

Document Citation

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Title | The masterbuilder |
| Author(s) | Jennifer Stone |
| Source | <i>Berkeley Monthly</i> |
| Date | 1983 Sep |
| Type | review |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 2 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | Fanny och Alexander (Fanny and Alexander), Bergman, Ingmar, 1982 |



Ewa Fröling and Mona Malm as Emilie and Alma Ekdahl: Is Bergman passing the torch to women?

Berkeley Monthly September, '83

The Masterbuilder

Bergman discovers the golden age of families in his "last" film, *Fanny and Alexander*. By Jennifer Stone

"... It is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship. It severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. In former days the artist remained unknown. ... Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation. The smallest wound or pain of the ego is examined under a microscope as if it were of eternal importance. The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy. Thus we finally gather in one large pen, where we stand and bleat about our loneliness without listening to each other and without realizing that we are smothering each other to death. The individualists stare into each other's eyes and yet deny the existence of each other. We walk in circles, so limited by our own anxieties that we can no longer distinguish between true and false, between the gangster's whim and the purest ideal.

Thus if I am asked what I would like the general purpose of my films to be, I would reply that I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to make a dragon's head, an angel, a devil—or perhaps a saint—out of stone. It does not matter which: it is the sense of satisfaction that counts. Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral."

—Ingmar Bergman, *Introduction to*

Jennifer Stone has spent the last two months trying to get to the bottom of things. She's decided she'd rather go to the movies.

the English translation of *The Seventh Seal* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1960).

THE FILMS OF INGMAR BERGMAN have followed me in the dark much of my adult life. In 1956, *The Seventh Seal* shattered whatever Christian mythos still clung to my soul. Bergman used medieval man as a metaphor to probe the black plague of modern despair. Watching it again more than a quarter of a century later (at the U.C. Theater's summer Bergman festival), the dark was light enough to see the human comedy beneath the horror.

Throughout the existential bone yard of the '50s, each Bergman film brought a new insight. While I didn't believe God was a big black spider (*Through a Glass Darkly*), I did know that modern birthing was an isolated anguish (*The Brink of Life*). In 1972 *Cries and Whispers* helped us to see our mothers and ourselves without the gothic gauze. Here Bergman used 19th-century woman (as *The Seventh Seal* used medieval man) to portray the loss of faith, the Kierkegaardian despair, the abyss of loneliness and death to which his women as well as his men are condemned. (Not that most women buy the notion that life is hell, but it's nice to get equal time.) In 1978, the modern mother herself was portrayed by the late Ingrid Bergman in *Autumn Sonata*, a role which hit home for many of us trying to understand our adult children.

This year we have *Fanny and Alexander*. Pauline Kael calls it a "willed masterpiece." Bergman calls it his last picture show. It has both the fairy-tale glow of *The Magic Flute*

(1975) and the old man's nostalgia so poignant in *Wild Strawberries* (1957). A great (3 hours and 10 minutes) Christmas card of a movie, room after room full of candles tell us that Bergman's church is the home, the hearth, the bosom of the family, a place where people still have the capacity to care.

Set in 1907 (Bergman was born in 1918), this is perhaps the past as Bergman wishes it had been. He sees the upper-middle-class Ekdahl family through the eyes of the ten-year-old Alexander, played by Bertil Guve. (Fanny is not a major character—only his little sister, a sort of shadow or more probably his own feminine aspect.)

In Bergman's mythos, the "little world" of the theater and of private life are a refuge of order and love within the great world, which is chaos. "*The world is a den of thieves and night is falling.*" Through one of the characters he admits this view is simplistic, but it's the best he can do. Of course, he still has his nightmares. Little Alexander sees ghosts, and Bergman implies that the ghosts of childhood dog him yet. Alexander's father becomes a ghost—taken ill while rehearsing the role of the ghost of Hamlet's father, he dies and returns as a gentle spirit who visits both Alexander and his own mother, Helena, to tell her his fears for his children. Going Hamlet one better, Alexander later finds himself haunted as well by the ghost of his sadistic stepfather, a clergyman who bears a decided resemblance to Bergman's own estranged father.

The middle of the film deals with Alexander's mother's marriage to this tyrannical bishop and the humilia-

(Continued on page 17)

tion which follows. Bergman has said, 'I think it's terribly important that art expose humiliation, that art show how human beings humiliate one another, because humiliation is one of the most dreadful companions of humanity, and our whole social system is based to an enormous extent on humiliation.' Alexander's love for the mother figure is almost as strong as his hatred for the stepfather. In *The New Yorker* (October 21, 1972), Bergman is quoted, "Ever since my childhood, I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red."

FANNY AND ALEXANDER creates the illusion that yes, there was once a golden age of families. The many relatives are a gallery of human frailties and charms. I identified most with Helena (Gunn Wallgren), the grandmother who seems to have more freedom and fun than the rest. My favorite moment comes after the family Christmas Eve party, when she tries to have a good cry over the family's foibles on the kindly shoulder of her old lover, a Jew in the medieval mold (Erland Josephson). When the tears won't come, she tries some more brandy to see if that will do it.

At film's end, Helena and Alexander's beautiful mother Emilie (Ewa Froling) seem to have inherited the family theater. Emilie comes to Helena to read August Strindberg's *The Dream Play* (Strindberg being, of course, Bergman's significant elder in the Swedish theater). Helena says, "What, that old misogynist!" But together they study the play and agree it's all "up to us now." Is Bergman passing the torch to women, or is he simply saying he's tired? At 64, he still works in the theater and on television (look for the five-hour TV version of *Fanny and Alexander*), but says that the physical strain of making films is too much. He lives now on the Swedish island of Faro, where his house is the same gray stark color as the shale stones that cover the beach. He has eight children and five grandchildren, and perhaps they have helped satisfy his longing for his own lost innocence.

THIS LONGING MAY CAUSE some viewers to have doubts about *Fanny and Alexander*, or even to consider it reactionary. Sven Nykvist's cinematography gives us a dreamy world only children can believe in. One long shot of Erland Josephson as the mysterious Jew tucked up in his great bed asleep is so like a 19th-century Arthur Rackham fairy-tale illustration it jumps at us. There is an idyllic christening scene in which the baby daughter of Emilie is paired with the illegitimate baby daughter of a household servant. In matching cribs of equal elegance, both are equally celebrated and fussed over.

There is much more of this wishful thinking on a grand scale. It would seem that Bergman has spent most of his creative years shedding and tearing at the values and textures of Victorian life which so tormented his youth, only to turn around in his old age and imagine there was grace and beauty in that world. Perhaps at this distance, the Victorians look good? Not that this is a valentine. Bergman the artist is still at the seashore playing chess with Death. He knows that domestic life is a cauldron of woes—but who, given any choice at all, would jump out of that cauldron into the fire of emptiness? ●