

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 mid life 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. 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.

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.

DESIREE

Character Desiree is a well known professional actress—like Elisabet Vogler in *Persona*—who was formerly married to Fredrik. They are now divorced, and she has taken up a new lover, the Count. In the film before us; and we see that she is destined to be the chief driver of the film's Shakespearean narrative. (Note likeness to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Frustrated with his own marital life, Fredrik goes to his own former mistress, Desiree, for advice; while with her, her present lover, the Count, arrives, and throws Fredrik out; from this point on, Desiree takes over as the rearranger of social relations in the group that joins these high flying social figures. (One thinks, in connection with Desiree, of such literary matchmakers as Mrs. Darcy, in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.) She negotiates with the Count's wife, and with her own wealthy and scheming mother, to get Fredrik back to herself, as in the old days, to get Fredrik's reluctant wife in bed with his stepson, to drive the Count back to his wife, and otherwise to restore order, as Prospero does in Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

Illustrative moments

Careless. Fredrik goes to Desiree's mansion, to ask her advice in his own marital situation. As he approaches her house, Fredrik falls in a puddle of water. Desiree helps him change his soaking clothes, and dresses him in a nightshirt belonging to the Count, her present lover. Careless? She fails to recall her date with the Count, who arrives, and is furious to find Frederik dressed in his, the Count's, nightshirt.

Realistic Desiree realizes, when faced with the Count's fury, that it is all up with her affair with the Count—who is anyhow the husband of her best friend, Charlotte—so that she should reunite the guy with his wife, and do what she can to restore order in her whole circle of friends. She acts by prodding her mother to arrange a major match making and restoring party.

Conciliatory. Once having been married to Fredrik, Desiree is fully cognizant of her old grievances, and yet decides to reunite with this former mate. She is not only a matchmaker, but a knower of herself and of her own needs.

Canny. When Fredrik comes to Desiree, initially, it is to ask for advice in his new marital difficulties. Desiree will clearly have been aware, at this point, that she might want to woo Fredrick back into her own court. She makes a point, therefore, of hinting to him that his wife, the sexy young Anna, may in fact be hot for Fredrik's stepson, the theology student who lives with his Dad, and is more interested in Dad's wife than in God.

THE COUNT

Character At the outset of the film, the Count is the active lover of Desiree, whose house he is approaching, for an evening date. (His wife, Charlotte, is at his home, waiting for him; his wife who is also Desiree's best friend.) Upon arrival, he finds there Fredrik, Desiree's former husband, wearing the Count's own nightshirt; a highly compromising gaffe on Desiree's part. Once more reunited to Charlotte, whom Desiree realistically respects and in fact loves, the Count returns to his wife, but not without forgetting the rebuff he seems to have suffered from Fredrik, whom he will soon challenge to a duel. The duel, as it turns out, is as amusing as these two comic figures, the Count and Fredrik, and ends with each man going happily his own way.

Angry We first meet the count when he arrives for an evening date at the house of his lover, Desiree. What he finds—his rival Fredrik wearing his, the Count's, nightgown—infuriates him and he orders Fredrik to leave Desiree's premises.

Accepting. For all his fury against Fredrik, a fury which the Count will not relinquish or forget, he accepts Desiree's determination, now, to send him back to his wife. He is a tame philanderer, and always a bit of a fool.

Defiant. Though willing to play ball with his wife and Desiree, who has pushed him away, the Count nonetheless holds onto his rivalry with Fredrik, whom he challenges to a duel. Fortunately he fills the pistols with soot, instead of bullets, so neither of the rivals bites the dust.

Jealous. The count's jealousy toward Fredrik, whose nocturnal visit to Desiree he misunderstood—taking it for eros instead of advice-seeking—becomes a factor in the count's rediscovered longing for his wife, whom suddenly, after the first encounter with Fredrik, he fears he may lose.