



theatre company

# reviews

## katzelmacher

### **CHICAGO READER - MARCH 8, 2007**

By Jack Helbig

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's dark 1968 play, about the clash between a group of small-minded German laborers and a Greek "guest worker," is a good choice for the side project: its small space echoes Fassbinder's claustrophobic worldview. And director Jesse Weaver's motley cast of energetic haters conveys the same nasty, brutish quality as Fassbinder's own ensemble, who also appeared in the low-budget 1969 film version. Faela Stafford is especially strong in the role originated by Hanna Schygulla. There's more honest, soul-stirring drama in this 40-minute play than in many three-hour productions.

### **TIMEOUT CHICAGO - MARCH 1, 2007**

By Novid Parsi

#### CRITIC'S PICK



Katzelmacher isn't subtle. The good thing is, though it might sound counterintuitive, neither is director Weaver's production. In German filmmaker Fassbinder's 40-minute clenched fist of a play, a Greek worker arrives in a German town where the women both want and resent him and the men just resent him; the violent outcome is equally inevitable

and obvious. But Weaver doesn't look for nuance where none exists; painting furiously with roller-size brush strokes, he rightly treats Katzelmacher's characters as archetypes. As we sit on crates and benches dotting the miniscule Side Project, the house lights that we expect to go down never do, while intense-looking, clipped-voice actors weave among us, kneeling and praying at one moment, taunting the Greek at others. Weaver's intimate, surround-sound staging smacks the point loud and clear: Xenophobes, they are us. Inches from your nose, so close you can see the length of the actors' fingernails, a couple is driven to sexual frenzy by the maddening thought of the foreigner's well-endowed prowess, while on a platform, the Greek eats out his German girlfriend.

Neither author nor director carefully dissects the Germans' fear and loathing of the other; instead, Katzelmacher seizes the mob-mentality head-and-blood rush toward violence. When the German men finally beat the outsider, who strategically answers "no understand" to their hostile questions, one of the youths jumps up and starts swinging the lamps that have been burning directly above our heads. A door bangs shut, the lights black out and the clenched fist loosens.



## **Fassbinder returns to its roots**

**CHICAGO TRIBUNE - MARCH 23, 2007**

By Nina Metz

“Katzelmacher,” the stark black-and-white film from writer-director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, was at the forefront of the New German Cinema when it debuted in 1969. Originally, however, it started out as a 45-minute play of the same name, also by Fassbinder.

Here in Chicago, Side Project has resurrected this little-seen drama with compelling results. (The production has an off-night schedule, running Sundays-Wednesdays.)

A story of bigotry, a group of Munich youths – factory workers, layabouts and their girlfriends – greets the arrival of a foreign laborer with overt hostility. (The term “katzelmacher” is Bavarian slang for an immigrant worker with an unchecked libido. Guard your women, in other words. It is no small irony that Fassbinder played this role in both the film and early stage version.)

Jorgos, the Greek emigre, threatens the status quo, especially when he takes a lover (Faela Stafford, desperate and tough), and attracts the attentions of his female boss (Stacy Magerkurth, in a nuanced performance of mixed emotions). It is only inevitable that Jorgos will see his blood spilled.

It is a narrative neither complex nor revealing. The beauty of the film is its matter-of-fact, almost blase attitude. Plus it is soooooo 1960s Europe. The clothes. The fast sex. The post-war malaise.

Director Jesse Weaver (who plays Jorgos) juices up these elements in the Side Project production, as well – the theater has been emptied of its seating, replaced by wooden crates clustered in the middle of the room, or along the walls amid the minimalist set of oil drums and broken sinks. “If it’s made of wood, you can sit on it,” we’re told before entering the space. Traditionalism is thrown out the window. How very Fassbinder.

The environmental seating goes a long way toward giving this production some oomph – you’re literally part of the action. So do the minis and headbands of Marsha Villanueva’s mod costumes.



