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

Lise-Lone Marker and Frederick J. Marker

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This book is a revised and expanded version of *Ingmar Bergman: Four Decades in the Theater*, published by the same authors more than ten years ago. The developments that have occurred in the interim, clustered around Bergman's triumphant return to the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm after years of self-imposed exile, have profoundly altered the course of this extraordinary career. Still the only book of its kind in English, this amply illustrated study uses detailed and comprehensive analyses of a range of Bergman's productions to chart the full scope and depth of his achievement in the theater, from an early *Macbeth* in 1944 to his widely acclaimed reinterpretation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in 1991.

Ingmar Bergman has held a place among the most innovative and prolific stage directors in Europe for nearly half a century. After his brilliant career as a film maker concluded with the Academy Award-winning *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), Bergman's search for new and exciting ways of creating theater has gone on with renewed energy. Especially in recent years, his touring Swedish productions of *Hamlet*, *Miss Julie*, *A Doll's House*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and other classics have reached a new audience of truly worldwide proportions, extending from London and New York to Moscow and Tokyo. Yet, for Bergman, there are never final solutions. Each new experiment seems to engender the next, in an ongoing process of creative inquiry that finds its fullest and most satisfying expression in his theater work.

The book will be of interest to scholars and students of theater history as well as to practitioners and the general reader.

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LISE-LONE MARKER

FREDERICK J. MARKER

University of Toronto



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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press, 1982, 1992

First published by Cambridge University Press as *Ingmar Bergman: four decades in the theater* in 1982

Second edition first published 1992

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Marker, Lise-Lone
 Ingmar Bergman, a life in the theater / Lise-Lone Marker,
 Frederick J. Marker.

p. cm. – (Directors in perspective)

Rev. ed. of: Ingmar Bergman, four decades in the theater. 1982.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-42082-2 (hardback). – ISBN 0-521-42121-7 (pbk.)

1. Bergman, Ingmar, 1918– . 2. Theater – Production and direction. I. Marker, Frederick J. II. Marker, Lise-Lone
 Ingmar Bergman, four decades in the theater. III. Title.
 IV. Series.

PN2778.B4M3 1992

792'.0233'092–dc20 91-46950 CIP

ISBN 0 521 42082 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 42121 7 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 1999

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-42121-8 - Ingmar Bergman: A Life in the Theatre
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Preface

The long-awaited opening last year of Ingmar Bergman's chamber production of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* marked the eighty-third stage production of this director's professional career. Later in 1991, a revival of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and an operatic adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae* for the Royal Opera in Stockholm brought the swelling total to eighty-five. "Isn't it strange," the aging but tireless master has been heard to say, "that knowing that any play could be my last production only makes it more fun to work on?"

When an earlier version of this book was first published, some eleven years and fifteen productions ago, it was certainly not clear to us just how quickly the prolific subject of our study would succeed in rendering it outdated. Developments that have occurred in the meantime, clustered around Bergman's return to his native Sweden in 1985, have profoundly affected his artistic style and outlook. Hence, this revised and expanded edition is, in many ways, a different book and, in our opinion, a better and more balanced one. Considerable attention is devoted here to Bergman's more recent endeavors, for the simple reason that both his German productions of the early 1980s and the subsequent series of works he has directed at the Royal Dramatic Theatre must indisputably be ranked among his most important accomplishments. Fresh reinterpretations of such recurrent favorites of his as *A Dream Play*, *Dom Juan*, and *Peer Gynt* have, each in a quite different way, altered accepted views of these classics in performance. In addition, however, he has explored a broad stretch of new territory in later years, ranging from plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Strindberg to works by several twentieth-century dramatists, including Per Olov Enquist, Eugene O'Neill, Yukio Mishima, and Bergman himself.

