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All in the Families

Diane Jacobs

(Autumn Sonata)

Baronet, 59 St. at Third Av.

Violette

Paris, Fifth Av. & 58 St.

This has been an especially rich cinema week, with lots of major openings, most of them foreign, many controversial, and all provocative on one level or another. With *Violette* and *Perceval* respectively, French New Wave directors Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer have set out for regions only hinted at in their earlier works, while *Autumn Sonata* affirms Ingmar Bergman's continued fascination with intimacies and with the obduracy of all feelings and particularly of love. While it would be inappropriate to describe *Autumn Sonata* as hopeful, it is a very beautiful film, as tolerant as it is bleak. This first union of the two masterful Bergmans — Swedish director Ingman, international star Ingrid — and of actresses Bergman and Ullman was bound to be of sentimental interest; it is of extraordinary artistic merit as well.

For me, Ingmar Bergman's 1957 *Wild Strawberries* is the ultimate statement on the visitations of the parents' lovelessness or seeming lovelessness upon the child; and I doubt even Bergman could surpass the breadth and profundity of this early masterpiece. *Autumn Sonata* is a quieter, more concentrated film on the same subject. Bergman has now honed his style to a point where exposition is unnecessary, and *Autumn Sonata* begins abruptly with Eva (Liv Ullman) seen in blurred focus at her writing table — like the subject of a Vermeer painting — and with her paunchy husband Viktor (Halvar Bjork) directly in front of the camera, telling us a few details of her emotional life. He speaks dispassionately and with an intensity that makes us sit up and take notice. Viktor seems patient, interior, unquestioning — maybe a little neurotic, and maybe dull. We are not surprised to learn that he's a minister, and when he tells us that he loves his wife for what she is — although she won't accept it — we believe him. Later, when we are informed that she doesn't love him, indeed has never loved anyone, we don't want to trust the various tellers. *Autumn Sonata* is the story of Eva and her mother, but it is Viktor's story too.

The film gets underway when Eva invites her relatively successful concert pianist mother, Charlotte (Ingrid Bergman), for an extended stay with herself and her husband in their parsonage home in the Swedish countryside. Charlotte has recently lost a man she lived with for 13 years, and her reunion with Eva — a sometime journalist and amateur pianist — is noteworthy because it is the first time they've met in seven years. The negligence is the mother's, and Eva seems to forgive. They hug, they cry, Charlotte chatters on about herself and is furious when she learns she must confront another daughter, Helena (Lena Nyman), who has been deformed by illness and is now living under Eva's care. Point and counterpoint are swiftly established: Eva is kind and unextraordinary, Charlotte is selfish and gifted. The other daughter, Helena, is both product of and metaphor for Charlotte's own lovelessness and inattention to family. As Eva spits at her later: "There's only one truth and one lie." Of course,

Bergman thinks otherwise.

Most of *Autumn Sonata* takes place during a single late afternoon and evening in the homely rooms Eva loves, where Charlotte's worldliness and glamour are slowly whittled away, along with layers of the past. Eva insists that adulthood can only be lived as an extension of the child's experience. The complaints are all Eva's: her mother cared only for her career; merely feigned love for husband and children; failed to appreciate Eva's best qualities and thus taught them to hide, let them atrophy. At first Charlotte refuses to listen, and when she does, the world becomes more complicated. Although we see Eva's husband, Viktor, only rarely — chewing on his pipe with a bemused twinkle in his eye, warning Eva not to expect too much of life or of a reunion with her mother — his presence is keenly felt as the two women snarl, weep, declaim. *Autumn Sonata* is a film about love between men and women as well as a reverie on familial aridity.

As is Bergman's wont in recent films, most of *Autumn Sonata* is shot within the "no exit" scope of close-up. There's much cutting from the daughter's huge, ardent face to a close-up of her mother, similarly naked, similarly divested of guile and delusion. When the two appear in a single frame, they seem to have been squeezed together, each of them too unwieldy, too important to be comfortable within the same image. One is usually in profile while the other upstages. Ullman is as good as she has ever been and versatile as she is only under Bergman's direction. As Eva, she is earth figure, barren wife, conciliator and ruthless child at once. It's wonderful to watch her use her lovelessness as a weapon and at the same time remain vulnerable to love.

But *Autumn Sonata* is Ingrid Bergman's film, and her performance is breathtaking. Never has Bergman, who is now in her sixties, given a more impressive performance — as villain mother, as stern career woman, as coquette, as a human being who can acknowledge guilt and beg forgiveness. She is sublime — not as a star, but as Charlotte. Where Robert Altman in *A Wedding* approached Lillian Gish with a reverence less for her character, the matriarch, than for the silent screen star herself, Bergman demands that Bergman become a character quite the opposite of her prototype. He directs his camera at her relentlessly, as if she were acting for the first and only time; and she is transfigured.

Autumn Sonata seems to have two endings. The first is a desolate parting, the second a reaching for reunion. It is as if Bergman initially decided that so much tearing apart could never end in forgiveness and then, in a mellower frame of mind, thought how could it end otherwise?