## **WINDY CITY TIMES - MARCH 14, 2007**

By Mary Shen Barnidge

A cursory look at the history of xenophobia will reveal significant similarities in the accusations aimed by hostile bigots at the strangers in their midst, one of which is typically the amoral licentiousness of the latter's menfolk—a perception invariably coupled with myths of superior sexual prowess. A “katzelmacher” is, literally, a “cat-maker” ( cf. “trying to make some girl” in the Rolling Stones song ), a diatribe connoting the libidinous proclivities of a tomcat.

Closer study, however, frequently reveals envy, as well as fear, at the foundation of such speculations. The German citizens in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's story, adapted by the author from his 1968 screenplay, are a band of blue-collar malcontents, their resentment at their own squalid lives expressed in mean-spirited remarks directed at the owner of the candy factory providing them their livelihood—a CEO doubly reviled for being female and for having risen above her former station in the community. But when the boss lady introduces a “guest worker” from another country into the labor force, a new target for their spleen emerges.

And we're right in the middle of it, under Jesse Weaver's direction for this side project production. A few audience members can seat themselves on wooden benches against the walls of the tiny performance space, but most will be relegated to perching on crates and upended oil drums in the center of the room, side-by-side and face-to-face with the townspeople bent on calumny, for the brief 40 minutes of the play's duration. In so intimate a setting, we cannot help but note the progress of the local citizenry's insecurity or its catalyst's inadvertent complicity in behavior first drawing, and then affirming, the wrath of his fellow employees.

Fassbinder paints a sympathetic picture of immigrant minorities, but he does not sentimentalize them, as the ironic ending reveals. And while the pervasive nature of destructive prejudice may be less shocking to us in 2007, rarely will we find it distilled as potently as in this exemplary demonstration of ensemble playing at its most intricate, with actors crossing within inches of one another ( us, too ) and physical confrontations both violent and passionate erupting barely arm's-length away. Scheduled in repertory with Thief River, Lee Blessing's study of marginalized individuals of another kind, *Katzelmacher* wants only a change in the weather to justify the trek north to Jarvis Avenue.



## **NEW CITY - MARCH 14, 2007**

By Fabrizio Almeida

Comparisons between entertainment mediums may seem unfair, but in the case of “Katzelmacher,” a tale chronicling the day-to-day tedium of a group of aimless and violent xenophobes, they are not unfounded. Indeed, the subject matter served legendary director Rainer Werner Fassbinder twice, for a 1968 stage production (presently receiving a rare American revival at The Side Project in Rogers Park) and more notably for a 1969 film treatment that has since become a minimalist classic of the New German Cinema. Using stark and simple cinematography, a series of drawn-out and static black-and-white shots produce an emotionally suffocating and desperately bleak eighty-nine-minute viewing experience. It’s therefore disappointing that although equipped with the same raw material – the elliptical dialogue is virtually the same in both versions – and despite a claustrophobic intimacy achieved by seating the audience directly in and around the action, director Jesse Weaver’s rushed and unsubtle forty-five-minute revival is a manipulative journey into dark psychological terrain, but one that is ultimately an unthreatening affair.

The problem here is mainly one of tone. Fassbinder’s characters and their amorality are disturbing only if their actions are seen as nothing more than the result of an emotional indifference and disturbing casualness to the suffering of others. It’s the same kind of inexplicable brutality that runs through the unrepentant, baby-stoning chaps in playwright Edward Bond’s 1965 “Saved,” or the HIV-positive adolescent rapists in filmmaker Larry Clark’s disturbing 1995 film, “Kids.” The kids in this play, however, have been misdirected to play their bloodlust from the get-go, pushing way too hard in an attempt to provoke and yet lacking that understated quality of monstrous innocence that characterizes schoolyard bullies or good-looking serial killers.

There are positives. The environmental design is inarguably the best use yet of the tiny Side Studio space, and the motley-looking cast, smartly costumed, is certainly something to behold up-close: Faela Stafford’s piercing blue eyes; Kurt Chiang’s gangly physique; Jodi Morton’s distressingly-jaundiced look and Sadie Rogers’ little-girl-lost dangerous sexiness. A misused, great-looking cast in a misunderstood great play.