

klaus kinski

The Master of Screen Depravity Speaks

By Ed Naha

Actor Klaus Kinski wears the label "notorious" well. As famous for his offscreen antics (he has for instance, the unfortunate habit of referring to many of his directors as "assholes") as he is for his onscreen performances, the German-born actor has made over 175 films, including *Venom*, *Nosferatu*, *Jules Verne's Rocket to the Moon*, *Aguirre*, *The Wrath of God*, *For A Few Dollars More*, *Circus of Fear*, *Schizoid*, *Woyzeck*, *Lifespun*, *Android* and, of course, *Fitzcarraldo*—a much chronicled production which once again found him working with/pitted against director Werner Herzog. ("You want to direct me!" he once railed at the filmmaker, "You're a dwarf director!")

The father of actress Nastassia Kinski, Klaus now lives in California. The following interview was done in-between bursts of hyperactivity on Kinski's part as he wound down his first science fiction film (*Android*) and began dubbing the American print of *Fitzcarraldo*.

It is not for the squeamish or folks who shudder at idiosyncratic behavior.

Fangoria: How do you prepare for a typical movie?

Klaus Kinski: I don't do typical movies.

Fang: Ok. How do you prepare for a movie?

Kinski: I don't. I don't even run through my lines. A lot of what I do comes from how I get along with my director. People always say that you cannot change the Bible and you cannot change Shakespeare. But me? I always change things. I have to. I am like that.

Fang: Have you ever worked with a genius?

Kinski: (laughing) Words. Words today block meanings. Words are losing their value these days. People don't communicate what they mean. If someone tells me "This coffee is genius," what does that mean? This is shit. If this coffee is genius, then what does "genius" mean anymore? I don't believe in words anymore. "Have a coke and a smile." I have a coke and it hurts my stomach. I become sick.

Fang: Why do you always play villains?

Kinski: If I had refused a lot of the movies I've done, you'd be asking me why I always played heroes. It's just a matter of timing and money. I don't think too much about it.

Fang: But you have done quite a few horror movies.

Kinski: Horror movies? No. Horrible movies? Yes. When the money was good.

Fang: Do you consider yourself typecast?

Kinski: People try to pigeonhole me. In Germany—a very stupid country—critics try to



Kinski with Isabelle Adjani in Herzog's *Nosferatu*.

label me. But I elude them. I once refused many roles because I didn't want to be typecast. Then, I started playing killers. I was just doing my job. I did it well. I kill people great in movies.

People started seeing me in killer movies and they'd say "We have a murderer in this movie! Get Kinski!" I'd sign a little piece of paper and find out later that I'd signed to do five killer movies... not just the one. I never read the contracts.

I worked that way because I didn't care. A guy on the street doesn't care what he steals. The point is to steal something. He steals just to stay alive. For a long period of time, I didn't care what movie I made or where I made it.

Fang: Has your attitude changed?

Kinski: A bit. I continued not caring at all until I noticed that everyone was doing very well except for me... because I was the only one not caring. So, I turned around, looked at Germany and said "F*ck You!" I left. A lot of the silly movies I made were my fault. But it wasn't really a fault. It was just the way I was.

The way I am.

Fang: How do you decide which movie to act in?

Kinski: Circumstances vary. Sometimes, it's "Who's getting paid more?" "Who has to work longer?" It gets funny. "If you don't give me this and this, I'll say F*CK YOU, YOU SHITHEAD." I really don't worry about any of this. Mostly, I don't care.

Fang: Do you care less about acting now than when you first started?

Kinski: I've never cared less or more. It's always been the same. If I was doing a movie that was really bad, I always realized that I had to play my role as good as possible when the camera was on me. The fact that the movie was total shit did not bother me.

For example, let's say that there's a hand that is used to playing the violin excellently. Let's say that hand belongs to the world's greatest violinist. But, the man finds himself out of work. Someone tells him "I don't have a job for a violinist but I do have a job for someone who is willing to carry out trash."

The violinist takes the job. He has to do his new job well or else he won't get paid. He won't eat. Although his hand is forced to carry garbage, that doesn't diminish the skill of the hand.

Fang: Does it ever bother you that you've never been in a box office hit?

Kinski: No, because that is not important. If I hadn't refused Ken Russell, Fellini and Spielberg and made their movies when they asked me, my life would be no different. It is not my fault that I accepted one movie and turned down another. I don't see any point in defending myself, either.

Fang: Suppose a producer walked into this room right now and said "Klaus, I have \$15 million and..."

Kinski: I'd say give it to me. In cash, please.

Fang: "Klaus, I have \$15 million to finance any movie you'd like to make." What would your ideal role be?

Kinski: I wouldn't care what I played... as long as he gave me the entire \$15 million. There isn't one role I'd like to play. There are many and there are none. I've always admitted to being a prostitute. I sell myself for money. I don't have to see myself up on the screen as Napoleon to feel satisfied about a movie. If you pay me a lot of money, I'll be in your film.

