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Opening Film

DENIS
MÉNOCHET

ISABELLE
ADJANI

KHALIL
GHARBIA

Peter Von Kant

a film by **François Ozon**

HANNA
SCHYGULLA

STEFAN
CRÉPON

AMINTHE
AUDIARD

FOZ PRESENTS



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Synopsis

Peter Von Kant, a successful, famous director, lives with his assistant Karl, whom he likes to mistreat and humiliate.

Through the great actress Sidonie, he meets and falls in love with Amir, a handsome young man of modest means.

He offers to share his apartment and help Amir break into the world of cinema...



INTERVIEW WITH **François Ozon**

Returning to Fassbinder

Fassbinder's body of work, philosophy and vision of the world have always haunted me. His unbelievable creative energy fascinates me and remains an example I follow in my own way of working.

I'd wanted to adapt *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* for a long time, but was too intimidated to tackle a cult film. My desire to adapt this classic of contemporary theatre was emboldened by the work of current theatre directors like Thomas Ostermeier, Krzysztof Warlikowski and Christophe Honoré, who have taken great liberties with classic pieces, reinventing them, desacralizing and modernizing them as they inject their own personal visions.

Self-portrait of the artist

I knew deep down that I wanted to make a version of *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* that I could identify with directly. So I traded the world of fashion for the world of cinema and changed the gender of the three main characters. I always suspected the story was a thinly veiled self-portrait, centered around one of Fassbinder's passionate love affairs. His last companion, Juliane Lorenz, whom I've known since I adapted *Water Drops on Burning Rocks*, confirmed my intuition. In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, Fassbinder had turned his own unhappy love affair with one of his favorite actors, Günther Kaufmann, into a lesbian love story between a fashion designer and her model.

And the character of Karl (Marlene) was inspired by Peer Raben, who composed music for Fassbinder's films and was also his assistant.

From that point forward, my approach to revisiting this work became clear: I would change the character of Petra into a man – *Peter von Kant* – and make him a film director. This would allow me to explore Fassbinder, and myself, through the looking glass. It was a way of betraying Fassbinder the better to find him, and find myself, in a universal tale of passionate love. The story is more relevant than ever in the way it questions the power dynamics of domination, control and submission in the creative arts, the Pygmalion/muse relationship...

20 years after *Water Drops on Burning Rocks*

Water Drops on Burning Rocks was consciously very theatrical, with an ironic detachment reminiscent of Fassbinder's cinema. I wanted to inject more empathy into my version of *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Maybe with age and experience I understand Fassbinder better, the way he sees life, creation and love right down to its most monstrous aspects. Fassbinder is not a loveable filmmaker. His films are not loveable. But I wanted us to feel a wide range of emotions towards Peter. To hate him one minute and find him touching, grotesque or endearing the next. My main reference in Fassbinder's work is his beautiful short documentary in the collective film *Germany in Autumn*. He films himself in his apartment with his mother and his lover, no frills, obliging them to take sides on the social issues in Germany, terrorism... He blends the intimate and the political in the most naked of ways, both literally and figuratively. The effect is at once pathetic, sincere and devastating.



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The adaptation

Fassbinder originally wrote the story for the theatre. He made it into a film in 1972 when he was just 25 years old. He had recently discovered the Hollywood melodramas of Douglas Sirk, and used all the theatrical and cinematic artifices and mannerisms at his disposal to film his play about emotional dependence and the impossibility of loving as equals. In my adaptation, I condensed the text and simplified the sometimes very literary dialogue in order to get us into the story more quickly and create strong identification to the characters. I used a theatricality that was more French, almost "boulevard" in style. There's also a dash of boulevard in Fassbinder's work, but it's more Brechtian, there's more distancing. I wanted to

highlight the emotional power of the text, bring the characters' humanity and feelings to the fore, leave behind Fassbinder's "little theatre of puppets" in favor of flesh and blood characters.

The "bitter tears" in Fassbinder's play and film are artificial, which is what makes them beautiful, both theatrically and cerebrally. But my goal was to try to make them more "real" for today's audiences. I wanted these tears to be shared, not just admired.

Filming a filmmaker

For Fassbinder, the world of fashion was merely a context. Petra's work is not developed or analyzed. We only know that she is successful, that she needs to draw new designs, and that her assistant is there to help her. In my film I wanted to put the work itself – cinema – at the heart of the story. We don't see a traditional film shoot, but I turned Peter and Amir's first meeting into a filmed casting session. Peter asks him questions. He wants to get to know him through his camera. His work is how he meets others, discovers them, elevates them.

