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IN THE PRESENCE OF A CLOWN

(LARMAR OCH GOR SIG TILL)

(DRAMA — SWEDISH)

An SVT production, in collaboration with DR (Denmark), NRK (Norway), RAI (Italy), YLE 1 (Finland) and ZDF (Germany), with support from the Nordic TV Co-production Fund and the Nordic Film & TV Fund. Produced by Pia Ehrnvall.

Directed, written by Ingmar Bergman. Camera (color), Per Sundin; editor, Sylvia Ingmarsson; set decorator, Goran Wassberg; costume designer, Mette Moller. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard), May 16, 1998. Running time: 120 MIN.

Carl Akerblom Borje Ahlstedt
Pauline Thibault Marie Richardson
Osvald Voogler Erland Josephson
Karin Bergmann Pernilla August
Anna Akerblom Anita Bjork
Rigmor the Clown Agneta Ekmanner
Mia Falk Anna Bjork

By EMANUEL LEVY

In the Presence of a Clown," Ingmar Bergman's latest telepic, doesn't rank high in the filmmaker's pantheon, but it reps a solid piece of work that will delight aficionados of the vet director, who turns 80 in July. Inspired by episodes and figures from Bergman's family, this sharply observed, well-acted chamber piece centers on Uncle Carl, a charismatic, middle-aged inventor who was a mental patient in an asylum. In the climate that prevails in today's movie market, best chances for this film, which has already been shown on Euro TV, lie with premium cable channels.

Roughly divided into four parts, "In the Presence of a Clown" is set in an Uppsala Psychiatric Hospital in 1925, a context that becomes more significant when the drama dwells on the potential of the new medium of cinema and the differences between the conventions of projected images and live theater. Bergman, who wrote and directed the film, uses a healthy dose of cynical humor in spoofing both mediums from the inside, based on his extensive work in theater, film and TV.

When first introduced, Carl Akerblom (Borje Ahlstedt, in a poignant perf) is sitting in an empty psychiatric ward, rapturously and secretly listening to records of his favorite composer, Franz Schubert.

Interacting with his doctor and another patient, Professor Osvald Voogler (reliable Bergman vet Erland Josephson), he's obsessing about how Schubert must have felt at the end of his life. Without hesitation, the doctor proclaims that the musician must have experienced "a sinking feeling." From this point on, Bergman uses the opposite metaphors of sinking and rising to comment on his central characters.

Afflicted with outbursts of rage, Akerblom was institutionalized for attempting to kill his beautiful, much younger fiancée, Pauline Thibault (Marie Richardson), who he refuses to see now. An encounter with a white-faced, white-dressed clown (Agneta Ekmanner), who reappears sporadically in the movie, brings recurring themes in Bergman's oeuvre to the surface: theology and spirituality, personal freedom and the constraints of marriage and, above all, creativity and death.

The playful Carl, who had mastered an impressive repertoire of magic tricks, is now intrigued by inventing a new performance style, the talking picture, one that will replace silent movies. Carl, Professor Voogler, his fiancée and other thespians embark on a tour that takes them to a remote provincial village.

To demonstrate the magic of his discovery, Carl chooses a play about the relationship between Schubert and Europe's object of desire, Mizzi Veith, defying both logic and chronology as Mizzi was not even born when the composer died.

About a dozen people including Carl's stepmother and his half-sister attend the show which takes place during a snowstorm. It's in the interactions between those at the show that Bergman reveals his mastery of in-depth psychological portraiture and focused mise-en-scene.

As always, there are emotional confrontations and rivalries: between mother and fiancée, as well as between fiancée and the troupe's sexy actress.

In its good moments, which are plentiful, new work brings to mind Bergman's 1984 teleplay, "After the Rehearsal," which also concerned a womanizing director torn by his love for several women.

In due course, Bergman offers the kind of wry commentary that only an accomplished artist like himself can on the art of acting, the difference between movies and theater and the meaning of role-playing onstage and off — all familiar Bergman motifs.

Bergman's devotees will note that new pic employs characters from some of his earlier movies, including "Fanny and Alexander" and "Best Intentions." In fact, Ahlstedt portrayed Uncle Carl in the aforementioned pictures.

While all members of the acting ensemble reach the heights anticipated in a Bergman movie, techs credits are extremely modest, disclosing budgetary constraints and indicating none too favorably that this is a teleplay.

The Swedish title, "Larmar och gor sig till," derives from Shakespeare's "Macbeth," Act V, Scene V.