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Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 'The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant' is a strange movie. But not half as peculiar as the real-life relationship that inspired it

Ryan Gilbey • Friday 11 April 2003 00:00 • Comments



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No one needed to teach Rainer Werner Fassbinder how to blow his own trumpet. His 1981 lists of what he considered to be the best German films (a top 10 of the most important, another tally of the most beautiful, a further one itemising the most disgusting) immodestly include many of his own works, while he anointed himself "The Most Important Director in the New German Cinema", consigning Wenders to third place, and poor Herzog to ninth. As it happens, I don't think he was far off the mark in these assessments. But what's striking about Fassbinder's miniature hit parades is that his finest picture has been omitted from each of them.

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, which he adapted from his own 1971 play, is a berserk, angry, funny and exhausting analysis of sado-masochistic power games masquerading as loving relationships. Why, then, is it absent from Fassbinder's top 10s? The answer lies, perhaps, in the picture's DNA. Many of Fassbinder's films were painfully personal works that were rushed straight to the cinema screen before the autobiographical wounds had properly healed; that proximity to undisguised suffering is one of the qualities that lends his films their sting. His personal favourite, *Beware of a Holy Whore*, was even based directly on the traumatic making of the movie that had immediately preceded it (the demented western *Whity*). *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* is something else. It is dressed to the nines in wigs, gowns and lippy, but it remains a naked account of the most significant and destructive

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love affair in Fassbinder's life. His autobiographer Robert Katz writes: "Rainer never challenged the view held by those closest to him that every word in the play was spoken either to him or by him."

The film has its roots in Fassbinder's infatuation with the black Bavarian actor Gunther Kaufmann, who soon realised that the attentions of an increasingly wealthy young film-maker could, with the minimum of reciprocation, prove profitable for him. "Suddenly prosperity stepped into Kaufmann's life," said Fassbinder's collaborator Kurt Raab. "Every wish, pronounced or merely read in his eyes, was granted." Lamborghinis took the role played in most relationships by chocolates and flowers. "There were four in one year, because hardly had Kaufmann wrecked one of these previous vehicles when the next one had to be found."

By all accounts, Fassbinder did not feel sufficiently reimbursed for his extravagances. So when the opportunity arose to shoot a film in Spain, he decided to combine business with pleasure: he wrote *Whity* for Kaufmann, complete with scenes specially orchestrated to relieve him of his shirt. Away from Kaufmann's wife and children, Fassbinder hoped that this access to his leading man's body would continue when the camera was switched off.

The shoot was hell. "Fassbinder would start the day demanding 10 Cuba libres – rum and coca-cola," remembers the producer Peter Berling. "He would drink nine and throw the 10th at the cameraman." The days ran to the rhythms of Fassbinder and Kaufmann – that is to say, like a runaway rollercoaster on rough ground. If the previous night had been a fruitful one, then the following day would be fruitful too. But if Fassbinder had been rebuffed, everyone would pay. After one long, sexless night, the director threatened suicide. "He even went as far as borrowing a razor," said Berling. "But in the end he simply shaved." You can just imagine the crew listening each night for a forecast of the coming day's working conditions; can the metronomic thud of a banging headboard ever have provided so much pleasure and relief to so many?

Fassbinder was nothing if not a man who knew how to spin gold from heartache. So blatant is the autobiographical thrust of *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, that Robert Katz can without fear of contradiction call it "the story, transsexualised into a lesbian love affair, of Rainer's relationship with Gunther." Petra is a self-absorbed fashion designer besotted with her doll-faced model, Karin, who responds only with scorn, boredom or material demands. Lamborghinis are not mentioned, but you get the gist. By the end, Petra has trashed her friends, her family and her crockery, all for a woman who barely notices she exists.

The play premiered in Frankfurt in June 1971, when Fassbinder was just



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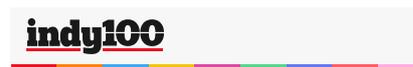


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25, and received lukewarm reviews. By the end of January 1972 he had shot a film version that was slavishly faithful to the play with the exception of a final-act divergence which darkened the tenor of the piece. He had addressed the perils of love and cohabitation previously in his maligned play *Water Drops on Burning Rocks*, which he wrote as a teenager (it was filmed 16 years after his death by François Ozon). But in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, there is a weight of experience and anxiety that was merely cosmetic in the earlier play.

It is a common complaint levelled against films adapted from plays that the theatrical origins are transparent. In *Petra von Kant*, those origins are positively exaggerated. Only once in the film's two hours and three minutes do we depart from the cramped single set – that's during the melancholy opening shot of two cats preening on a staircase.

After that, we are cornered, like the characters, in Petra's garish apartment, with its vast murals of reclining nudes, and its staff of bald mannequins with heads pressed together in wordless and sinister gossip. It is here that Petra, played with brittle regality by Margit Carstensen, ponders her life, and receives a procession of visitors who line up like courtiers paying their respects to a dying queen.



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Hanna Schygulla, Fassbinder's most frequent leading lady, is like a stiletto in the heart as Karin; it is likely that on-set tensions enabled her to relish her character's sadism more than was proper. "If, for whatever reason, it was more important for me to cast her in a smaller role, I literally had to come begging," remarked Fassbinder. "She continued, however, to have bigger problems with so-called supporting roles, especially if Margit Carstensen played the lead." Judge for yourself, then, if those drop-dead looks that Schygulla shoots at Carstensen are examples of great acting, or documentary inserts.

The film is more claustrophobic than *Twelve Angry Men*; think of it as *Three Pissed-Off Lesbians* and you're close. For his cinematographer, Fassbinder returned to Michael Ballhaus – the man with the Cuba libres down his shirt-front. It might seem incongruous that Ballhaus went on to work with Martin Scorsese after completing 14 films for Fassbinder: what do the roaming spectacles of *GoodFellas* and *Gangs of New York* have in common with this airless torture chamber? More than you might think. Ballhaus's camera finds depth in Petra's dungeon. He examines its dimensions, magnifying them, distorting them – at one point, the white

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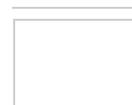
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shagpile occupies half the screen, with Petra relegated to the top half of the frame, where she cries into her gin. His compositions emphasise the penal topography of her apartment, and her life.

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant was well-liked; even *Variety* thawed out, commending it as "very human," before reminding readers that it contained "quite a bit of lesbian love, yet... is never disgusting." It's the film that got me hooked on Fassbinder, and the work of his to which I have most frequently returned. But I had always found it a traumatic undertaking, every bit as oppressive as Godard's *Le Mépris*, perhaps because I first saw it whilst in a relationship that I ached to escape, and in which I could discern shades of Petra and Karin. But I see now that the film can alter with the viewer's state of mind. And can even concede that it has its fun side. It would not be inappropriate, for instance, to stage a *Petra von Kant* party: simply cram the house with mannequins, invite a few of your bitchiest friends, and sink a double Cuba libre every time Petra changes her wig.

'The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant' is screening on Sunday and Wednesday at the National Film Theatre, as part of the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival



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