Amir reveals himself before the camera, not just to Peter but also to the viewer. Suddenly we see him differently, he becomes an actor, which also makes us doubt his sincerity. Is his story true, or is it merely calculated to move Peter, to stimulate his desire to create? When Peter seizes the camera, his appetite to film Amir is clear. That movement plunges him into the creative desire of Pygmalion for Galatea.

Sidonie is also a variation on the theme of Pygmalion and his muse. Peter loves and hates her simultaneously. "I preferred the actress to the woman," he says. In Fassbinder, the character is merely a confidante; a best friend for Petra to bounce off. I wanted to make her more active, even manipulative. This muse is nourished by the relationship Fassbinder had with his actresses, and that I sometimes have with my own.

"Human beings need each other, but haven't learned to be two."

This is the key phrase in Fassbinder's text, the quintessence of his conception of human relationships. He constantly evokes the impossibility of living as a couple, the inevitability of the daily routine being infected with power struggles, lies, infidelities. For Fassbinder, every aspect of love is oppressive. I've had many opportunities to discuss this with Hanna Schygulla. According to her, Fassbinder was on a quest for a love that was pure, but suffered as he instead encountered manipulation, ulterior motives, pain. *Love is colder than death...* That was the tragedy of his life, and I think it's what killed him, in a certain sense.

In my version I wanted to be faithful to his dark, cruel view of love while revealing the irony and humor in the mechanisms of unhappy desire. I imagined Peter as a big drama queen, always making too much of things. In the Fassbinder film too there is a queer side, with the women overplaying their femininity. Peter is forever drowning in his emotions. He's excessive, overly emphatic. And more often than not, he's high on alcohol or drugs. The trick was to embrace the theatricality of the character without losing the emotion.

Denis Ménochet

Denis, whom I've known well and admired since *In The House* and *By the Grace of God*, was the perfect actor to play this clay-footed demiurge, this fragile ogre, both tough and tender. It was important to me to make his character beautiful and touching, as Fassbinder himself was at the beginning of his career when he acted in his own films, notably *Fox and His Friends*.

Denis threw himself into this character, who abandons himself to melancholy rage and a certain exhibitionism when he brazenly dances the first time with Karl. I initially suggested that Denis button his shirt,

but he preferred to show his chest, immediately embracing his physicality, as well as the metaphorical stripping bare to come.

We didn't prepare a specific choreography for when Denis dances to the Cora Vaucaire song *Comme au Théâtre (Like at the Theatre)*. I just asked him to play drunkenness and despair. He remembered a Fred Astaire choreography, which inspired him. It's that blend of lightness and drunken heaviness that gives the scene its power and emotion.

Khalil Gharbia

While Fassbinder was inspired by his love affair with Günther Kaufmann, I was more inspired by the actor El Hedi Ben Salem from *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, who was also one of his lovers.

I set out to find an actor of North African origin between the ages of 25 and 35. Many refused, fearful the role might hurt their image. So I opened up the casting to younger, more open-minded actors, which turned out to be a good thing, as it allowed me to explore a more innocent, less virile side of my character.

I discovered Khalil Gharbia in a beautiful Swedish short by Jerry Carlson, *The Night Train*. He never says a word in it, but expresses a gamut of emotions with his eyes and unsettling presence. I liked him for his spark and his ability to embody Amir's ambiguity. He had both a virginal naiveté and the insolence necessary for the second part of the story. Above all, he was comfortable in his body and his sensuality, which was crucial for playing opposite Denis.

Isabelle Adjani

I'd always dreamed of working with Isabelle Adjani but never believed my dream would come true. I was thrilled when she accepted, and touched by the way she loved the script – focusing not on her role but on what the film had to say about love, which she un-

derstood.

Isabelle is a fascinating actress, a Stradivarius. You only have to say, “a little more, or a little less, emotion or cruelty” and she gracefully plays the note. For her character’s look, we worked with costume designer Pascaline Chavanne to emulate the 1970s styles of stars like Marlene Dietrich and Elizabeth Taylor. Isabelle likes playing against type, and I think she enjoyed being a coked-up diva and actress very different from her, yet inevitably similar in the eyes of the audience. As with Peter, there are hints of truth in her character. We had to balance irony and vulnerability. From the moment she said yes, I knew I’d have to hear her voice singing in German! So I added the song *Jeder Tötet, Was Er Liebt* (*Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves*), based on the poem by Oscar Wilde and sung by Jeanne Moreau at the cabaret in *Querelle*. Isabelle’s mother was German, creating a nice echo with Fassbinder.

