

'Half-Blood Prince': dating and darkness

Harry Potter is back in his penultimate film, with limited but special effects-laden action and large doses of teen love

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



PHOTOS: REUTERS AND BLOOMBERG



It's been an exceptionally long wait for Potter fans for this, the sixth and penultimate installment of the series, but fans are unlikely to be disappointed. David Yates, who did such a splendid job with *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2007), is back at the helm to good effect as the mood of the series continues to darken.

As with previous installments, there is once again simply too much story to cram into the two and a half hour running time. Those not familiar with the books, or who have not at least been following the films, are left to flounder without the slightest compunction. Yates dives directly into this new adventure with no preamble, giving up any pretense that this is a stand-alone feature.

The last two years have seen the principle cast grow up a good deal, and *Half-Blood Prince* has a significant high school romance sub-plot that contributes much of the action and most of the humor of this installment. The romantic comedy elements are not particularly slick and are aimed very much at the younger teen crowd with tentative maneuvering, hypersensitivity and arch references to snogging. Nevertheless, while young love is portrayed in broad brushstrokes, Yates has enough real sympathy for his young stars and the tribulations of adolescent romance to pull off this rather difficult act without embarrassing himself or the audience.

Moreover, stars Daniel Radcliffe (Harry Potter), Rupert Grint (Ron Weasley) and Emma Watson (Hermione Granger) have managed to maintain a level of continuity in their characters, giving the audience more of an investment in them than would normally be possible within the relatively short span of a feature film so crammed with other material.

Unfortunately, the teen romance takes up a good deal of time, so that the magical machinations of the wizard world can only be given rather cursory treatment, and the assembled adult cast, with a few notable exceptions, are left with very little to do. Maggie Smith (Minerva McGonagall) is all but ignored, and Helena Bonham Carter (Bellatrix Lestrange) swans around in a caricature of being mad, bad and dangerous to know.

While the heroic trio of Radcliffe, Grint and Watson do a more than adequate job, it is Michael Gambon (Professor Albus Dumbledore) and Jim Broadbent (Professor Horace Slughorn) who give *Half-Blood Prince* its depth, and Yates lingers perhaps a little too lovingly on these two old men of the theater. Gambon has settled into his role as principal of Hogwarts and Harry's mentor beautifully, and this installment allows him to pull out all the stops

as the master wizard who makes the ultimate sacrifice for the greater good. Broadbent, who plays the minor but pivotal character of Professor Slughorn, is perhaps the most enjoyable character to watch, and in his relatively short screen time makes an enduring impression.

A new arrival on the scene is Bonnie Wright, who plays Ginny Weasley, Harry's love interest. Previously she had been very much in the background, but with *Half-Blood Prince* she emerges as a strong and potentially interesting character who is likely to blossom in the final installment. She helps provide the young love aspects of this film with a little gravity, in contrast to Grint's playing his own romantic predicament for laughs, not always with complete success.

Film Notes

HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE

DIRECTED BY: DAVID YATES

STARRING: DANIEL RADCLIFFE (HARRY POTTER), MICHAEL GAMBON (PROFESSOR ALBUS DUMBLEDORE), JIM BROADBENT (PROFESSOR HORACE SLUGHORN), BONNIE WRIGHT (GINNY WEASLEY), JULIE WALTERS (MOLLY WEASLEY), RUPERT GRINT (RON WEASLEY), EMMA WATSON (HERMIONE GRANGER), HELENA BONHAM CARTER (BELLATRIX LESTRANGE), ALAN RICKMAN (PROFESSOR SEVERUS SNAPE)

RUNNING TIME: 153 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: IN GENERAL RELEASE

The climactic set piece in which Harry and Dumbledore delve deep into an enchanted cave in search of a secret treasure, might all too easily be part of the footage for a video game and produced a lack of visceral, as opposed to purely visual, thrills. Yates, who has clearly worked hard to tell a good story, allows himself to get caught up in the special effects and at this crucial moment leaves his dramatic sensibility behind. Having dawdled over the romance, he has to rush through the heroics, giving this highly elaborate set piece a rather cursory and unsatisfactory quality.

For all its faults and unevenness, *Half-Blood Prince* is good to look at, but Yates is clearly putting the pieces in place for *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, which is scheduled for release in two parts next year and in 2011. At the end of two and a half hours, one has the feeling of having sat through an extended introduction to the main event, not altogether a satisfactory way to leave the cinema.

A world of woe and heavy blows

Spot is showing films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose work is riddled with scandal, controversy and painful love

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

When audience members left the theater after watching *The Third Generation*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1979 film about the West German Red Army Faction terrorist group shown at Taipei Film Festival (台北電影節) earlier this month, they were overheard by a staff member grumbling about how terrible the flick was.

Fassbinder's films are known as being something of an acquired taste. After a decade-long absence from the big screen in Taiwan, his works return with a retrospective at Spot comprised of 25 feature-length works, out of an oeuvre of 43 films the director made before he died from a drug overdose in 1982, aged 37. Excepting the 15.5-hour long *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, all of his best-known and highly regarded films are included in the lineup.

"We wanted to do Fassbinder three years ago," said Wang Pai-chang (王派彰), the festival's curator. "But it was impossible to get our hands on copies of his films because every place in the world was holding retrospectives to mark the 20th anniversary [of his death]."

