



**DREAM PALACE**

# The Seventh Seal

*With a pre-recorded introduction by Mike Williams, Editor Sight & Sound.*

## Seven reasons to celebrate 'The Seventh Seal'

Set in the time of the Black Death, Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* centres on a pensive knight, Antonius Block (Max von Sydow), who returns to Sweden after fighting in the Crusades. Death (Bengt Ekerot) comes to claim him, but Block forestalls his demise by challenging Death to a game of chess – Block wishes to find answers to some of life's big questions and perform at least one meaningful deed before he dies.

Since its release [over] 60 years ago, *The Seventh Seal* has become an acknowledged classic of world cinema. But just why has the film proved so popular?

### 1. Because it's both timely and timeless

When *The Seventh Seal* was released in 1957, the world was still recovering from the Second World War, the Cold War was underway and a well-founded fear of nuclear destruction was spreading far and wide. For contemporary audiences, Bergman's tale of a knight returning from war to face the possibility of society being decimated by the bubonic plague clearly resonated. But by focusing on the wider issues of man's relationships with death, life and God, Bergman was able to transcend simple metaphor and make the film a rich philosophical allegory that remains relevant even today.

### 2. Because, despite being a film about death, it's life-affirming

During his journey through the plague-ravaged land, Block meets a band of travelling players – Skat (Erik Strandmark), Jof (Nils Poppe), Mia (Bibi Andersson) and Mikael (Tommy Karlsson), the infant son of Jof and Mia. Early on, Skat dons a stage mask of Death, but he soon throws it casually aside, for death is not on their minds. In fact, the players represent all that is good in life and, in an idyllic moment, Mia offers Block wild strawberries and milk – a moment that he promises never to forget. It is with Jof, Mia and Mikael that the film ends, proving that the lightness of life will always survive the blackest of days.

### 3. Because it's full of great performances

Throughout much of the 1950s, Bergman served as the director of the Malmö City Theatre, where he established a troupe of actors to work with him across both stage and screen. Those featured in *The Seventh Seal* include Gunnar Björnstrand, Åke Fridell, Gunnel Lindblom, Anders Ek and Bibi Andersson. But it was Max von Sydow, in the leading role, who would rise to international stardom thanks to the success of the film: Hollywood came calling, and some of his most famous roles followed, including Jesus in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), Father Merrin in *The Exorcist* (1973) and Ming the Merciless in *Flash Gordon* (1980).

#### 4. Because it's beautifully shot

While Bergman's later partnership with Sven Nykvist might be more famous today, it was cinematographer Gunnar Fischer who created *The Seventh Seal's* indelible images. Fischer's collaboration with Bergman stretched from 1948's *Port of Call* to 1960's *The Devil's Eye*, and can be identified by the sheer clarity of his highly composed images. Fischer had a unique understanding of lighting and contrast, which he claimed to have learned from the Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer (they collaborated together on 1945's *Two People*). Perhaps the crowning visual achievement of the Bergman-Fischer period, *The Seventh Seal's* stark black-and-white cinematography exemplifies the duo's penchant for expressionist, chiaroscuro lighting – the perfect visual metaphor for a film about the clash between lightness and darkness.

#### 5. Because it's funnier than you might think

Unlike many arthouse directors, Bergman never forgot the need to make his films entertaining. He felt a great responsibility towards his audience, seeing them as the people who were ultimately paying his wages. Somehow, over the years, *The Seventh Seal* has acquired a reputation for being humourlessly bleak, but the truth is quite different, and the weightier scenes are balanced by scenes of comic relief. In fact, even the opening sequence, in which Block first meets Death, is littered with witty one-liners – as Death draws the black set of chess pieces, he quips: 'Appropriate, don't you think?'

#### 6. Because it's genuinely iconic

There are few films that enter the wider public consciousness to the extent that they become identifiable from a few simple signifiers, but *The Seventh Seal's* images of Block playing chess with Death must surely be among the most recognisable in cinema history. In crafting the scene, Bergman drew upon a medieval church mural he saw as a child, in which a man played chess with Death. But even if Bergman wasn't the originator of the concept, it was *The Seventh Seal* that made it iconic – and, like all iconic works, the film has been parodied many times, perhaps most notably in *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* (1991).

#### 7. Because it helped launch the international arthouse film scene

Although films had been travelling overseas since the silent era, the widespread success of *The Seventh Seal*, especially in America, helped usher in a new period of international exposure for arthouse cinema. The film proved that cinema could be a serious means of philosophical expression and, what's more, that such expression could be popular with audiences. Foreign films became a viable enterprise in America and, in 1957, the Academy even introduced an Oscar for best foreign language film (though *The Seventh Seal* wasn't nominated). Bergman's film has since become a staple of arthouse cinema and been admired by directors as diverse as Woody Allen, Eric Rohmer, Martin Scorsese, Guillermo del Toro, Paul Verhoeven and Krzysztof Zanussi.

## **‘The Seventh Seal’: a contemporary review**

*The Seventh Seal* is a revelation, both in its authentic strangeness and in the new light it throws upon its director, Ingmar Bergman. With this extraordinary film one can discard previous reservations – Bergman is a craftsman with a real vision, working within a commercial establishment, for whom filmmaking is and can be nothing less than a personal catharsis.

