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Ingmar Bergman in the Isolation Ward

By Andrew Sarris

Ingmar Bergman has directed some 40-odd films since 1945, and he was writing screenplays for other directors before that. The international vogue for Bergman, however, is little more than 20 years old. Consequently, we have been going backward and forward on Bergman ever since the early '60s. I was first exposed to Bergman in the mid-'50s with *Torst* and *Night of the Clowns* on the sexy foreign film circuit, and the earliest critique I can recall dismissed his work as "tired German Expressionism." In the late '40s I had seen Alf Sjöberg's *Torment* from a script by Bergman, but the movie itself was marketed on 42nd Street as a sex vehicle for Mai Zetterling. Alf Sjöberg's *Miss Julie* from the Strindberg play was tied with Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* for the grand prize at the 1951 Cannes Film Festival, and, though we did not know it at the time, the stage was being set for the metaphysical concerns of Ingmar Bergman to rise over the ashes of the bread-and-butter parables of Neorealism—at least in the restricted realm of international "art" films. In the late '50s *The Seventh Seal* made Bergman the most written about and most analyzed director in the world. *Wild Strawberries* consolidated his position, and in the years that followed he became a byword for moody, introspective, and fiercely individualistic cinema. People were getting on and off the Bergman bandwagon at different stops. I began to have my first doubts at around the time of *The Magician*, and I never regained my earliest enthusiasm through such alleged "comeback" films as *The Virgin Spring*, *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, *The Silence*, *Persona*, *Shame*, and *Cries and Whispers*. Bergman's oeuvre seemed, to me at least, increasingly heavy, ponderously despairing, and stylistically tortured. I missed the reckless romanticism of *Summer Interlude*, *Monika*, *A Lesson in Love*, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, and *Brink of Life*. I resented people who treated Bergman as the only serious filmmaker in the world, and I noted with some interest that most of the Swedish people I encountered were down on Bergman for one thing or another. Some regarded him as quaintly anachronistic in his religious rhetoric. Others found his work lacking in visual originality and topical relevance.

Ingmar Bergman is now 62 years old, and his latest film—*From the Life of the Marionettes*—can be regarded as his latest "comeback" in that it is the most coherent and most cohesive achievement of the past decade. Filmed in Munich with a largely unfamiliar German cast, *Marionettes* reminds us once more that its creator remains the most perceptive cinematic observer of the neurotic spirit let loose in the modern world. Bergman himself explains the genesis of the film in his preface to the printed screenplay (which, incidentally, is not entirely faithful to the finished film): "In the first part of *Scenes from a Marriage* appear two furious and disastrous persons whom I called Peter and Katarina. They should really have been given much more room for this drama in *Scenes*, but Johan and Marianne took up all the space, and I had to remain silent about the further vicissitudes of the perilous couple. In a screenplay that was designed on a large scale and on the whole turned out to

be a failure (*Love Without Lovers*), Peter and Katarina's marital disaster occurs as one of several themes. The film foundered, but the two refused to go to the bottom with the rest of the wreckage. They kept stubbornly recurring in my plans. Scenes took shape, and now *From the Life of the Marionettes* is a fact."

Bergman has been taking the more literate members of his audience into his confidence in this manner since *Cries and Whispers*. It is as if he were trying to demystify the creative process of making movies so as to discourage the murky disquisitions based on the assumption that the artist played God with his characters, or, worse still, that the artist had nothing on his mind but the death of God. Bergman is also anxious to separate himself somewhat from the work so that a naively biographical analysis cannot place him inside the soul of each of his characters. Indeed, what is particularly impressive and exciting about *Marionettes* is Bergman's apparent effort to get completely outside of himself and under the skins of his various characters, not for any length of time, and certainly not over a life span, but moment to moment in the midst of an overpowering emotional crisis. It is possible that Bergman has reached a stage in his life when he can no longer tell stories from beginning to end.

