

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Fanny and Alexander 1982

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Autobiographical. *Fanny and Alexander* is an historical period piece about two siblings and their large family, in Uppsala Sweden; the time is the first decade of the twentieth century. The film, originally a 312 minute television miniseries, was intended as Bergman's last film before retiring—actually he made two more films, documentaries, before retiring—and thus to be a kind of autobiographical retrospect of his own life. Many of the players of his own childhood percolate through the series, though the most fully identified are Bergman himself (Alexander), his sister (Fanny), and his father (Alexander's stepfather, the bishop.) It should be mentioned that Bergman believed there was also a lot of himself in the bishop; in other words that he was not totally unlike the severe clergyman whom at the same time he had strongly resisted, as a son.

Planning. Always retrospective, always building his work on his own past, Bergman conceived the present story—for it is largely 'fictional'—while he was working on *From The Life of the Marionettes* (1979), that basically bitter biopsy of a marriage torn apart. The screenplay was completed, shortly after, on the island of Faro, and in his habitual fashion he constructed at this major final work during the next couple of years.

Production. By time of production Bergman assembled a virtual extravaganza of historical retrospect. No attention was lacking, in the artistic preparation for the film, which was scheduled for several carefully chosen sites north of Stockholm. The artistic director, who began planning the sets six months before production date, carefully appointed what was to be the Bishop's Residence, the grandmother's flat, the main body of the Ekdahl residence, where Oscar and Emilie and the children resided—which was scrupulously decked out in art nouveau style. Provisions were made for the downtime entertainment of the young people actors—a pillow fight was staged, as a break time relaxant, and bikes were available, to allow for working off animal spirits. A full brass band was imported and trained, to ceremonialize the death of Oscar, Emilie's husband. The active crew on the set involved sixty characters with lines, and 1200 extras

STORY

Beginnings. The year is 1907, and the film opens on the forty third annual Christmas pageant, at the theater owned by the Ekdahl family. The grandmother of the family is morose, as she feels the passing of time, and talks with an old flame about 'the good old days.' That the good old days are passing is emphasized soon after by the unexpected stroke and death of Oscar, the husband of Emilie and the siblings' father. (The good old days for Bergman himself, as he later commented, precede this death.)

Remarriage. The death of Oscar opens the way for Emilie to undertake a new marriage, to the doctrinally severe Bishop of Uppsala, who makes it clear to the bride to be, and her children, that he will insist on complete authoritarian control in the family. (He wants his new bride to bring nothing with her to her new home, the bishop's residence—including mementoes or clothes; and he extends the stricture to Emilie's children, who, as we soon learn, are going to be virtual captives in their own new home.) Emilie makes clear, in advance of the marriage, that she has no great passion for it, and indeed it is about to lead her, and her children, into suffering.

Conflict. We have our eyes on Alexander, as the new marriage develops into deepening conflict. (After all, Bergman is doing autobiography here, and moving himself into the sensitive bulls eye of the film.) In the brief absence of their mother, in the bishop's residence, the two children feel alienated and overwhelmed by the severity of the bishop himself, who catches Alexander—always on the naughty side

in this regard—prevaricating, and doing so imaginatively, the worst sin in the bishop's list. (Alexander makes up the story that the bishop drowned two children and his first wife right there in what is now the bishop's residence, twenty years previously.) The tale is not pure fabrication, but embroidery on both an account given the children by one of their nurses, and an extrapolation from the fear the very presence and manner the harsh uncompromising bishop instills in the children. All that Alexander felt, in aversion to his stepfather, is confirmed by the vicious corporal punishment the bishop inflicts on the 'prevaricating' Alexander.

Despair. The quality of life, for the children and their mother, steadily declines, inside the frame of the marriage to the bishop. From austere and uncompromising, the bishop gradually becomes sinister, the children lose all freedom, and Emilie, finding herself in an advanced stage of pregnancy, requests a divorce. The blow then strikes: divorce, in the bishop's eyes, would mean desertion, and desertion would mean loss of the children.

