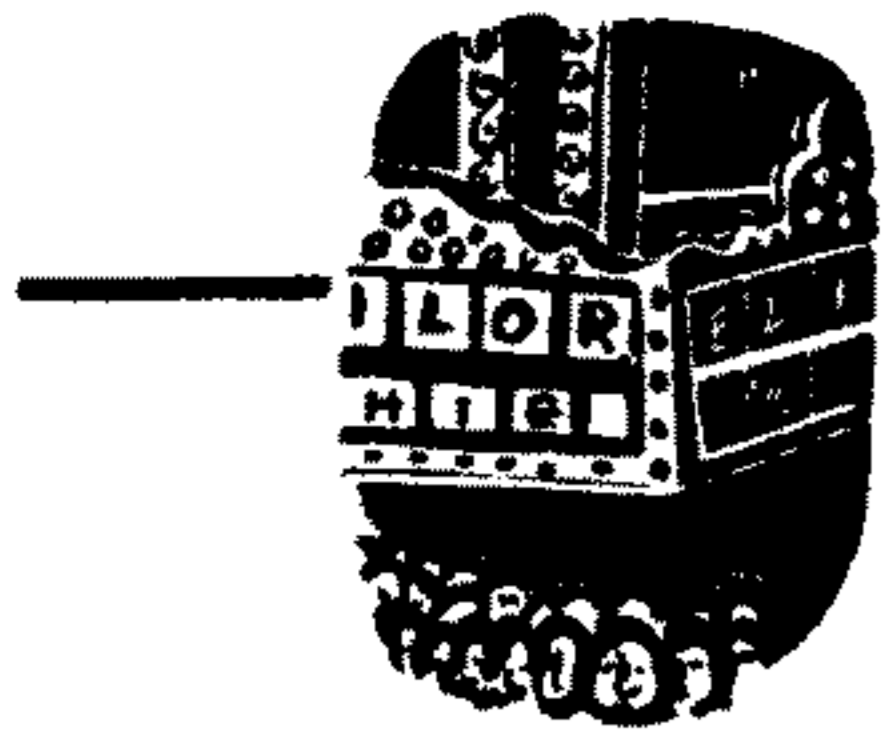


Document Citation

Title	Show of magic
Author(s)	Hollis Alpert
Source	<i>Saturday Review</i>
Date	1959 Aug 29
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Ansiktet (The magician), Bergman, Ingmar, 1958



Show of Magic

THE ASTONISHING Swedish director, Ingmar Bergman, is up to several more of his tricks in "The Magician," a faintly dizzying mixture of the macabre, the comic, the mystical, and the supernatural. If not quite so enigmatic as the same director's "The Seventh Seal," it nevertheless has puzzling overtones, moments that are poetic in intent, other moments that are the sheerest farce. Like others of his films, it is darkly, moodily, beautifully photographed; it compels and fascinates; and it is also strangely, unexpectedly charming, for such Gothic material as he has chosen. Bergman has the closest thing to a stock company of actors as are presently employed in films. Prominent in "The Magician" are several of the expert Swedish actors who have successfully peopled his previous movies. If you are in the habit of following Bergman films (a very "in" thing to do at the moment, although, I suspect an "out" thing to mention) you will recognize their names if not, in every case, their faces.

Max von Sydow, for instance, the chess-playing knight of "The Seventh Seal," and a filling station attendant in "Wild Strawberries," is this time seen in the title role. He is an itinerant magician, a hypnotist, and faith-healer, and has actually two faces—the one of the professional charlatan, the other of his unmasked, more commonplace self. (The original title translates somewhat loosely to "The Face," and probably refers to the former—which has the look of a poetic criminal, a satanic priest, a demagogue, a corrupt saint. It is, at any rate, a splendid, haunting makeup that von Sydow, or rather Vogler, the magician, adopts.) Slightly more recognizable is Ingrid Thulin, who we first see masquerading as the magician's male assistant and who turns out to be his wife. In the cast, too, is that Bergman stalwart, the remarkable Gunnar Bjornstrand, as Doctor Vergerus; Bibi Andersson, the delightful young girl in "Wild Strawberries," as a coquettish servant; and Toivo Pawlo, as a pompous chief of police. But these are only a few of a fascinating group Bergman has brought together in a tale that describes twenty-four hours in the lives of the members of the Vogler Magic Health Theatre troupe, on its way from Denmark to Sweden something more than a hundred years ago.

The coach carrying the party (which includes Vogler's witch of a grandmother, and a soddenly drunk, near dead actor Vogler has rescued from a swamp) is stopped at a toll-gate; the troupe is escorted without ceremony to the house of the rich Mr. Egerman, and to settle a wager, Vogler is asked to put on a performance. Has he supernatural gifts or hasn't he? The chief of police, one of the guests, is threatening—Vogler's faith-healing and hypnotic practises got them in trouble in Denmark—and Dr. Vergerus is rudely challenging. It is on him that Vogler concentrates both his demonstration and revenge.

It is an eerie night that everyone spends. In the servants quarters the grandmother distributes love potions and utters dire prophecies; the young coachman is seduced by the servant girl; the manager of the troupe is taken in hand by the housekeeper. Upstairs, Mr. Egerman's wife, a hysteric, sees in the magician's false face a mystical understanding of her torments. The alcoholic actor dies in Vogler's arms, the grandmother sings a young girl to sleep with a weird song, lightning flickers and thunder crashes in true Gothic style. The face of Vogler in the privacy of his bedroom turns out to be ordinary, fretful over the hard life of a magician and the test he has to face the next day.

VOGLER prepares for the edification of his hosts no mean display of parlor tricks, but "proves" his powers to the extent of arranging, seemingly, his own death and resurrection. Mesmer's discoveries were not widely known at the time, and the tricks of hypnotism are effective on everyone but the scientific skeptic, Dr. Vergerus. It is the 1840s, after all, and God and the supernatural are under attack. But it is the artist in Vogler who is incensed the most by Dr. Vergerus, and the doctor is given a lesson in the diabolical. At the end of his ordeal he is scared half to death, but his skepticism is unshaken. Vogler, who has tried to surpass himself, has failed, and must beg and grovel.

Bergman provides no easy answers to the puzzles he has concocted, although the "mysteries" themselves are easily explainable. In fact, they are at times made transparent, and be-

come part of the ghoulish fun. Bergman may be saying that the face of the charlatan appeals to something primitive in man's nature; Vogler may represent the diseased Christ figure, the artist, the illusionist; the overtones for these speculations are all there. Oddly enough, our sympathy is constantly directed toward Vogler himself, and here perhaps is the clue. Vogler, in spite of the fact that he is a trickster, becomes aware that he may have, momentarily, the very powers he pretends to have. Inventing the unexplainable for his audience, he glimpses the irrational, and is haunted by it. Vogler's, then, is the spirit of modern man, Bergman seems to say, inventing miracles, and facing an abyss.

WHATEVER message for us there is in the story, Bergman makes sure that it ends properly, as a good story should.

Vogler is granted his moment of triumph and recognition, and Bergman closes on a fanfare of trumpets, on a farcical note that seems to say that a motion picture director is, after all, merely an illusionist himself, a charlatan with a clever bag of tricks. But Bergman is an artist, and whatever he does is done with artistry, and with a feel for truth. It may be a sideshow he has given us this time, but what an absorbing one he has prepared for all who enter his magic tent. A remarkable movie indeed, from the most remarkable director extant. —HOLLIS ALPERT.