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hatever it is—a powerhouse love story, a cosmic case history, a metaphysical horror film alternately exalted and excruciating—*Breaking the Waves* is no movie for the timid. With this audacious 156-minute meditation on the fragility of human happiness, Danish director Lars von Trier smashes through his own well-established wiseguy facade. *Zentropa* and *The Kingdom* were movies of calculated affront, but *Breaking the Waves*, which had its local premiere at the last New York Film Festival, is founded on excess. As the title tells you, it's designed to shatter.

A pure film experience, *Breaking the Waves* is essentially timeless. The drama is set in a generic 1970s and a generically desolate northern fishing village held spellbound by the harshest of Puritan regimes. The narrative is simple and harrowing. Against the advice of suspicious church elders, a simpleminded local maid marries a bluff and worldly "outsider," one of the workers on an offshore oil rig. The couple enjoy a few days of unfettered happiness and then, as if in retribution, descend into an abyss of limitless pain.

Played by Emily Watson (making her film debut as a last-minute replacement for Helena Bonham Carter), Bess is wide-eyed and stubborn. Watson's mischievously mugging performance—in close-ups she always looks as though about to burst—is the heart of the film. Trusting to the point of self-destruction, a more passionate version of the saintly fool Giulietta Masina created in *La Strada*, her Bess is deflowered by her groom Jan (Swedish star Stellan Skarsgård) in their wedding hall's bathroom. Bess's innocent spontaneity is all the more vulnerable in the context of the local pieties. Women are neither allowed to speak in church nor to attend funerals, which seemingly consist of consigning the deceased sinner to hell. Even church bells are regarded as a distracting form of pleasure—no wonder von Trier self-servingly cuts from the church to Bess's enjoyment of the movie *Lassie*.

Bess feels as intensely as a child. She talks to God (and replies to herself, an octave lower, in a stern Voice of God), she sighs "thank you" during intercourse, and she suffers Jan's absence with an almost animal degree of deprivation. She also prays for his return and, in the first of several divine interventions, gets her wish. An hour into the movie, Jan is horribly injured on the rig and shipped back to the village hospital, paralyzed and perhaps deranged.

Breaking the Waves
Written and directed by Lars von Trier
An October Films release
Up/Down/Fragile
Directed by Jacques Rivette
At Anthology Film Archives
November 15 through 24

BY J. HOBERMAN

Anyone who has seen *The Kingdom* appreciates von Trier's interest in grisly medical procedure, but *Breaking*

had praised the outsiders' music.)

And, just as Bess wrestles with her God, so von Trier seeks to vent his emotional intensity by engaging the most excessive of romantic painters and the unyielding oeuvre of the solitary Danish master, Carl Theodor Dreyer. *Breaking the Waves* evokes the harshly repressive religion of Dreyer's *Day of Wrath*, the martyred goodness (and extreme

close-ups) of his *Passion of Joan of Arc*, the self-sacrificing love celebrated in *Gertrud*, and, most daringly, the literal miracle that climaxes *Ordet*.

Not since Andrei Tarkovsky, another von Trier model, has a European filmmaker ventured so far in search of transcendence. Von Trier's "Passion of Bess" may not constitute a religious epiphany, but it draws the viewer completely into an extravagantly bleak world of carnal



Happy days: Skarsgård and Watson in *Breaking the Waves*

the Waves is as devoted to the irrational as it is to naturalistic melodrama. Indeed, the movie comes to resemble a kind of Strindberg *ER*-rewrite once Bess, in the elemental quality of her love, attempts to both please and cure Jan by bestowing her favors upon a succession of strange men. In the course of this self-abasing quest, she is expelled from the church, rejected by her family, and tormented by the village children—ultimately cast out by everyone except her own cruel and punitive personal deity.

Scarcely less than Bess, von Trier is capable of some fabulous gestures—including casting the neophyte Watson. Mainly, von Trier presents his outrageous melodrama as though it were a form of cinema verité. Raw as the Scottish weather, *Beyond the Waves* is a movie of handheld swoops and tumultuous jump-cuts, with Robby Müller's camera following the actors in and out of focus. The color is intentionally drained (produced by shooting on 35mm film stock, transferring to video, then back to film) and the movie divided into chapters, each beginning with a flamboyantly synthesized landscape. These static "God's eye views" are animated by subtle mists and dramatic shifts in light and, to add to the kitsch sublimity, accompanied by a few bars of suitably grandiose and thematically apposite '70s pop—Elton John extolling the "yellow brick road" or David Bowie wondering about "life on Mars." (Interrogated by the elders regarding her prospective husband, Bess

bliss and spiritual anguish. A melodrama at once monumental and ridiculous, primeval and tawdry, *Breaking the Waves* is itself a kind of miracle.