

SCREEN: BY FASSBINDER, 'BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ'

Following are excerpts from a review by Vincent Canby that appeared in The New York Times of July 10, 1983. The film opens today at Lincoln Plaza Cinema and Vandam Theater.

THE New York theatrical premiere of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Berlin Alexanderplatz," the late German director's masterly, 15 1/2-hour television adaptation of Alfred Döblin's epic 1929 novel of postwar Berlin, stands to become one of the year's most important cinema events. Its importance goes far beyond the Fassbinder career, though we must now reevaluate that career in light of "Berlin Alexanderplatz," a 1980 work that has the effect of being the coda we did not see in Fassbinder's final film, the lamentable "Querelle."

When it was shown in Germany, "Berlin Alexanderplatz" was in 13 segments, totaling 13 1/2 hours, plus a two-hour epilogue. At the Lincoln Plaza Cinema it will be more or less parceled out to the public in three-hour chunks over a five-week period.

Totally impractical - at least from any levelheaded business point of view - is the way in which I saw the film, that is, in two sections, one lasting seven and a half hours, the other eight, on successive days.

In "Berlin Alexanderplatz" Fassbinder has created a huge, magnificent melodrama that has the effective shape of a film of conventional length. There's never before been anything quite like it, possibly because no film maker of comparable stature has ever tried to work on such a grand scale, with the exception of Erich von Stroheim when he attempted to realize his vision of "Greed."

Throughout his short but spellbinding career - more than 30 features between 1969 and 1982 - Fassbinder concentrated on films that reflected his own idiosyncratic visions, while occasionally putting his talent in the service of the works of others, most successfully in his adaptations of Theodor Fontane's "Effi Briest" and Vladimir Nabokov's "Despair," based on an English-language

screenplay by Tom Stoppard. It's in this small group of adaptations that "Berlin Alexanderplatz" belongs, towering above all of the others.

"Berlin Alexanderplatz" is a seriocomic, two-volume epic about the life, death and salvation of one Franz Biberkopf, a former transport worker who, when first met, is leaving prison after a four-year term for having beaten to death his prostitute-mistress in a drunken fury. The time is 1927 and Franz, a hulking, self-confident fellow given to sudden rages and quick remorse, makes a vow to himself to remain "decent."

It's not easy. There are no jobs open to him. For a while, he sells tie- clips on the street, becomes a vendor of the National Socialist newspaper "The People's Observer" though he has no use for the Nazis, flirts with anarchism and finally becomes involved with a mob of crooks - comic but deadly parodies of the crooks in early Fritz Lang movies.

Fassbinder adds at least one important character and changes the tone of several others but otherwise sticks closely to the D'oblin novel, in which Franz, moving from one mistress to the next, getting into one scrape after another, blames fate for his troubles instead of recognizing the rottenness of the world and double-crossing friends for what they are.

In the film's apocalyptic finale, Franz, mad as a hatter, has a long dialogue with Death, comparable to a jazzy sort of Dostoyevsky vision, in which Death lectures Franz on the need to look with his eyes and see, to listen with his ears and hear. In attempting to be "strong" and "decent," says Death, Franz has remained naive without being innocent.

As Death talks to Franz in New Testament terms, the movie also makes associations between Franz and Jeremiah, Job and Abraham. Then, like Christ, Franz dies and is resurrected in the person of someone who looks exactly like Franz Biberkopf and has his papers in his pocket.

At the center of the film is the remarkable performance of Gunter Lamprecht as Franz. He is a large, doughy-looking fellow with small eyes, a big stomach and a certain sweetness that makes understandable the loyalty he inspires in the series of women who live with him. Mr. Lamprecht must rant, rave, laugh crazily, booze, brawl and never - not for a minute - be ridiculous while behaving in ridiculous ways.

Almost as important to the film is Gottfried John, a tall, lanky man whose features look to have been carved out of wood, who plays Reinhold, a pathological

killer and stuttering ladies' man whom Franz persists in considering his very best friend.

Fassbinder has surrounded Mr. Lamprecht and Mr. John with virtually all of the members of his great stock company, whose familiar faces on this screen give the film the manner of a grand finale. They include Brigitte Mira, Irm Hermann, Ivan Desny, Volker Spengler, Udo Kier and, especially, three actresses who are identified with the director's greatest work.

Hanna Schygulla ("Maria Braun") is radiant - again - as the high-class prostitute and former mistress of Franz who continues to watch over him; Elisabeth Trissenaar ("The Stationmaster's Wife," "In a Year of 13 Moons") is one of Franz's more pliant mistresses, and Barbara Sukowa ("Lola") is nothing less than superb as Mieke, a streetwalker, years younger than Franz, whose love for him prompts him to commit what becomes a mortal sin and leads to her death. Miss Sukowa gives a performance worthy of the young Lillian Gish.

"Berlin Alexanderplatz" was made into a German film in 1931 by Piel Jutzi. Mordaunt Hall, in reviewing Jutzi's "Berlin Alexanderplatz" in the May 11, 1933, issue of The New York Times, noted that it was "an adaptation of Alfred D'oblin's two-volume novel, which is said to have been among those tossed to the flames yesterday in Berlin." Yet it survives, triumphantly. Fassbinder's Coda

BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ , a German film directed and written by Rainer Werner Fassbinder; from the novel "Berlin Alexanderplatz" by Alfred D'oblin; director of photography, Xaver Schwarzenberger; edited by Juliane Lorenz; music by Peer Raben; produced by Peter Martheshmeimer; released by Teleculture Films. At Lincoln Plaza Cinema, Broadway between 62d and 63d Streets, and Vandam Theater, 15 Vandam Street. Running time: 15 hours, 21 minutes. This film has no rating. Franz Biberkopf Gunter Lamprecht Eva Hanna Schygulla Mieke Barbara Sukowa Reinhold Gottfried John Lina Elisabeth Trissenaar Frau Bast Brigitte Mira Minna Karin Baal Ida Barbara Valentin Herbert Virchow Roger Fritz Meck Franz Buchreiser
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