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978-0-521-42121-8 - Ingmar Bergman: A Life in the Theatre

Lise-Lone Marker and Frederick J. Marker

Excerpt

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## Introduction: The magic triangle

Ingmar Bergman's long and productive career in the living theater still tends to be overshadowed, at least outside of Europe, by his fame as a film maker. For nearly half a century, however, Bergman has continued to hold a place among the most exciting and innovative stage directors active in the European theater. He has also been quick to point out that an understanding of this side of his creative activity is indispensable to a fully balanced assessment of his art. "There has always been a short distance between my work in the theater and my work in the film studio," he has reminded interviewers more than once. "Sometimes this has been an advantage and sometimes it has been a burden, but the distance has always been small."

From the outset, during his years of apprenticeship in the 1940s, the forceful and fiery young director's first professional productions at the city theaters in Hälsingborg and Gothenburg aroused the curiosity and then quickly won the respect of Sweden's foremost critics. Then, during the 1950s, his six luminous seasons at the Malmö City Theatre began to attract the same sort of wider international recognition that came during those years to such films as *Smiles of a Summer Night*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Wild Strawberries*. And, indeed, by then Bergman had already forged a distinctive theatrical style of his own, achieved in close collaboration with the handpicked ensemble of performers he had begun to gather and train. The preeminent value of simplicity and suggestion had become his hallmark as a director. The basic and focal significance of the actor and the human face would continue to shape his conception of theater, film, and their interaction.

During the years that followed – filled with a succession of such memorable Bergman films as *Winter Light*, *The Silence*, *Persona*, and *Cries and Whispers* – his intense involvement in the living theater seldom waned. For three and a half onerous years in the mid-1960s, he even found time to serve with distinction as artistic director of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in

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Stockholm. From the moment he began directing there in 1961, in fact, Sweden's national theater has remained Bergman's true spiritual home.

For a time, however, his lasting and fruitful relationship with Dramaten (as it is affectionately known to its friends and admirers the world over) was seriously jeopardized by his clash with a blundering Swedish tax bureaucracy. In 1976, police descended without warning or provocation on a Bergman rehearsal of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*, and the director was taken off for questioning in connection with allegations that were later shown to be utterly groundless. No one who has read Bergman's account of the incident in *Laterna Magica* can be in doubt about the depth of his shock and anger. Shortly afterward, he left his native country and settled in Germany. During the eight years he spent at the respected Residenztheater in Munich, his artistic vision deepened and expanded. In all, he staged a total of eleven major new productions in German, including (even by his own grudging admission) some of the best work of his career. Among them, certain to be counted the most ambitious of all his achievements in the theater, was the mammoth Bergman Project – a simultaneous trilogic presentation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, and his own adaptation of a familiar Bergman screenplay, *Scenes from a Marriage*. After four months of intensive preparation, often rehearsing six days a week and ten hours a day, he opened these three works on the same evening in 1981.

Even so prodigious a theatrical labor as this, however, is regarded differently by Bergman than film making, from which he retired in 1982 with the Academy Award-winning *Fanny and Alexander*. "I hope I will have the chance to work in the theater until they carry me out. Because that is a great joy to me," he told the authors at the time, in an interview for *Saturday Review*. "And besides, it's no strain. That is work for a lazybones." Three years later, the very morning after his successful production of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* opened in Munich, his self-imposed exile ended as abruptly as it had begun. His anger had cooled, his desire to direct again in his own language was keenly felt, and he went home to Sweden to live and work. Since then, his search for new and exciting ways of making theater has gone on without ceasing. Each

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new experiment has appeared to engender the next, in an ongoing process of creative inquiry that, for him, finds its fullest and most satisfying expression in the rehearsal experience itself, "learning to listen to the playwright's words and to his heart together with the actors."

Both in rehearsal and performance, the art of the theater, seen from Bergman's perspective, is always a collective art that can only arise out of intensely collaborative creative activity. This attitude predicated his familiar assertion that only three elements are ultimately necessary "for a theatrical production to function" – a text, actors, and an audience. Any discussion of his theater poetics must inevitably concern itself closely with the dynamic interplay of the three related components of this magic triangle: the conceptual design of his reinterpretations of particular texts; his (implied) philosophy of acting, characterized as it is by his strong conviction that it is the actor and the actor alone who must bring the text to life in the hearts of the audience; finally, and by no means least important, the deliberate strategies he has used to realign the audience's imaginative response, thereby forging an ever stronger bond between the performer and the spectator, the stage and the auditorium.

