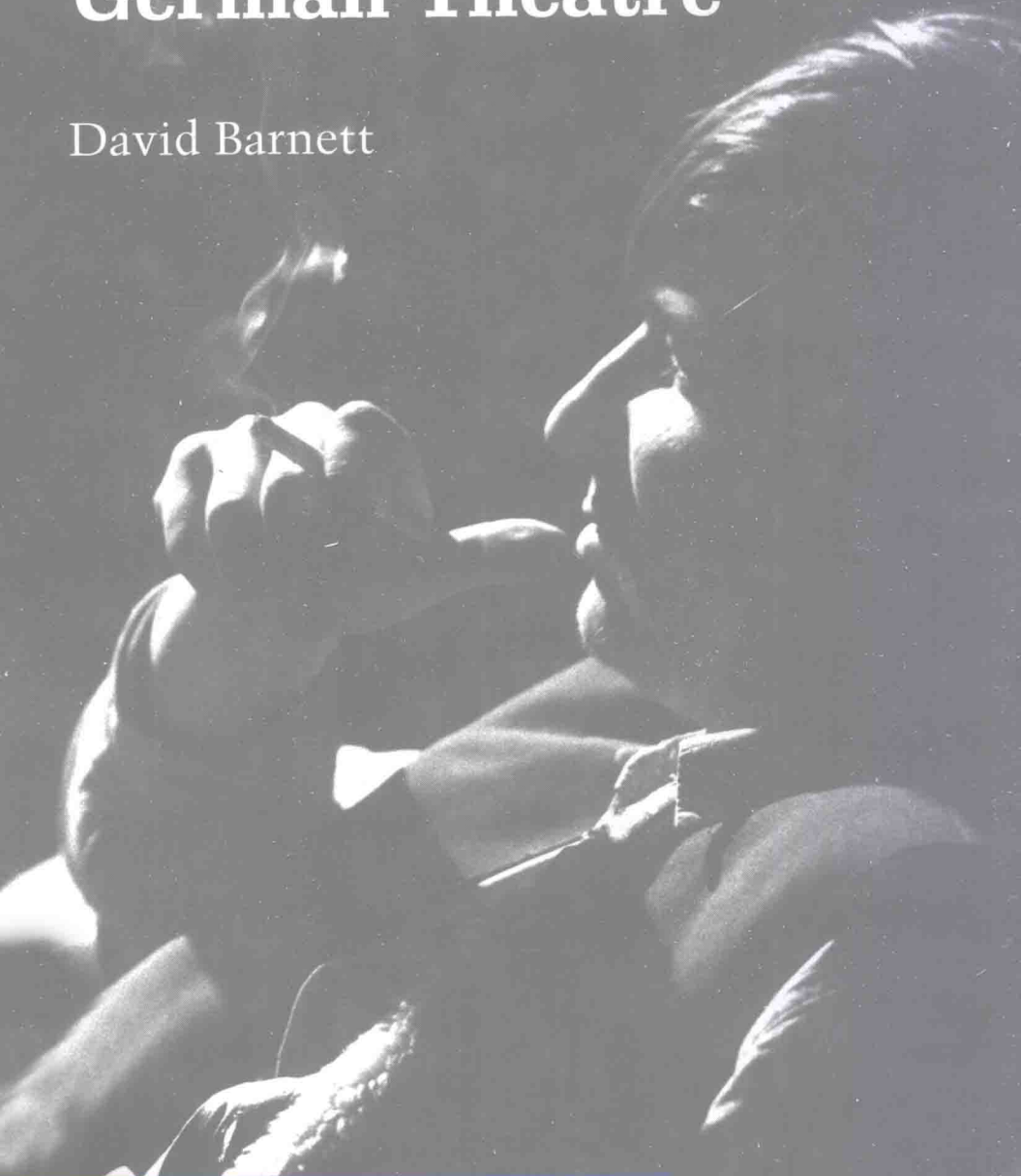


# Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre

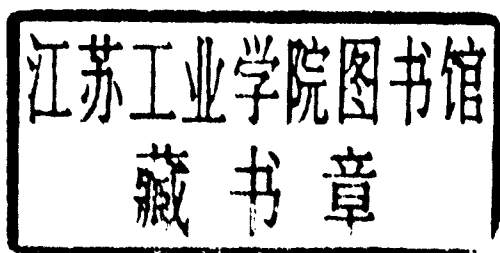
David Barnett



BRIDGE STUDIES IN MODERN THEATRE

# **Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre**

David Barnett  
*University College Dublin*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,  
New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521855143](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521855143)

© David Barnett 2005

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN-13 978-0-521-85514-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-85514-4 hardback

---

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this  
book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will  
remain, accurate or appropriate.

---

**For Georgina**

## Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the help and generosity of a great deal of people. In terms of Brecht's 'erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral' (roughly: 'eat first, ask questions later'), I am most grateful to the Humboldt Foundation, who funded me as a Research Fellow for a year's stay in Germany. I also thank the School of Music and Humanities at the University of Huddersfield for granting me a year's sabbatical and the money to pay for teaching cover.

Juliane Lorenz and Annemarie Abel at the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation have also been exceptionally helpful in opening up and guiding me through the holdings of their archive on many occasions. I would also like to thank all those who gave up their time to allow me to interview them: Harry Baer, Karlheinz Braun, Rudolf Waldemar Brem, Margit Carstensen, Irm Hermann, Hans Hirschmüller, Kurt Hübner, Yaak Karsunke, Gunter Kräã, Renate Leiffer, Juliane Lorenz, Joachim von Mengershausen, Peer Raben, Günther Rühle, Jörg Schmitt, Hanna Schygulla, Heide Simon, Volker Spengler, Eberhard Wagner and Gerhard Zwerenz.

