

Introduction

Fassbinder: life, film and theatre

Rainer Werner Fassbinder may well have died on 10 June 1982 at the age of thirty-seven, yet the spectre of his biography has eclipsed the forty-two films he left behind, and the rest of the work has remained an underrated footnote to the excesses of his life. The publication, in the same year as his death, of three books by two close associates and an author with whom Fassbinder had worked in various capacities helped to establish a series of Fassbinder legends which have never really forsaken him or his reputation.¹ The biographical interpretation of his work followed and has more or less been a staple of Fassbinder criticism, with a couple of notable exceptions. Psychologizing accounts which include his work more as an excuse for revelations and speculations have been written by Ronald Hayman, Robert Katz and Peter Berling. The new monograph on the artist that was released to mark the twentieth anniversary of his death contains the line that Fassbinder's life was 'identical to his film work'.² The biographical interpretation of his work was not helped in the slightest by a television film, *Ein Mann wie EVA* (*A Man like*

¹ Kurt Raab and Karsten Peters, *Die Sehnsucht des Rainer Werner Fassbinder* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 1982); Harry Baer with Maurus Packer, *Schlafen kann ich, wenn ich tot bin. Das atemlose Leben des Rainer Werner Fassbinder* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1982); and Gerhard Zwerenz, *Der langsame Tod des Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Ein Bericht* (Munich: Schneekluth, 1982).

² Michael Töteberg, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2002), p. 112. Even this book, which addresses Fassbinder's work seriously, dabbles with tittle-tattle and biographical exegesis.

Cambridge University Press

0521855144 - Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre

David Barnett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER AND THE GERMAN THEATRE

EVA), directed by Radu Gabrea in 1983, which highlighted all the worst clichés about Fassbinder's life. The idea of casting a woman (Eva Mattes, an actress Fassbinder worked with on several occasions) in heavy make-up as 'Fassbinder' was shrewd and could have produced an interesting sideways glance at him. But EVA (an allusion to Fassbinder's abbreviated initials, RWF) is spiteful, unstable, wilful, emotionally exploitative, hypocritical, squalid, tyrannical and vindictive. Herbert Spaich, a biographer who does not get bogged down in pat psychological interpretations, called the film 'the height of bad taste'.³ A recent film by Rosa von Praunheim, *Für mich gab's nur noch Fassbinder. Die glücklichen Opfer des Rainer Werner Fassbinder* (*For Me There Was Only Ever Fassbinder. The Grinning Victims of Rainer Werner Fassbinder*), made in 2000, is just another sensationalist account which pays almost no attention to artistic output in the slightest.

To an extent, Fassbinder was partially responsible for the prominence of his life in interpretations of his film work. As Thomas Elsaesser points out, the 'rumour-machine' was a way of attracting attention, ultimately to the films, and thus creating an audience and a dialogue.⁴ That the film work has been so neglected in favour of scurrilous depictions of a life is nothing short of a scandal.

Fassbinder is one of the great multi-media artists of his generation. His sensitivity towards medium and his ability to understand crucial distinctions between artistic genres led to a sizeable body of work that far outstrips the already astonishing tally of forty-two films. He was at home in the cinema, on television and in the theatre, yet the last has been much neglected.

³ Herbert Spaich, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Leben und Werk* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1992), p. 115. In this book, all translations from the German have been done by the author unless otherwise acknowledged.

⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany. History Identity Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), p. 10. Elsaesser's book is one of the few major works that refuses outright to engage with Fassbinder's biography as a way into his creative output. The book, focusing predominantly on the film work, is one of the sharpest analyses available.

