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Fanny and Alexander: Bergman's Farewell Grand but Problematic

By MICHAEL LAM

Fanny and Alexander, the three-hour-plus, densely-populated, epic-scaled new film by Ingmar Bergman, is not as fascinating in itself as in the responses it has gathered from the critics. It is the master's last work — at least it is declared as his last work — and everyone is showering it with praises not connected with Bergman since his 1975 *Magic Flute*. Who says that critics are heartless creatures?

Bergman was, of course, the darling of the art houses in the 50s and 60s — he was the art house. For the first time, film-goers were taking the film-going experience seriously. It was *The Seventh Seal* which pushed us to confront Death and God; and it was *Wild Strawberries* that made us think of old age and the process of aging.

LESSONS

Thanks to Bergman, movies were no longer technicolored affairs of sun and fun, but black and white philosophical lessons in morality and life and other Serious Matters. They were no longer movies, they were cinema.

Then Bergman went out of fashion. All of a sudden, he seemed to have lost his magic touch—starting, quite aptly, with *The Touch* in 1971. *Cries and Whispers* and *Scenes from a Marriage*, both domestic dramas that are



Scene from *Fanny and Alexander*. Old friend Isak Jacobi (Erland Josephson) comforts family matriarch Helena Ekdahl (Gunn Wallgren).

suspiciously soap-operative, did get positive reviews in general, and *The Magic Flute* briefly reconciled the master with his followers.

But his next four films were critical failures. They appeared pretentious and wronged. Upon the mention of Bergman's name, audiences made faces, if not jokes. Woody Allen's *Interiors*, though intended as a straight homage to Bergman, is nonetheless read as a comedy in mannerism. And art houses, feeling the backlash, stopped reviving Bergman's old works.

career is a luxurious one. There is also no denying that his is a problematic film—badly structured, awkwardly paced, boringly self-congratulatory.

Most of the characters are so underdeveloped, that instead of sensing the joy of participating in the reunion of Bergman's film family, one feels simply the irritation of having to watch an endless parade of stereotypes passing by.

Not that *Fanny and Alexander* is a worthless film. The cinematography by Sven Nykvist is as exquisite as ever, individual scenes are gems viewed separately. And there is the wonderful performance by Gunn Wallgren and the haunting presence of Harriet Andersson.

But if Bergman has never been able to subtract himself from his work, he has also failed to speak to us in the first-person. The distance he puts between himself and the audience becomes a mild offense in *Fanny and Alexander*. After all those years, he still distrusts us.

LOP-SIDED

Finally, is there a valid reason to title the film *Fanny and Alexander*? Fanny is so obscure throughout the film, putting her name in the title further upsets the already lopsided balance. How about *Ingmar and Alexander*? That, at least, would introduce a new dimension to the

Now comes *Fanny and Alexander*, along with the director's announcement of retirement from filmmaking. before long, it is declared a masterpiece. But is *Fanny and Alexander* actually better than *Face to Face*? Is it actually the so-called "definitive statement" from that someone who, in questioning the silence of God, has become God himself? Or is it time for nostalgia to take over reasoning?

FAREWELL

Granted that *Fanny and Alexander* is a grand farewell. Granted that the gesture of choosing one's own final chapter in a long