Hanna Schygulla

We got along very well on *Everything Went Fine*, and I was happy when Hanna agreed to return to this story in 2021 as the mother, after having played the object of desire Karine for Fassbinder in 1972. She knew Fassbinder’s mother very well, and although she was very discreet on the subject, it was moving to be able to talk about them with her.

In Fassbinder’s play and film, the mother is quite vain and cruel. I wanted to expand her, particularly in the scene where she’s alone at night with her son, who is desperate to sleep. Hanna suggested the German lullaby she sings to Peter: *Schlaf, Kindlein, Schlaf* (*Sleep Baby Sleep*). It was pretty heady to film the woman who sang *Lili Marleen* for Fassbinder singing now in my film.

Stefan Crepon

For the role of Karl, I needed someone with a striking silhouette and a strong, mysterious presence in the spirit of Irm Hermann, who was unforgettable in Fassbinder’s film.

Stefan was perfect for the role. He has an intensity and expressivity in his acting that allows the audience to project all sorts of emotions on him. When Hanna Schygulla met him on set, she said, “So you’re playing Marlene? You’ll see, not a word, but it’s the best role, the most rewarding!”

Set design and cinematography

In *Water Drops on Burning Rocks* I put the accent on 1970s middle-class German kitsch. Here, I wanted to show the beauty and glamour of those years, as much through set design as cinematography, using lacquered surfaces, reflections and mirrors, and the warm, dark colors of Fassbinder’s apartment as seen in *Germany in Autumn*. We shot on location in the former kitchens of an orphanage in Ivry-sur-Seine, which my set designer Katia Wyszok and I refurbished and redecorated. Director of photography Manu Dacosse and I worked a lot with contrasts and atmospheres to delineate the seasons.

Fassbinder had several periods. His “social” period, during which he churned out “poor” films on meager budgets (often with DOP Michael Balhaus): *Beware of a Holy Whore*, *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul...* and *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, whose small budget is quite apparent. Then came the films that brought him international recognition: *Lili Marleen*, *Lola*, *The Secret of Veronika Voss*, *Querelle...* He finally had the means to lean into what he’d always loved – the Hollywood cinema of Douglas Sirk. For *Peter von Kant*, I wanted to use the color and stylization work that characterized his final period on material from his first period.

A self-produced film

I’ve always been close to the production on my films. Coming from shorts, I learned early on that you need to know what things costs when you’re making a film, and that success is often dependent on budget.

As a student of Éric Rohmer, I was struck by how often he mentioned money in his film classes, evoking the cost of his films and the importance of them being profitable. The New Wave directors understood that the price of freedom – both for the creative work itself and the pace of the creative output – was their involvement in the production of their films.

Despite my awareness of the economic stakes, and the fact that I’ve been coproducing my films for many years, I had always approached filmmaking solely through the prism of directing. For this project – more radical in its form and its economy – I wanted to be held accountable to no one except... Fassbinder! So I decided to produce it myself. This also allowed me to follow his example: rapid execution, short shooting schedule, one set, reduced crew, familiar actors and economy of means.

Producing the film obviously added pressure, but everyone played along, from the actors, the technicians and my usual financial partners. Working directly with everyone on the film in this way gave me an opportunity to see behind the scenes.

A declaration of love to cinema

My film *Peter von Kant* is perhaps more optimistic than Fassbinder’s. Though Peter ends up alone and isolated, his eyes are open to his films, his imagination, fiction. He filmed Amir, he recorded his love. All that suffering was not in vain; it made its way to the big screen. Creation – and cinema – save Peter.

As I imagined this ending, I also thought about a criticism I often hear: “You don’t live, you just make films.” But making films *is* living. Living more intensely, even!



INTERVIEW WITH **Denis Ménochet**

How did you approach this new project with François Ozon?

I started by watching Fassbinder's films. His world is very powerful, almost devouring. I was impressed by its breadth and dark energy, and the importance of the writing in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. I've never done theatre and I wasn't sure I'd be comfortable with all that dialogue. In the end I managed it, but I had to work hard. A play written by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and filmed by François Ozon... It was like going to school!

I also watched a lot of interviews of Fassbinder, and François showed me the short (part fiction, part documentary) in *Germany in Autumn* that Fassbinder had shot in his apartment with his lover of the time. In that raw film, I could see that Fassbinder was both funny and a prisoner of his own intelligence. What he says about his era is always relevant, and at the same time his emotional investment is palpable. Things seemed to affect him more than the average person.

