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Fanny and Alexander: The Sermon's Over . . .



Fanny and Alexander

By Blake Lucas

"*Fanny and Alexander* is the sum total of my life as a film maker," Ingmar Bergman has said of what he alleges will be his last theatrical movie, and it appears that most critics have taken their cue from that remark and rushed to acclaim the Swedish director's artistic testament as a masterpiece. I would love to be in accord with that judgment, for I have a passion for last films, and, more generally, for the final reflective phase of an artistic career.

If an artist has the opportunity, he may practice his art long past the point when it has any relation to fashion, creating in a manner alien to the spirit of the time, as he listens only to his own inner voice, disdaining stylistic flourishes and showing contempt for modish subjects. His works will then become something special—lucid, mysterious, daring, pure. In cinema, this has been the case with most of the

masters, and I yield to no one in my admiration for such beautiful and profoundly personal twilight works as Carl Dreyer's *Gertrud*, John Ford's *Seven Women*, Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, F. W. Murnau's *Tabu*, Luis Bunuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Street of Shame*, D. W. Griffith's *The Struggle*, Yasijuro Ozu's *An Autumn Afternoon*, Max Ophuls's *Lola Montes*, and Raoul Walsh's *A Distant Trumpet*, to name only top-of-the-line final cinematic statements.

In all essentials, *Fanny and Alexander* conforms to the pattern; in it, Bergman articulates his deepest feelings through a highly adventurous structure that seems to engage his attention on every level.

The problem here, one that needs to be stated rather brutally, is that Bergman is not one of the masters of the medium. Arguably, he has never made a great film, nor for that matter surpassed the modest but genuine achievement represented by such relatively early works as *Illicit Interlude* (1951), *Summer With Monika* (1953), *The Naked Night* (1953), and *Dreams* (1955). At the same time, he possesses many admirable qualities, and there is nothing too outrageous about the degree of critical admiration long accorded him. A brief consideration of a few general points will put these strengths and weaknesses in perspective, and their individual relevance to *Fanny and Alexander* can then be more fully explored.

1) Bergman is a serious man who has always been intent on expressing serious ideas (which is not to say he hasn't, on many occasions, treated those ideas in the form of comedy) and I have no desire to reproach him for not being frivolous about his artistic objectives. Contrary to the contentions of his severest detractors, a certain amount of intellectual weight should not hurt a film. Unfortunately, Bergman never integrates his ideas seamlessly into the narrative. Again and again, characters are wrenched from the context of the stories to become spokesmen (or spokeswoman) for a didactic consideration of philosophical/intellectual/spiritual issues. One often has the sense that the characters are first and foremost projections of Bergman himself. While it is perhaps inevitable that fictional representation will mirror a narrative artist's own conflicts and that the characters will function accordingly, the task of the artist is to maximize the aesthetic distance between himself and the projection. Bergman is insufficiently subtle about this, so much so that one is forced to conclude that the ideas are being given precedence over the artistic whole, or, at least, are dictating the conditions for it.

2) The limitation that prevents Bergman from freeing his characters to live spontaneously in the narrative dulls the luster of the much-lauded performances of his actors and (particularly) actresses. Bergman deserves full credit for numerous brilliantly played scenes and films. Bibi Andersson's erotic monologue in *Persona* is only the most memorable stretch of an uncommonly nuanced portrayal, while Victor Sjöström invests the old man in *Wild Strawberries* with a complete and complex emotional life. Harriet Andersson in *Summer With Monika* and Liv Ullmann in *The Passion of Anna*, among many others, are no less remarkable. However, Bergman's psychological astuteness and

his skill for eliciting emotionally detailed characterizations are tarnished by too-conscious and seemingly unshakable positions about men and women. The men are sometimes foolish and often tyrannical or intellectually aloof, while the women seem to evoke a more sympathetic interest because they more genuinely represent the life force. I've always been suspicious of Bergman's apparent feminism precisely because of the persistence of these dubious prototypes. A male/female duality exists in all individuals, but Bergman's treatment of men reflects such lack of ease with the male aspect of the self (for no readily discernible reason that might be attributed to his actual personality) that his celebration of the feminine aspect begins to seem gloomily pessimistic. In fact, Bergman's female characters suffer most from projections of his sensibility, even if it is the positive aspects of that sensibility that they manifest. The individuality that he encourages in his actresses conflicts with the demands placed upon them to be vessels into which the director can pour his deepest thoughts and feelings.

