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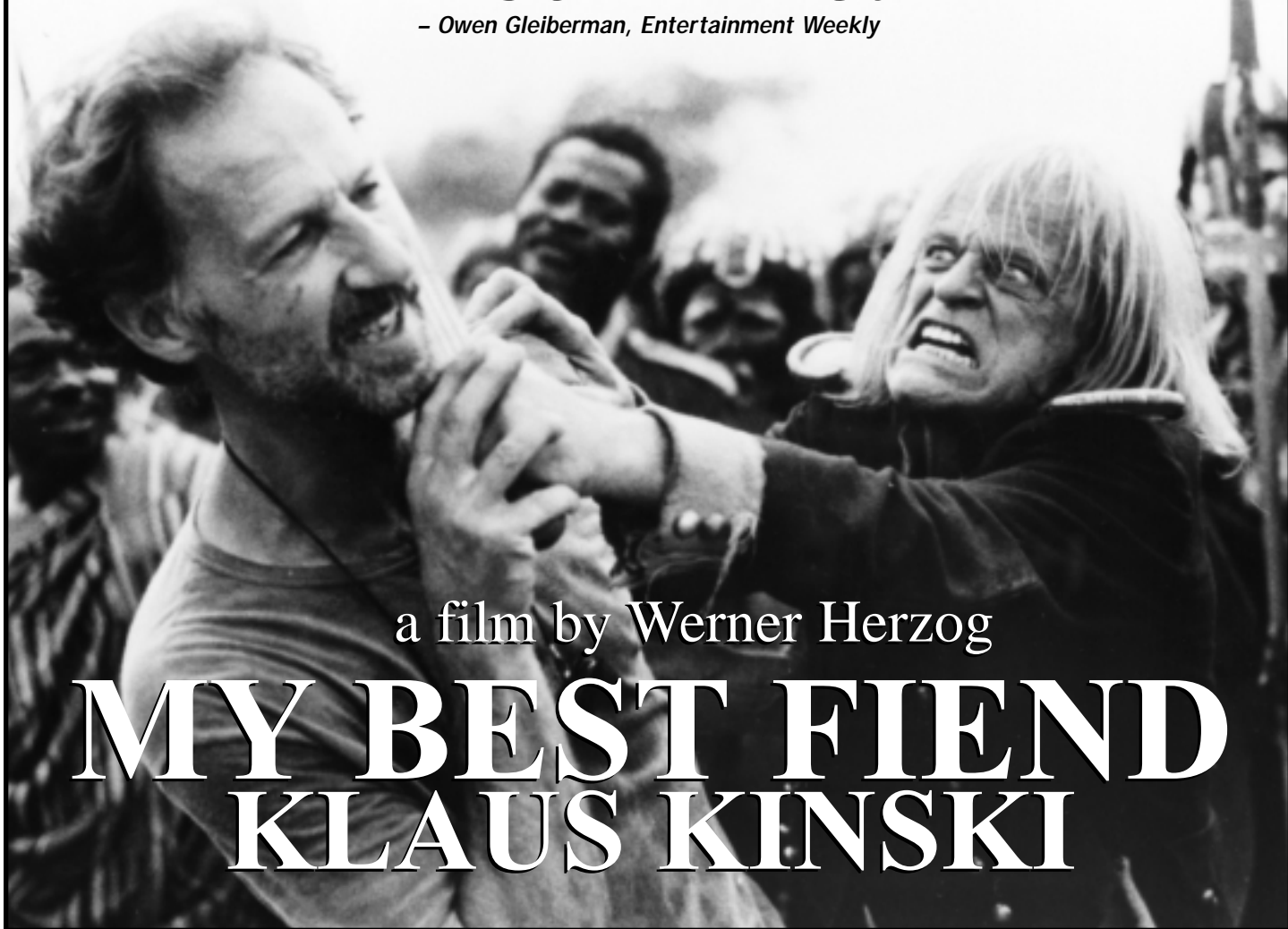
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"FASCINATING!"

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a film by Werner Herzog

MY BEST FIEND KLAUS KINSKI

Werner Herzog's compelling documentary about his turbulent relationship with his great friend and mortal enemy, actor Klaus Kinski - the star of Herzog's *Aguirre*, *Woyzeck*, *Nosferatu* and *Fitzcarraldo*.