At the core of his experiments with this communicative bond is his preoccupation with the nature of theatrical illusion itself and the related process of the actor's "transformation" – in itself a magical (*i.e.*, suggestive and intuitive, rather than rational) process that takes place in the consciousness of the spectator and must accordingly always be calculated from the latter's point of view. Direct and unimpeded contact between the audience and the living actor is thus, for Bergman, the true basis of what we call illusion in the theater. The false reality of a scrupulously "lifelike" setting holds no place in his method. With increasing determination over the years, his economical, actor-oriented style has sought to eliminate everything that might potentially "detheatricalize" the actor by detracting from his presence, thereby dissipating his power to influence and ultimately control the audience's emotional engagement.

For, Bergman would argue, the actor does not and cannot transform himself; only the encounter with an audience permits that curious feat to be accomplished. The circus artist

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waiting to spring in “just for you who sit there and sense his presence,” the watching character waiting (as often happens in a Bergman production) to step forward and play his part, the actors on the stage whose gestures and faces alone create the rhythm of the performance – each of these is a living signifier of a mutual pact that exists between actor and spectator. That pact acknowledges and, in turn, depends upon the spectator’s willing participation in the event. The actor, with that “wonderful ability to suggest directly,” is governed by the artistic obligation to guide the audience, to stimulate its emotional reactions, to activate its intuitive desire to engage itself in the theatrical experience – in a word, by the obligation to get across. Success in doing so is directly related to the vitality of the communicative bond between stage and auditorium. The process of transformation can only occur by mutual consent.

The basic key to the spectator’s involvement in the mimetic experience lies, for Bergman, in his conviction that “the true theatrical creation must always remind the audience that it is watching a performance.” He distrusts abstract theories about such matters, however, and a parable is often the closest he comes to an explanation. A favorite story of his (retold both in *Laterna Magica* and in *After the Rehearsal*) concerns his experience when, night after night at the age of twelve, he sat hidden in the flies at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, watching *A Dream Play* being performed:

It was the first time I became aware of the actor’s magic. The Lawyer held a hairpin between thumb and forefinger. He bent it, straightened it, and broke it in pieces. There was no hairpin, *but I saw it*. The Officer stood behind the door in the set, waiting for his cue to enter. He was bending forward, gazing at his shoes, his hands behind his back. He cleared his throat quietly, just an ordinary person. Suddenly he opened the door and stepped into the stage light. He was changed and transformed: he *was* the Officer.

The one fundamental similarity between Bergman’s work as a film maker and his work in the theater is, in his own opinion, the overriding necessity of arranging the actors, in relation to each other and in relation to the spectator (camera), in such a way that their persuasive charisma (“the magic of their faces and their movements”) communicates itself as forcefully and unambiguously as possible. The “theater of circumstances,” with its “busy” management of scenery, lighting, and sound

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effects that ultimately only serve to detheatricalize the presence of the living actor, has long since been put behind him. Instead, he has sought to restore the actor to his rightful place in the theatrical framework, in just relationship to the two other elements that, in Bergman's experience, are required to create that which we call theater – the words the actor speaks and the actively engaged audience he reaches out to encounter.

## 1 Talking about theater: a conversation with Ingmar Bergman

Despite his more recent excursions into autobiography and self-criticism (*Laterna Magica, Pictures*), Ingmar Bergman has remained as reluctant as ever to discuss his creative methods in explicitly theoretical terms – particularly, it seems, when it comes to theater. Over the years, many major interviews and public appearances have yielded their share of useful insights into his art as a film maker, but his long career in the theater (which cannot, he himself insists, be separated from his film work) has rarely been a subject of major interest on these occasions. In our own case, our later published interviews with Bergman have all tended to focus on details of interpretation in a new production, much more than on general principles and methods of work.