Fang: What do you consider your worst role?

Kinski: Who can say? Someone wanted to make a movie with me as Adolf Hitler, once. It was about 10 years ago. Originally, this pro-

ducer wanted to make a movie about Ludwig II with me as Ludwig. Fine. Everything went wrong with this f*cking movie. He couldn't get it made. I walked up to him yelling, "You owe me money! Give me my money!"

He said, "I can't do the movie, but I can offer you another role . . . Adolf Hitler." I said "F*ck you, you asshole!" and walked out.

Some years later, someone asked me why I didn't do it. Aside from the fact that I don't think Hitler is particularly interesting, I didn't do it because I would have been better than Adolf Hitler. I could have delivered his speeches a lot better. . . that's for certain.

Fang: You've done a lot of fairly macabre movies in your career. Movies like *Circus of Fear*, *Venom*, *Marquis De Sade: Justine* and *Scotland Yard vs. Dr. Mabuse* . . .

Kinski: So what?

Fang: Do you feel any affinity towards that type of movie?

Kinski: None whatsoever. Some I do because of the story. Some I do because of the money. Some I do because of the director.

Fang: Would you ever like to direct a movie?

Kinski: No. I've been directing myself for years. I don't have to prove to the world that I can direct a movie. Directing is madness. The only good thing about it is that if you're really obsessed with movies you'll be a great director. Working with a great director is wonderful for an actor because it means that you're not forced to take the advice of an idiot.

Fang: Do you think most directors are idiots?

Kinski: Some. Not all. As an actor, you don't have the choice of working with whom you please. You try to do the best you can. Even when you're on a movie with a real idiot for a director and the movie is a real pain in the ass to do, it doesn't pay to complain all the time because, despite the fact that the movie is shit, you're still making more money than normal people do.

Isabelle Adjani keeps Kinski's *Dracula* by her bedside till the coming of the morning light.



PHOTO © 1981 PARAMOUNT

As a kidnapper in *Venom*, Kinski grapples with a murderous snake.

Fang: How do you react when you step onto the set of a movie and realize that it's a real dog?

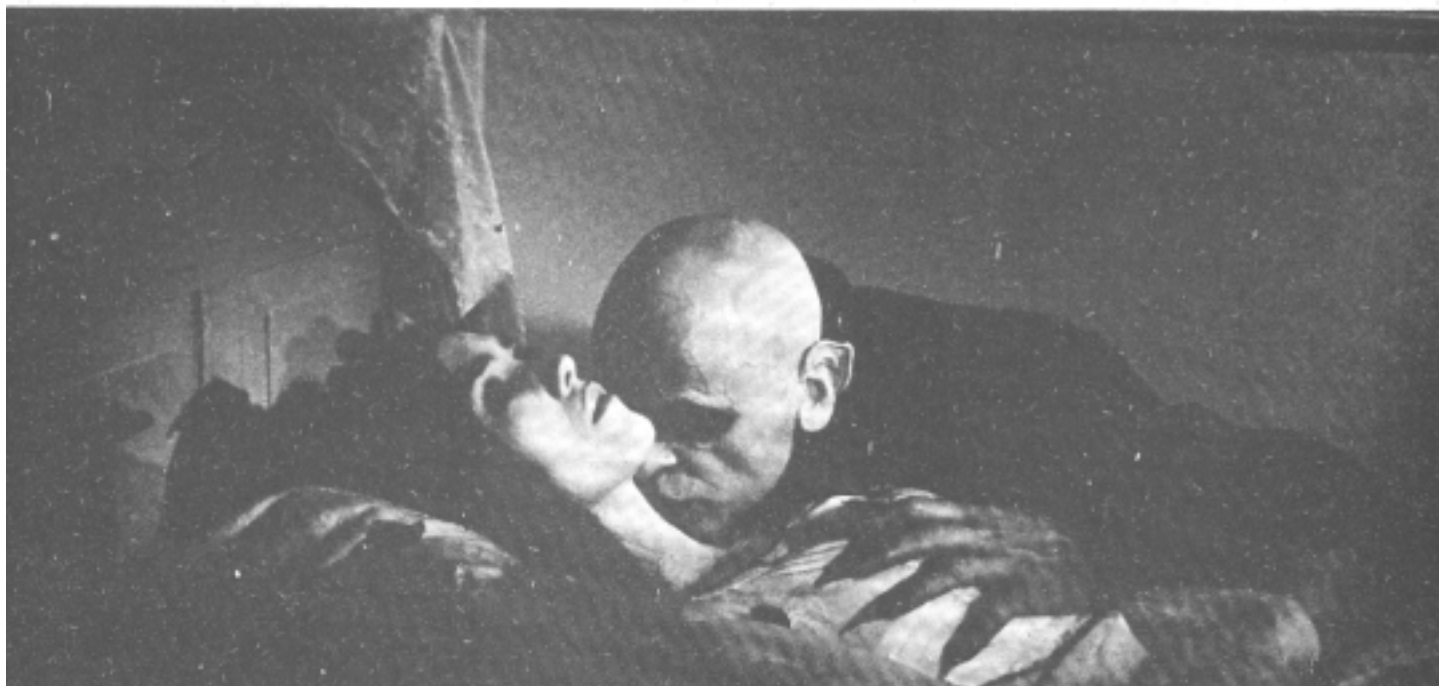
Kinski: I try to burn the studio down. Heh-heh. Just kidding. There's no visual reaction but you certainly feel it deep down inside. Sometimes you try to help the movie as much as you can. But that never works when you're working with an arrogant director. Someone you cannot talk to.

