

# **SMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT** 1955

Ingmar Bergman

## **OVERVIEW**

Married five times, caught up in smouldering adulteries many times in between, Bergman was quite naturally fascinated with the complexities, anguishes, and resolutions that go along with these inevitable maladies of social constraint, and family reliability. In *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) he brings his understanding, of these perplexities, to bear on what is traditionally a festive Midsummer night in Sweden, in the course of which social license is widely tolerated and enjoyed. He ultimately brings together four couples who by end of the night have rearranged or newly defined their sexual partnerships, and in each case for the better—at least as far as their immediate personal happiness is involved.

## **STORY**

The story before us is jumpstarted by a middle aged lawyer, once before married, who is in his second marriage. He lives with his wife, a gorgeous 19 year old; his son, a theology student of the age of his wife, and a sexy housemaid. The crisis brewing around Fredrik, the lawyer, is that he has not yet had sex with his wife, who is 'reluctant.' The age discrepancy, between the two partners in this couple, is as it were the initial move in a game of musical chairs which generates the sequence of marital mishaps that construct the whole film.

**Old Friends - Fredrik and Desiree.** Fredrik is discouraged by Anna's repeated refusals to make love. This unconsummated situation is intolerable for Fredrik, who goes for advice to an old girlfriend, Desiree, a worldly observer and a well known stage actress. She has come to sense that Fredrik is still attached to Desiree, and in fact he is about to visit this old lover, in order to ask for advice with his marital stalemate. On entering Desiree's house, Fredrik falls in a puddle of water, soaks himself, and has to put on a nightgown, in which compromising and humiliating situation the Count finds him later that evening. The crowning embarrassment for Fredrik is Desiree's suggestion that his wife may have fallen for her stepson, which is exactly what Fredrik doesn't want to hear.

**Rivals** Fredrik is twice challenged by the Count, Desiree's lover. We have mentioned the first challenge, when the Count drives out the nightshirted Fredrik—who is becoming gradually a kind of figure of fun in the narrative. On the second occasion, the Count finds his wife, Charlotte, talking with Fredrik. Once again the Count challenges our 'figure of fun,' this time raising the stakes to Russian roulette. Fortunately, the Count had loaded the revolver with soot, so that neither man suffered anything worse than a rather degrading dust bath. Our Fredrik, safe and sound, now turns to Desiree, and asks her not to leave him—to which she agrees.

**Social engineering** From the confused situation the drama of social rearrangements sets forth. It is Desiree's assumption, at this point, that she has lost the Count, and she decides on a master plan which will—with the abundant help of her worldly and well to do Mom—bring her back to Fredrik; shunt Anna—Fredrik's 'reluctant' wife—over to her stepson, for whom she has already developed a strong attachment; drive the Count back to his wife, Charlotte, whom jealousy has made him desire again; and even, as a last touch, prompt the elopement of Fredrik's housemaid with the Count's groom. This sequence of personal dramas, in a short compass, is the consequence of Fredrik's initial marital discomfort, and is embedded in the age difference between Fredrik and his wife. In the end, as we see, he gravitates back to his former, and older, lover, Desiree, after having set in motion the game of musical chairs mentioned earlier. In other words, Desiree will replace Fredrik, as the initial launcher of developments, and like Prospero, in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, will shed magic change over the actors in the play. In the end, at least for the moment, the players will be happy, a perfect comedy.

## THEMES

**Joy.** We are 'surprised by Joy,' here, to borrow the title to C.S. Lewis' masterful text on his religious insight. Everything works out all right, though for how long we have no idea. Each partner is simply aligned with the best match for him or her. As if by magic.

**Sexuality.** Joy is related to sexual satisfaction, into this film. Personal compatibility is the driver behind sexual attraction, of course, and in the end each character has found a mate they like, as well as desire.

**Faults.** It takes many weaknesses, apparently, to keep the social order running smoothly. *Jealousy* brings the Count to rediscover the beauties of his wife, Charlotte; *lust* drives Henrik toward Anna; and *old fashioned love of the familiar* makes Fredrik finally settle down with his previous lover Desiree.

**Drivers.** if there is a *master of ceremonies* here it is Desiree's rich and worldly mother, who brings together the main participants in the drama, and dowers it with her dual wisdoms, of the importance of sexual drive and the power of the grape; or Desiree herself, who is a diva in love with love, and has found the saving graces of humor and compromise.

## CHARACTERS

**Fredrik**, a mid life lawyer, is a truly comic character, whose weak position is symbolized by the lack of consummation of his two year marriage. He finally finds his way back to his old lover, Desiree.

**Desiree**, a well known, witty, and worldly actress is a former lover of Fredrik, and in the end the comfortable person to whom Fredrick returns. She is a social plotter if there ever was one.

**Henrik** is the seemingly studious young theology student son of Fredrik, who is actually about to replace his dad, as the lover of Anna.

**The Count** is the husband of Charlotte, to whom in the end he returns. He twice works up a jealous rage against Fredrik, but the two never quite manage to kill one another.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### FREDRIK

**Character** *Smiles of a Summer Night* is a film about events in society, rather than a play of character, but if any character particularly fixes our attention it is Fredrik, the first character developed before our eyes, and the one whom we most often view at different stages. He is a carefully dressed midlife lawyer, anxious about his love life, jovial but somewhat distracted in his relation to his son, and plainly uncomfortable with the social setting of his life—particularly with his gorgeous young wife's indifference to sleeping with him. Fredrik moves from ineffectual through advice-needy, through just plain lucky, when it turns out that the Count has not loaded bullets into the Russian roulette pistol.

### Illustrative moments.

**Self-confident.** When he gives advice to his son, at the outset of the film, Fredrik is self-confident and fatherly. He feels that his son has cut himself off too soon from the pleasures of life, and that he should loosen up. 'Don't overstress the theology.'

**Perplexed.** Fredrik's wife, Anna, has refused to let him consummate their marriage. Stretched out on the bed for sleep, she tells him that she will 'need a little more time,' and that in the future they will 'have a baby.' His ego is wounded, his intelligence is perplexed.

**Suppliant.** Troubled by Anna's 'reluctance,' Fredrik turns to his old flame, Desiree, for advice. Unfortunately, her best suggestion is that he should watch out lest his son replace him as Anna's lover. Fredrik is having trouble finding advisors who truly have his good at heart.

**Game.** Fredrik, though not the initiator of the Russian roulette episode, is nonetheless game enough to see it through. He senses that, even if he loses the initial bet, which he does, he will find protection.

**Vulnerable.** In the end, having survived the roulette challenge, and covered with soot, he pleads with Desiree not to leave him. He will stay with her. She will not be 'reluctant.' He will not have a son panting to replace him.