

# Winter's tales

As the NFT begins a two-month Ingmar Bergman retrospective, our correspondent pays his own homage

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A LEAFLESS tree stands in silhouette against a lake. A mantelpiece clock ticks loudly. A consumptive woman writes in a journal at her desk. Her thoughts, relayed in a matter-of-fact voice-over, plunge straight into the subject of her dreams: the brittle, acrid loneliness that everyone, even lovers, is doomed to suffer.

Such an opening can only be a film by Ingmar Bergman. He is the world's most nakedly sincere film-maker and its most vigorously pessimistic. His creative fertility — films, novels, stage plays, even music — is at odds with the spiritual catalepsy that afflicts his characters. But it is a paradox that animates all his work: how can an artist be so unflaggingly passionate and versatile about dissecting unhappiness? The classic Bergman composition, used many times from *Persona* to *The Silence* to *Autumn Sonata* et al, shows a face staring towards us, half obscured by another face in profile. There are many variations, with profiles facing sideways or upwards, but the essence of these two overlapping faces remains the same: intimacy without communication, the core of Bergman's drama.

Right from his first film, *Frenzy* (aka *Torment*), which he wrote in 1944, Bergman was tackling the agonies of the lonely, unheard soul. The complete retrospective of his films,

which runs at the National Film Theatre over the next two months, reveals a majestic evolution from his early Expressionist melodramas — high-minded and a little obvious — through his 1960s psychological dramas to his more wistful Edwardian family sagas in the 1980s.

The erotic charge in his work is striking — often the only thing seething more violently than hatred in his white nightgown-clad women is sexual desire. But all 40 of his works, even his comedies such as *Smiles on a Summer Night*, are laced with the same anguished quest for metaphysical meaning.

One does not have to go far to unearth the reason. Bergman's father was a Lutheran pastor who served at the King of Sweden's court. He was such an authoritarian that Bergman barely spoke to him for 40 years after leaving home.

Many of his films throb with an intellectualised revenge on his upbringing. Viewed en masse, his films are a glaringly Oedipal grappling with his own obsessions, stark diagrammatic disquisitions on the absence of God or the futility of faith. The pastors in his films either preach to empty pews, as in *Winter Light*, or administer horrific, cold-blooded beatings, as in *Fanny and Alexander*. Even his secular father figures are rigid, unfeeling egotists preoccupied with their work or social image.

The biblical tenet of forgiveness appears in so many of the films, but characters who cannot extend it are not necessarily condemned. In his seventies, Bergman reflected on a vitriolic film critic he'd once punched after being incensed by his remarks. The critic was long since dead, but Bergman could not bring himself to lay the matter to rest: "I will never forgive that man."

The withholding of forgiveness for parental neglect is a major weapon in Bergman's moral universe. Even after his rapprochement with his father, which allowed the warmth of nostalgia to filter into his work, Bergman remained obsessed with parental cruelty. It became the turn of the mothers to be monsters.

Included in the retrospective is *Best Intentions*, directed by Bille August but written by Bergman, a surprisingly compassionate account of how his parents met and married against the wishes of his mother's family. The evil figure is the girl's snobbish mother, who intercepts her letter and whisks her away on holiday in an effort to break the relationship.

It is an interesting irony of Bergman's success that his most loyal audience is the section of society he repeatedly lacerates. He is fetishistic, even masochistic, about burrowing into the hypocritical penetralia of bourgeois family life. He rarely resorts to caricature to sweeten the pill. He has used allegory, most famously in *The Seventh Seal*, with Death as an implacable chess player, and with the circus world of *Sawdust and Tinsel*. But his harshest triumphs are his distinctly Swedish chamber pieces of family strife that follow in the tradition of Strindberg.

These can be lurid, like *Cries and Whispers*, with its cancer-stricken sister and feuding siblings stalking rooms of darkest red. Or stringently muted, like *Autumn Sonata*, with mother and daughter tearing each other apart in monochromatic shades of tan and fawn. But they always break through to the bitter truths that conventional society prohibits discussing. In a way, the middle class go to Bergman to confirm what they are feeling guilty about.

It is a larger version of Bergman's pivotal mirror scenes, where self-recognition is forced on to repressed characters by making them inspect their lined reflections. The closer the inspection the better. Bergman's style has gone through many stages, from the fractured avant-garde approach of *Persona*, with its shock cuts and clips of melted film in the projector, to the more naturalistic approach of his later works. But his infatuation with the prolonged close-up has never wavered. Only Sergio Leone has moved in closer for longer. It is tyrannical at times.

It explains why Bergman can usually make for arduous entertainment. But he insists: "The more excited, the more raw, horrible, brutal, or elaborate a scene is, the better it is to keep the camera an objective mediant. If the camera forces its way between and begins talking about its own emotions, usually it will just get in the way, and prevent you from experiencing anything."

For such persistent bleakness to work, Bergman has had to be as unsparing with himself as his subjects. His characters are often artists morbidly self-absorbed at the expense of their families, often afflicted with ulcers, just like he was in the workaholic frenzy of most of his career.

At 82, he leads a cloistered existence on the tiny, rain-lashed island of Faro, off Sweden, where he has lived since 1967, but he still writes and occasionally directs for Swedish TV. Liv Ullmann directed his last big-screen script, in 2000, a drama called *Faithless*. A disillusioned pastor's son to the end.