

## Document Citation

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# BREAKING THE WAVES

(DANISH-FRENCH)

An October release (in U.S.) of a Zentropa Entertainments (Copenhagen)/La Sept Cinema (Paris) co-production, in collaboration with Trust Film Svenska, Liberator Prods., Argus Film, Northern Lights, Swedish TV Drama, Media Investment Club, Danish Film Institute, Swedish Film Institute, Norwegian Film Institute, Dutch Film Fund, Finnish Film Foundation. (International sales: Christa Saredi World Sales, Zurich.) Produced by Vibeke Windelov, Peter Aalbaek Jensen. Executive producer, Lars Jonsson. Co-producers, Axel Helgeland, Peter van Vogelpoel, Rob Langestraat, Marianne Slot.

Directed, written by Lars Von Trier. Camera (color, widescreen), Robby Muller; editor, Anders Refn; music, Joachim Holbek; production design, Karl Juliusson; costumes, Manon Rasmussen; sound (Dolby SR), Per Streit; assistant director, Morten Arnfred; casting, Joyce Nettles. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 13, 1996. Running time: **159 MIN.**

Bess McNeill .....	Emily Watson
Jan .....	Stellan Skarsgard
Dodo McNeill .....	Katrin Cartlidge
Terry .....	Jean-Marc Barr
Dr. Richardson .....	Adrian Rawlins
Mother .....	Sandra Voe
The Man on the Trawler .....	Udo Kier
Pits .....	Mikkel Gaup
Pim .....	Roef Ragas
Grandfather .....	Phil McCall

(English dialogue)

**T**his emotionally draining new film is a complete change of pace for Danish wunderkind Lars Von Trier, whose previous work includes the florid thriller "Element of the Crime," the brooding exploration of fascism "Zentropa" and the comically quirky hospital satire "The Kingdom." None of these will prepare audiences for "Breaking the Waves," a soaring story of love and devotion set in a remote, backward coastal village in north Scotland in the '70s, and which deals with such weighty subjects as faith, sacrifice and miracles. A sock performance from newcomer Emily Watson is the centerpiece of this distended spiritual journey. Significant critical support for Von Trier's impressive but flawed epic will make this a must-see for discriminating viewers, although commercial prospects are likely to remain limited to arthouse venues.

Thematically, the film is at times reminiscent of David Lean's 1970 "Ryan's Daughter"; both pictures have a shy, romantic female character, a rugged man she marries and a remote village setting close to a wild coastal location. But whereas Lean opted for a visually lush look, Von Trier goes in the opposite direction and has come up with an unsettling, pseudo-documentary style that is likely to distance many viewers. In terms of sheer dramatic impact, the film is a winner, but Robby Muller's hand-held wide-screen lensing, with frequent and vertigo-inducing use of whip-pans and focus pulling, and Anders Refn's jagged editing, are a turn-off. This is not a film to see from the front rows of theaters.

Pic centers on Bess (Watson), a shy, religious girl who's lived all her life in an austere community where the village elders forbid church bells, women are kept in their place and sinners are told they'll be condemned to hell when they die. Bess is to marry Jan (Stellan Skarsgard), a raffish adventurer who works on a North Sea oil rig. It seems an unlikely union, and Von Trier fails to explain how the couple got together in the first place, why Jan was at-

tracted to this rather strange young woman, who regularly "talks" to God and then answers her own questions in a stern voice as if God were replying. It's something of a puzzle, too, given Jan's presumed appetites, to discover that Bess has managed to remain a virgin until her wedding day.

Nevertheless, Bess and Jan are soon blissfully happy, and Von Trier films the early days of their married life with consummate tenderness and affection, including an amusing moment when she contentedly accepts his post-coital snores. Their joy is cut short, however, when Jan is injured in an accident on the rig; he's brought home paralyzed from the neck down, and Bess blames herself because she'd prayed to God that he'd come home to her.

Confined to a hospital bed, Jan begs Bess to entertain him by having sex with other men and telling him about her experiences. She's at first reluctant, especially when she's rejected by the hospital's sympathetic medico (Adrian Rawlins). But she finally starts sleeping around and believes her actions are helping to cure Jan, though common sense would indicate otherwise. She rationalizes her behavior by commenting that "God gives everyone a talent. I'm good at this."

Gradually, as her behavior becomes known, she's ostracized by the little community, including her troubled mother (Sandra Voe). It's revealed, well into the film, that Bess has a history of mental instability and was hospitalized after the sudden death of her brother some time earlier. Her sympathetic sister-in-law Dodo (Katrin Cartlidge), a nurse at the local hospital, tries to help, but Bess is determined to fulfill what she sees as her destiny to the bitter end, convinced that her increasingly outre sexual activities are bringing about Jan's salvation.

The last section of the film, which is filled with savage irony, rewards the viewer's patience with its power, and few will be unmoved by the finale (pic ends with a truly memorable image). Bess' spiritual journey is a profoundly moving one, almost worthy of the Danish master

Bess' story is divided into seven chapters and an epilogue: Each chapter is intro'd with a gorgeously lit landscape (the only beautiful shots in a visually unattractive film), interludes Von Trier describes as "God's-eye view." These glowing images are accompanied by

a few bars of well-known songs, including standards from Elton John and Leonard Cohen.

