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THE MAGICIAN

Presented by the Fine Arts Council of Catholic University

February 26, 1967

Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman
Director: Ingmar Bergman
Photography: Gunnar Fischer, Rolf Halmquist
Editing: Oscar Rosander
Music: Erik Nordgren
Sets: P. A. Lundgren
Producer: Allan Ekeland

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The Cast:

Vogler.....	Max Von Sydow
Manda (Aman).....	Ingrid Thulin
Vergerus.....	Gunnar Bjornstrand
Grandmother.....	Neima Wifstrand
Spegel.....	Bengt Ekerot
Sara.....	Bibi Andersson
Ottilia.....	Gertrud Fridh
Simson.....	Lars Ekborg
Starbeck.....	Toivo Pawlo
Egerman.....	Erland Josephson
Tubel.....	Ake Fridell
Sofia.....	Sif Ruud
Antonsson.....	Oscar Ljung
Henrietta.....	Ulla Sjoblom
Rustan.....	Axel Dubert
Sanna.....	Birgitta Pettersson

The Magician lasts one hour and forty-two minutes.

The Magician: Historical and Other Digressions

The Magician has been called intellectually meaningless and emotionally fraudulent.¹ It is the highly improbable story of Albert Emanuel Vogler, a nineteenth century mesmerist and chief performer of Vogler's Magnetic Health Theater. Vogler is a student of Mesmer, but now, no longer confident that his knowledge is capable of helping people, he leads his small troupe from town to town where their performances combine cheap trickery and hypnotic feats. It is a historic fact that the followers of Mesmer were despised and distrusted by the members of the medical profession. Such men were without proper medical background, and their faulty application of Mesmer's principles did more harm than good. It was by default that hypnosis became a part of the magician's act. The actual process of hypnosis, of course, has been distorted, to fit Bergman's own purposes, but the mutual hatred of Vogler and Vergerus, the mesmerist's troupe of dissemblers, and the herb-gathering grandmother are all historically, as well as dramatically, sound.

It seems odd that The Magician should be titled a comedy, for its ending reveals a mocking desolation which is comic neither in the common nor Aristotelian sense of the word. Bergman is laughing, of course, at the foibles of humanity, but his laughter is so bitter that we refuse to recognize its bitterness and wonder instead at the "happy ending", refusing to realize that the ending is the most bitter sting of all. Such nihilism is hardly surprising, for once God has ceased to exist, the system of ethics and love of humanity based on his existence must also cease. It is an unpleasant film, but it is hardly meaningless. When all is over, and Vergerus has won both the day and his bet, the supernatural has been laid to rest and man remains alone, bitter and alone. Even the sinister grandmother no longer bothers us. She is just another old hag who has made a lot of money by playing on the desires and superstitions of humanity. And yet, there is that

small indefinable doubt bred by Tubal's words: "Another thing, Granny can make things jump. Granny knows what I mean. Tables fly, chairs fall over, the candles and lamps go out and so on. We know Granny's tricks. Will Granny please be good now and control herself? Granny's tricks are passé. They're no fun any more because they can't be explained." Perhaps it is significant that Granny's tricks are never in evidence.

One wonders whether the basic trouble may not be that what Bergman is saying about the relation between truth and trickery in the magician's act (and by extension, surely in his own) is really rather bogus, so that when he ultimately finds himself debunking the magician's art by way of an unassailable magician's act, the cinema, his conviction fails him. He has been carried too far, it appears, in the elaboration of his original thesis, and what looks in the script a fairly coherent piece of dramatic fantasy is just not intuitively true for Bergman the film-maker. Where another director working from Bergman's script might somehow have glossed this over, Bergman cannot; all his technical resources cannot carry him over something in which he has, subconsciously at least, lost belief, and so the virtuosity stands out with something like the uncomfortable extravagance which characterizes lies told by an unusually truthful man.

Bergman's Film Techniques and His "Repertory Company"

Bergman can invest a film quickly and surely with poetry and mystery, for he is a man of serious mind and serious imagination.² Numerous sequences are masterly, like the one in the attic, where the rationalist is almost frightened out of his reason. Some of his mannerisms are now recognizable (for instance, deleting the sound as the horses pull the wagon through the shadowy forest in order to heighten the eerie effect), but at least they are not prosaic mannerisms. The film to him is interesting only as a freehand way of asking immense questions, whether in drama or comedy.

Two other points about Bergman are important. He is one of the relatively few film directors who can be criticized in quite this vein because he writes his own scripts. The film that you see is the one he conceived, not the one he was engaged to execute, and much of the texture comes from the fact that the conceiver and (broadly speaking) the executant are the same. It is like the happy, almost lucky feeling one gets when a good poet is also a good reader of his poems (Dylan Thomas).

The second point is that, like few other current directors, he has assembled a stock company of actors and technicians who respond to him and, as such a company should, evidently think him the greatest man alive. Gunnar Fischer, his photographer, Oscar Rosander, his film editor, and Erik Nordgren, his composer, are now like extra senses of Bergman's. Among the actors are the gaunt Max von Sydow, the coolly beautiful Ingrid Thulin, the enchanting Bibi Andersson, the incisive Gunnar Bjornstrand. Their reappearances in differing roles of differing importance in Bergman's films provide more than a sense of theatrical ensemble: at a deeper level, the creation of so many characters by so few actors gives us a sense of the Promethean range of human nature.

¹David R. Nelson, Ingmar Bergman: The Search for God, Boston University Film Studies No. 1, 1964, p. 32-34.

²Stanley Kauffman, review of The Magician, New Republic, October 12, 1959.

Films by Ingmar Bergman: Crisis, 1945. It Rains on Our Love, 1946. A Ship to India, 1947. Music in the Dark, 1947. Port of Call, 1948. Prison, 1948. Three Strange Loves, 1949. To Joy, 1949. It Can't Happen Here, 1950. Illicit Interlude, 1950. Secrets of Women, 1952. Monika, 1952. Sawdust and Tinsel (The Naked Night), 1953. A Lesson in Love, 1953. Dreams, 1954. Smiles of a Summer Night, 1955. The Seventh Seal, 1956. Wild Strawberries, 1957. Brink of Life, 1957. The Magician, 1958. The Virgin Spring, 1959. The Devil's Eye, 1959. Through a Glass Darkly, 1961. Winter Light, 1962. The Silence, 1963. All These Women, 1964. Persona, 1966.