Plan. Faced with an impossible dilemma, Emilie and her mother—whose concern for the whole crisis is constant—turn to an old Jewish family friend, Isak Jacobi, who works with them to devise a plan. The father of the Jewish family insinuates himself into the bishop's residence, on the grounds of wanting to buy a wooden chest that belongs to the bishop; the transaction is completed, barely, as the two children, hidden inside the chest, are whipped away to freedom, without the knowledge of the bishop, who has sold the chest under his own nose.

Interlude. For some time, and for security's sake, the two children are housed and hidden in the antique shop run by the Jewish friends of the Ekdahl family. Alexander meets there a visionary youngster named Ishmael, who introduces Alexander to the notion of the interfusion of souls. Alexander grows through dream and trance.

Resolution. Emilie refuses to restore the children to the bishop's residence, and in a climactic scene she gives the bishop, who is plagued with insomnia, a large dose of the bromide she herself takes as a sleep aid. She announces to him her intention to flee, just as he is passing out. But that is not the end of the evening's drama. Coincidentally, the bishop's invalid aunt knocks over a kerosene lamp, incinerates herself, and in flames runs down the corridor to get the bishop's help. Unfortunately, however, the groggy bishop finds himself enveloped in the flames, and burns to death.

THEMES

Severity. The bishop offers the maximum in severity of view point, at least up to the point where his severity converts into overt sadism. He is a foe of imagination—of Alexander's type, which involves fancy and anxiety—and he is hostile to everything Emilie brings to the marriage, from her past life.

Childhood For Bergman himself, it seems, the happiest moments of childhood were those in which he was immersed in a large happy family. One thinks, for an example, of the way Alexander fits himself under the piano, which forms a kind of shelter for him, and from which, cozily, he can watch the movements of the adults walking and talking in the convivial Ekdahl living room.

Family The Ekdahls are a large and widespread upper middle class family, living their familiar routines and conviviality. However from the beginning, at their Christmas theater party, there is a sense—listen to the Grandmother insinuate it—that the passing of another year has meant a decline in life, an inherent sadness. The Bergman family is never happy for long, nor is this one an exception.

Reconciliation. At the very end of the film, the family makes an effort to celebrate the birth of the child created by the bishop and Emilie, as well as that of the infant of the family maid, Maj, and Alexander's uncle, Gustav Adolf—a skirt chaser and live wire, who has played a hearty part in the film. Emilie, meanwhile, inherits the family theater, and at the very end is planning to consider a new production, a play by Strindberg.

CHARACTERS

Alexander. Alexander is the next to youngest child of Emilie and Oscar, and the consciousness through whom we experience the entire film. He is present to the film, that is, both as a hovering presence, and as an actor—a young boy thrown into the lap of a sadist stepdad; a wanderer in dream through the visions of his family friend Ishmael; a listener, at the very end, to his mother's reading of a text from Strindberg.

Emilie Emilie is the mother of Alexander and Fanny, the wife of the bishop—until his death, and finally the mother of the child she has with the bishop. She is a protective mom, who is unhinged by the death by stroke, of her husband Oscar, and who never recovers fully enough to make a careful choice of a second husband.

Grandmother. Emilie's mom, the matriarch of the family, sets the tone of the film, by remarking to an old flame that the pleasures of the Christmas theater pageant seem to be diminishing. She is a guardian of the good old days, and of the photo album that enshrines them.

Bishop. The bishop is a handsome man, a ladies' man in fact, but a strict authoritarian who demands complete control over Emilie and her two children. In the end, thanks to the insomnia which his lack of peace enforces, he allows himself to be incinerated.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ALEXANDER

Character Alexander, and his slightly younger sibling, Fanny, are the two principal characters of the film. While Alexander is not present to every scene—say the love scenes involving Gustav Adolf or the conversations that take place between his mother and grandmother, while he is confined at the bishop's house—his role and destiny, in the whole family drama, is constantly palpable. His conflict with his stepfather seems to encapsulate the problem of the imaginative and the intangible, which is always being intimated by this film.

