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Auteur da fé

by Scott Rosenberg

AFTER THE REHEARSAL. Written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. With Erland Josephson, Ingrid Thulin, and Lena Olin. A Triumph release. At the Sack Copley Place.

"Movement. Faces. Voices. Stillness. Magic. Everything represents — nothing is." That's Ingmar Bergman's recipe for the kind of theater he loves, as voiced by his alter ego Henrik Vogler (Erland Josephson), a grumpy director who's the focus of *After the Rehearsal*. You'd think, then, that the old filmmaker would see where his latest film goes wrong: within its brief (70-minute) span, nothing represents — everything is. The Swedish psychologist/magician serves up a distilled, nakedly autobiographical draft of life in the theater, one unsweetened with metaphor or symbol; he takes a sour pint of Art and a bitter quart of Life and swirls them together, for the world to taste how miserable the artist's cup can be.

At the start we see the napping director slumped over his script of Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. Bergman thrusts two women onto Vogler's stage, into his life: Anna (Lena Olin), a talented 23-year-old newcomer who's starring in his play and who comes on to him, and her mother, Rakel (Ingrid Thulin), an aging, alcoholic former leading lady who seems to have died years ago but who haunts Vogler, her ex-lover, interrupting the nascent intimacy between director and starlet. Bergman's familiar theme — the danger that acting will carry over into performers' lives and replace natural emotions — crops up in embarrassingly clumsy ways: Anna asks, "What deludes me into using pseudo-feelings?"; Vogler shouts at her, "I refuse to act in your play!" Art's pre-empting of life culminates in an affair that Vogler and Anna conduct entirely through improvised dialogue. They act out the likely course of their would-be romance, gradually getting into their roles, and that seems to satisfy them as much as actually living it: in essence, they agree, "Let's not and say we did."

Compounding the awkwardness of the screenplay is a voice-over technique that's supposed to take us inside the director's head. With Josephson's pink, grooved

mien sitting immobile before us, we hear his voice murmuring strings of verbiage that tell us what his character's really feeling. When Anna wanders in to look for a lost bracelet, he grouses: "I want her to go. The bracelet is so patently an excuse." When the apparition of Rakel arrives to hector him, he feels "Distance. Indifference. Boredom. Fear. Powerlessness. Helpless rage. Distance." Is this what goes on inside Ingmar Bergman's brain? The same artist who once decorated his cranium with the canvases of *The Seventh Seal* and *Smiles of a Summer Night*?

Actors — and Bergman's actors more than most — are

supposed to be able to express what they think without speaking, and though Josephson doesn't actually open his mouth when he thinks aloud, the screenplay cripples him by forcing him to tell instead of show. Its weaknesses glare all the more visibly since *After the Rehearsal* is shot in the claustrophobic close-up style of *Scenes from a Marriage* and *Autumn Sonata* — talking heads, and sobbing heads, and shuddering heads, and impassive heads, filling the frame in succession, with infrequent long tableaux from the back of the theater to show us where everyone's standing. The technique, as Bergman has already proved, allows the actors' intensity of gaze to heat the space among themselves and between them and their audience; but this time around it's simply stifling. Josephson, who played the repressed husband in *Scenes* and the madcap uncle in *Fanny and*

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Erland Josephson and Lena Olin: face to face

Rehearsal

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Alexander, locks his stony black eyes into a deadened stare, and Olin responds with fidgety, hurt blankness. Only Thulin — the old professor's daughter-in-law in *Wild Strawberries*, looking frayed and puffy today — seems to be suffering the existential distress the others merely discuss.

As with even the most turgid of Bergman's productions, *After the Rehearsal* contains moments of delicate power that show how high he can climb — and that make his failure smart all the more. He presents the transition from Vogler's remembered spat with Rakel back to his present flirtation with Anna through a riveting traveling close-up: it moves gingerly in a circle, starting from the director's lips, falling to his hand in his lap, following the hand over to Anna's hand in her lap, rising to Anna's eyes, then finally crossing back over to Vogler's face. It's a silent journey from one dimension to another, across still pools of time; unlike most of the film's sequences, it isn't suspicious of its own powers — it puts them to work.

Bergman announced that *Fanny and Alexander*, his opulent child's-eye view of growing up among theater artists, would be his last film; since *After the Rehearsal* was produced for Swedish TV, he hasn't broken that promise, technically. But his new offering traverses the same ground as *Fanny* with none of its vigor or warmth. It seems like a private exorcism for Bergman — which no one would deny him the right to conduct, but which perhaps shouldn't have been released to theaters. *Fanny and Alexander* was proof enough that Bergman is a true heir to Ibsen and Strindberg both; and since he's forsaken the screen for the stage he's rededicated himself to those masters — as well as directed a *King Lear* that's reputed to be a knockout, with Edgar and the Duke of Albany crossing swords over the corpses of Cordelia and the King while the set disintegrates. Vogler indicts himself for taking directorial liberties: "I knead the text. At the end I erect a huge cross, or I clothe the actors in tatters. I violate Strindberg!" Simultaneously, he thinks in his voice-over, "Why do I say these ridiculous things?" Bergman, too, takes such liberties on stage, usually with good reason; he also sometimes says ridiculous things in his work, and *After the Rehearsal* is one: a superfluous exercise in self-analysis from a director who has already bared his soul to its limits. □