

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Bergman's farewell bouquet</b>
Author(s)	Sheila Benson
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Fanny och Alexander (Fanny and Alexander), Bergman, Ingmar, 1982

# BERGMAN'S

By SHEILA BENSON

## FAREWELL BOUQUET

**H**ow flummoxing "Fanny and Alexander" must be to critics of Ingmar Bergman. For although it is quintessential Bergman, it is at the same time steadfastly positive, a joyous grace note on which to end a career, and the last thing the no-sayers might expect.

No more feature films, he has said. He is young, still; 65 this July. A stripling, if he were a symphony conductor. If he ever changed his mind and decided to make another last film, or even another next-to-last, no one would hold him to this premature farewell, I am sure.

In any case, he has left us this irresistible, perfectly arranged bouquet to be remembered by. He says it is not autobiography and at the same time he says, "cheerfully," "There's a lot of me in the bishop, rather than in Alexander."

If parallels to his life exist, and they do, as a reading of Peter Cowie's careful biography will bring out in abundance, do they really matter? Not for enjoyment of

---

**What seems important is to go off and enjoy the film, one of the most accessible of any in Bergman's career.**

---

the film. I'm not sure if it isn't a kind of intellectual one-upmanship to know (and be able to tell people) that Bergman's father was a strict and harsh Swedish Lutheran pastor; that the young Bergman had a younger sister with whom he spent hours with his magic lantern; that he had a beloved grandmother in whose house he found a refuge or that his childhood was, to use Cowie's phrase, "clouded by a terrible fear of punishment and humiliation."

All this is part of the weave of the film, and certainly the harsh stepfather-pastor is one of the film's most intensely felt characters. But the appearance of a stepfather-tyrant with a strong grip on his stepson's ear is also a memorable part of "David Copperfield," one of the books Bergman enjoyed being read aloud. Are we to begin to nod knowingly, secure in our smug knowledge that both David and Bergman were born with a caul?

I'm not—exactly—being silly here; it's just that by now more words seem to have been written about this film than are in it. You could drown in them. What seems important is to go off and enjoy the film, which is one of the most straightforward and accessible of any in Bergman's career.

The screenplay is available for reading (afterward, I should think), rich in all sorts of background and different in interesting ways from what was finally filmed, or what finally reached the screen. In it you'll find, for example, the suggestion that both Fanny and Alexander came from two different fathers and that neither one was their devoted actor-manager father Oscar, who dies, leaving the children as he is preparing to play the ghost in "Hamlet."

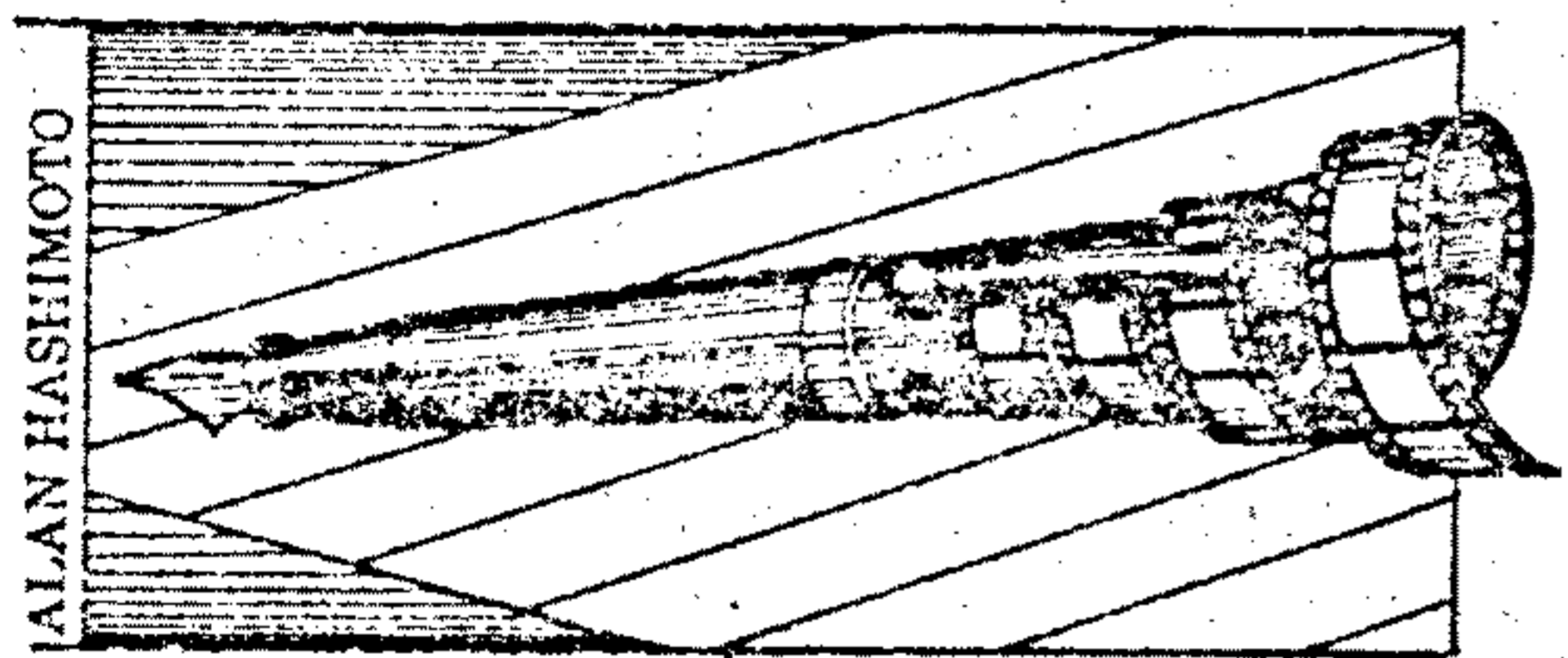
That is interesting background, certainly; almost electrifying. But what we have to go by is what is on the screen. And what is on the screen is the widow