Illustrative moments

Hidden. As a young and pampered sibling, Alexander loves to hole up under the family grand piano, and from that protected spot to watch the swirling back and forth of the guests that move through the Ekdahl parlor.

Confined. Alexander is startled when he realizes that the windows in the bishop's house are barred, and that he and Fanny are effectively prisoners. He takes his sister over to see the surprising iron bars, and immediately begins to speculate on ways the two of them could escape.

Inspired. During his interlude as a hide out in the antiques store of the Jacobi's, family friends of the Ekdahls, Alexander makes the acquaintance of the mysterious young man named Ishmael, who is a master of conveying, in dreamlike language, the potential in human consciousness to fuse into other consciousnesses.

Imaginative. Alexander's conflict with the bishop, his new stepfather, springs from the boy's high spirited imagination coming into contact with the excessively rigorous literalism of the new dad. Where the borderline gets crossed between lying and imagining, the pastor is a most vigilant policeman.

EMILIE

Character Emilie is the mother of Alexander; she finds herself generationally caught between her own mother, the retrospective and philosophical grandmother of the family, and her two children, who are just beginning to discover the world. Emilie is badly shaken by the death of her husband, with whom she had a warm relationship, and she is entering shakily onto a second marriage with a man, the bishop, whom

she barely understands. By the end of the film she is once again alone with her two children, owns the family theater, and is ready to pursue life on of course a much more complex level.

Illustrative moments

Confused. Shortly after her own husband's death, Emilie is attracted to the local bishop, who is a widower. Not sure of what she wants in a new husband, and very much in limbo, she falls into the powerful plans of this obsessed man, in no way realizing, at this point, that he is a dangerous sadist.

Scared. As Emilie realizes what an authoritarian her new husband is, she grows alarmed. What will happen to her children? What will she be able to do, as for instance with the family theater? She is still shaken by the death of her first husband.

Pregnant. In a deep bind, Emilie goes to her mother in law, from her first marriage, to ask for advice; she is pregnant, and therefore trapped in her relation to the bishop. She is considering asking for a divorce, but she learns, in discussion, that the bishop would in that case not release her children to her. She grows desperate.

Peaceful. Peaceful? Emilie reaches some kind of resolution, at the end of the film. By the death of the bishop, she has recovered custody of her children, including the child she had by the bishop, and she appears to be happily engaged in the ongoing life of the family theater, with which the film opened.

BISHOP

Character The bishop is a handsome man, many years a widower, and ostensibly a fine catch. It is immediately apparent, though, that he is a strict authoritarian, with rigid ideas about child behavior, strict morality, and that he is no friend of the 'imagination.' He wishes to remake his new wife, and her two children, completely in his own image, which will not happen. His inevitably calamitous end is a relief to all.

Illustrative moments

Particular. From the time of his first 'pre-marital' interview, with Emilie, in which they discuss the nature of their proposed marriage, the bishop is to the last degree fussy about detail. He wants to make certain, for instance, that Emilie brings no personal possessions with her, to her new marital home.

Sadistic. From the outset, the bishop is concerned that Alexander may be a 'liar,' and when he learns that the boy has invented a story about his, the bishop's, first marriage, the results are swift; the bishop has the boy cruelly flogged.

Anxious. Like most authoritarians, the bishop is inherently anxious, fearing breaches of those rules he requires in order to survive. Arguably this anxiety is what keeps the bishop awake at night, what leads to his taking the sleeping medicine, and thus what leads to his incineration.

Ardent The bishop is a person of strong and committed opinions, and in principle a useful member of society. However, he is unable to control his disciplinary inclinations, and in the end becomes a torturer rather than a helper.