The film wonderfully captures the atmosphere of the remote village where time seems to have stood still and a deeply conservative group of churchmen make the inflexible rules.

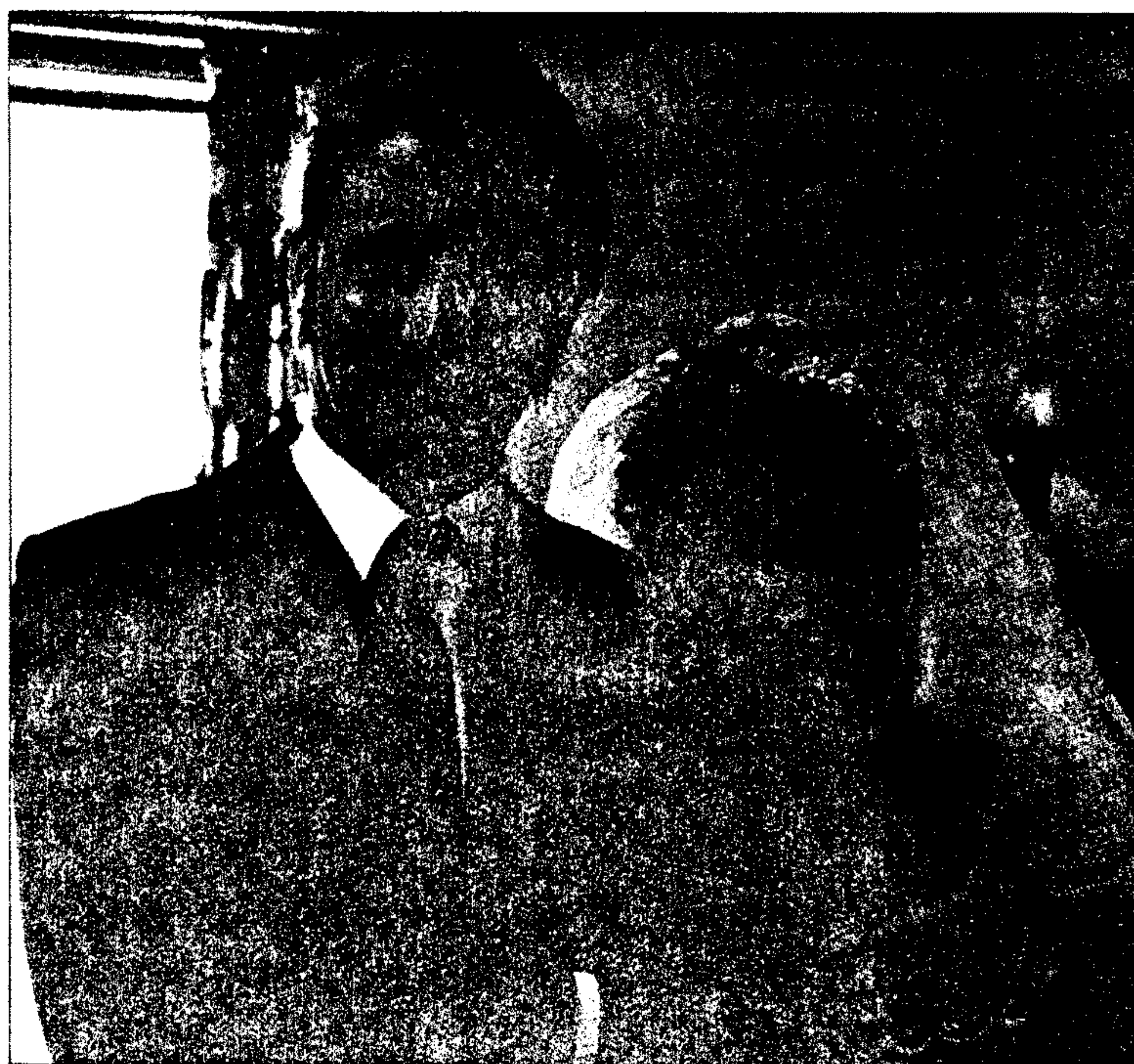
Watson is a major find as Bess. Graced with delicate, expressive features, she gives an extraordinary performance, never descending into conventional "mad" scenes, but emerging as a sensitive, lively young woman who will make the ultimate sacrifice for the love of the man she's chosen to marry. Occasionally she glances directly at the camera, giving audiences an intimate complicity with this beautiful character.

Skarsgard is fine as Jan and lends welcome nuance to a character he has to play mostly on his back. But the actor is somewhat hampered by a thinly defined character; little is revealed about the man's personal history. Cartlidge gives warm support as the worried Dodo, a role she makes much bigger than the standard "worried friend." Adrian Rawlins is sympathetic as the kindly doctor who comes to love the increasingly irrational Bess.

Jean-Marc Barr has a minor role as Jan's best friend, while Udo Kier does a chilling bit as a sadistic seaman who appears briefly. The final credit crawl provides a helpful visual ID of the principal cast members.

This is a major achievement for Von Trier, although there will be debate over some of his artistic decisions here, especially regarding the length, which could well be reduced, and the grainy, dizzying visuals. But the power of the theme and the central performance carry the day.

—David Stratton



**FAITH, HOPE AND SACRIFICE:** Lars Von Trier's Scottish-set "Breaking the Waves" stars Stellan Skarsgard and Emily Watson as a couple who find an unconventional way to deal with tragedy.