This is a wholly indigenous film, with something of Stiller’s sophistication and Sjöström’s sense of elemental worship – indigenous, that is, in its style. It is also a mature embodiment of childhood’s nightmare fears, still to be seen in all their perverted horror painted on the walls of those medieval country churches where Bergman’s father once performed funerals and baptisms and preached sermons. It is a period film in the sense that *Ugetsu* is a period film, but not in any way in the manner of Fritz Lang’s *Destiny*, where an almost identical subject was handled with heady, heavy, defeated romanticism. There is no implied retreat or pessimism in Bergman’s choice of subject, even though his main images are familiar from any number of medieval morality plays and Chaucerian comedies. These archetypal symbols have been appropriated to lend the film clarity in its quality of timelessness and also its contemporary relevance. The witch-hunters, the penitents and the pillagers are still among us; we are each of us of their breed, deaf, denying, stifled by insecurity, while a bird hovers and screams its warning above – an omen of the Age of the H-bomb.

Death answers nothing. He remains a dispassionate, cultured, oft-mannered old gentleman, treading softly through a lonely world. Cowled and black-robed, Bengt Ekerot, in perhaps the best performance of a wonderfully well-acted film, makes him a macabre though never bizarre figure. In the film, questions are asked, facts accepted; the innocent and artist (the strolling player) sees visions and the future is his. Bergman answers what he can, though of course there remain mysteries in his film, locked doors over which he keeps jealous watch; and part of the quality of his film lies in what is not explained, in its obscure tensions and unsolved problems.

**Peter John Dyer, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1958**

THE SEVENTH SEAL (DET SJUNDE INSEGLET)

A film by: Ingmar Bergman  
Presented by: Svensk Filmindustri  
Studio Manager: Carl-Henry Cagarp  
Production Manager: Allan Ekelund  
Assistant Director: Lennart Olsson  
Script Girl: Katarina Faragó  
Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman  
Based on the play Trämålning by: Ingmar Bergman  
Director of Photography: Gunnar Fischer  
Assistant Photography: Åke Nilsson  
Stills Photography: Louis Huch  
Editor: Lennart Wallén  
Art Director: P.A. Lundgren  
Costumes: Manne Lindholm  
Make-up: Nils Nittel  
Music: Erik Nordgren  
Music Director: Sixten Ehrling  
Sound: Aaby Wedin  
Assistant Sound: Lennart Wallin  
Special Sound Effects: Evald Andersson

Cast:

Max von Sydow (*Antonius Block, the knight*)  
Inga Landgré (*Karin, the knight's wife*)  
Gunnar Björnstrand (*Jons, the squire*)  
Nils Poppe (*Jof, the jester*)  
Bibi Andersson (*Mia, the jester's wife*)  
Bengt Ekerot (*Death*)  
Åke Fridell (*Plog, the blacksmith*)  
Inga Gill (*Lisa, the blacksmith's wife*)  
Erik Strandmark (*Jonas Skat*)  
Bertil Anderberg (*Raval*)  
Gunnel Lindblom (*mute girl*)  
Maud Hansson (*the witch*)  
Gunnar Olsson (*church painter*)  
Anders Ek (*monk*)  
  
*uncredited*  
Lars Lind (*young man outside church*)  
Bengt-Åke Benktsson (*tavern keeper*)  
Tor Borong (*peasant in tavern*)  
Gudrun Brost (*woman in tavern*)  
Harry Asklund (*merchant in tavern*)  
Ulf Johanson (*leader of the soldiers*)  
Sten Ardenstam, Gordon Löwenadler (*soldiers*)  
Karl Widh (*disabled man*)  
Tommy Karlsson (*Mikael, Jof and Mia's son*)  
Siv Aleros, Bengt Gillberg, Lars Granberg, Gunlög Hagberg,  
Gun Hammargren, Uno Larsson, Lennart Lilja, Monica Lindman,  
Helge Sjökvist, Georg Skarstedt, Ragnar Sörman, Lennart Tollén,  
Caya Wickström (*flagellants*)  
Owe Svensson (*corpse on hillside*)

Sweden 1957  
96 mins

DREAM PALACE

**The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)** + pre-recorded intro by Mike Williams, Editor *Sight & Sound*  
Fri 28 May 20:50; Wed 30 Jun 14:30  
**The General**  
Sat 29 May 12:45  
**Footloose** + pre-recorded intro by Francis Lee  
Sat 29 May 18:00  
**Winner of the Dream Palace Audience Vote: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)**  
Sun 30 May 12:20  
**Broadcast News**  
Sun 30 May 15:40 (+ intro by Sarah Smith); Sat 19 Jun 20:20  
**Beau Travail** + pre-recorded intro by Kirsten Johnson  
Sun 30 May 18:20  
**Car Wash**  
Mon 31 May 18:50  
**Blow Out**  
Tue 1 Jun 20:40  
**Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Bú sànn)**  
Wed 2 Jun 20:50  
**The Shout** + pre-recorded intro by Mark Jenkin  
Thu 3 Jun 18:00  
**The Wonders (Le meraviglie)**  
+ pre-recorded intro by Mark Cousins  
Thu 3 Jun 20:30  
**Magnificent Obsession** + **Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)**  
Sun 6 Jun 18:40  
**Black Narcissus**  
Mon 7 Jun 17:50

**Mirror (Zerkalo)** + pre-recorded intro by Malgorzata Szumowska  
Wed 9 Jun 14:30  
**David Byrne's American Utopia**  
Mon 14 Jun 18:00  
**The Elephant Man** + pre-recorded intro by Prano Bailey-Bond  
Tue 15 Jun 17:45; Sat 19 Jun 12:00  
**Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat)** + pre-recorded intro by Chaitanya Tamhane  
Sat 19 Jun 17:50  
**The Warriors**  
Mon 21 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia); Mon 28 Jun 14:30  
**Beginning** + pre-recorded intro by Luca Guadagnino  
Tue 22 Jun 20:30  
**The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover**  
Thu 24 Jun 20:30  
**The Gleaners & I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse)** + pre-recorded intro by Zhu Shengze  
Fri 26 Jun 14:30

In partnership with:



BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals.  
Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.  
See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)