Known to prefer Hollywood genre flicks over highbrow European cinema, Fassbinder first caught international attention with films modeled on American melodrama through which he made critical and often provocative statements about contemporary social ills.

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (1973) is an account of the vicious hostility



A scene from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair*, one of 25 of the German director's films being shown at Spot — Taipei Film House.

and public revulsion an elderly white cleaning lady's marriage to a much younger black Moroccan "guest worker" elicits. *Martha* (1973) examines a marriage in which the wealthy husband tries to re-educate the wife in accordance with his bourgeois ideas and interests; she eventually learns to take pleasure in her own oppression.

The director's trademark subject is fascism, which in *Satan's Brew* (1976) is caricatured through the film's protagonist, a former "poet of the revolution," who resorts to brutal sadomasochism when he suffers writer's block.

Openly gay, Fassbinder made several films that deal with

homosexuality and relations based on violence, exploitation and control. In *Fox and His Friends* (1974), the unsophisticated working-class Franz, a character based on Fassbinder's then-lover, Armin Mier, and played by the director himself, falls in love with a son of an upper-class family and is eventually left destitute and destroyed.

Classified as Fassbinder's bleakest and most personal work, *In a Year With 13 Moons* (1978) follows the tragic life of Elvira, a prostitute and transsexual formerly known as Erwin who finds death is the only escape from life's travails. It is said that Fassbinder made the film to exorcise his pain after Mier committed suicide

on the director's birthday in 1978.

Fassbinder's characters are often desperate for love but condemned to become victims of the powerful and corrupt. In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), a tale of the lesbian love-triangle between fashion designer Petra von Kant, a young model and her maid, each exploits the love of the others. The film, which takes place solely in Petra's room and bears no reference to the outside world, is a fine example of Fassbinder's adept storytelling skills.

Never before shown in Taiwan, *Querelle* (1982) is the enfant terrible of New German Cinema's last film, and arguably his most (in)famous. Based on Jean Genet's novel *Querelle de Brest*, the stylized film brims with archetypal gay imagery in its portrait of an enclosed, decadent realm inhabited by sailors, leather-clad men, criminals, prostitutes and murderers. Fassbinder dedicated the film to one of his former lovers El Hedi ben Salem, who played Ali in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and hung himself in jail in 1982 while serving time for killing three people.

Fassbinder's greatest commercial success, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), the first part of a post-World War II trilogy, which also includes *Lola* (1981) and *Veronika Voss* (1982), uses the female leads to examine social changes in post-war Germany. A meek housewife-turned-entrepreneur, Maria Braun bears witness to Germany's economic recovery that is achieved at the expense of human values. *Veronika Voss*, a glamorous star during the

Third Reich, represents the past that some Germans try to bury, but which easily resurfaces.

Also in the lineup are some of Fassbinder's lesser-known works, including *Love Is Colder Than Death*, the director's feature debut, *Katzelmacher* and *Gods of the Plague*, all made in 1969. These early films are extensions of his work in the theater, characterized by static camera shots, unnatural performances, stylized dialogue, and pale, shady characters played by actors who later became regulars in his films.

The motifs Fassbinder returned to again and again throughout his short yet extraordinary career — loneliness, alienation and frustrated love — may not be for the fainthearted, but they make for compelling cinema.

"In each of his films, Fassbinder talks about love. But for him, love is capricious and uncertain," Wang said.

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: Rainer Werner Fassbinder retrospective
WHEN AND WHERE: Until Aug. 14 at Spot — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家), 18, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段18號); Aug. 6 to Aug. 14 at Kaohsiung Municipal Film Archive (高雄市電影圖書館), 10 Hesi Rd, Yen Cheng Dist, Kaohsiung City (高雄市鹽埕區河西路10號)
ADMISSION: Tickets in Taipei are NT\$170 for Spot members and NT\$200 for non-members, available through NTCH ticket outlets or online at www.artsticket.com.tw; Kaohsiung screenings are free
On the Net: www.twfilm.org/fassbinder

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

About the Looking For and the Finding of Love

A tension-ridden romance between a composer and a singer ends in self-inflicted tragedy, or so it seems, until ... the latter follows her troubled beau to the other side. Fassbinder, this ain't. Curiously mixing chronically challenged relationships with special effects, this German fantasy is more than three years old, one among a miserly lineup of films this week that suggests Taiwanese distributors have elected not to put up any real product against the *Harry Potter* juggernaut. Co-written by *Perfume* author Patrick Süskind, of all people.



Anamorph

Willem Dafoe stars in this 2007 horror mystery as a cop with a line in hunting serial killers, but his latest case proves to be his most dangerous yet. "Anamorph" refers to the shifting of an image as it is observed from specific positions; the psycho version afflicting Detective Dafoe sees scenes of carnage become works of art. This film's humdrum critical response shouldn't be enough to turn away horror fans who like a lot of blood and gristle with their artsy mood. Starts tomorrow.



Bunt

A youngster who lives to deliver hot water in his school finds himself without a purpose in life when new technology arrives, so he looks to the school baseball team for salvation. But there's a problem: He's expected to play for a team whose coach is under real pressure. When a film from South Korea that's more than two years gets a grindhouse release, it's usually a DVD promotion, and this one is no different. Unlike many, however, this one has real heart and deserves a wider young audience. Starts tomorrow.