Emilie, in the middle of the night after her much older husband has died, giving vent to rhythmic, bloodcurdling animal cries of grief as she paces back and forth at his bier, unaware that anyone else can hear her. (Not, in other words, giving the controlled actress's performance that she has been able to give all day long.)

That is the film's truth, as we see it. And this would seem to be what Bergman wants us to take away with us, or he would have done it very differently. So background is all very good, but too much of that sort of thing can make you crazy.

For the literal, the "escape" scene which marks the end of the second third of the film is a terrible problem. An escape clause of your own for those afflicted with excessive literalness is to remember the numbers of puppets in Isak's house, and to remember Emilie's imperious "Don't touch them!" which ends the sequence. There is possibly a connection. The other possibility you had



better consider is magic. Why not?

The commanding Emilie brings up the question of the film's women. We see much of "Fanny and Alexander" in the company of young Alexander, a dreamy, inward boy to whom ghosts appear and statues come to life. Alexander quite overshadows his younger sister, but she is the only female the film treats this way. These Swedish women run their worlds as firmly yet imperceptibly as any Japanese wife. They are resilient, but they can be fierce.

Grandmamma Helena, clearly at the head of her family, also controls the theater her husband has left her, although her son Oscar manages it. She is an actress with a good eye for business.

The beautiful Emilie, although lonely and vulnerable enough to enter into this quick second marriage (the entire span of the film is slightly more than a year), is no mewling Victorian wife where her children are concerned. Repeatedly Emilie behaves on her children's behalf like the lioness she resembles. And she and Helena have an accord based on mutual admiration as well as love.

The plump and wonderful Aunt Alma (Mona Malm) keeps her family together and wins the undying affection of her mother-in-law Helena by being supremely, cheerfully above her husband's philandering. And the current object of that husband's ardor, the lame servant girl, Maj, is no helpless victim herself. She is sturdy about what she needs, even if it means an upheaval in that husband's generous plans for her future.

Although he is fond and even forgiving of the men in "Fanny and Alexander" (he lets no suicidal impulse carry away the weakest of Helena's three sons, for instance), Bergman's women are both the strength and the heart of the film. (For not the first time in a Bergman picture, either.)

And most certainly they are a conduit

to the intuitive side, a quality Bergman follows devoutly. "He is courageous enough to follow his own intuition," Cowie quotes Kabi Laretei, one of Bergman's still-closely connected ex-wives. "He's one of those rare people who really *believes* in his intuition."

And in the same source, Bergman himself has said, "My impulse has nothing to do with intellect or symbolism; it has only to do with dreams and longing, with hope and desire, with passion."

It may not be stretching Bergman's beliefs too far to suggest that this might be the spirit in which to come to "Fanny and Alexander," and not as a road map, a pilgrimage, a Rosetta stone, or as a guide to the leitmotifs of Bergman's entire career. It may be every

one of these things, but it's also possible to lose the pure joy of this film that way.

Bergman speaks in the opening and closing of his film of the actors' world, "the little world," prized for its "orderliness, routine, conscientiousness and love." At the conclusion, one of those actors says that they "should be content with the little world and make the best of it. The world is a den of thieves and night is falling . . . we must be kind, generous, affectionate and good. Therefore it is necessary, and not in the least shameful, to take pleasure in *the little world*, good food, gentle smiles, fruit-trees in bloom, waltzes."

And to take pleasure in a film such as "Fanny and Alexander." □