Introduction

Fassbinder was a playwright, a theatre director and a stage actor. He wrote sixteen published dramas (of which five were radical adaptations of classic texts), two radio plays, and there are various texts, adaptations and fragments which either remain in the archives or have been lost over time. After training at acting school and work as an extra, Fassbinder entered the theatre at the age of twenty-one in 1967, when he stepped in for an injured actor at the small, independent *action-theater*. Its forced closure in 1968 allowed Fassbinder and his team to set up the *antiteater*, which grew to national prominence within a year. Fassbinder was 'discovered' by one of the most important figures in West German theatre, Kurt Hübner, in 1969 and was invited to become an in-house dramatist and then director at Hübner's Bremer Theater. In the following years directing commissions arrived from some of the most prestigious theatres in the Federal Republic. In 1974, seven years after his first tiny role and still in his twenties, Fassbinder was given his own part-publicly funded theatre in Frankfurt. Yet these impressive credentials are overlooked and erased in the critical literature. Mauro Ponzi, who wrote a short, comparative biography of Fassbinder and Pasolini, barely considers the drama work at all, even though both film-makers spent a great deal of time working in the theatre.⁵ Christian Braad Thomsen, one of the great popularizers of Fassbinder's film work outside Germany, believes that we cannot properly understand the drama because it was written for specific actors with specific styles in mind. However, this argument is at best questionable, since it rather renders the investigation of almost any drama, from the ancients via Shakespeare to Beckett, pointless. Thomsen concludes: 'for Fassbinder, theatre was undoubtedly a "film school"'.⁶ Wallace Steadman Watson asserts that 'one can make only limited claims for the importance of Fassbinder's work in the theatre', which he views, like Thomsen, as ephemeral and too closely shackled

⁵ Cf. Mauro Ponzi, *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Rainer Werner Fassbinder* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1996).

⁶ Christian Braad Thomsen, *Fassbinder. The Life and Work of a Provocative Genius*, tr. Martin Chalmers (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 47 and 59.

RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER AND THE GERMAN THEATRE

to its times.⁷ However, such opinions, espoused by authors who are not theatre specialists themselves, are openly contradicted by the major upswing of practical interest in Fassbinder's theatre work in the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century (cf. the table of productions in the epilogue to this book). The plays are being produced and performed regularly and often, both in the German-speaking countries and further afield. Their appeal clearly transcends their immediate contexts and has found resonance in contemporary society.

Fassbinder himself did little to dispel the impression that he was never really interested in the theatre. Filming almost always took precedence over theatre commitments, and after the acclaimed production of Claire Luce Boothe's *The Women as Frauen in New York* at the Schauspielhaus Hamburg in 1976, he was never to work in a theatre again. Yet these facts belie a more active engagement. Fassbinder was never afraid of revealing his debt to his experiences in the theatre, even though they were usually couched in terms that viewed them as secondary to his film achievements. In 1971/2 he said the theatre had taught him 'how to work with actors and how to tell a story'.⁸ By 1974 he explained how dearly he valued the depths of relationships developed over a rehearsal period in a theatre: when he worked on the film *Martha* with Karlheinz Böhm, everything went swimmingly. But after seven weeks of work on *Hedda Gabler* at the Theater der freien Volksbühne in Berlin, the emergence of complexity and 'chasms' in his relationship with the actor was 'absolutely central'.⁹ Even in an interview in which he said he was never really that interested in theatre and would never direct another play again, Fassbinder added a few pages later that he *would* consider returning there to direct a play more like a film, 'concretely, directly, together with people who were

⁷ Wallace Steadman Watson, *Understanding Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Film as Private and Public Art* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), p. 57.

⁸ Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Die Anarchie der Phantasie. Gespräche und Interviews*, ed. Michael Töteberg (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Introduction

interested and affected by it'.¹⁰ Fassbinder went on to stage *Frauen in New York* a few months after the interview and hatched various plans to return to the theatre in the last seven years of his life. These plans ultimately came to nothing.