An ample, annotated chronology at the back of the book is intended to provide the interested reader with a sufficiently detailed synopsis of Bergman's astonishingly productive career as stage director, film maker, playwright, and more. In

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the book itself, meanwhile, we have adopted an approach that is neither biographical nor strictly chronological. Rather than attempting a comprehensive and correspondingly less detailed account of Bergman's entire oeuvre as a theater director, we have maintained a focus on major productions of the works of certain key playwrights who have continued to hold a central place in his theater poetics. These practical production analyses are intended to represent different aspects of his directorial syntax and interpretative approach. The perceptive reader will quickly begin to discern in them recurrent devices, compositional patterns, and interpretative choices that together add up to something like a Bergman "style." Ultimately, however, he is as fervently convinced as Max Reinhardt was that there is no single directorial style or method valid for all plays, that each play faces the director with a new and distinct problem of translation into the language of the living theater.

Max von Sydow credits his friend and sometime director with "an amazing ability to simplify complicated plays and complicated pieces of action in plays and make them crystal clear" – and it is, above all, this ability to achieve emotional clarity that explains Bergman's power to make a play from the past live in our time. The interpretative vision he brings to the particular work before him is at once deeply personal and keenly analytical, wholly responsive to the play's past and yet fully in touch with the contemporary world of the audience he seeks to engage. Impatient with what he calls the "trumpetry" of pedantic "word fidelity," his faithfulness to a performance text is an intense loyalty to the inner spirit he discovers in it and to the artistic consciousness he perceives behind it. More recently, in such radically antitraditionalist productions of the past ten years as *Hamlet*, *Dom Juan*, or *John Gabriel Borkman*, one discerns an even stronger sense of his personal identification with play and protagonist, coupled with a more acutely critical attitude toward accepted assumptions about them.

The three playwrights at the center of this study – August Strindberg, Molière, and Henrik Ibsen – represent Bergman's own preferences as fairly as they do our own. His relationship to Strindberg has remained one of the most essential features of his artistic physiognomy. His cycle of Strindberg productions – particularly of *A Dream Play*, *The Ghost Sonata*, and *To Damascus* – has continued to strengthen the lasting bond

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between these two kindred spirits. Bergman's successive re-interpretations of Ibsen's plays are already recognized as milestones in the performance history of that playwright's work in this century. Finally, Bergman is in a very basic sense a classical director – someone with a true gift for assimilating the reality of past styles and traditions in staging a classical play. As a result, perhaps no director outside of France has had more success than he has in translating the essence and the inner spiritual reality of Molière's darkly comic vision to the contemporary stage.

Although this book is concerned primarily with the close critical analysis of completed productions and the conceptual interpretations underlying them, we hope that at least some sense of the intricate and methodical creative process that precedes the finished work will also emerge. Bergman's art is intimately bound up with an ability to establish a close and intensely creative personal contact with his actors. He has always been unwilling to discuss his rehearsal methods in either intellectual or mystical terms. "An immense amount goes on between the actors and me that cannot be analyzed," he says simply. "That is how it often is in relations with the actors. After all, I am one of them. I am the complementary part." The combination of creative sorcery and clinical clarity in a Bergman rehearsal is indeed fascinating to behold, and we are privileged to have been permitted to behold it on many different occasions over the years.

Although a study of contemporary theater practice is by no means less dependent upon the primary sources and objective documentation that are essential to all reliable theater research, there are important additional avenues of approach to a contemporary subject that are closed to the student of the more remote theatrical past. The most obvious and potentially most useful of these is firsthand observation – the recollection of certain rare and exciting moments in the theater that will, one senses, not soon be forgotten. Yet even the richest, most vivid of these received impressions is selective and thus potentially seductive. Hence, we have naturally tried in every instance to support personal recollection of particular Bergman productions with as much documentary evidence as possible. In particular, we have made every effort to let contemporary newspaper critics speak frequently, in their own words, as

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descriptive (if not invariably reliable) seismographs registering the impact that a given theatrical moment had on its first audiences. (To simplify matters, where no date is given in the text, a review may be assumed to have appeared on the day following the date given for the opening.)