There is also a host of Fassbinder's associates, archivists and others who have provided me with materials which have greatly deepened my understanding of Fassbinder's work in the theatre (and I repeat some of the names already mentioned with pleasure): Wilfried Beege (photographer), Karlheinz Braun (publisher), Rudolf Waldemar Brem, Corinna Brocher (Rowohlt), Denis Calandra (University of South Florida), Margit Carstensen, Frank Fellermeier (assistant to Peer Raben), Steffi Friedrichs (Theater Bremen), Stefan Hemler (LMU, Munich), Irm Hermann, Hans Hirschmüller, Yaak Karsunke (critic),

## *Acknowledgements*

Frau Katzidef (Bundeswehr-Archiv), Brigitte Klein (Theatersammlung Frankfurt), Renate Leiffer (independent assistant director), Juliane Lorenz, Dr Neumann (Stadtarchiv Bochum), Peer Raben, Günther Rühle, Ulrike Schiedermair (Deutsche Akademie der Darstellenden Künste), Bruno Schneider (independent film-maker), Dr Schneider (Stadtarchiv Frankfurt/Main), Heide Simon, Gerrit Thies (Kinematek, Berlin) and Eberhard Wagner.

I should also like to thank all those at CUP who have supported this project. Dr David Bradby has encouraged me ever since I submitted my first proposal, and Dr Vicki Cooper, Alena Dvorakova and Becky Jones have overseen the production process with great care. A final note of gratitude goes to Dr Geoff Westgate, who took the time to read the whole manuscript and offer a vast array of keen insights that had clearly passed me by while writing.