Where theatre *is* mentioned in the longer studies, it is almost exclusively presented with factual inaccuracy or other material error. Although such mistakes are usually minor – a wrong date, a failure to understand the boundary between Fassbinder's work at Munich's *action-theater* and the *antiteater* – they betray the fact that almost no concerted work has been done on the history of his theatrical activities. Even Joanna Firaza, who has written and published a doctoral dissertation on Fassbinder's dramas, is reliant on other people's accounts and, although she offers many interesting and important insights into the texts and their contexts, she displays a palpable lack of knowledge of the original productions themselves.¹¹

The second problem in the existing literature on Fassbinder's theatre concerns theatrical aesthetics and their deployment by critics. For the most part, Fassbinder is portrayed as an Artaudian, a sensual, irrationalist director, fascinated by the unsayable in performance. Fassbinder's interest in Artaud is well documented: Artaud provides the epigraph to the much-misunderstood film *Satansbraten* (*Satan's Brew*) in 1976, is recited by Fassbinder as a voice-over in his only documentary, *Theater in Trance* (1981), and the film *Despair* (1977) is dedicated to him, Van Gogh and Unica Zürn. Such a view was pioneered by Michael Töteberg in an article in which he argues that the *action-theater* was 'the Munich branch of the Living Theatre'.¹² Although he suggests that Fassbinder's aesthetic is somewhere between Artaud and Brecht, his belief that the *action-theater* owed much of its energy to the ecstatic revolutionaries from America owes much to one

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 76 and 80.

¹¹ Cf. Joanna Firaza, *Die Ästhetik des Dramenwerks von Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Die Struktur der Doppeltheit* (Frankfurt/Main et al.: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 11, 20–5 or 112, for example.

¹² Michael Töteberg, 'Das Theater der Grausamkeit als Lehrstück. Zwischen Brecht und Artaud: Die experimentellen Theatertexte Fassbinders', *Text und Kritik*, 103 (1989), pp. 20–34, here p. 22.

RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER AND THE GERMAN THEATRE

production, *Antigone*, in which Fassbinder stepped in for an injured actor midway through the run. Non-specialists have championed the Artaudian Fassbinder and dismissed a Brechtian influence. Jane Shattuc attempts to historicize the assertion by claiming Brecht was part of the 'established left' and therefore not such an oppositional figure, although this was not really the case in the late 1960s.¹³ There had been a 'Brecht boycott' in the Federal Republic which had followed the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Elsewhere, critics are keen to follow Fassbinder himself on Brecht. In an interview of 1971, Fassbinder associated Brecht with coldness and abstraction, whereas he preferred the Hungarian Ödön von Horváth, who was more concerned with relationships between everyday people.¹⁴ In 1975 Fassbinder elaborated on this position, when asked about Brecht's influence. He believed he had been influenced

as much as anybody in Germany has been influenced by Brecht, but not especially . . . What's important to me and everyone else is the idea of alienation¹⁵ in Brecht, and my films have the character of the Brecht didactic pieces. But they are not so dry as the *Lehrstück* ['the learning play']. That's the thing that disturbs me about Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, the dryness; they have no sensuality.¹⁶

¹³ Jane Shattuc, *Television, Tabloids and Tears. Fassbinder and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995), p. 87.

¹⁴ Christian Braad Thomsen, 'Conversations with Rainer Werner Fassbinder', in Laurence Kardish (ed.), in collaboration with Juliane Lorenz, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), pp. 85–9, here p. 88.

¹⁵ 'Alienation', the mistranslated *Verfremdung* of Brecht, is better rendered as 'defamiliarization', making the familiar strange and thus stimulating curiosity. This study will prefer the latter rendering.

¹⁶ Quoted in Klaus Bohnen, "'Raum-Höllen" der bürgerlichen Welt. "Gefühlsrealismus" in der Theater- und Filmproduktion Rainer Werner Fassbinders', in Gerhard Kluge (ed.), *Studien zur Dramatik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1983), pp. 141–62, here p. 156. The interview originally appeared in English in the magazine *Film Comment*, November/December 1975, p. 14.