3) Although Bergman is an assured craftsman, he lacks the kind of cinematic fluency that would allow his mise-en-scène to gracefully assimilate his ideas. The literality of both idea and effect that tends to rob his films of richness and spontaneity does not seem to be the result of wrongheadedness. On the contrary, as *Fanny and Alexander* vividly demonstrates, Bergman is sensitive to the implications of camera angles, camera movement, shot duration, decor, and lighting; but, unfortunately, he does not possess the natural flair that would give flow to his directorial decisions. By contrast, a director like George Cukor has always emphasized his allegiance to theatrical traditions more strongly, but Bergman seems incapable of creating a moment like the one in Cukor's *The Marrying Kind* when a past-to-present

dissolve (following the abrupt death of a child in a seemingly casual, lovingly realized sequence in a natural setting) is accompanied by a scream that unites the heroine's immediate despair with that which concluded the flashback. Though the effect in the Cukor example is calculated, it registers as spontaneous and unstudied. Bergman, on the other hand, seems to work hard for every effective moment, and the effort shows. The other artistic problems that attach to his work would be greatly alleviated if immediate aesthetic and emotional responses were less subsumed by an awareness of the creator's guiding hand.

That brings us to *Fanny and Alexander*, a film in which all of the problems that have plagued Bergman throughout a long and consistently interesting career surface once again. A period story set in 1907, the film has many twists and turns and a fairly rich intermingling of varied plot elements, both comic and grave, prosaic and magical. At a running time of more than three hours, the work affords Bergman plenty of opportunity to explore its contrasting aspects in a reasonably graceful manner, and he does not rush.

The Christmas celebration that forms the first hour finds the two children who give the film its title (Permillia Allwin and Bertil Guve) on the fringe of the action while Bergman concentrates attention on adult members of the large Ekdahl family of which they are a part, primarily Helena (Gunn Wallgren), their grandmother, and her three adult sons (Allan Edwall, Jarl Kulle and Borje Ahlstedt), as well as Isak Jacobi (Erland Josephson), a Jewish merchant who is Helena's closest friend and to whom Bergman imparts a romantic and somewhat mystical aura. In this portion of the work, Bergman emphasizes two motifs that have persistently engaged him and which are vital to the meaning of *Fanny and Alexander*—the theater and sexual relationships. Helena had been a celebrated actress in her earlier years and her son Oscar (Edwall) is presently a theater manager and mediocre actor. Oscar's death at the beginning of the second hour initiates the main narrative thread, a modern fairy tale centering on his widow Emilie (Ewa Froling) and two children, Fanny and Alexander, who become the victims of a cruel villain (a severe and tyrannical bishop played by Jan Malmsjo), whom Emilie foolishly marries. This part of the story emphasizes further significant motifs—the interplay of imagination and magic with reality,

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and the recognition of evil and moral/spiritual awakening that accompanies that recognition. These motifs are, of course, intimately related to those introduced earlier. Bergman is quite intent on covering everything meaningful in life and art.

Of greatest interest, however, is not the often-fascinating story that Bergman has devised but the manner in which he uses it as a flexible vehicle to carry his thoughts and feelings. Bergman may have chosen the period setting because of the opportunity it afforded him to express his feelings through the mise-en-scène and, to some extent, he is successful in doing this. Earthly concerns are manifested by the elegant and richly decorated Ekdahl mansion; the sections that take place in the setting are the most comic and down-to-earth, sometimes heavily so. The Bishop's castle, on the other hand, is an austere dwelling, sparsely decorated and almost devoid of color. The pale green dress that Emilie wears when

she and the children first visit their new home signals the shift of tone as the film drifts into a more poetic realm. I give Bergman a lot of points for working to make this film expressive on a purely visual level. The color, decor, and costumes are treated conscientiously throughout, and Sven Nykvist's lighting is exemplary in following (and sometimes evoking on its own) the almost psychological transformations of the material that periodically occur.

