



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Smiles of a Summer Night (Sommarnattens Leende)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Ingmar Bergman's first international success, this brings together a number of couples, would-be couples and ex-couples for a weekend at a country house in 1900, and observes their deceits, delusions and disappointments as they interact in amorous intrigue. Acerbically witty – especially in debunking the men– yet compassionate, it was much admired by Truffaut, who considered Bergman an exemplary auteur and 'a born moviemaker'.

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By the start of 1955 Ingmar Bergman had been making films for 10 years – scripting some of them, directing others and, increasingly often, directing from his own scripts. He was gaining a reputation in his native Sweden but was as yet relatively little known abroad. Of the 20 films in which he'd been involved, only two – *Waiting Women* and *A Lesson in Love* – could be clearly classified as comedies, and both involved fairly dark elements. No one – and perhaps least of all Bergman himself – would have predicted that his breakthrough film, the one that brought him to international fame and creative independence, would be a romantic period comedy.

All the more surprising, too, that Bergman's most joyous film (although *Smiles*, too, is by no means devoid of darker elements) should have emanated from what, by his own account, was anything but a happy period in his life. His third marriage, to the journalist Gun Grut, had broken down and his passionate liaison with the actress Harriet Andersson ('The first great female influence on Bergman's films,' according to his biographer Peter Cowie) was all but over. His previous film *Dreams/Journey into Autumn* (1954) had flopped at the box office. His finances were sadly depleted and his health was poor; he was suffering from gastric flu and stomach cramps, and believed he might have stomach cancer. 'This was a terrible time in my life and I was extremely depressed,' he recalled. 'I went away to Switzerland and I had two alternatives: to write *Smiles of a Summer Night* or kill myself.'

Luckily, for him and for us, he chose the former. The origin of the story, it seems, was an old script idea he'd abandoned, called 'An Ancient Chinese Proverb', about a young man who falls in love with his father's new wife. The film's mood, though, may have been partly inspired by Bergman's recent hit production of Lehar's *The Merry Widow*, staged in Malmö. Carl-Anders Dymling, head of the production company Svensk Filmindustri, and Bergman's patron from the outset of his career, was persuaded to put up a generous budget, making it Bergman's most expensive production to date – but with the strong hint that, if the film did poorly, it might be the last time the director could look to SF for backing.

The shoot lasted 55 days, during an unprecedented heatwave in southern Sweden. Exteriors were shot around Jordberga Castle, some 25km southeast of Malmö. The heat, especially in the studio interiors, did nothing to improve Bergman's state of health, nor his notoriously volatile temper. 'I was sick

during the entire shooting and was apparently in a rotten mood,' he recalled years later in *Images: My Life in Films*. A further source of anxiety was his knowledge that Ulla Jacobsson, playing a virgin teenage bride, was pregnant when the shoot started and her costumes had to be specially designed to conceal her condition. Also in the cast was his former lover, Harriet Andersson and – in a tiny role – her successor and namesake (but no relation) Bibi Andersson, with whom Bergman had just embarked on what was destined to be a long-running liaison.

None of these potential sources of tension, though, leave any trace on the finished film, an exquisitely poised, witty comedy whose elegance doesn't exclude moments of near-farce, and whose celebration of erotic joy still finds room for passages of humiliation, bitterness and suicidal despair. The plot, crafted within the conventions of a sexual round dance, involves four couples and their shifting attractions one towards another; any weakness in the performances could have caused the whole structure to lurch lopsidedly. But casting was always one of Bergman's greatest strengths, and here he was ideally served.

Central to the action were Gunnar Björnstrand, as the buttoned-up but cynical lawyer Fredrik Egerman, and Eva Dahlbeck as the actress (and Egerman's erstwhile lover) Desirée Armfeldt.. To back them up he had Harriet Andersson as the flirt housemaid Petra; Jarl Kulle as arrogant Count Carl-Magnus, Desirée's current lover; Margit Carlqvist as Magnus's neglected wife Charlotte; Ulla Jacobsson as Egerman's virginal second wife Anne; Björn Bjelfvenstam as his anguished, would-be-pious son Henrik; Åke Fridell as the tubby groom Frid, cheerfully lusting after Petra; and Naima Wifstrand as Desirée's mother Mme Armfeldt, châtelaine of the country mansion where they all assemble to play out the intricate patterns of their relationships. With the exception of Jacobsson all of them had previously worked with Bergman, and the whole cast fitted their roles to perfection.

Bergman's script, shrewdly stylised to suit the period of the film (the turn of the 20th century), is often openly theatrical and epigrammatic. 'Beware of good deeds,' warns former courtesan Mme Armfeldt, a venerable relic of bygone loves. 'They cost far too much and leave a nasty smell.' At one point Desirée asks her mother, 'Why don't you write your memoirs?' 'My dear daughter,' responds the old lady, 'I was given this estate for promising not to write my memoirs.' Parallels are hinted with Mozartian opera, especially *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Magic Flute* (which Bergman would later film in 1974), and with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There's also a precedent in classic Swedish cinema with Mauritz Stiller's subversive, sexually charged comedy *Erotikon* (1920), a way-ahead-of-its-time movie that similarly enjoys teasing us with attractions that flirtatiously fluctuate and shift between characters.