Introduction

The 'dry' or 'cold' Brecht discussed here is used as a brickbat by critics against Brecht the theorist when addressing his part in Fassbinder's development. I shall be returning to Brecht and his role in Fassbinder's theatre practice in chapter 2, and will be exploring a different, more sensual interpretation of Brecht.

Fassbinder and the West German theatre

We see, then, that in the various histories of Fassbinder and his work, the dramatist and theatre director receive fairly short shrift. And even when commentators do consider the drama, the analysis lacks the edge of primary research. What is left unwritten is the remarkable climb of a minor actor from a small role in a little-known theatre's production of a Greek classic to a figure of great stature within the West German theatre system. At the peak of his directing career, Fassbinder was offered contracts at some of the most important theatres in Germany by some of the most innovative *Intendanten*¹⁷ and was finally entrusted with his own experimental theatre before he was thirty. Equally exceptional is the fact that in this brief seven-year period, Fassbinder had also made over twenty-one feature-length films for cinema and television. Although this book is exclusively dedicated to Fassbinder's work in the theatre, it should be clear to those familiar with the films that Fassbinder's aesthetics owe a great deal to a sense of artifice, or theatricality. This quality arose from his extensive experience of the theatre, which engaged his creative focus for a full and intensive year and a half before he made his first feature. Fassbinder was acutely sensitive to the differing demands of a medium, something he exhibits at the age of twenty-one: 'In the world of television, I am most interested in the possibilities afforded by the TV film, whose fundament is not theatre plays but solely texts written for the possibilities

¹⁷ The term is untranslatable but broadly means 'artistic directors'. However, these are the people who run and shape the theatres in German-speaking countries and consequently have powers that transcend the more demarcated job title of 'artistic director'.

RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER AND THE GERMAN THEATRE

of the television.¹⁸ Klaus Ulrich Miltz argues that new media are 'not born into an empty world', and that the new medium pressurizes the old, so that the old must learn from the new.¹⁹ Fassbinder did not mistake the theatre for a cinema or a television set, but engaged with all three to generate new forms of theatre and performance.

In addition to Fassbinder's work as a director, I shall be examining the plays themselves, the conditions of their production and their contribution to a post-Brechtian theatre. Fassbinder's dramas have been treated in scholarship, but only with a limited focus on a small number of works, and then with little, if any, discussion of Fassbinder's approach to theatrical production or direction. Shorter, article-length criticism is mainly textual rather than dramaturgical. Only Firaza has dedicated a whole book to Fassbinder's drama, but even she has not quite delivered the promise of her study's title, namely an aesthetics.

A closer examination of the oeuvre reveals something far more interesting than the literary quality of the texts or their relationships to various genres. Firaza notes that heterogeneity is the only unifying factor in Fassbinder's drama.²⁰ The playwright paces impatiently from style to style, playing with the possibilities of one before moving onto another in his next play. He takes up the *Volksstück* (a genre discussed in chapter 1), the melodrama, the experimental play, the burlesque, satire and the radical adaptation. Yet even the concept of genre is problematic. As Benjamin Henrichs points out, Fassbinder's works are all 'bastards of form'.²¹ The theatre imports ideas from the cinema, and provincial perspectives from his native Bavaria are seen through the lens of America. Each play demonstrates a new approach,

¹⁸ Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 'Wie stelle ich mir meine zukünftige Berufstätigkeit vor?', in *Filme befreien den Kopf*, ed. Michael Töteberg (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 123.

¹⁹ Klaus Ulrich Miltz, *Media Interplay in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's Work for Theatre, Cinema and Television* (unpublished PhD thesis: University of Edinburgh, 2000), p. ii.

²⁰ Firaza, *Die Ästhetik des Dramenwerks*, p. 13.

²¹ Benjamin Henrichs, 'Fassbinder, Rainer Werner. Oder: immer viel Trauer dabei', *Theater heute*, Sonderheft 1972, pp. 69–70, here p. 70.