Marionettes could just as easily be entitled *Scenes from a Murder* or *Scenes from a Crack-Up*. Peter Egerman (Robert Atzorn) murders a prostitute named Ka (Rita Russek). A police interrogator tries to find out why. He interrogates Peter's analyst Mogens Jensen (Martin Benrath), Tim (Walter Schmidinger), a homosexual friend of the family, and the business partner of Peter's wife Katarina (Christine Buchegger). But the police interrogator is not endowed with the mystical powers and options of the truthseeker in detective stories, and his point of view is neither that of the audience's nor of the auteur's. Many scenes are played out without the participation of the interrogator, and the mystery, such as it is, is never solved in the gothic Rosebud or Rebecca manner. The psychiatrist, whose lech for Katarina casts his objectivity in some doubt, diagnoses Peter's emotional problem as a case of latent homosexuality that erupts into violence in the uninhibited atmosphere of the prostitute's sex-shop lair. Peter's scenes with the prostitute are shot in color whereas the various interrogation and revelation scenes are rendered in a bleak, dismal black and white. What are we to make of the psychiatrist's diagnosis or of the revelation that Tim, the homosexual, introduced Peter to the ill-fated prostitute so that Peter would leave his wife, and, perhaps, turn to Tim for solace? A slightly shocking pattern of betrayal is effected by Bergman's arbitrary ordering of sequences backward and forward in time, and before and after the murder. Hence, we learn of Tim's feelings for Peter only after we have seen Tim take Katarina into his confidence on his feelings as if she were his only friend in the world. Similarly, the psychiatrist is shown betraying Peter by making a pass at his wife immediately after he has treated Peter as an old friend.

The episodic structure of the film, however, forestalls any confrontational payoffs



Ingmar Bergman with his wife Ingrid

for these acts of treachery. Clearly, what Bergman is seeking is not the squalid plot machinery for an intrigue-ridden melodrama, but a diversion of the audience's attention from the wordy rationales for psychological disintegration to the images of this disintegration. By setting up his minimeletramas in a matter-of-fact manner, Bergman undermines the authority of the people seeking to "explain" Peter's breakdown. In the episode involving the interrogator and the homosexual, Bergman crosscuts between the two speakers with a disturbingly inconsistent angle of reference that seems to shift the location of the tape recorder between the two speakers. The viewer is left with the uneasy impression that the camera does not reflect the point of view of either of the two speakers with respect to the other, but, rather, of a third person (Bergman himself perhaps) at an obliquely noncommittal angle from the conversation. The fact that the three women in Peter's life—wife, mother, and prostitute—are roughly the same basic type adds another layer of absurdist irony to the proceedings. The more information is given, the more of a maze the film appears to be, and at the very end of the journey into the hero's mind is an immaculately kept cell in which the protagonist has found peace at last with a very frayed teddy bear from his childhood. As one gazes upon the voluptuous temptation of utter catatonia projected in this spectacle, one cannot help averting one's eyes from the involuntary portrait of the artist as an old man.

The fact that Ingmar Bergman has had a long and distinguished career makes it possible for the scholar of his work to chart the evolution of themes and motifs. The films of his early days were strikingly erotic. By contrast, *From the Life of the*

Marionettes projects no erotic spark at all. Even the violence is half-heartedly muted, and there is no longer even a perverse joy in psychic aggression. Certain images are strikingly similar in their urban anomie to some found in Godard's *Every Man for Himself*, but Godard can find both consolation and inspiration in the paradoxes of power relationships amid kinky sex. Bergman cannot find much hope in anything or anyone, and he is therefore unable to generate much excitement even out of depravity and self-destruction. *From the Life of the Marionettes* is nonetheless a cinch to make my 10-best list not simply because Bergman has paid his dues over the years, but because it is stirring to watch his heroic efforts to make a genuine movie out of the last dregs of his doubts and fears. The emotional intensity of the effort must be mindboggling.