I worked on a movie in England recently that was impossible. Everything the director said was wrong. I would say, "Look, I'll show you that it cannot work that way." He wouldn't listen. I couldn't help myself. "F*ck you!" I say. How can you get caught up in a

movie when you wind up fighting for every scene? Every shot? What's the point? How can you argue with someone who always has to be right? Even if you can prove to him that he is not right?

Fang: Are you as difficult to work with as people say?

Kinski: Me? No. Look. I've been acting a long time. You just know some things after a while. You can't always explain them to people. You'll see things about the lighting. You'll notice how your body is being positioned. If it's being positioned wrong, you'll ask "What are you doing this for?" If no one pays attention, you'll say "Do you like my ass in the middle of your scene? If you like it that





In New World's production of *Android*, Kinski's keeps the title character's hands full with his neck. New World is also the distributor for *Fitzcarraldo*, the latest collaboration between Kinski and director Werner Herzog. PHOTO: © 1982 NEW WORLD

much, why don't you just photograph my ass?"

I've gotten in trouble at times because I'll see how a director is ruining a movie and I'll try to make it better.

Fang: One of your latest films, *Fitzcarraldo* is already something of a legend. . .

Kinski: Yeah, they made a legend out of it. It's strange to see how a legend grows.

Fang: How did this one grow?

Kinski: Werner Herzog invents his own legends to make himself look interesting. He was writing down notes the entire time he was shooting the film. He had a notebook with him, always. It took him longer to write his ledger than it did to film the movie. Every three minutes, he'd be off scribbling. He was printing tinier than the print you find in the Bible. Brave! You can print smaller than the Bible.

He would send these letters back to newspapers in Germany, like some explorer describing the conquest of the North Pole. "This morning, Kinski tempts me. . . but I resist! I cannot give up!" That sort of shit. "I have the feeling that Kinski is terrified of being filmed!"

Of course I was terrified of being filmed! The cameraman didn't know anything about lighting and half the crew didn't understand the movie.

Fang: Was filming in the Amazon jungle as rough as Herzog states?

Kinski: We made it rough. The jungle is life itself. A thousand times more alive than anything you've ever seen. We didn't go there to be a part of it. We invaded it. We shaved the jungle and made a stinking camp in the middle of it. Radios blaring. It was disgusting.

Herzog was most interested in showing the world that he could pull a 250 ton ship over a mountain. That's the plot of the movie. I would say things like "You are stupid! This task is stupid! What are you trying to prove? American movie makers would use a small, model ship that would duplicate the full scale ship. You'd save time. You'd save money."

He said, "No. I want to show the world that I can do what nobody has ever done." I say to that, "F*ck that, asshole."

The real *Fitzcarraldo*'s ship was only 35 tons. He had it dismantled and carried across the jungle. Herzog wanted to outdo the real *Fitzcarraldo*. That's crazy.

Fang: Did Herzog's behavior strike you as being particularly odd?

Kinski: No. Herzog's always been like that. He did strange things when we were filming *Aguirre* 12 years ago. He wanted us to do suicidal things. But he didn't count on me. I wouldn't get trapped like the others.

We were supposed to go down the jungle rapids in a raft. The local natives were saying "You'll die! You can't do that!" Herzog dismissed them. He was in a motorboat. I was on the damned raft with over 40 pounds of armor on. If I had fallen into the water, I wouldn't have been able to swim. The raft ran into a tree. We were in water up to our waists. I started cutting my armor off. Herzog told me to stop. To keep it on, I yelled back "F*ck you!" He didn't care about me. He filmed the entire scene, with me cursing at him and cutting off my armor. Later, he played that one scene in Germany before the movie opened. He was already creating legends years ago. Me? I think a movie, if it's good, will create its own legend once it opens.

Fang: Do you dislike Herzog?

Kinski: No. He's a highly talented guy. He does very good movies and he's not the sort of person who always talks in bullshit. He does many, many things right. But he's also sick. Obsessed. He wants to make history, not movies. Anyone who wants to make history is stupid.

Fang: Why did you do a movie like *Android*?

Kinski: I thought it was a clever little movie. It is the first movie I've done that children might like. The greatest thing in the world is to do something for children.