Peter is at once funny, unbearable, endearing, upsetting... How do you make such a multi-faceted character your own?

For starters I had Fassbinder's genius text, which provided all those nuances. Then my job is to live sincerely in imaginary circumstances! I tried to place myself emotionally in Peter's gut, breathe like him, feel things the way he did.

And most of all, I had François directing me. *By the Grace of God* really brought us closer. We're friends

now, we're comfortable with each other. I feel free to make suggestions, he feels free to accept or reject them. We came up with a lot of fun ideas, and we had the luxury of ample rehearsal time to try out different things for the movements, the acting... François gave us an amazing energy and the freedom to explore different avenues. It's surprising to see what he did in the editing. While we were shooting, it felt like we were making a far more theatrical film.

You strip bare for this role, both physically and emotionally.

I wasn't expecting François to give me such a gift of a role, and I wanted to thank him by giving the film everything I had in me. I did not want to disappoint him. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, that there was a reason he'd given me this gift. His encouragement helped me push myself even further.

Working on subsequent shoots, I've realized that *Peter von Kant* was a real growing experience for me. It took me to another level of playing a script like a musical score and diving into the character's feelings. Delving into Peter's emotional state felt like working out and toning my acting muscles.

Did you try to imitate Fassbinder in any way?

Never. I'm incapable of doing, for example, what Philip Seymour Hoffman did in *Truman Capote*. The way for me to get to Fassbinder was through his writing, his beautiful writing, with all its emotion, anger, humor... And this may sound silly, but I like to believe that Fassbinder was with us on that set somehow. During the scene where I dance to *Comme au Théâtre*, which

becomes almost like a trance, several crew members told me they also felt his presence among us.

That vibe also most definitely came from François. His lifelong passion for this director has inspired him right down to his work ethic, the way he unapologetically goes from project to project, unafraid to venture into so many different territories.

So did you draw on François Ozon for inspiration?!

Sometimes in the body language, especially when Peter speaks to Karl. I took inspiration from François' characteristic impatience on the set!

How did you approach the dance scene to the Cora Vaucaire song?

I started by listening to it a lot. It's a beautiful song, and I love what it says. I still listen to it now. And there were stairs in the decor, so I watched Fred Astaire videos and took inspiration from the way he goes up and down stairs, twirls through space... Although in the end, I can't really see much Fred Astaire in that sequence!

That was the scene I dreaded the most. But Peter's intoxicated state (after being drugged up for days) helped me a lot. Then Manu Dacosse's cinematography guided me home, coaxed me into a state of abandon.

I pestered the costume designer Pascaline Chavanne to get me tiger skin briefs for that scene, like the ones Gérard Depardieu wears in *Tenue de Soirée*. That's an actor and a film that really inspired me.

«Human beings need each other but haven't learned to be two.» What do you think about Peter's relationship to love?

At the start, Peter expresses some very fixed ideas about love. The successful director preaches from atop his ivory tower, but he's really just protecting himself. He's utterly alone. And when he falls for Amir, all his tidy theories are shattered! We all have our ideas about love, but when our emotions take over, we find ourselves in relationships that contradict our theories.

When Peter meets Amir, there's a sexual fantasy for sure, but he's also found someone who is as alone as he is, whose life is broken. Beyond the physical and sexual attraction, Peter wants to take Amir in, protect him, be his Pygmalion. Peter falls in love not just with Amir but also with the creature he could shape Amir into. And when Amir ultimately escapes him, Peter is riddled with jealousy. And again, all his theories about freedom in relationships come tumbling down.

Peter is focused more on possession than on love.

Peter himself says to his mother, «I didn't love Amir, I just wanted to possess him.» This too is very beautiful and very true. Homosexual or heterosexual, this is universal. Many people make the mistake of wanting to possess the person they're with. What does it really mean to love someone? I think that's the question the film raises, and the one that obsessed Fassbinder.

What's your take on Fassbinder's cinema?

I love the modern lens through which he viewed his times. It's fascinating. He had his troupe of actors and he was so singular, all while being very influenced by America. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* is a beautiful film. So is *Querelle*, with the Jeanne Moreau song that François got Isabelle Adjani to sing in German. Nevertheless, it couldn't have been easy to work with him, and I think his cinema is quite cruel.

Indeed, *Peter von Kant* isn't as harsh as *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*.

True, *Peter von Kant* is more joyful, in the image of François, who seems to be less dark than Fassbinder. It's also a question of rhythm. Fassbinder's film is quite slow, with sparse editing. François brings the lightness and vivacity that characterize his films and his shoots. If I'd tried to deliver my lines more slowly, he'd have stopped me in my tracks: «We're not making a three-hour film here!»

