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Loving Couples (1964), Mai Zetterling

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Loving Couples was Mai Zetterling's first full-length feature film and first effort as a director after a long and successful career as an actress. Born in 1925 in Vasteras, Sweden, Zetterling began her professional life in the theater of her own country and eventually moved into film acting. She achieved international recognition in 1944 through her portrayal of a terrorized shopgirl in Alf Sjöberg's *Torment*. Film roles in England and America followed.

Zetterling began directing in England, where she made four documentaries for the BBC. In 1962 she turned to independent production with *The War Game*, a short feature. *The War Game* deals with two young boys who battle over a toy gun, chasing each other to the top of a block of apartments. It is an overtly allegorical film and strongly denounces the absurdity of war.

After finishing *The War Game* Zetterling returned to Scandinavia where her four feature films, *Loving Couples* (1964) *Night Games* (1966) and *The Girls* (1968), and *Doctor Glas* (1968) were produced. In these the political interest evidenced in *The War Games* is channeled into a concern with the oppression of women. In addition, Zetterling's major work reflects a fascination with convoluted psychology, which has characterized the Scandinavian theatrical tradition from the time of Ibsen and Strindberg. "At the center of it all one senses a kind of feminist fury, a raging humiliation which grows more vehement and implacable in each successive film," wrote Nils Peter Sundgren in his book *The New Swedish Cinema*.

Loving Couples, as its title suggests, treats problems of heterosexual love and marriage. "A woman is emotionally formed by men," the director has said, "and never quite breaks away from them, even if she would like to." The film is based on a series of novels, *Froknarna von Pahlen*, by the eminent Swedish writer Agnes von Krusenstjerna. Set in Sweden during the years immediately preceding the first world war, the story is told in flashback and concerns three young women from different classes of society who are brought together in the maternity ward of a Stockholm hospital. All had gotten pregnant the previous



summer at a party given by the Landborg family, and their prior history is revealed as a series of events which leads each to her fate in motherhood.

Agda (Harriet Andersson) developed a bohemian lifestyle after enduring a childhood on the streets which included a seduction by an aging lecher. Reckless and flighty, Agda was invited to the Landborgs' party to model for Stellan, a young homosexual artist (Jan Malmström). During her stay she embarked on an intrigue with the Landborgs' son Bernard (Heinz Hopf), but when she learned she was pregnant, she married the artist Stellan in return for a substantial cash gift from the Landborg family. Taking a casual and contemptuous attitude toward motherhood, Agda has her baby while carrying on a flirtation with the doctor.

In contrast to Agda's defensive frivolity, Adele (Gunnel Lindblom) has reacted to the vicissitudes of her life by becoming bitter and sullen. Of lower-class birth, she resents the patronage of others more fortunate than herself. Her sour attitude was even more pronounced after an early, unhappy romantic attachment. Eventually she married one of the Landborgs' servants, thereby becoming a servant to the family herself. In this capacity she attended the summer party. Later, in the hospital, when Dr. Lewin (Gunnar Björnstedt) tells her that her baby has been stillborn, she remains unmoved, still coldly withdrawn from any positive emotional involvement with the world around her.

The aristocratic member of this trio of new mothers is Angela (Göta Petre). Orphaned early in life, she became greatly attached to her Aunt Petra (Anita Björk). After a lesbian encounter with one of her teachers, she fell in love with her aunt's former lover Thomas, an archeologist (Hans Strååt).

Pregnant and cast off by Thomas, Angela determined to stand up against the prejudices of her time and bear her illegitimate child, revealing an unexpected strength beneath her surface sensitivity. The pain and suffering she endures while giving birth form the climax of Zetterling's film.

The difficulties and traumas faced by each of these three women are brought about by two things: the unfeeling brutality of the men in their lives and the inequities inherent in the class-structured society around them. Peter Cowie has written: "The men in *Loving Couples* can be divided into those who seek their sexual gratification without a thought for the consequences, and those who, in the words of one elder of the von Pahlen family, stay at home 'lapping cream like castrated tomcats' . . . But the men in their turn have been emasculated by the system, by the Edwardian hypocrisy of the upper classes of Europe before the first world war, shattered their repose."

