

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Die Ehe der Maria Braun

Credits:

Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Producer: Michael Fengler

Screenplay: Peter Märtescheimer and Pea Frölich from an idea
by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Cast: Hannah Schygulla (Maria), Klaus Löwitsch (Hermann), Ivan Desny
(Oswald), Gottfried John (Willi), Gisela Uhlen (mother), Günter Lamprecht
(Wetzel), Elisabeth Trissenaar (Betti), Liselotte Eder (Mrs. Ehmke), Hark
Bohm (Senkenberg), Volker Spengler (Schaffner), Michael Ballhaus
(lawyer), Rainer Werner Fassbinder (black marketeer)

Production: Shot in Coburg and Berlin, January–March 1978

Running time: 120 minutes

Biography

Rainer Werner Fassbinder was born on May 31st, 1945 in Bavaria. His parents divorced in 1951 and he continued to live with his mother in Munich, where she worked as a translator. From 1961 to 1963 he lived with his father in Cologne, working in the latter's real estate business.

From 1963 to 1966, Fassbinder took private acting lessons and attended evening courses in an acting school in Munich. In 1966 and again in 1967 he applied for entrance to the *German Film and Television Academy in Berlin* (and was rejected both times). In 1966 he also began acting and directing in the *Action Theater* in Munich as well as directing his first short film, "This Night", which is now lost.

Some commentators have grouped Fassbinder's career into three periods. 1969 through 1971 might be considered his apprenticeship and in this time, he directed or co-directed 11 feature length films in conjunction with a group called *Antitheater-X Film*, which consisted mostly of former members of the *Action Theater*.

In 1971 at the beginning of his middle period (1971–1975) Fassbinder dissolved *Antitheater-X* films, and formed his own production company, *Tango Film RWF*. He was influenced by the films of the German-American director Douglas Sirk and wanted to create films accessible to a wider audience. In his final and most complex phase from 1975–1982, Fassbinder created films which masterfully blended private and public themes.

Throughout his career, Fassbinder worked at a prolific pace, completing over 40 feature length films in a span of scarcely 15 years. Many of these films are now considered to be among the best of postwar international cinema. Fassbinder died in June of 1982 a few weeks after his 37th birthday.

Précis – Allen Krumm

People in Germany are craving miracles and cigarettes in 1945. For Germany, the greatest miracle is a rebuilt economy. For **Maria**, it is finding a husband snatched away by war after only "a half a day and a whole night" of marriage. While waiting with unwavering faith ("Why are you so sure your husband isn't dead?" "Because I want him to come back."), Maria is willing to do what it takes to survive. She trades cigarettes to her mother to obtain her mother's brooch, and trades the brooch to a black marketeer in order to get a cocktail dress so she can work in a bar which caters to American servicemen.

Maria rapidly becomes the dominant figure in her family, even after Willi, her brother-in-law, returns from Russian imprisonment with the news that **Hermann** is dead. At the bar she meets/seduces a black American serviceman ("May I dance with you, Mister Bill?") who provides desperately needed goods to the family, as well as providing valuable English lessons to Maria. But when Hermann unexpectedly returns from the dead, Maria cheerfully clobbers the now expendable **Mr. Bill** over the noggin and accidentally kills him. Understandably, the Americans are not pleased to have barmaids killing their servicemen, and Maria is brought to trial. Hermann takes the rap and is sent to prison.

In her own way, Maria is faithful to Hermann, assuring him she will wait and in the meantime live for both of them. She then immediately gets herself hired by a wealthy French businessman, **Oswald**, who promptly falls in love with her, as Maria planned and expected. Oswald and his uptight German partner Senkenberg rapidly realize that Maria is a valuable advisor as she helps them

close a crucial deal with an American. At the same time, Oswald tries to initiate an affair in a traditionally discrete and gallant manner, not realizing at first that he is dealing with a very different kind of woman ("Shall we have another drink?" "No, I want to sleep with you.")

Even after Oswald makes it clear that he is in love and wants her to live with him as his mistress, Maria makes it clear that she expects their business relationship to continue and that she only wants to be paid what she is worth. Meanwhile, she calmly keeps poor Hermann advised of her escapades when visiting him in prison. "It is a bad time for emotions" she tells him, "But I like it that way. No one can hurt you."

Oswald is utterly frustrated and fascinated by Maria, and in a desperate move finally goes himself to visit Hermann in prison ("I wanted to meet the man Maria loves.") Hermann himself is getting a bit irritated by Maria and when she assures him in a subsequent visit that she has "...lived my life for you—for us", Hermann angrily asks the guard to take him back to his cell. A behind the scenes deal with Oswald gets Hermann released early. He leaves a farewell note to Maria and departs for Canada (part of his deal with Oswald).

Maria grimly continues her business career still trying to believe in her own autonomy while growing distant from those who love her such as Oswald and her mother. Fassbinder's fascinating narrative proceeds toward a dénouement that is as unpredictable as Maria herself. For soccer fans, the last seven minutes of the film alone are worth the price of admission.

"The Marriage of Maria Braun" established Fassbinder as a major figure. Its screening at the *Cannes Film Festival in 1978* was a great success and it subsequently attracted great attention at the *New York Film Festival in 1979*. Fassbinder had originally wanted to produce an epic of nearly eight hours, but wisely submitted to the editing and rewriting of Peter Märthesheimer and Pea Frölich. The resultant combination of their script and Fassbinder's directing is a masterful treatment of personal and public themes which powerfully illuminate the contradictory realities of postwar Germany. But Fassbinder's cinematic gift is perhaps best captured in the remark of a critic: "*Fassbinder likes to tell a good story.*"