



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Merchant of Four Seasons

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Fassbinder was influenced by a range of aesthetic practices, but this chronicle of the downward spiral of a would-be-engineer-turned-fruitseller casually neglected by family, friends and society is as astute, unsentimental and affecting as *Mouchette*. Fassbinder's conversion to the cause of melodrama was still recent, and the florid flourishes here are still counterbalanced by a minimalist focus on essentials.

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*Der Händler der vier Jahreszeiten* – the title is a literal translation of the French '*marchand des quatre saisons*', which sounds as odd in German as it does in English – marked a turning-point in Fassbinder's film practice, and was the first of his films to achieve widespread recognition and acclaim in Germany; it represented a new beginning after the group introspection and self-criticism of *Beware of a Holy Whore* the year before. Briefly, the collapse of Fassbinder's Antitheatre ideal of ensemble creation led him to a reassessment of his political role as a filmmaker, and to a revision of his ideas on film form and stylisation; *Merchant* was the first result, paving the way for the subsequent TV 'soap opera' *8 Hours Are Not a Day* and the movie *Fear Eats the Soul*.

The most striking difference between this and earlier Fassbinder movies is the immense gain in simplicity and clarity, qualities about which there is nothing deceptive. As the chronicle of a man whose dreams and aspirations are systematically denied him by his petit bourgeois environment, *Merchant* could hardly be more straightforward: its linear narrative (as schematic as the pattern of rejections and exploitations in *Fear*) is a step-by-loaded-step catalogue of the betrayals and humiliations that Hans suffers, while occasional fragmentary, dream-like flashbacks serve to expose the roots of his oppression. The other main change is the nature of the *mise en scène*; the Godardian unpredictability and genre permutations of the earlier films are replaced by a kind of hyper-naturalism, still very stylised in its deployment of the actors and locations and in its use of dialogue, but absolutely keyed to mundane realities. Fassbinder himself calls this a search for a true 'naïveté', by which he evidently means as ingenuous as possible a presentation of his themes; it could perhaps more helpfully be described as a 'primitive' style, in the sense that the word is used to characterise a Douanier Rousseau painting or a vintage Sam Fuller movie.

The fascinating tension between this wish for a 'transparency' of style and the formal innovations intrinsic to the process of realising it – a tension that later

forms the very substance of movies like *Martha* and *Effi Briest* – is here kept very much in check. *Merchant* consequently achieves an extraordinary reading of ‘ordinary’ events, and does so with apparently effortless ease; the fact that it was shot in only 11 days suggests both the strength of the method and Fassbinder’s confidence in it. The film’s theme is double-edged. The sympathetic portrayal of Hans’ suffering is intensified by the character’s own inarticulateness; Fassbinder takes pleasure in speaking ‘for’ a man incapable of doing so himself, just as Petra von Kant’s theatrical outpourings of grief spell out emotional responses that are commonly repressed or understated. At the same time, though, Hans’ eminently understandable withdrawal into resentful silence tends to redirect attention the more strongly on to the other characters, whose actions and attitudes caused his plight, and as it proceeds the film develops an extremely thorough-going critique of petit bourgeois society in terms much less equivocal than, say, Chabrol’s.

Fassbinder sharpens his critique by locating it historically; although he’s not shy of the odd anachronism, it is clear from the clothes and many of the props that the action occurs in the Fifties, and it is no accident that several of the character names – Epp, the lawyer von Schirach – will carry Nazi associations for a German viewer. The ending, with Harry stepping into Hans’ shoes ‘for the sake of the child’ and thus perpetuating the social cycle that brought Hans down, carries the full charge of Fassbinder’s venom, its provocativeness springing from its very bleakness. It should be noted that the inexorable quality of the exposition is sometimes blackly humorous in the manner of later Fassbinder, without in any way compromising the director’s commitment to his stance. Although seen here after several of the films that it led to, *Merchant of Four Seasons* stands up strongly as an all-but-exemplary product of Fassbinder’s theory of political film. And although it evidences a much greater authorial control than many of its predecessors, a major factor contributing to its success is the admirably unified ensemble playing.

**Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1975**

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## THE MERCHANT OF FOUR SEASONS (DER HÄNDLER DER VIER JAHRESZEITEN)

*Director:* Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
*Production Company:* Tango-Film (Munich)  
*Producer:* Rainer Werner Fassbinder \*  
*Production Manager:* Ingrid Fassbinder  
*Unit Managers:* Christian Hohoff, Karl Scheydt  
*Assistant Director:* Harry Bär  
*Script Supervisor:* Ilse Zott  
*Screenplay:* Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
*Director of Photography:* Dietrich Lohmann  
*Lighting:* Ekkehard Heinrich  
*Camera Assistants:* Herbert Paetzold, Peter Gauhe  
*Editor:* Thea Eymész  
*Art Director:* Kurt Raab

## Cast

Hans Hirschmüller (*Hans Epp, fruitseller*)  
Irm Hermann (*Irmgard Epp, Hans's wife*)  
Hanna Schygulla (*Anna, Hans's sister*)  
Klaus Löwitsch (*Harry*)  
Karl Scheydt (*Anzell*)  
Andrea Schober (*Renate Epp, Hans's daughter*)  
Gusti Kreissl (*Hans's mother*)  
Ingrid Caven (*Hans's great love*)  
Kurt Raab (*Kurt, Heide's husband*)  
Heide Simon (*Heide, Hans's younger sister*)  
Peter Chatel (*doctor*)  
Elga Sorbas (*Marile Kosemund*)  
Lilo Pempeit (*customer at fruit barrow*)  
Walter Sedlmayr (*man who sells cart*)  
Salem El Hèidi (*Moroccan*)  
Marian Seidowski (*job applicant 3*)  
Daniel Schmid (*job applicant 1*)  
Michael Fengler (*playboy who tries to pick up Irmgard*)  
Hark Bohm (*policeman*)  
Harry Bär (*job applicant 2*)  
Rainer Werner Fassbinder (*Zucker, fruit wholesaler*)\*

West Germany 1972  
88 mins

\* Uncredited

The screening on Wed 1 Jun will be introduced

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### The Merchant of Four Seasons (Händler der vier Jahreszeiten)

Wed 1 Jun 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 11 Jun 20:30

### Ivan's Childhood (Ivanovo Detsvo)

Thu 2 Jun 14:30; Mon 20 Jun 20:50

### The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty

#### (Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter)

Fri 3 Jun 20:50; Mon 13 Jun 18:10; Fri 24 Jun 20:45

### Taxi Driver

Sat 4 Jun 20:45; Wed 15 Jun 20:40;

Sun 26 Jun 18:20

### The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)

Sun 5 Jun 13:10; Tue 14 Jun 20:45;

Wed 29 Jun 20:40

### Escape from Alcatraz

Mon 6 Jun 20:45; Sat 25 Jun 17:50

### Thief

Tue 7 Jun 20:30; Thu 16 Jun 18:00; Sat 18 Jun 20:30; Thu 30 Jun 20:30

### 71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance

#### (71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls)

Wed 8 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large);

Mon 27 Jun 21:00

### Rosetta

Fri 10 Jun 20:50; Wed 22 Jun 18:15 (+ intro)

### Stranger by the Lake (L'Inconnu du lac)

Sun 12 Jun 18:10; Wed 15 Jun 18:10;

Tue 28 Jun 20:40

### Down by Law

Fri 17 Jun 20:45; Tue 21 Jun 20:45

### Certain Women

Sun 19 Jun 13:10; Thu 23 Jun 20:50; Wed 29 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by BFI Director of Public Programme and Audiences, Jason Wood)

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