

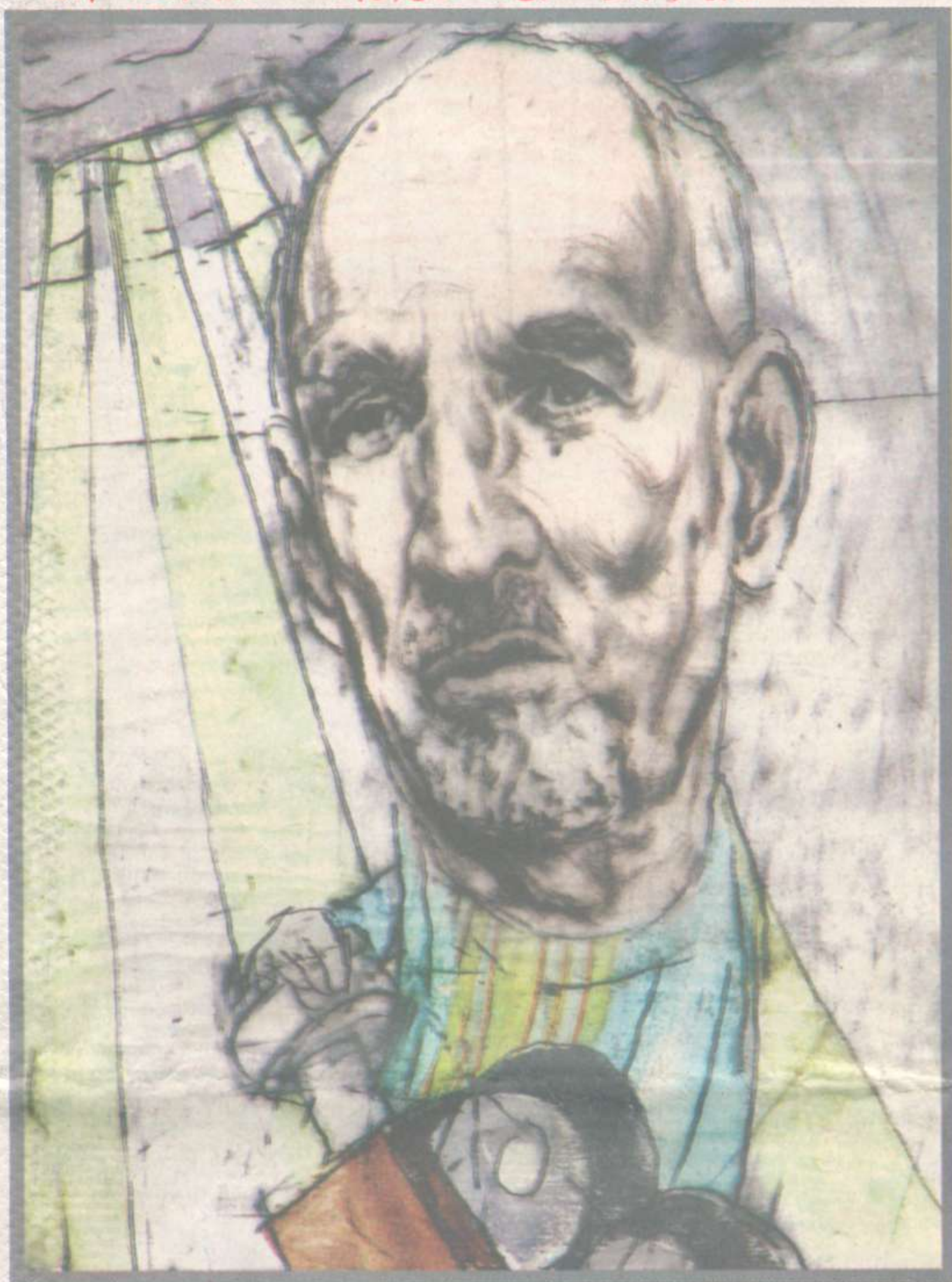
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THE DIRECTOR'S ART

To think like

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Ingmar Bergman, with one more brave work, reminds us of how filmmakers can be seers.

By PETER RAINER
Special to The Times

INGMAR BERGMAN has always been a tease when it comes to farewells. As far back as 1966, with the release of "Persona," he delivered a speech entitled "Each Film Is My Last." When he announced in 1983 that "Fanny and Alexander" would *really* be his last, everybody assumed it was just another one of his Swedish jokes. Maybe so, but the punch line has been a long time coming. True, he made "After the Rehearsal" for television a year after "Fanny and Alexander." But since then, if you don't count a handful of televised stage performances — silence. At last he has a new movie, "Saraband," also made for television and completed in 2002, when the director was 84. The punch line may have fallen on deaf ears: With no new bonafide Bergman movie for decades, the current generation of filmgoers has come to regard him, if at all, as a relic. Even many of his older admirers, who grew up with "The Seventh Seal" and "Wild Strawberries," have all but forgotten him. They long ago passed through their "Bergman phase." Some are surprised to hear he is still alive.