Hence, the conversation that follows (which is excerpted from two much longer interviews conducted in 1979 and early 1980) is still, to our knowledge, the only interview in English that concentrates in depth and detail on what might be called Bergman's implied philosophy of theater and the nature of theatrical communication. If what he says here seems at times to be echoed verbatim by Henrik Vogler, his introspective alter ego in *After the Rehearsal* (1984), it is hardly any wonder – for in that wry and sometimes very bitter film about the curiously ambiguous role of the director, “old” Vogler is allowed (for once) to express his creator's own views on the art of the stage with unusual frankness.

In these pages, however, Bergman speaks for himself, discoursing with wit and intelligence on a variety of concerns ranging from the nature of the actor's art to the relationship between stage and film in his own work, from the state of the contemporary German theater (in which he worked for eight years) to such key creative principles of his as rhythm, choreography, and suggestion. As he talks about his own productions and those of others, a great deal is revealed about his directorial vision and method – everything, perhaps,

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except those closely guarded secrets (“a few small tricks”) over which the master has always carefully and purposefully drawn a veil. “By all means, borrow my machines and duplicate what I am doing,” he once remarked, some thirty years ago. “Take your time. Learn to be agile with your fingers, learn how, just at the right moment, to divert the attention of the audience with your *spiel*, learn speed, and the mysterious illumination! You will still not do what I am doing, you will still fail. You see, I perform magic. I conjure!”

## TALKING ABOUT THEATER

LLM. In writing about your long and richly productive career as a stage director, we’re naturally very interested to know where you yourself would like to see the emphasis placed. Which performances are your own favorites? You have said before that you dislike looking back at any of your work from the past. But which stage productions do you feel are the ones you like best?

IB. It’s very difficult. I don’t know. It has nothing to do with the result; it has to do only with the atmosphere – the time we had together when we worked on the play. The reason why I am much more a man of the theater than a man of the film is because theater is to me always . . . to work in the theater is a way of living. To make a picture is a heavy job, it really is. But to go to the theater in the morning, to go to the rehearsal room, to come together with the actors and sit down, and to work with them . . . learning to listen to the playwright’s words and to his heart together with the actors . . . that is a way of living; that is the best of all. And if you are together with actors who share the same way of thinking, the same attitude toward their job, it’s wonderful. I think I will make one or two or three more pictures – and then I will stop. But I hope I will have the chance to work with the theater until they carry me out. [Laughter.]

LLM. I hope you don’t mean that about your films.

IB. Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. That’s very simple. Because film making is physically very, very heavy – it’s a lousy job – physically. One day you feel very tired, you don’t want to . . . and when you are tired physically, you need an enormous vitality every day to come through, to be on top.



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Do you understand? You make about three minutes of the picture every day, and those three minutes must be on top, on the very top. You start at nine o'clock in the morning and then you work eight hours, very hard. And everything comes from you . . . it comes from me, everything, at every moment. And the whole crew depends on your feelings, on your most irrational reactions. And it's *very* difficult.

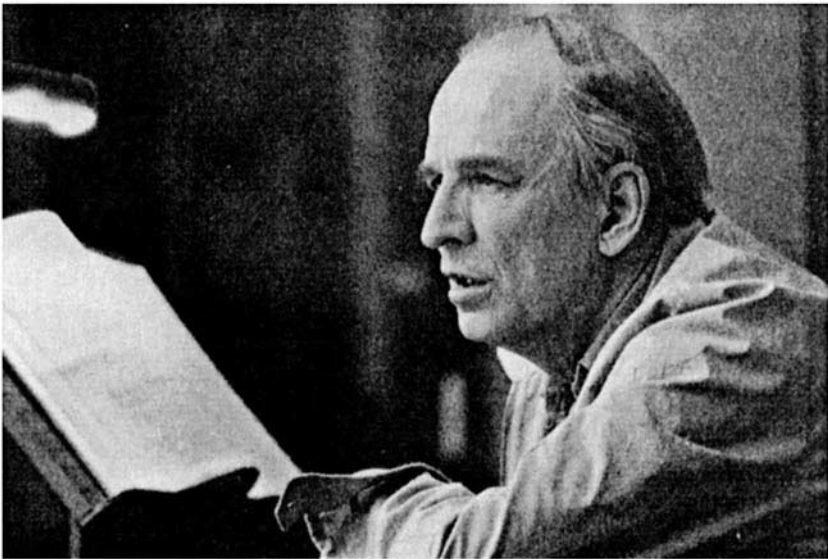
FJM. Different from the theater in that respect?