Even so, Bergman cannot content himself with a carefully modulated aesthetic plan. The most considered aspect of his direction is his emphasis on those aspects of the material that will crystallize his thematic intentions. Scenes in which characters display their most deeply felt attitudes are hit hard—Oscar, for example, giving a speech about the meaning of theater and the experience he wants his audience to derive from it (and this is only one instance in *Fanny and Alexander* when Bergman turns a character into an undisguised surrogate). Insensitive male attitudes and the generosity of women's responses to those attitudes are treated at length in scenes involving the womanizing Gustav Adolf (Kulle), his wife, and the woman he seduces. Bergman does display a certain sophistication in these

scenes; in contrast to the clichéd love-making normally found in the cinema—scenes that seem to define sex as a purely lyrical experience composed entirely of orgasmic rapture—Bergman honestly and somewhat comically describes the reality that sex can be when it is an unromantic and purely physical diversion, as is often the case. Even so, Bergman is no more subtle about the place of these scenes in the overall design than he is about Oscar's speech on the theater, Gustav Adolf's grandiloquent musings in a later sequence, or Helena's meditation over lines from a Strindberg play at the film's close.

I wish Bergman had given as much attention to the relationship of Emilie and the Bishop as he does to Gustav Adolf's seduction of the maid, but perhaps he got in over his head here. Emilie's attraction to the Bishop is inexplicable except as being masochistic. A few strange scenes between these two characters encourage that perception, and since Emilie is not brought into focus clearly elsewhere in the story, the chain of scenes in which her children are made to suffer at the hands of the Bishop throw her into an extremely unattractive light that Bergman could not have intended. With the Bishop himself, a crucially important character, the simplistic attitudes that Bergman has long worn on his sleeve are most evident. Bergman wishes to oppose true and false spirituality and to expose puritanical morality as an unmitigated evil. Many of his most sympathetic characters in earlier works were seeking a true and direct path to God; the Bishop is the opposite of those characters, and he is afflicted by the overbearing masculinity of some Bergmanesque male. The fairy-tale context presumably allows Bergman to create a character we will recognize as transparently evil from the moment we see him but that does not excuse Bergman's strange reticence in treating the complexity that should underlie that evil. When the Bishop viciously canes Alexander, the boy's face is never shown. Instead, the scene is composed of medium-close shots of the Bishop and others. In place of a complex interaction between victim and victimizer, Bergman emphasizes the sadistic deed for its own sake; in doing so, he encourages no other audience response than a deepening of its already uncomplicated hatred of the villain.

Even though *Fanny and Alexander* is weakened by Bergman's chronic limitations, I was more engaged by it than by most recent films. And, indeed, it contains much that is positive—revelations appropriate to a testament work emerge in one of the characterizations.

The character who draws forth the best of Bergman is Helena. Gunn Wallgren is so magnificent in this role that I am forced to qualify my earlier observations about Bergman's narrow conception of women. Bergman encourages Wallgren to invest this sympathetic matriarch with a roundness and human complexity that never seems shadowed by the director's usual tendency to self-projection. When Helena reminisces about her romantic past, intimately confides to Isak Jacobi that her sexuality is still alive, and ruefully acknowledges that her family has cast her in a role that she must gracefully accept in spite of her reluctance, Bergman seems to be acknowledging that his perceptions of the dimensions of his women might have been too subjective in the past. Appropriately, it is Helena who, in the final moments, refers to Strindberg as a misogynist; and I don't doubt for a moment that Bergman intended this little joke as a gentle self-reproach. As Wallgren lives and breathes in the role of Helena, her director humbly steps back, relaxing his iron grip on the act of creation and graciously conceding that even the artist most resolved to be truthful has his limits. ■