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# MINI-TAKES



From "The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant."

## THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's thirteenth film made at the age of twenty-six is less a genuine motion picture than a sketchbook exercise by a multi-media director. Conceived by Fassbinder as five acts and four wigs for the beautiful Margit Carstensen, a film like the 1972 *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* deserves the equivalent of a loft showing or of some other form of semi-public exhibition in order to match the spirit in which it was conceived. As matters stand in New York, however, the Waverly theatre has staked itself out as Fassbinder's loft, and it's a wonderful, courageous state of affairs for a commercial theatre to step out of the mainstream and to adopt an experimental filmmaker as a house director all its own. The Waverly, which has introduced many previous Fassbinder films to the paying public, is scheduled to open *Bitter Tears* on June 11.

I have not seen enough of Fassbinder's work to determine where he is going or even if he learns as much from his films as the critics seemingly do. His last Waverly release, *Fox or Fist-Right of Freedom*, was quoted by *Variety* as his 29th film in his 29th year and his latest digression from a career heavily involved in radio, TV and the stage. For my part, there are too many gaps to fill in a judgment on where *Bitter Tears* fits in Fassbinder's career or how it corresponds to his potential; but as a dramatic memo to self in the form of a pseudo-film, *Bitter Tears* does not offend my critical sensibility as much as it challenges it.

Fassbinder's tale of Petra von Kant's tempestuous grief over a betrayed romance tends to juggle rather than to point up its themes. Fassbinder arbitrarily confines the drama to one room dominated by a Rubenesque mural and restricts the cast to female roles in order to surround Petra (Margit Carstensen) with one-dimensional figures of a mother, a daughter, a rival, a servant, and a lover. The five scenes are then more neatly marked off by optical dissolves than they are by the internal binding of dramatic confrontations; and despite all the tracking movements in the manner of Ophuls and all the stark floor angles in the manner of Fuller, the weight of the filmic exercise is carried by screenwriter Fassbinder's words and by the actresses spotlighted to convey them. *Bitter Tears* is thus more of a "reading" than a "seeing;" and, indeed, its text and the interpretive acting carry the brunt of the graphic imagery and violent passions without the flamboyant visuals necessarily correlating on the same emotional plain. An early in-joke in Petra's one-room refuge refers to "Joseph Mankiewicz" (sic), but Fassbinder neither shapes an *All-About-Eve* morality play about a young vamp doing in an established professional nor truly explores a lesbian affair nor examines the pressures on a famous, dress-designing divorcee who has carved out her private niche with a strong feminist viewpoint. Fassbinder is able to unload a generosity of themes without committing himself to any of them; and yet, admirably, he never divorces himself fully from the material through cheap distancing effects. At this period in his career, Fassbinder seems distinctly aware that Petra von Kant's bitter tears are really cold glycerine and that his next project merely awaits the turning up of a calendar leaf.

## THE COMEDY WATCH

This past month, the Museum of Modern Art's special treat in its retrospective on American Comedy has been its attractive grouping of short-reel comedies. So far, prints sought out from archives throughout the world have been arranged into separate programs devoted to Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Fatty Arbuckle, Harold Lloyd, Mack Sennett and Douglas Fairbanks with each program usually showing a screen debut as well as the development of the artist's particular style through his two-reel career. (Specialized programs have been built around silent-screen comediennes and black comics.) The *Our Gang* kids in their rarely seen silent shorts tore up the screen this past weekend, and the present week will introduce Harry Langdon in separate programs on Thursday, June 10, at 6 pm and on Saturday at noon. An extensive coverage of silent features and back-up shorts otherwise continues through the month until the last of the great laugh-getters, Laurel and Hardy, debut in the retrospective on June 27.

Tom Allen