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*Fanny and Alexander* stars Bertil Guve (left) and Pernilla Allwin.

# The Resurgence of Ingmar Bergman

By Andrew Sarris

**FANNY AND ALEXANDER.** Directed and written by Ingmar Bergman. Executive Producer: Jorn Donner. Production Company: Cinematograph AB for the Swedish Film Institute, The Swedish Television SVT 1, Sweden, Gaumont, France, Personafilm and Tobis Filmkunst, BRD. Released by Embassy Pictures.

**TRADING PLACES.** Directed by John Landis. Screenplay by Timothy Harris and Herschel Weingrod. Produced by Aaron Russo. Released by Paramount Pictures.

*Fanny and Alexander* is vintage Ingmar Bergman with nothing sour, apocalyptic, or even justifiably weary about it. The ultra-Germanic nihilism of *The Serpent's Egg* and *From the Life of the Marionettes* has been replaced by a full-bodied blend of the nostalgic amplitude of *Wild Strawberries* and the magic-lantern ghost dances of *The Magician*. If you have ever liked an Ingmar Bergman movie, you should respond favorably to *Fanny and Alexander*. If Ingmar Bergman has never meant anything to you, then you may be somewhat mystified by the studied obliqueness of the narrative.

The eponymous Fanny (Pernilla Allwin) and Alexander (Bertil Guve), for example, are very slowly sorted out as the small children of Oscar Ekdahl (Allan Edwall) and Emilie Ekdahl (Ewa Froling), two players in the provincial theater. When we first encounter these four ultimately central characters they are virtually engulfed in a cascade of family, friends, and community. The title itself proves to be somewhat misleading in its binary implications inasmuch as it is the 10-year-old Alexander who comes as close as anyone to projecting the tortured sensibility of Bergman himself. The magic also is rendered almost entirely through Alexander's feverish temperament. I say "almost entirely" rather than "absolutely entirely" because he is not the only character to see the ghost of his dead father, who, incidentally, was the victim of a stroke after a wretched rehearsal of the role of Hamlet's ghostly father. Alexander's grandmother Helena Ekdahl

(Gunn Wallgren) actually speaks with the ghost of her dead son, though it is a suspiciously one-sided conversation. Helena has two other sons: Gustave Adolf Ekdahl (Jarl Kulle), a jovial entrepreneur with a roving eye indulged by his plump, cheerful, but perceptive wife Alma (Mona Malm), and Carl Ekdahl (Borje Ahlstedt), a bitter, mediocre, impecunious professor

out of Ibsen and Chekhov, and his long-suffering German wife Lydia (Christina Schollin), who must bear the brunt of her husband's corrosive self-hatred. And then there are uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, colleagues and servants, all taking their places in the pageant that unfolds during the year 1907 in a Swedish backwater overflowing with love and hope, fear and hate, joy and disillusion.

As always, Bergman develops themes and feelings as much through his settings and artifacts as through his characters. In the published screenplay of *Fanny and Alexander*, Bergman goes into great detail about the art nouveau sunniness of the Ekdahl house, and about what th

evolution of the decor represents in the perpetual struggle between the older and younger generations. This and much other background information is not available in the film, which, though it runs three hours, is still considerably sketchier and less verbose than the screenplay.

One would think that Bergman has fallen between two stools by not being self-consciously "textual" enough for the New Critics, and yet being too literate for a new generation of flash-and-energy worshipers. Indeed, it is possible to draw up an allegorical blueprint for *Fanny and Alexander* that would make Bergman seem painfully obvious and pretentious. Look, there is Ingmar's magic lantern. The Jewish question pops up with mystical affection in the person of Isak Jacobi (Erland Josephson), an antique dealer who is Helena Ekdahl's old lover and companion, and who has two eccentrically visionary nephews Ismael (Stina Ekblad) and Aron (Mats Bergman) assisting him at his spooky premises. Bergman's puritanical upbringing takes on the monstrously Dickensian contours of melodramatic repression in the person of Bishop Edvard Vergerus (Jan Malmsjo), who wins the hand of Alexander's mother for a time, and turns life into an austere hell for both mother and children.

Yet even when the narrative takes an overtly gothic twist, the prevailing tone of reflective reminiscence eases the pain of Alexander's ordeal. It may still be too early to designate *Fanny and Alexander* as Bergman's *The Tempest*, but he is very near the point when lyrical reverie somehow supplants the most tentative gesture of dramatic conflict. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss *Fanny and Alexander* as irretrievably schematic or sentimental. As in all of Bergman's films, there are in

*Fanny and Alexander* a multitude of privileged moments and incisive observations that only Bergman can provide. No matter how hard his characters try to fit into their period costumes, they can never erase from their expressions the gleam of modernist afterthoughts. The single-minded intensity and formal rigor of a Dreyer or a Bresson have never been Bergman's strong suits. With *Fanny and Alexander* we see more clearly than ever that Bergman's oeuvre has always been the proper province less of the theologian than of the psychoanalyst. Bergman remains one of the few genuine grown-ups ever to make movies, and we need him now more than ever.

The Public Theater is providing a three-week salute to Bergman with 33 of his 43 features. From June 14 through July 3 one can peruse the work of one of the most sensitive and sensual artists of the 20th century, particularly in such passionate works as *Summer Interlude*, *Brink of Life*, *A Lesson in Love*, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Sawdust and Tinsel*, *Secrets of Women*, *Monika*, *Dreams*, *Thirst*, and, oh yes, *The Seventh Seal*. I must confess that I am still moved more by *The Touch*, *Port of Call*, and *Scenes from a Marriage* than by *Persona*, *The Silence*, and *Autumn Sonata*. People whom I respect have found a great deal more in *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, and *Cries and Whispers* than I have ever been able to locate. The series as a whole is nonetheless truly and luminously monumental.