IB. At the theater, if you don't feel well, you don't feel well . . . and you can say to the actors: Today I don't feel well, let's go out for a walk in the park or go to the museum and see an exhibit or just sit down and have a chat. Or . . . today it was not so very good, but perhaps tomorrow or the day after tomorrow or next week it will be better. Film making is very neurotic – you're obsessed – your work is very neurotic; but the creative work of the theater, made together with the actors, is a very healthy way of creating.

FJM. You often speak of the theater as a collective, in the sense of working together with the actors.

IB. Yes, it's a wonderful way of coming together and being in contact with other people.

FJM. As a director it must be difficult to reach that stage of





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being able to be relaxed enough to take it that way. Do you know what I mean? Isn't the young director who is starting out much more tense . . .

IB. That's different. Of course. Every day, every morning while you are rehearsing, you wake up very, very early in a kind of tension, and the tension is always there; but you have to use it as a battery. You must not infect the actors, because if you infect them with your tension, they will be very unhappy. So you must simply tell the actors to sit down and then say to them: Children, let's relax; let's just take it easy. Let's listen to each other. Because acting is never – and that is a great misunderstanding – acting is never an *I*, it is always a *you*. Because the minute two actors forget themselves and take everything from the other one, then you have the great moments of performance. And that is the whole secret.

FJM. What I meant before about tension is also related to our earlier discussions of the director's script, which you always prepare and then put aside. You have often said that improvisation is dependent upon careful preparation. But what *is* the relationship between pre-preparation and then being able to put it all aside?

IB. You must be absolutely certain when you go to rehearsals. When you go to the first rehearsal, you must be absolutely sure; you must have prepared precisely and you must be absolutely sure – that *this* is what Strindberg has meant. And you must be happy with it. You must have made it your own experience – your own spiritual experience. And then you can relax in the material, you feel you are there. There are no longer any acts of violence, not against the text, not against the actors. Rehearsing in the theater has to do with contact, with listening, with tenderness, with love, with security. And then if, together with the actors, you can produce this atmosphere, it is a creative atmosphere – then it starts. It's a miracle. It starts. Yes, it is alive. Because I get things from the actors and I give things back to the actors.

FJM. Without worrying about what you had planned beforehand.

IB. Yes. But I have to prepare precisely for every little moment, in every little detail. I must know that *this* is what I want to do, and then I can improvise.

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LLM. You don't have the sounds of their voices in mind, then, before you go in?

IB. Yes, sometimes. But not always. Sometimes very clearly . . . I have the actors in mind, always, when I prepare; I always have actors in mind. What can this actor do, and what can he not do? What are his limitations? What are his difficulties? What is his strength?

LLM. Do you ever read lines for them?

IB. No, never. Never. I can tell them the rhythm. We can talk about the rhythm of a line, but I never tell them how to play it. We can talk about the choreography and we can talk about the rhythm and the pauses, but I never tell them how to say it.

FJM. Rhythm is very important to you, isn't it.

IB. Rhythm is the most important. That is the most important of all. Also in film.

LLM. Do you see a connection between film and theater in that respect?

IB. No. Not very much. But rhythm is always the most important thing that exists. Because everything is rhythm. At every moment of our lives, without ever thinking about it, we live with different kinds of rhythm – breathing, the beating of the heart, the movement of our eyes, the cycle of day and night, of destruction and creation, everything in the world is rhythm. And therefore our artistic work must also be built on the fact that we work with it – we must listen our way forward to the specific rhythm of the play, to the specific rhythm of the text. And this is precisely the difficulty when you work so much with translations; if the translator has not captured the rhythm of the original – which happens very rarely – then we are caught in a hell, because you sense that you are working against the text, going against the play. It is very difficult.

LLM. When you talk about rhythm, you don't mean merely speech rhythm and textual rhythm, do you. You mean visual rhythm as well.

IB. Yes, everything. The entire arrangement of movements, the whole rhythm of the performance. This to me is essential. To go faster, to go slower, to stop, all those things.

LLM. I think I understand what you mean. *The Misanthrope*, for instance, was a production you could talk about almost in