

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Delight in a feuding alliance

German film director Werner Herzog met actor Klaus Kinski in the 1950s when, by chance, the yet-unknown Kinski rented a room in the Munich boarding house where the teenage Herzog was living with his family. Kinski had a fit of temper and smashed the bathroom to bits, including tub and sink.

Describing the scene, Herzog is filled with admiration: "You could sift the pieces through a tennis racket. I never thought it was possible that someone could rave for 48 hours."

To be detested by a brilliant person must be terribly flattering. Or so one might conclude from Herzog's cheekily titled documentary *My Best Fiend*, an elegy to the famously egomaniacal actor Klaus Kinski.

The Independent Film Channel is airing this documentary as part of a Herzog-Kinski retrospective that includes broadcasts of three of the five films on which they collaborated: *Aguirre: Wrath of God* (1972), *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). (The Independent Film Channel. All four films are being broadcast repeatedly throughout August. Check local listings.)

My Best Fiend isn't just a hagiography about Kinski as mad genius, although there are some elements of that conventional strain. Herzog goes on and on, in a somewhat self-indulgent fashion, about the manifold ways in which he and Kinski hated each other. Against all odds, it's sheer delight.

Herzog revels in the wiseacre role he has adopted for this comedic dirge. He



Klaus Kinski in director Werner Herzog's documentary about their stormy alliance, 'My Best Fiend'

revisits some of the locations where he made films with Kinski, in order to point out the dozens of places in which the latter had his Tourette's-like outbursts.

While filming *Fitzcarraldo* in the Amazon rainforest, a crew member was bitten by a poisonous snake, and his foot had to be cut off, as there was no time to wait for medical care. Herzog saw what was coming, with the attention shifting away from the shooting: "I knew that [Kinski] would throw a fit now that he was just a marginal figure."

Next, we are shown a clip from *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog's masterpiece about a turn-of-the-century Peruvian ice-seller who attempts to build an opera house in the Amazon jungle.

Foregoing the opportunity to show off his directorial mastery, Herzog chooses a minor scene – all he wants to do is point out the Amazon tribal chief who offered to kill Kinski as a personal favour to the director. "I told [the chief], 'For god's sake, no! I need him for shooting [the film]'. But they were dead serious."

This film includes several interview excerpts where the two make additional death threats to each other, which come across as pure exhibitionism. "I want to

In another scene, Herzog swells with unmistakable pride as he reads what Kinski wrote about him in his autobiography, describing Herzog's "derangement, insolence, indolence, brutality, megalomania. Any further elaboration would be a waste of time."

Herzog comments: "Nevertheless, the book keeps coming back to me, almost like an obsessive compulsion."

Strangely, Herzog claims he helped write those sections of the book. "[Kinski] told me, 'No one will buy this book if I don't say bad things about you.' We went through the dictionary to find foul expressions." The claim is halfway believable, but one wonders who came up with some of the other lines from the book that Herzog doesn't read to us, such as: "I refused to stick to Herzog's hair-raisingly crappy script."

Herzog is tongue-in-cheek at times, but he still does not seem to mind besmirching himself in these compromising stories about himself and Kinski. I was embarrassed by Herzog's grievances, which reveal more about the speaker than about the subject.

Herzog complains that, while filming in the


grievous of transgressions. "He was posing as a nature lover. He was always showing off in this way."

Herzog could not countenance this fake frolicking, and explains his distaste in a scene that resembles a Monty Python parody of a German New Wave director: "There's a lot of misery, the same that is all around us. The trees are in misery. I don't think the birds sing; I think they just screech in pain."

But those who are familiar with Herzog's other films will take such stupefying utterances with a grain of salt. For Herzog's directorial speciality is those scenes that are so tense as to be funny.

When discussing Kinski's death, Herzog can't help showing us one such scene, taken from his film *Nosferatu*. In this scene, Kinski (as the vampire) is struck by daylight and writhes to the floor in a campy, arty fashion: he flutters his fingers gracefully, and his breath whistles through his body as though it were a hollow reed.

This doesn't seem like a reverential tribute on Herzog's part. Yet this is a documentary about two egos, and it seems that Herzog couldn't resist letting the audience know that it is the director, not


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