In fact, during his fadeaway from the screen, Bergman has written a number of screenplays for others, a novel and a memoir, and remained quite busy as a stage director. And "Saraband," which reunites Johan (Erland Josephson) and Marianne (Liv Ullmann), the divorced couple from the 1973 film "Scenes From a Marriage," is a potent blast of Bergman-iana. It doesn't have the tempered air of a valedictory. Watching [See Bergman, Page E6]

Tough vision, a gentle hand

[Bergman, from Page E1] the film was, for me, like revisiting a foreign country I remembered fervently but hadn't been back to in a very long time. When one of the characters, Johan's weebegone son Henrik, proclaims, "Sometimes I think an incredible punishment is waiting for me," I beamed. Bergman's back!

And yet, there is a Rip Van Winkle aspect to his reappearance. "Saraband" is the work of an artist who, in terms of his lifelong creative obsessions, has never really been away. But the world has changed around him since his "retirement," and what people are looking for in movies may have changed too. Bergman is undeniably one of the great directors, but he has always stood for more than the sum of his films. From the first, he was regarded not simply as a movie director but as a visionary who grappled with the Big Questions of God and Man. His symbol-thick films were drenched in the night sweats of mortal torment. He was the kind of artist we had been brought up to believe was the real deal: He suffered for our souls.

A NEW REALITY

WE no longer regard artists, certainly not movie artists, as seers. We do not look to them for spiritual instruction. (Bloggers have become our new seers.) Bergman himself resisted such a role; in interviews over the years, he often seems almost comically obtuse about his intentions. Typical is an exchange from an interview with John Simon, who reasonably postulates that "Persona" is "really about how a person who feels empty, depleted, and sick gets back into life again by using another person," to which Bergman responds that the film is "a tension, a situation, something that has happened and passed, and beyond that I don't know."

It is, of course, a truism that artists are often their own worst explainers. And surely Bergman is being coy here, just as he was when he once likened himself to one of the anonymous artisans who built the Chartres cathedral. But he's also being honest. No filmmaker who works as close to the knife edge of intuition as he does can hope to deliver movies with the thesis-like comprehensiveness and lucidity that his international admirers claim for him. (His movies are so impeccably crafted that it's easy to assume that his thinking is equally rigorous.) And yet it is also abundantly true that, more so than with any other director, Bergman can be discussed in the same terms that (for better or worse) we reserve for a great literary artist. His visual language is voluminous, his themes upper case, his fixations have a pedigree going back to Strindberg, Ibsen, Kierkegaard.

It was this appeal, in fact, that initially accounted for much of Bergman's attraction among American postwar literati who normally wouldn't be caught dead admitting that the movies could be an art form. Lionel Trilling, for example, reviewing a collection of Bergman's screenplays in 1960, even went so far as to confess that, although the director was "the only contemporary maker of films

who figures in the mind of the public as a creative artist in his own right," Trilling himself hadn't actually seen any of his films. Bergman didn't catch on exclusively with liberal intellectuals; his films also carried a seal of approval for the many middle-class patrons looking for a little "betterment." For all these audiences, Bergman made it reputable to like movies — or at least his movies. By comparison, attending a typical Hollywood film was like slinking into a theater while wearing a raincoat.

Bergman ascended at just the right cultural moment for his myth to take root. Film critics were advancing the auteur theory, which posited that the director was the "author" of his films. The expanding art-house audience in the mid- to late-'50s, still recoiling from the horrors of war, was highly receptive to Bergman's brand of existential dread (and to the ministrations of psychoanalysis, which was also in the dread business). His movies were discussed as allegories about the soul's progression through an uncomprehending universe. Many of his most celebrated films through the mid-'60s were explicitly religious. In "The Seventh Seal," Max von Sydow, a medieval knight (and prototypical modern man), famously plays chess with Death and cries out, "I want knowledge, not belief." "The Virgin Spring," also set in the Middle Ages, is about a father who seeks to understand God's plan in the rape and murder of his daughter. Bergman's father was a severe Lutheran minister — he would punish his son by locking him in the closet — and one doesn't have to be a strict Freudian to see how fundamentally this upbringing affects the films.

Bergman has always downplayed the orthodoxy of his art. In the preface to his collected screenplays he says that for him, "religious problems do not take place on the emotional level but on an intellectual one." But what powerfully disturbs audiences about his movies isn't the sophisticated theology, it's the awe and fear at their core. Bergman transmutes religious stories into sinister fairy tales full of foreboding. Later on, when he had completed the trilogy of "Through a Glass Darkly," "Winter Light" and "The Silence," the movies became less religious but no less convulsive. "Persona," "Shame," "Cries and Whispers" and "Autumn Sonata," among many others, are still about the need for belief, the futility of belief, but this time the agonies are more secular. While God cools off on the sidelines, man and woman, parent and child, are center stage — often quite literally at each other's throats.

