeanne Moreau comes across as the elegant pro that she is and speaks (in English) of the purity of vision that Fassbinder and Genet share and touches upon the film's exploration of the ambiguity of the individual.

"The Wizard of Babylon" reveals a homoerotic fantasy in the making, with sailors and leathermen hanging around a highly stylized waterfront dive set presided over by the bespangled, world-weary Moreau. However, as Fassbinder, cast and crew go about the familiar rituals of film making, always a tiring yet finally mysterious process to the outsider, we are treated to poetic ramblings, attributed to Wolf Wondratschek and spoken by actor Klaus Loewitsch.

The ramblings go on and on about Fassbinder's loneliness, ambitions and the nature of celebrity in such a way as to suggest that Schidor may well be mingling, if not downright confusing, his aspirations and frustrations with those he attributes to Fassbinder. Some of the remarks apparently really were Fassbinder's and suggested for use as narration by him, but it's hard to tell where Fassbinder leaves off and Schidor takes over. At any rate, the method smacks of presumption, and its effect is pretentious. "The Wizard of Babylon" (Times-rated Mature for adult themes, some blunt language) leaves us with the feeling that it reveals more about Dieter Schidor and his dreams of glory than it does its deceased subject.