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The Power to Make Us Feel

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

It's not very difficult for a film to make us feel. All it has to do is stir up pools of memory and association or present some inherently sentimental situation, and the chances are that we will respond. The real challenge for a film is not to stop there, leaving those emotions as it found them, ready-made and formless, but rather to give them substance and significance, enlarging and transforming them.

Traditionally, of course, this is the difference between feeling as treated in a

On Film

"Autumn Sonata"

"Bloodbrothers"

work of art and feeling as it comes to us in more popular forms. It is also the difference between the handling of emotion in two current films, Ingmar Bergman's "Autumn Sonata" and Robert Mulligan's "Bloodbrothers." Both treat of the same universally recognizable and highly charged situation, the conflict between parent and child; and both, consequently, manage to touch us where it hurts. But only one, Bergman's "Autumn Sonata," also offers us for our pains new insights and new sympathies.

"Autumn Sonata" is a Swedish language film photographed in Norway (after "The Serpent's Egg," his recent disastrous attempt to work in English and in a German setting, Bergman is happily back in Bergman country). The film centers on the agonized confrontation after a separation of some seven years between a mother (Ingrid Bergman) and her middle-aged daughter (Liv Ullmann).

The two women are strikingly contrasted in almost every element of their being. The mother is a concert pianist who has spent her life in performance, travel and in a series of romantic liaisons (the occasion of this visit to her daughter being the death of her most recent lover). She is a gifted, glamorous and extraordinarily vivacious woman, who is also thoroughly narcissistic and totally self-absorbed.

Her daughter, on the other hand, is timid, withdrawn and plain—or at least she makes herself plain, wearing dowdy clothes, a severe hairdo and little granny glasses. A sometime journalist married to a provincial clergyman, she has in marked contrast to her mother devoted herself to helping others. Indeed, so benevolent is she that she has taken into her home her invalid sister who is suffering from an unnamed disease that has deprived her of speech and mobility. She had earlier been placed in an institution by the mother.

Pitiably neglected as a child, overwhelmed by her mother's dynamism and force, starved for the love and affection that her mother has withheld from her, such a daughter would automatically command our sympathies, and at the outset of the film she does. But the genius of Bergman's film is to turn our feelings around, to make us see in the daughter's ostensible selflessness simply another form of self-absorption, a more monstrous one, perhaps, of accusatory and cruel self-pity.

Her martyrdom, moreover, emerges not as an affirmation of the needs of others but as a denial of her own needs—a denial of warmth and life itself. Her mother, at least, is vital and alive. And though we are asked to view her critically, we are in the end made to empathize with her and so are no longer able to dismiss her as merely selfish and destructive.

The way in which Bergman effects this reversal is not through any structured sequence of event and action, but, as in "Scenes from a Marriage," through an almost exclusive focus on character. Limiting his drama to the point where it is almost virtually a dialogue (there are only two other sustained characters in the film and one of these, the sister, adds very little), Bergman allows mother and daughter to unmask themselves, to reveal their inner natures and the nature of their relationship as we listen to their words and watch them react in searching close-up.

Such concentration is, of course, demanding for both audience and performer, and Bergman's film might have been claustrophobic had he used lesser talents than Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann. Both are superb, but it is Ingrid Bergman who is the revelation here. Her performance as the mother is a miracle of characterization, making clear that she is not only one of the most beautiful actresses in the world but also one of the most gifted and courageous.