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TORMENT

A turning point in the Swedish cinema—confirming Sjöberg's position as the leading new director, and the arrival of Bergman, who scripted the film. A harsh tale of an adolescent's first contact with adult evil, shot in a shadowy, expressionistic way and thus prefiguring Bergman's own early work. A youth in his last year at school is tormented by a sadistic master—taking refuge with a shop-girl; he finds her terrorized by an unknown man.
...—M.W. (1944. Starring Alf Kjellin and Mai Zetterling. 100 mins. Courtesy of Janus Films.)

In company with many films, plays, and novels, *Frenzy* (Hets, 1944) is important not so much for its intrinsic merit as for the revolutionary departure that it signalled to the *cognoscenti* of the time. It has grown in stature since because Ingmar Bergman, its young script-writer, has developed into a master director. *Frenzy* can justifiably be shrugged aside as just another film about the tyranny of school life, with a romance included to soften the harsh impact of the setting. But one must remember how the Swedish cinema had been demoralised by the failures of the thirties. Bergman, who had begun his career in the theatre, was dissatisfied with the pre-war generation. "Here was a very angry young man — long before they became the fashion — a writer looking at the world through the eyes of a teenage rebel harshly criticising his parents, offending his teachers, making love to a prostitute, fighting everything and everybody in order to pursue his integrity and his right to be unhappy." ³⁰ Sjöberg was asked to direct this sombre screenplay, and found that the revolt of youth against the pompous characteristics of an older generation was closely allied to his own interest in the clash between classes in the social order. Donner ³¹ claims that *Frenzy* is important as Bergman's film, not as Sjöberg's. But it is unquestionably Sjöberg's visual style that endures, and that imposes on the narrative its arresting overtones of sadism, loneliness, and black despair.

Jan-Erik (Alf Kjellin) is studying hard for his matriculation exams. His Latin master, known hatefully as "Caligula", tortures those in his form and preys on Jan-Erik in particular. At first his position seems impregnable. Subtle details betray his Nazi sympathies (he reads *Dags-posten*, a Swedish Nazi newspaper, for example). He is inhuman. But then Jan-Erik meets a girl, Bertha, who works in a nearby tobacconist, and shares his misery with her. His own parents are shown to be aloof and incapable of understanding his problems; a schoolmaster could not conceivably be anything but a model of integrity. The stiffness of the family can be likened to the Molander dynasty's pedantry in *Iris and the Lieutenant*.

Bertha tells Jan-Erik that she is terrified of a nocturnal visitor, who insists on following her and is so delicate in his movements, so swift in his disappearances, that she wonders if he is a ghost. This, of course, is Caligula, though Bergman's early leaning towards dramatic irony ensures that Jan-Erik is ignorant of the torturer's identity until it is too late. One night he discovers Bertha dead in her room. A quick search of the flat uncovers Caligula, hiding behind some coats in the hall, his glasses (the symbol of his Himmler-like authority) trembling in his hands. He is suddenly transmogrified into a pathetic creature, eaten up with inferiority complexes and a coward outside his classroom. The police dismiss Bertha's death as being due to a combination of alcoholism and heart failure. But Jan-Erik now knows that Caligula is responsible. In a climactic scene with the school headmaster, he attacks Caligula passionately. He is disqualified from taking his matriculation. His friends pass the exam and Jan-Erik lives alone in Bertha's old room. The headmaster visits him and offers to help. Jan-Erik has stepped outside the bounds of conventional progress. His friend, Sandman (Stig Olin), is the only one who dares to accuse Caligula in public. The conclusion of the film is more melancholy than that of most of Bergman's own work. Jan-Erik's love is dead; his academic career is wrecked; he is

removed from the financial stability that his parents represent.

Caligula, however, reappears in different guises in Bergman's films. He wears the rather sinister glasses which are used similarly by Alman in *Wild Strawberries* and Vergerus in *The Face* (both these characters are as helpless without their glasses as Caligula is in *Frenzy*). The school is a microcosm of the hell that Bergman's later figures will regard as symbolising the whole world. His imagination bears strange fruit sometimes, as when Caligula recalls how a cat had sunk twenty claws into his flesh and had to be cut away from him after it had been drowned in a water butt. The words of the headmaster towards the close of the film too, are an interesting reflection on Bergman's outlook. "I believe there's a reason for everything that happens, even though it may seem strange to our eyes." Bergman was fortunate in having the accomplished hand of Sjöberg to give expression to his script. It was not until *Prison* (1948) that Bergman's own cinematic style was sufficiently assured to justify his ideas.

The opening scene, showing a boy who is late for his class being pursued with a fiendish concentration by one of his teachers (Gunnar Björnstrand), sets the mood of persecution superbly. The echoing stairways and the harsh shouts of the teacher smack of the concentration camp. The brooding shadows of Bertha's room loom over the young creature, and the silhouette of Caligula's hand stretching out across the pillow towards her throat achieves an effect almost as horrific as that moment in *Nosferatu* when the vampire's clawing fingers slide across the landing. In the sequence dealing with Bertha's funeral, Sjöberg repeatedly uses low-angle shots, to isolate the mourners against the summer sky and to give prominence to the features of Jan-Erik as he walks behind the coffin, his emotions controlled with a tremendous effort of will. Some of these moments are too expressionistic and too calculated, but the majority epitomise perfectly the black and white view of the world held by adolescents at the time. *Frenzy* does not fail, as Donner has emphasised, "because its feelings are subjectively true." ³¹