# Contents

*List of illustrations* viii

*Acknowledgements* xi

Introduction 1

1 The roots of the *antiteater* 12

2 1968 and all that 62

3 Beyond Bavaria 120

4 The big time 175

5 Post Frankfurt, post mortem 218

*Epilogue* 251

*Bibliography* 264

*Index* 286

# Illustrations

## Chapter 1

- 1: *Jakob oder der Gehorsam* (*Jack or Submission*) at the  
action-theater, March 1967. © Wilfried Beege page 24
- 2: *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (*Offending or Insulting  
the Audience*) at the action-theater, 1967.  
© Wilfried Beege 26
- 3: *Antigone* at the action-theater, August 1967.  
© Wilfried Beege 28
- 4: *Leonce und Lena* at the action-theater, October 1967.  
© Wilfried Beege 34
- 5: *Hands Up, Heiliger Johannes* (*Hands Up, John the  
Baptist*) at the action-theater, December 1967.  
© Wilfried Beege 38
- 6: *Zum Beispiel Ingolstadt* (*Ingolstadt, For Example*) at  
the Büchner Theater, February 1968. © Wilfried Beege 42
- 7: Fassbinder as Erwin Abel in the Bundeswehr training  
film *Schuldig oder Nichtschuldig* (*Guilty or  
Not-Guilty*), 1968. © Bundeswehr 56

## Chapter 2

- 8: The 1974 production of *Iphigenie auf Tauris* von  
*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe* at the Theater am Turm  
(TAT). © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation 90
- 9: *Der amerikanische Soldat* (*The American Soldier*) in  
rehearsal at the action-theater, January 1968.  
© Wilfried Beege 97



- 10: *Die Bettleroper (The Beggar's Opera)* at the antiteater, February 1969. © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation 100
- 11: *Anarchie in Bayern (Anarchy in Bavaria)* at the Münchner Kammerspiele, June 1969. © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation 112
- 12: *Werwolf (Werewolf)* at the Forum Theater, Berlin, December 1969. © Frank Roland Beeneken 116

### Chapter 3

- 13: *Das Kaffeehaus (The Coffeehouse)* at the Bremer Theater, September 1969. © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation 133
- 14: *Das brennende Dorf (The Burning Village)* at the Bremer Theater, November 1970. © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation 142
- 15: *Pioniere in Ingolstadt (Military Engineers in Ingolstadt)* at the Bremer Theater, January 1971. © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation 146
- 16: *Blut am Hals der Katze (Blood on the Cat's Neck)* at the Städtische Bühnen, Nuremberg, March 1971. © Gerhild Lehnert 152
- 17: *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant)* at the Landestheater Darmstadt, June 1971. © Pit Ludwig 161
- 18: *Bremer Freiheit (Bremen Freedom)* at the Bremer Theater, December 1971. © Andreas Buttman 168
- 19: *Hedda Gabler* at the Theater der freien Volksbühne, West Berlin, December 1973. © Ilse Buhs 171

### Chapter 4

- 20: *Liliom* in rehearsal at the Schauspielhaus, Bochum, November 1972. © Stadt Bochum, Presseamt 184
- 21: Fassbinder's office in the TAT, Summer 1974. © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation 196
- 22: *Germinal* at the TAT, September 1974. © Manjit Jari 198

*List of illustrations*

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 23: | <i>Fräulein Julia</i> ( <i>Miss Julie</i> ) at the TAT, October 1974.<br>© Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation | 204 |
| 24: | <i>Die Verbrecher</i> ( <i>The Criminals</i> ) at the TAT, November<br>1974. © Manjit Jari                     | 206 |
| 25: | <i>Onkel Wanja</i> ( <i>Uncle Vanya</i> ) at the TAT, December<br>1974. © Manjit Jari                          | 212 |

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup> The biographical interpretation of his work was not helped in the slightest by a television film, *Ein Mann wie EVA* (*A Man like*

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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'.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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.<sup>5</sup> 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"'.<sup>6</sup> 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

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

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

to its times.<sup>7</sup> 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'.<sup>8</sup> 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'.<sup>9</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

interested and affected by it'.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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'.<sup>12</sup> 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

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 76 and 80.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 alienation<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> '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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.



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*<sup>17</sup> 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

<sup>17</sup> 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'.