

Querelle: The Last of Fassbinder

by John W. Rowberry

"Finally — there's no getting away from him — Fassbinder rides again in Kamikaze 1989. Through the pottiest of comic strip plots, the Falstaff of European Filmdom shows what a career he could have carved for himself as an actor. . . And what other movie director or actor would have left as his swansong on-screen image — as the end credits roll — the picture of himself trying to fuck the poster of the first American astronaut on the moon?"

— Film Comment Magazine

Since Rainer Werner Fassbinder's death last year, interest in his last three films has risen to a near fever pitch. The international film community clamors to insure that Fassbinder's fans will get a heavy dose of the German's talents. *Lola* and *Veronika Voss* have done well in general art house release across the country; *Querelle*, the last of Fassbinder's completed films, will soon follow. (The film is currently playing at the Varsity in Chapel Hill — Ed.)

These films are only three out of the more than forty films the openly gay German film director made in just thirteen years. For over a decade, Fassbinder has been lauded by film critics for his striking vision. *Querelle*, his adaptation of the infamous Jean Genet novel about sexuality, power and murder, set in France, stands to cause the greatest controversy of all his feature films. While its auspicious premiere at the Venice Film Festival guarantees it will be treated seriously by the international film community, what fate it will have in America remains to be seen.

The film made its formal American debut at the San Francisco International Film Festival in late April. It didn't get the spectacular opening night slot many would have liked -- that was set aside for Franco Zeffirelli's film of the opera *La Traviata* — but it was at least included, prior to the nationwide Columbia-Triumph spring release. Also, it was shown at the landmark Castro Theatre, itself set in the heart of San Francisco's largest gay neighborhood.

Querelle could stand as Fassbinder's masterpiece, much as Pasolini's *Salo* marked a specific milestone in the late Italian film director's career. *Querelle* has been touted as the most experimental as well as the most openly gay film project in Fassbinder's career.



Brad Davis, seen here with the late director R.W. Fassbinder, plays the title role in *Querelle*, a controversial drama based on the classic homoerotic novel by Jean Genet.

Filmed in English with an international cast (Jeanne Moreau, Brad Davis, Franco Nero and, in a bit role, Frank Ripploh, director and star of *Taxi zum Klo*), Fassbinder pulled no punches when it came to Genet's explicit, although nearly surrealistic, expression of homosexuality.

Nero and Davis, who had never worked with Fassbinder before, were faced with roles of sexual candor far beyond anything they had experienced as actors in the cinema before. Fassbinder, in answer to press charges that he was unfairly expecting too much from his cast,

said "I never ask an actor to do more than he is capable of." Moreau, a personal friend of the French homosexual novelist Genet, had the easiest time with her role in the film. The entire shooting for *Querelle* took no more than 24 days.

Everyone involved in the production accepted their roles before reading the script. They all wanted to work with Fassbinder very badly. Moreau was interested in the project itself and wanted her role very much. For her, Fassbinder was a bonus. Nero wanted to do the film from the start, although he had some

trepidation as to what he'd be required to do before he read the script. Brad Davis, who had already appeared in a film with homoerotic aspects, *Midnight Express*, was worried about the nature of his part only briefly.

Subsequently, they have all said that they felt that their roles were very important to them as actors and very important to the cinema. They have all expressed very positive feelings about the film, Davis especially.

In its initial showings, however, *Querelle* is getting terrible reviews. It's getting either

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