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MOVIE REVIEW

# A film giant proves elusive in ‘Searching for Ingmar Bergman’

By **Peter Keough** Globe Correspondent, December 13, 2018, 1:13 p.m.



Ingmar Bergman (right) and Kabi Laretei with their son, Daniel, as seen in the new documentary “Searching for Ingmar Bergman.” LENNART NILSSON/COURTESY OF OSCILLOSCOPE LABORATORIES

A century after his birth, 11 years after his death, in 2007, does Ingmar Bergman still matter in an age of superheroes, CGI, and YouTube?

Judging from some of the top independent films of the year, his influence is stronger than ever. Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma," for example, recalls elements of Bergman's autobiographical "Fanny and Alexander" (1982) as filtered through a neorealist lens. More blatantly, Paul Schrader's "First Reformed" combines the existential dread of Bergman's "Winter Light" (1963) with the impotent rage of "Taxi Driver" (1976), which Schrader wrote and Martin Scorsese directed.

German director Margarethe von Trotta also confesses to the impact that Bergman has had on her life. In her peripatetic and provocative documentary, "Searching for Ingmar Bergman" (co-directed with her son, Felix Moeller, and her editor Bettina Böhler) Trotta remembers the first time she saw a Bergman film. She was 18, in Paris, in the early days of the French New Wave, and friends "dragged" her to see "The Seventh Seal" (1957).

The documentary screens at the Brattle Dec. 21-23.

Though she'd been indifferent to movies until then, the experience changed her life. She decided to become a filmmaker; and though her own politically charged films such as "Marianne & Juliane" (1981) and "Rosa Luxemburg" (1986) differed from Bergman's sensibility, his presence loomed over her career, as it did for many filmmakers of her generation and generations to come.

But who was Bergman, really? Though he was one of the most autobiographical (if not narcissistic) of artists, he remains an enigma, and though Von Trotta's search turns up intriguing nuggets — such as his youthful admiration for Hitler — her subject eludes her. She visits the places where Bergman lived and worked and which he still haunts (literally: Those who have stayed since his death at his final home on Fårö Island say they can sense his presence). She interviews such directors as Olivier Assayas, Carlos Saura, and Mia Hansen-Love, who extol him and seek to emulate him. She reminisces with Bergman's longtime collaborator Liv Ullmann about her presenting von Trotta with the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1981 for "Marianne & Juliane," a film which Bergman claimed convinced him to resume his career after a long hiatus. The anecdote is not so much self-congratulatory as illustrative of the reciprocal nature of artistic

influence.

More intriguing are her interviews with Bergman's son Daniel Bergman and his grandson Halfdan Ullmann Tondel, both filmmakers themselves. The latter recalls watching "Pearl Harbor" (2001) with his grandfather at his Fårö screening room and how the old auteur would fast forward through the love scenes to the action sequences. Less amusing are the memories of his son, who remarks how his father "would say to his ladies when they were pregnant, 'Now I know you love me,' and left them." A photo of Bergman's dozen or so offspring gathered for their father's 60th birthday — some of them meeting each other for the first time — looks like a group snapshot from a high school reunion. Bergman had no use for his own children, as more than one interviewee observes, because he never gave up the idea that he was still a child himself.

Von Trotta became acquainted with Bergman when he was living in Munich in the 1970s, in self-imposed exile after he suffered the traumatic "betrayal" of being arrested in 1976 by Swedish authorities for tax violations. Consequently, she gives special attention to two histrionic films he made during that period, "The Serpent's Egg" (1977) and "From the Life of the Marionettes" (1980) — regarded by most as minor works — and to his uneven tenure as director of Munich's Residenztheater. She remembers how he insisted on holding hands with her when they chatted; clearly, he was going through a rough patch, artistically and psychologically.

Von Trotta comes closest to the object of her search when she looks at images from his movies. Especially images of the seashore. She begins the film on the rocky Swedish beach where in "The Seventh Seal" Death first appears to the Knight, a scene that has forever changed the lives of many who have seen it, and not just filmmakers. The film ends on a beach on Fårö, where Death finally came for Bergman himself. Von Trotta stands next to a jagged monolith, eerily resembling Bergman's profile. It towers over her, intimidating and impenetrable.

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## SEARCHING FOR INGMAR BERGMAN

Directed by Margarethe von Trotta, Felix Moeller, and Bettina Böhler. Written by von Trotta and Felix Moeller. At the Brattle. 99 minutes. Unrated (nudity, angst, narcissism, genius). In English, German, Swedish, and French, with subtitles.

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