Cambridge University Press

0521855144 - Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre

David Barnett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

an alternative perspective, a fresh consideration. However, at the very heart of Fassbinder's drama is a fascination with language as a social phenomenon. The ability, but more often, inability to communicate, the violence exerted through language, and the dependencies language creates are investigated through a kaleidoscope of forms.

Fassbinder's work in the theatre is not solely of interest within the man's development as an artist. His career in the theatre allows us to explore the West German theatre system itself. Fassbinder's career takes us through all the major crises and debates that surround the most subsidized theatre in Europe. The *Kellertheater* scene that flourished in post-war Germany was a direct challenge to the conservative, stagnant, yet well-funded theatres that were still the norm in Germany at the time. In a Germany that was both facing up to its catastrophic past and looking to forms of art that challenged bourgeois concepts of literature and theatre, smaller private theatres were starting to offer aesthetic competition. That Fassbinder's association with the *antiteater* gained it a national profile, distinguished the company in that it was able to offer an alternative not only to its own more immediate rivals in Munich, but to the state-supported theatres as well. The success of the *antiteater* generated an interest in Fassbinder and his approaches to production that was to channel him into the system itself: Kurt Hübner, one of the most innovative *Intendanten* in Germany, engaged Fassbinder as a playwright and later as a director at the publicly funded theatre in Bremen. This came at a time when more adventurous *Intendanten* were seeking a new kind of theatre, one which called into question the orthodoxies of the older generation and their conservative conceptions of theatre. The *Regietheater* ('directors' theatre') that was taking off in the late 1960s became a haven for Fassbinder and his radical ideas on staging. Once established as a theatre director in his own right, Fassbinder was left to deal with one further issue that had dominated West German theatre politics ever since the student revolts of 1968: *Mitbestimmung* ('collective decision-making'). Fassbinder's period as the head of the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt was in many ways his theatrical Waterloo. The challenge of running a theatre under the principles of collectivity was untenable, and his initial enthusiasm and subsequent disenchantment

Cambridge University Press

0521855144 - Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre

David Barnett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER AND THE GERMAN THEATRE

mark the end of an era in the theatre history of the Federal Republic. Fassbinder thus presents himself as an important figure in all the major debates surrounding the post-war theatre's problematic metamorphosis from the polite pastime of the middle classes into a more inclusive, more experimental and more exciting institution.

This book is thus a contribution to a much-neglected area of Fassbinder's working biography, a critical examination of both Fassbinder's drama and its production, and an exploration of West German cultural politics at a time of great crisis and upheaval, around and in the wake of the turbulent year of 1968. I have consulted the broad source material in a bid to gain a clearer idea of the productions and their rehearsal and performance styles. Extensive interviews were also undertaken with almost all the central figures from Fassbinder's early days in the theatre in Munich and the later period, including actors, ensemble members and theatre critics who followed his progress. I have also visited the archives of the major theatres and cities in which Fassbinder worked after his auspicious beginnings in Munich. The evidence from all the sources is contradictory, and the reader should understand that each description of a production is provisional. I have, however, tried to give as helpful, critical and authoritative a set of sketches as possible in order to establish the methods and the principles of Fassbinder's work in the theatre.

In the first chapter I shall be discussing the *action-theater*, the collective Fassbinder joined as a stand-in before establishing himself as one of its central members. The theatre will be considered within the context of both a highly subsidized theatre system and the network of *Kellertheater* in the Munich of the late 1960s. The second chapter moves on to deal with the *antiteater* and its distinctive performance style. The central importance of the 1968 student movement and its effects on cultural paradigms will be compared to and contrasted with the *antiteater's* practices. Chapter 3 charts Fassbinder's uneasy integration into the system, and his various commissions to direct at the cream of the German theatres. Here the ideas of the *Regietheater* will be explored and Fassbinder's place as a director will be assessed. The fourth chapter will then consider Fassbinder's spell as the head of the Theater am Turm (TAT) together with the attendant difficulties of a