

ARTS

Bergman's finale is a great success

**Fanny & Alexander
Princess Theatre**

review by Christine Koch

Ingmar Bergman's latest and reportedly last film, *Fanny and Alexander*, is a treat to see, a visually beautiful work of emotional, psychological, and symbolic depth.

Presenting the wealthy and theatrically-inclined Ekdahl family in turn-of-the-century Sweden, this movie is a wholesome and heartwarming celebration of family life, of love and openness. Partly autobiography, a focal point is the young

Alexander Ekdahl, an imaginative, individualistic youngster. An important part of the film is devoted to tracing his character, his relationships with family

Fanny and Alexander is a finely crafted, exuberant depiction of childhood and growing up.

members, his reaction to his father's death, and his rebellion against his mother's remarriage and his stepfather.

Yet *Fanny and Alexander* embraces the entire family. Beginning with Christmas and a traditional family gathering, we are treated to an examination of each individual — the philandering Gustave, his tolerant wife, the financially desperate Karl, the matriarchal grandmother, her lover Isaac, Maj the saucy but good-humoured servant impregnated by Gustave... Few characters are spared here. However, to err is human, and though none is perfect, each radiates a warmth and beauty seldom seen today, on the screen or off.

Fanny and Alexander is a very "literary" film. Considering the Ekdahl family's involvement with the theatre, one might view this movie as being about theatre, drama, and acting — a reflexive

work, as it were. In fact, the role of the theatre in the film is one of grand metaphor. Oskar Ekdahl speaks of his theatrical group as a little world which sometimes reflects the big outer world, and sometimes seeks to entertain it, to provide an escape. The theatre, then, and by induction the film, may be a microcosm of life.

Conversely, in real life all the world's a stage. The grandmother, who in her time has played such leading ladies as Juliet and Ophelia, recognises that in real life one must assume different roles (wife, lover, mother, grandmother...). The continuing parallels between *Hamlet* and this story of the Ekdahls seems intentionally to underscore this theme. Significantly, Oskar Ekdahl dies while playing the ghost of Hamlet's father, and his own troubled spirit haunts the film, returning to watch helplessly as Emily and her two children are oppressed and abused by the man she marries.

Yet — "Don't play Hamlet, my son," Emily tells the brooding Alexander on the night of her wedding. "I am not Gertrude, nor Edvard Claudius."

The character of the brutal and abusive stepfather is a stock literary figure, overworked to the point of being almost a cliché. And his death here in a sudden fire

seems too contrived and facile, a resorting to the old *deus ex machina* convention. Bergman gives a symbolic twist to the figure of the wicked stepfather, however, in making him a bishop, and thus a dark representative of the Church. The harrowing nightmare in which Emily and her children find themselves is effectively set in the sterile and unlovely house of the bishop, presided over by the furies which his mother, sister, and housekeeper seem to be to the children.

The only elements in the film which do not quite succeed are the intrusions of the supernatural. I had trouble with the comings and goings of Oskar's ghost, with the dabbling in magic of Aaron (the nephew of the kindly old Jew Isaac who finally rescues the children), and with the spiritualistic entering of Alexander's soul and mind by Ishmael (Isaac's other nephew). These seemed neither convincing nor accessible in a film loaded with the otherwise down-to-earth details of human existence.

But these are minor flaws. The success of *Fanny and Alexander* — and it is an enormous success — rides on its finely-crafted, exuberant depiction of childhood and growing up in a large, close family. As such, it provides healthy relief from Hollywood fare.

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1:45 - Facecrime
3:00 PM - Rank and File

Friday September 16
12 noon - Rank and File
1:45 - Johnny Dee Fury
4:00 PM - Voice

Not even the critics know for sure

Does she, or doesn't she (succeed with play)?

**Turning Thirty
Theatre Network**

Review by Gilbert Bouchard and Jens Andersen

JA: OK, the audience loved it, you liked it and Liz Nicholl's of the *Edmonton Journal* oohed and aahed all over it. I thought it stunk, despite a few passable jokes and a generous helping of cheesecake.

The problem is that, having just turned thirty myself and having had quite a long acquaintance with sitcoms, I have grown quite tired of them. And don't try to tell me *Turning Thirty* isn't a sitcom. Where else would you see a cliché nutty professor like Jerome portrayed, writing to the Baader-Meinhof gang (after being rejected by the PLO and the FLQ) saying, "You are my last chance to become a respectable revolutionary?"

And where else would you see the cliché repressed female (in this case a nun) oozing the predictable neurotic sexuality? **GB:** But then again, nuns, neurotic, erotic and otherwise have been popping up in drama, literature and everything else you can think of since Chaucer tapped out "The Nun's Tale." Boiling it down to a platitude: life is a cliché in itself. You can't come up



Co-author and actress Cashman

with new perversions — just gross out your predecessors occasionally. Ms. Cashman has a very good ear for dialogue, and a great sense of timing, which in my opinion matched her ability to illustrate the pretensions of the common, or not so uncommon man. This makes for a very enjoyable one-man show. So there!!

JA: Well, 95 per cent of the inhabitants of this sorry planet are, I agree, living clichés (and when the social activists succeed in banning stereotypes from the media, these people will disappear from history without a

trace). And of course they have their place in literature. Sinclair Lewis, in fact, won a well-deserved Nobel Prize for his semi-sympathetic portrayal of one such character, that quintessential fat, booshwah real-estate agent, *Babbitt*.

But the clichés here are nothing but a launching pad for two-bit gag lines, and some ho-hum philosophizing. An example of the former: nature-child Leona telling how she would "like to feel up someone's aura." There were plenty more of these tired double entendres.

An example of the latter: the "communion" bit at the end of the play, where the actress chews a cracker, spits it out onto the floor, picks up a piece, and offers it to Theatre Network's Artistic Director Stephen Heatley in the second row of the audience. Heatley eats it.

Obviously there is a heavy message about the meaning of life in this episode. I would guess it is, "Some people will swallow anything."

GB: The play would have been much better at least 10 minutes shorter. The whole clown bit left a lot to be desired, and wasn't that funny. But overall, the play (as un-intellectual and unsophisticated as it was) worked. It was polished, well brought off, and most of the audience seemed to like it (they sure laughed enough). Maybe there comes a time when a person should drop his intellectual saber and just enjoy a work-after all, a butterfly is much more enjoyable alive and fluttery than dead and pinned to some biologist's corkboard.

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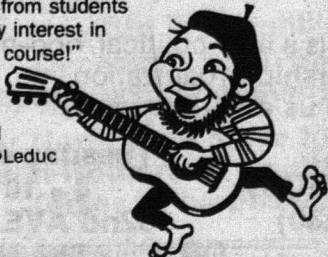
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