No matter how clotted with symbolism Bergman's films are, he never loses sight of his audience. Unlike another modern master, Jean-Luc Godard, whose films have often resembled private affairs, Bergman is very much a showman in a venerable theatrical tradition. The rap against him has always been that angst is his shtick, one reason he is so ripe for parody. Before he decided to become Ingmar Bergman, Woody Allen would send him up all the time. But genius is not as malleable as talent, and it is the rare great artist who has not howled at the same moon for an entire career. (Of course, not all howls are equally sonorous; I would not wish "The Serpent's Egg" on anyone.)

What makes Bergman's particular career so unusual is that, unlike almost any other writer-di-



The Kobal Collection / Svensk Filmindustri

CHECK-MATE: Antonius Block (Max von Sydow), at right, must play the game of his life — against Death — in Bergman's 1957 film "The Seventh Seal."

rector, he has been free to make personal movies since the very beginning. With unprecedented, conspiratorial intimacy, his great stock company of actors (Von Sydow, Ullmann, Josephson, Bibi Andersson, Harriet Andersson, Gunnar Björnstrand, Ingrid Thulin and others) incarnate his torments. The "real" world rarely collides with his own. When, for example, in "Persona," he flashed images of the Warsaw ghetto or a Buddhist Vietnam war protester in flames, it was as if his antennae had suddenly picked up static from outer space. (That's not where he belongs; he's an inner-space kind of guy.) With few exceptions, Bergman has never even ventured outside of Sweden, and many of his most famous films, especially the later ones, are chamber dramas for a handful of actors.

THE TIGHT SHOT

FEW filmmakers have directed as many shattering performances as Bergman, or photographed them more expressively. Or been as preternaturally attuned to the psyches of women. The focal point of his movies is the human countenance in all its infinite masquerades. (One reason he loves filming monologues is because they allow him to zero in on the face in motion.) The old saw that filmmakers should avoid using too many close-ups does not apply in Bergman's case: We can never get our fill of the faces in his movies because their mysteries always lie just beyond our comprehension. The most famous image from "Persona," the merged profiles of Andersson and Ullmann, made that mystery manifest. But dozens of other images are just as spookily ineffable as this one. There is no more resonant leave-taking in movies than the final shot of Victor Sjöström's aged physician in "Wild Strawberries," his head on the pillow after a long odyssey, as he turns into a revenant before our eyes.

Bergman's obsession with death is also an obsession with life — for what is being taken away. The rapture in "Smiles of a Summer Night" and "The Magic Flute," or in the festive scenes from "Fanny and Alexander," is the flip side to his doominess, and every bit as piercing. When the patriarch in "Fanny" closes out the film by exhorting his brood to "be happy while we are happy and take pleasure in the little world," he is speaking the bliss of common sense. Bergman was criticized for collapsing into bourgeois sentimentality, but after all the abysses he's spelunked, who had a better right to tout delight?

