

## The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser [PG]

1975 (West Germany)

110 mins

UK released **Re-released in the UK 19 January 2024**

Director **Werner Herzog**

Screenplay **Werner Herzog** (book); **Jakob Wassermann**  
(uncredited)

Cinematography **Werner Herzog** (additional cinematography);  
**Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein**

Music **Bruno S.** - musician: piano improvisation (uncredited)

Cast **Bruno S.** (Kaspar Hauser); **Walter Ladengast** (Professor  
Georg Friedrich Daumer); **Brigitte Mira** (Frau Käthe,  
housekeeper for Professor Daumer)

Werner Herzog's enduringly gripping and influential movie is rereleased for its 50th anniversary; it is Herzog's early masterpiece, a bold and brilliant retelling of a strange true story from German history, plainly and candidly staged, full of poignancy, and pathos as well as mystery, but which is also revealed here to be about the arbitrary nature of survival and death. The original German title is *Jeder für Sich und Gott Gegen Alle*, which translates as *Every Man for Himself and God Against All*, which Herzog used as the title of his recent autobiography. In 1828, a disturbed and feral youth appears apparently from nowhere in Nuremberg, claiming to have grown up alone, imprisoned in a dungeon like an animal and then abruptly released and abandoned. The astonished townsfolk take him in; a kindly schoolmaster looks after his education, and his rapid learning of speech and behaviour makes him celebrated in high society where he is rumoured to have noble birth – for who but a well-born family would take the trouble to conceal a disturbed child like this? And could it be that his very existence is politically embarrassing?

Herzog's superb film centres on a masterstroke of nonprofessional casting: 42-year-old Bruno Schleinstein, who had spent much of his life in care, with learning and educational difficulties, and untrained musical talents and who had already been the subject of a documentary. In the film he was credited as Bruno S (perhaps patronisingly, to emphasise his childlike primitive credentials). Herzog

used Schleinstein again in the 1977 film *Stroszek*. Like other nonprofessional actors briefly elevated to iconic movie stardom and then returned to obscurity, Schleinstein reportedly had mixed feelings about the experience.

Watched again now, this film reveals Schleinstein to be quite as much of an enigma as Kaspar Hauser. His performance has a stolid dignity and self-possession, understated and calm, where a regular actor might be expected to be histrionic and hammy. And with this new viewing, I could see the sly and mischievous comedy in his performance: a twinkle in the wide-eyed gaze and the determined set in the mouth. He is a holy innocent among the people crowding around him, variously good-natured or malign.

The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser inspired David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* and Yorgos Lanthimos's recent *Poor Things*; these film-makers responded to the rich dramatic potential in middle-class polite society's tortuous reaction to a dissident outsider in their midst, someone who artlessly exposes their fears and whom they can neither accommodate nor reject.

Moreover, there is something overwhelmingly sad in Kaspar as he tries to explain his recurring dreams, particularly one about a caravan of camels in the desert.

The caravan is leading ... where? Kaspar is stupefied by his realisation that he does not know but, like a child, dwells on the mystery long after an adult would have shrugged and forgotten about it. Kaspar is transfixed by the potent poetry of unknowing that surrounds everyone's life and death.

**Peter Bradshaw**, *The Guardian*, 18 January 2024 (abridged)

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