***Peter von Kant* is buoyed by a love of cinema and jubilation in the acting.**

It was indeed exhilarating to find ourselves in a total autarky on that one set. We were all happy to be there together, especially in the context of Covid and confinement. We wanted to play, to let ourselves go. That no doubt comes across in the film. Stefan Crepon and I were saying we felt like that shoot was kind of a paradise lost.

We also have François to thank for that atmosphere. He surrounded himself with the right people. We were all very available for each other. We looked out for each other. I was especially attentive to Stefan, and obviously to Khalil. It was his first film, and that reminded me of my own first experiences. The films we make are above all the memories we take with us from the shoot. I wanted his first shoot to be as wonderful as possible.

And playing opposite Isabelle Adjani and Hanna Schygulla?

It's so amazing to find yourself talking to Isabelle Adjani about love! There she was before me, excitedly playing her part. I was so intimidated at first. Then little by little, she became a true ally. A fascinating ally.

When Hanna saw me in Fassbinder's famous white suit, she had an emotional moment. It wasn't like seeing a ghost, but it did take her back to a critical moment in her life. I think it's so powerful and moving that she plays Fassbinder's mother in the scene at the end between her and Peter. And she is magnificent.

Peter ends up alone, but he has his memories of Amir on film.

Exploring the theme of love through the prism of cinema is moving, especially right now, with changing attitudes towards going to the movies, falling theatre attendance, the emergence of platforms... I hope *Peter von Kant* will give people a renewed desire to go out to the cinema, go out to the theatres, to experience the intensity of beautiful love stories.



Cast

Peter von Kant	Denis Ménochet
Sidonie von Gassenab	Isabelle Adjani
Amir Ben Salem	Khalil Gharbia
Rosemarie	Hanna Schygulla
Karl	Stefan Crépon
Gaby	Aminthe Audiard

Crew

Screenplay and direction	François Ozon
Freely adapted from	<i>The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant</i> by Rainer Werner Fassbinder
Produced by	FOZ
Cinematography	Manu Dacosse
Set Design	Katia Wyszko
Costumes	Pascaline Chavanne
Sound	Brigitte Taillandier
Sound Editor	Julien Roig
Sound Mixer	Jean-Paul Hurier
Editor	Laure Gardette
Music	Clément Ducol
First Assistant	Marion Dehaene
Casting Director	David Bertrand
Hair	Franck-Pascal Alquin
Makeup	Natali Tabareau-Vieuille
Production Manager	Aude Cathelin
Stills Photographer	Carole Béthuel

Songs

Jeder tötet was er liebt
(Each Man Kills the Things He Loves)

Interprété par Isabelle Adjani

Paroles de Oscar Wilde / Traduction de François Ozon / Musique
de Peer Raben et David Ambach
© Musikverlag Hans Wewerka
Arrangé et réalisé par Clément Ducol
Photo © 2021 FOZ

Schlaf, Kindlein, schlaf
Interprété par Hanna Schygulla

Musique de Johann Friedrich Reichardt
© 2021 FOZ

Comme au théâtre
Interprété par Cora Vaucaire

Paroles et musique de Roland Arday
© Warner Chappell Music France
Photo © 1970 Barclay

In my Room

Interprété par The Walker Brothers

Paroles et musique de Prieto Pedro Joaquin Espinosa,
Lee Julien Pockriss et Paul Vance
© EMI Robbins Calao Inc, Music Sales Corporation et Warner Chappell Music Spain
Photo © 1966 UMG Recordings, Inc

Alle Männer sind Teddybären

Interprété par Barbara Valentin

Paroles et musique de Nick Munro
© Universal / MCA Music Publishing on behalf of Ed. Star Musik
Photo © 1966 Teldec

Du bist mir unvergesslich
(I Should Be Gettin' Better)

Interprété par Bryan Hyland

Paroles de Peter Udell / Musique de Gary Geld
© Universal Music Publishing on behalf of Universal Polygram International Publishing, Inc
Photo © 1962 UMG Recordings, Inc

Paintings

The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian

de Giovanni Battista Caracciolo

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Herbert Pope,
Arthur Pope, Edward W. Forbes and Paul J. Sachs
Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Saint Sébastien

de Pierre-Paul Rubens

Photo © BPK, Berlin, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Jörg P. Anders

San Sebastian

de Marco Toscano

© Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano

Midas et Bacchus

de Nicolas Poussin

Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée Magnin) / Michel Urtado