GERMANY • 1999 • 95 mins • Color • In German and English with English subtitles

With Friends Like These... The Story of Kinski and Herzog

JANET MASLIN

When the actor Klaus Kinski wrote his autobiography, he referred to Werner Herzog as "the vermin," "this blowhard" and "a miserable, hateful, malevolent, avaricious, money-hungry, nasty, sadistic, treacherous, cowardly creep." And those were some of the nicer things he had to say. Now Herzog has a chance to return the favor with "My Best Fiend: Klaus Kinski," an account of their unbelievably turbulent collaboration and how each man tormented and goaded the other into doing his best work.

"Every gray hair on my head I call Kinski," Herzog tells the camera during this captivating documentary, a film that serves as an eloquent coda to their unforgettable creative partnership. It doesn't take long to see what he means about the hair. From the day he and Kinski, who died in 1991 at the age of 65, met as boys in the same boardinghouse, the wear and tear that accompanied the fierce Kinski temperament was apparent. "I never thought anyone could rave for 48 hours," the filmmaker reflects, remembering an incident in which the budding actor locked himself in a bathroom and reduced it to smithereens.

He also recalls when Kinski threw two hot potatoes and some cutlery at a theater critic who had failed to praise him sufficiently. In the context of the film's reminiscences, this does not sound like an atypical event. "Quite often it was very difficult to talk to him, because he answered back as Jesus," Herzog remembers, and the film illustrates that. It begins with glimpses of Kinski speaking to a lecture audience in his messianic mode, and then screaming at a heckler who comes on stage.

With Kinski as both muse and nemesis, Herzog was just the artist to harness that fury. Their first film together, in 1972, was "Aguirre: The Wrath of God," in which Kinski played his most astonishing madman. Peering out wild-eyed beneath his explorer's helmet, the actor played an ever more delusional explorer in the midst



of the Peruvian jungle, using his hugely expressive features to make the character's deranged hubris unforgettable. For Herzog's own forays into the heart of darkness, Kinski made the perfect traveling companion. (Their four other films together were "Woyzeck," "Nosferatu," the great, haunting "Fitzcarraldo" and a last feature, shot in Africa, "Cobra Verde.")

Mr. Herzog uses the documentary not only to summon amazing Kinski stories but also to contemplate the actor's authentic (if erratic) genius. In "Aguirre," he says, "somehow the beast had been domesticated after all, so that his true madness, his true energy was contained within the frame of a screen image." Anyone who has seen that film will recognize the understatement in this. Meanwhile, "My Best Fiend" switches gears easily among from Herzog's nostalgic observations, film clips of the finished work and documentary scenes that chronicle behind-the-scenes turmoil. In Machu Picchu to shoot "Aguirre," Kinski is seen ignoring the director's suggestions and announcing: "You have to beg me. Even David Lean did that." (The actor turned up in "Dr. Zhivago.") "And Brecht, too."

As the filmmaker describes the various death threats that punctuated their off-screen relationship ("It went so far that at

one time I seriously planned to firebomb him in his house"), a whiff of showmanship is also seen here. If Kinski enjoyed throwing fits, he seemed to enjoy it most while a camera was running; Herzog, for his part, seems to enjoy remembering a false rumor that he once directed Kinski while armed with a rifle, and describing his threat to shoot Kinski with eight bullets and use the ninth on himself. ("Whoever heard of a pistol or rifle with nine bullets?" the actor sneered in his memoir.) While "My Best Fiend" does a splendid job of chronicling the high drama and creative pinnacles of their work together, it emphasizes the most public and bleakly amusing aspects of their story. Mr. Herzog's deeper, more complete memories remain his own.

MY BEST FIEND

Klaus Kinski

Directed by Werner Herzog; in English and German, with English subtitles; director of photography, Peter Zeitlinger; edited by Joe Bini; music by Popol Vuh; produced by Lucki Stipetic; released by New Yorker Films. Running time: 95 minutes. This film is not rated.

Cast: Werner Herzog (Narrator), Claudia Cardinale, Eva Mattes, Beat Presser, Guillermo Rios, Andres Vicente, Justo Gonzalez and Benino Moreno Placido.

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