A second and very different kind of approach to a contemporary production is afforded by the possibility – at times only a hypothetical one – of direct consultation with the artists involved. On the whole, we have been very fortunate in this respect. We are greatly indebted to the actors who took time and trouble to talk with us about their work with Bergman. Uppermost in our minds in this regard are Bibi Andersson, Max von Sydow, and Erland Josephson, who gave their interviewers and audience a memorable morning of insights at the Nobel Symposium at Dramaten in 1988. Also, several of Bergman's assistant directors have generously permitted us access to their useful notes and work scripts, including Ulla Elmquist (Copenhagen), Johannes Kaetzler (Munich), and Annette Gassmann (Salzburg and Munich).

Above all, however, it is to Ingmar Bergman himself that we owe our deepest debt of gratitude, not only for treating our many requests and appeals for help with unfailing kindness but especially for stealing time from crowded schedules to sit down and talk with us so often about his theater life. He intensely dislikes the idea of looking over his shoulder at the theatrical past, be it his own or anyone else's. "The thing I like most about a theater performance is that it exists for a few evenings, perhaps a season. And then it's gone," he told us in one of our very first meetings. "I love the theater because it is only that single moment. Everything is there – and then it disappears." Unlike a film, the permanency of which causes him a curious kind of discomfort. Some of the reluctance has been overcome or set aside by mutual trust and friendship, and we have gone on talking together over the years – never, be it said, with the goal of "reconstructing the dinosaur with the amiable assistance of the Monster himself" (to borrow a wry phrase from *Pictures*, his candid new self-appraisal of his films).

Thus, although personal consultation has played a vital role in the preparation and shaping of this study, the book speaks with its own voice. Although some elements of personal

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history have been included where it seemed appropriate, it is intended as an analytical portrait of Bergman's theater work, not as a biography. The viewpoints expressed and the conclusions drawn here are entirely our own.

Like its predecessor, this book has relied heavily on the cooperation and active assistance of a wide range of institutions and individuals. The kindness and helpfulness we have encountered in this connection have been a source of lasting pleasure and encouragement to us. The roster of acknowledgements found in the earlier edition will not be repeated here, but our gratitude to these initial helpers remains entirely undiminished.

We owe special thanks to the theaters we have come to over the years for help, and whose librarians, press officers, and dramaturges were always so ready and willing to accommodate us: the Malmö City Theatre, the Danish Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, the Salzburg Festival, and, in particular, the Residenztheater in Munich and the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. The latter is a special case altogether. Since Bergman's return to Sweden seven years ago, our attention has been concentrated principally on Dramaten and his productions there. Thanks to the cordial hospitality and capable help of such people as Ann-Christine Jernberg, Leif Östman, Dr. Tom J. A. Olsson, Sten Rodin, Nea Cleve, and their congenial colleagues at that wonderful theater, our working visits there have been a delight.

We are indebted to the major photographers represented here – Beata Bergström (Stockholm), Rigmor Mydtskov (Copenhagen), Eva Titus (Jean-Marie Bottequin studio, Munich), Wilfried Hösl (Munich), and Bengt Wanselius (Stockholm) – for their courtesy in allowing us to use their images. Their work, which goes far beyond publicity photography, forms a lasting documentary record of the scenes and settings in a given production. (Even here, though, some caution is needed, in that pictures taken at a photo rehearsal do not always correspond to the end result in a Bergman performance.)

Occasional use has been made here of edited excerpts from interviews and articles published previously by us in *Films and Filming*, *Maske und Kothurn*, *Modern Drama*, *Saturday Review*, *The New York Times*, and *Theater*. We acknowledge the cour-

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tesy of these publications, and we wish to mention our particular thanks to Dr. Joel Schechter, editor of *Theater*, for his loyal support and encouragement of our Bergman studies. Also on the editorial side, Professor Christopher Innes deserves our appreciation for his continued interest and constructive counsel. We are grateful to Sarah Stanton of Cambridge University Press for having suggested this book and to Victoria L. Cooper for seeing it through the press.

Most keenly felt of all is our gratitude to Ingmar Bergman and his wife Ingrid. Their forbearance has been this project's saving grace; their friendship is its best reward.

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