Zetterling's decision to set her narrative in a period when sexual repression and inhuman attitudes toward women were at a high point adds power to her indictment of male selfishness and social hypocrisy. These two dehumanizing forces are combined in the institution of marriage, which is viewed in *Loving Couples* from a cynical perspective. "Marriage—it's like falling asleep for the rest of your life," remarks one of the film's protagonists. An even harsher judgment on heterosexual relationships is passed by the embittered servant Adele, who pronounces at one point: "There isn't any love—it's just beds and dirt and slime."

Following the lead of other Scandinavian artists, Zetterling chooses to film her story with erotic explicitness, an explicitness which takes on a special meaning in her

Adele during her labor in *Loving Couples*.



case since it reflects a woman's view of sexuality. "Miss Zetterling has eschewed the romanticizing or moralizing to which her male colleagues are prone," commented Judith Crist in her review of *Loving Couples*. "Hers is a distinctly female frankness in her dealing bluntly with much that men tend at best to blush over or smirk at."

Other aspects of Zetterling's artistry in *Loving Couples* are also traceable to her unique background and her place in the Swedish film tradition. Obviously her impeccable casting skills and her assured direction of actors and actresses owe much to her own experience as an actress. In her outstanding work with performers Zetterling follows a long line of distinguished Swedish filmmakers beginning with Victor Sjöström and Mauritz Stiller. Many of the performers she chose for *Loving Couples* had previously been trained in their craft by Swedish directors such as Ingmar Bergman.

Zetterling's visual style is less clearly related to prevailing trends in her own country. Because of the baroque complexity of her images and her fondness for the grotesque, she has often been compared to Fellini. But many of the visual qualities of her films are undoubtedly derived at least in part from Alf Sjöberg, whose film *Torment* played an important part in Zetterling's early career as an actress. Zetterling's style seems to share the expressionistic tendencies of Sjöberg's, especially when one considers the characteristically bold contrasts in lighting which are found in the films of both.

In *Loving Couples* the famed Swedish cinematographer Sven Nykvist provides a masterful interpretation of Zetterling's idiosyncratic visual preoccupations. In this film her style works effectively to promote a strong emotional involvement with

the three female protagonists as well as a sense of the complex and oppressive social environment which is victimizing them.

In the two feature films Zetterling has made following *Loving Couples*, her tortured, psychologically dense feminism has been even more pronounced. *Night Games*, with Ingrid Thulin, treats the emotionally crippling mother-fixation of a young boy. Again, the action is set in the early part of the century, but the script this time is based on an original story composed by the director herself. Her most recent feature, *The Girls*, deals with a troupe of actors touring with the play *Lysistrata*. Though Zetterling has been largely inactive in filmmaking during the last few years, she did contribute a short segment on weight-lifting to David Wolper's *Visions of Eight*, a documentary on the 1972 Olympic Games.

Virginia Wright Wexman

LOVING COUPLES. 118 min. Director: Mai Zetterling. Screenplay: Mai Zetterling and David Hughes (based on the novels *Froknarna von Pahlen* by Agnes von Krusenstjerna). Producer: Rune W. Kranz. Cinematographer: Sven Nykvist. Music Arrangement: Rodger Wallis. Editor: Paul Davies. Art Director: Jan Boleslow. Original title: *Älskande Par*.

FILMOGRAPHY.

The Polite Invasion (documentary), 1960; *Lords of Little Egypt* (doc.), 1961; *The Prosperity Race* (doc.), 1962; *The War Game* (short), 1962; *The Do-It-Yourself Democracy* (doc.), 1963; *Loving Couples*, 1964; *Night Games*, 1966; *Doctor Glas*, 1968; *The Girls*, 1968; *Visions of Eight* (doc.; segment on weight-lifting), 1974.

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