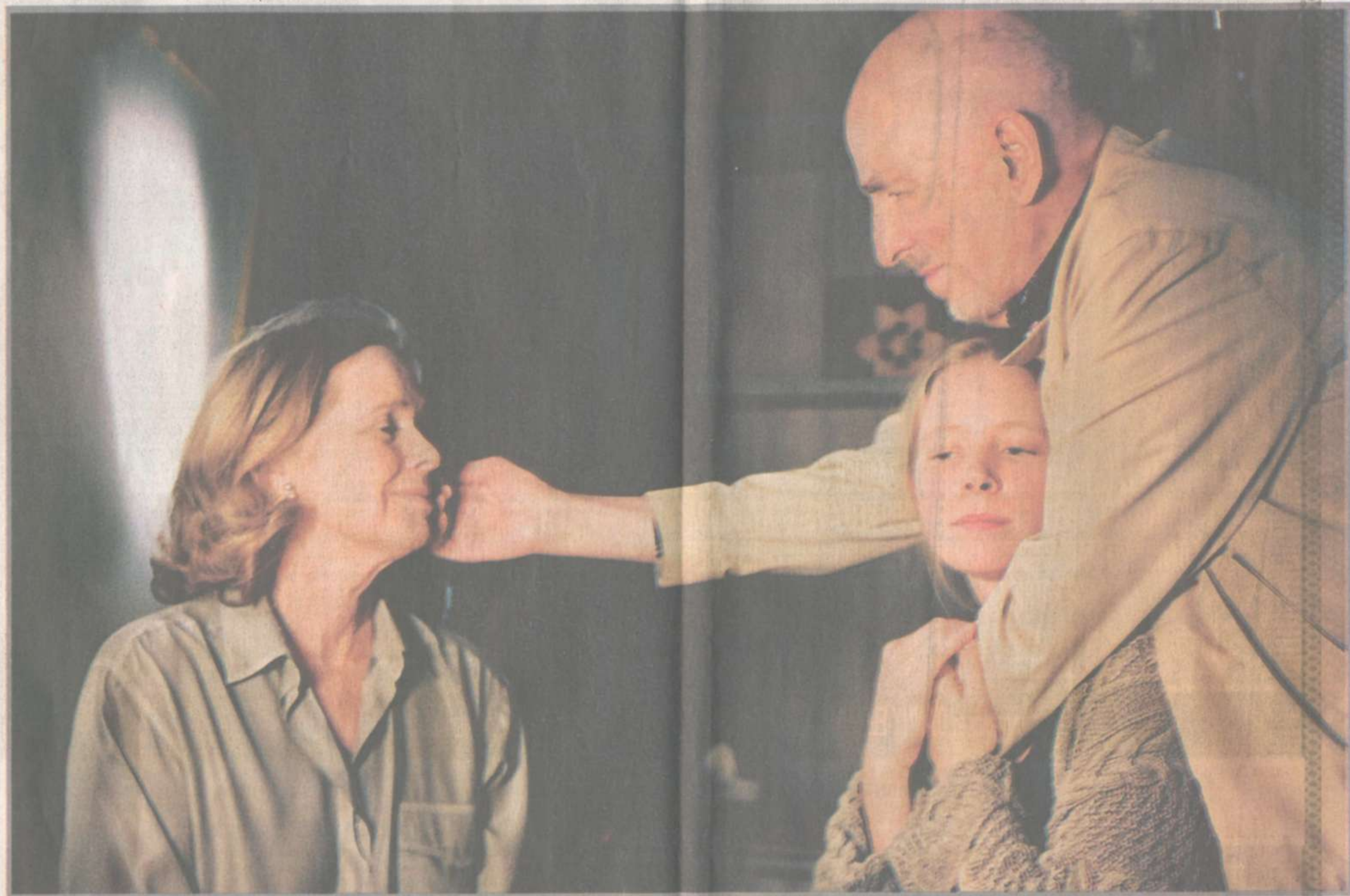
Besides, "Saraband," which may indeed be his

swan song, undoes the sentiment. It's set in a world where there is, at best, a nostalgia for happiness. Marianne and Johan, several times divorced, have not seen each other for 30 years. She surprises him with a visit to his summer lake cottage and they clasp hands, but they are only going through the motions, and soon Marianne understands she has made a big mistake. Johan's estranged 61-year-old music professor son Henrik (Börje Ahlstedt), by an earlier marriage, lives on the property with his 19-year-old cellist daughter Karin (Julia Dufvenius), with whom he shares a harrowing, quasi-incestuous relationship. In "Scenes From a Marriage," Marianne and Johan were essentially the whole show. Here, the progeny take over and their hatreds constitute a foul legacy. Marianne is the watcher in this passion play; Johan thinks he is already dead, which is how his son would like him. Henrik has the rumpled, contented contours of a burgher, but when his venom rises he becomes a basilisk, and "Saraband" turns into the most unsettling of horror movies.

Sex is at the root of everything for Bergman, which is why even his most metaphorical voyagings seem mysteriously, unmistakably carnal. The sheer texture of flesh carries a charge in his films. In "Scenes," the couple's emotional and sometimes physical violence was overwhelmingly sexual in nature; a saraband could be defined as an erotic dance for two, and in Bergman's new film, their dance has frozen in place. Sex no longer has the power to inflame them.

In seeking out Johan, almost 20 years her senior, Marianne did not anticipate that he is beyond caring. She was trying to recapture herself as she was in her 30s, full of possibilities and game for another go-round. She's still game but knows now there is no consolation to be found in her past with Johan, and this realization is both her tragedy and triumph. She has been jolted out of her final illusion, and the freeing is redemptive. Bergman has placed his balm on her.

"Saraband" can be looked at as a movie about Marianne's aging and, in a sense, it's about Bergman's aging too. As is often true of late works by movie directors, it has a pared simplicity. (Think of John Huston's "The Dead" or Luis Buñuel's "That Obscure Object of Desire.") But Bergman has most often been at peace when he is closed up with his camera and a few intense performers. Stylistically, there is nothing new about "Saraband." What is new is that, at a time when so many filmmakers avoid the most atrocious realms of human experience, Bergman continues to hang tough. That's his heroism. That's why he still matters.



BENOT WANSELINUS Sony Pictures Classics

'SARABAND': Bergman, on the set with Liv Ullmann, left, one of his trusted stock company of actors, and Julia Dufvenius.