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REVIEWS

A CRITICAL LOOK AT MOVIES, MUSIC, ART, BOOKS, EVENTS AND CULTURAL PHENOMENA IN THE BAY AREA



Ewa Froling (l.) and Mona Malm celebrate Christmas in 'Fanny and Alexander,' Ingmar Bergman's latest, and possibly last, film.

M O V I E S

Bergman frolics (for Bergman, that is)

EDWARD GUTHMANN

FANNY AND ALEXANDER. Written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. Opens Friday, July 8th at the Clay. SF. opens Friday, July 15th at Act One, Berk.

The ripe glow of nostalgia permeates the opening passages of *Fanny and Alexander*, Ingmar Bergman's sentimental, surprisingly optimistic new film (and reportedly his last). The rich, life-embracing tableaux that illustrate a 1907 Christmas Eve in Uppsala, Sweden — Bergman's own childhood home — are exquisitely photographed by Bergman's perennial collaborator, the masterful Sven Nykvist: lace tablecloths, plush embroidered pillows, a huge dining table with garlands of

flowers and poinsettias, spacious salons with heavy red brocadés. It's easily the lushest, most commodious set design we've seen since Violetta's knock-out spread in Zeffirelli's *La Traviata*.

Outside, sleighbells ring, well-bundled villagers carry piles of packaged gifts and the cool crunch of a man's footsteps in the snow herald the onset of the charmed season. It's Currier and Ives gone to Sweden.

This is Bergman's *Amarcord*, an effervescent postcard memory of the director's own childhood (he was born in 1918, a good 20 years after his alter-ego
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Alexander). And it's filmed with a robustness that Bergman hasn't displayed since *Smiles of a Summer Night* in the mid-'50s. His characters, of course, aren't nearly as sensuous as Fellini's, but for the austere, typically self-punishing Swede, it's a stretch. Who'd expect Bergman to introduce a lovably gross, whiskered uncle who delights small children with his ability to blow out candles with a single blast of posterior wind?

Fanny and Alexander, played rather stiffly by Pernilla Allwin and Bertil Guve (a Robby Benson lookalike), are the young sister and brother in a large, multi-generational family that convenes for a boisterous holiday celebration. Helena Ekdahl (Gunn Wallgren) is a retired actress and well-heeled widow who's handed down the management of the family-owned theater to her eldest son, Oscar (Allan Edwall). Father to Fanny and Alexander, Oscar is a dull man and a sluggish actor. Another son, Gustav (Jarle Kulle), a restaurateur, is the billygoat of the brood, a shameless scamp whose pawing at Helena's maid causes little distress to his good-natured wife (Mona Malm). The third son, Carl (Boerje Ahlstedt), is a gloom-pot and failed academic, with a nuisance of a wife (Christina Schollin) who still speaks her native German after 20 years in Sweden.

The Ekdahls' sweet but formal sense of communion is crushed when Oscar dies of a stroke while playing the Ghost in a rehearsal of *Hamlet*, leaving wife Emilie (Ewa Froling), a vital and beautiful woman, to raise the children alone. Enter Edvard Vergerus (Jan Malmsjo), a grimly God-fearing bishop who proposes marriage to Emilie and promises to assume the childrearing reins left by Oscar.

Talk about Dickens! Cruel Edvard is a terror in clerical collar, a despotic tyrant who locks up Emilie, whips Alexander, and forbids the lot of them to bring any possession or reminders of their former lives into his sepulchral home. The mood shift from the Ekdahl's *House Beautiful* digs into the bishop's starched-white sarcophagus is bad enough. But the bishop's idea of cuisine and comportment make *Oliver Twist* seem like a bacchanal. When Alexander reveals a dream he's had — about the bishop murdering his first wife and children — the withered house-servant he confides it to (Harriet Andersson) blows the whistle on him, triggering a primitive household tribunal climaxed by a lashing. "The love I feel for you and your mother and sister is not sloppy," the bishop tells him. "It is harsh and strong." Me, I'll take the slops any day.

Can we buy Emilie's colossal gullibility? How can a spirited, creative woman — even in 1907, even devastated by the loss of her husband — be so dumb as to trade the cozy comforts of the Ekdahl manse for the bishop and his promise of hearth and prayer? The psychological motives are at best tenuous. Eventually, Emilie and the kids escape, like refugees from a gothic fairy-tale nightmare, and reunite with their father's family in a cheery epilogue.

A lot of fuss has been made over the triumph of joy over gloom and repression in this film. *Film Comment* called it "conciliatory," praising the expansive, taste-the-nectar bid by a director who slogged through so many dreary winters and thorny battles with religion, family enmity and rotten love. It's true that *Fanny and Alexander* has a blissful, coming-of-spring finale, but

the torment we tread with the bishop in order to get there is pretty agonizing stuff.

Even the early parts of *Fanny and Alexander* aren't all that jubilant. The Ekdahl family is mostly ritualized, self-conscious and bourgeois, and — considering they're a family of showfolk — surprisingly tight-assed. I think it may *seem* like a righteous blast because we expect such tony chamber pieces from Bergman, or interpersonal transaction marathons like *Face to Face* and *Autumn Sonata*.

Finally, why is this picture called *Fanny and Alexander*? It's not filtered through their point of view, and it gives the youngsters a mostly peripheral status. Alexander is a non-entity, save for his strong imagination and ability to conjure his dead father's spirit, and Fanny is even more of a blank. Poor little Pernilla Allwin hasn't a thing to do, and nary a word of dialogue. The pivotal character is their mother, Emilie, and it is Ewa Froling — a younger, more vital Liv Ullman type — whose beauty and intensity give this film its most potent human spark. ■