Yet the film is still very much Bergman's in its skilful juxtaposition of contrasting moods and events: most notably in the scene of Henrik's attempted suicide, which moves in a matter of seconds from incipient tragedy through farce into erotic joy. There are moments of sheer venom, as when Charlotte, visiting Anne, is spurred into a bitter denunciation not only of her own faithless husband but of the entire male sex: 'I hate him! I hate him! Men are beastly! They are vain and conceited and they have hair all over their bodies...! Love is a loathsome business!' The tirade is all the more powerful for being delivered straight to camera. Equally heartfelt, though despairing, is

Henrik's soliloquy shortly before he attempts suicide: 'Oh Lord, if your world is full of sin then I want to sin... Take my wretched virtue from me.'

Bergman uses his intricate plot to explore diverse attitudes towards love and sexuality, using each character, each pairing, to comment on and illuminate the others. In their direct, earthy pleasures the servants Petra and Frid expose the hollow pretensions of their supposed betters, yet they sense their own limitations beside the starry idealism of the young lovers Henrik and Anne. Fredrik Egerman's frustrated desire for his virgin wife, weakened by the feline seductions of Countess Charlotte, finally crumbles before the sardonic maturity embodied in his ex-mistress Desirée. Yet even Fredrik, a repeatedly humiliated figure, evinces in his perplexed strivings a humanity lacking in the poised and coldly brutal Count Malcolm. As so often in Bergman's films, the women come out of the whole affair distinctly better than the men.

Death, so frequent an obsession in Bergman's films, is for once mostly absent, though the director can't resist including him as the last of the carved wooden figures that emerge from the old-fashioned clock as it strikes the hour of three. But finally, after the brief Nordic midsummer night has smiled three times, it's left to Frid, fresh from his bout of love in the hay with Petra, to strike the final joyously positive note. It's a note that's already been anticipated more than once: when Anne – having quizzed Petra about her extensive sexual experiences – concludes, 'Nearly everything that is fun is not virtuous,' the maid blithely retorts 'If so, hurrah for vice!'; and when after dinner Desirée regales the company with Johann Strauss's *Freut euch des Lebens* (*Rejoice in Life*). And so now as Frid, beaming, raises his arms in a gesture of benediction and greets the rising sun with, 'There is no better life than this!' Bergman for perhaps the first time in his output achieves the ideal balance between emotional involvement and ironic detachment.

In her 1962 account of Bergman's films, critic Marianne Höök noted how 'in its enormous whiteness, *Smiles of a Summer Night* possesses all the nuances of a colour movie and a joy in the rendering of the material which is seldom found in film but often in painting'. This 'enormous whiteness' and the film's overall visual elegance can be credited to Gunnar Fischer, cinematographer on all Bergman's strongest films of this period. Coupled with his sinuously smooth camera technique, the enchantment of his lighting is seen at its finest in the crucial dinner-party sequence, with Mme Armfeldt and her table guests captured in a shimmering pool of light within the shaded subfusc surrounding them where the servants hover discreetly in attendance.

Svensk, evidently pleased with the fruits of their investment, entered *Smiles* in competition at Cannes, where it won the prize for Best Poetic Humour and Bergman was nominated for the Palme d'Or. According to Bergman's own account, he had no idea his film had been entered for the Festival until, sitting on the toilet one day, he read in his paper 'Swedish Success at Cannes' and discovered what had happened. He immediately borrowed the money for an air fare and, arriving at Cannes, confronted Dymling to insist that SF finance *The Seventh Seal*, about which the company had previously expressed reservations; with that film his international reputation was secured. 'Ever since the success of *Smiles of a Summer Night*,' Bergman later wrote, 'nobody has interfered with my work. I have been able to do as I wished.'

Philip Kemp, extract from BFI 5-Disc Blu-ray Box Set *Ingmar Bergman Vol.2* booklet

SMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT (SOMMARNATTENS LEENDE)

Director: Ingmar Bergman

Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri

Unit Production Manager: Gustav Roger

Unit Manager: Ove Kant

Production Manager: Allan Ekelund

Assistant Director: Lennart Olsson

Script Supervisor: Katherina Faragó

Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman

Director of Photography: Gunnar Fischer

B-Camera: Åke Nilsson *

Editor: Oscar Rosander

Art Director: P.A. Lundgren

Costumes: Mago

Music: Erik Nordgren

Music Director: E. Eckert-lundin

Sound Recording: P.O. Pettersson

B-Sound: Lennart Wallin *

Cast

Gunnar Björnstrand (*Fredrik Egerman*)

Ulla Jacobsson (*Anne Egerman*)

Björn Bjelfvenstam (*Henrik Egerman*)

Eva Dahlbeck (*Desirée Armfeldt*)

Naima Wifstrand (*Madame Armfeldt*)

Jarl Kulle (*Count Carl Magnus Malcolm*)

Margit Carlquist (*Charlotte Malcolm*)

Åke Fridell (*Frid, the coachman*)

Harriet Andersson (*Petra*)

Jullan Kindahl (*Beata, the cook*)

Gull Natorp (*Malla, Desirée's maid*)

Gunnar Nielsen (*Niklas*)

Bibi Andersson, Birgitta Valberg (*actresses*)

Gösta Prüzelius (*footman*)

Svea Holst (*maid*)

Mona Malm, Lena Söderblom (*chambermaids*)

Josef Norman (*guest at Madame Armfeldt*)

Yngve Nordwall (*Ferdinand*)

Hans Strååt (*Adolf Almgren, the photographer*)

Lisa Lundholm (*Mrs Almgren*)

Börje Mellvig (*notary*)

David Erikson (*tobacconist*)

Arne Lindblad (*actor*)

uncredited

Sten Gester, Mille Schmidt (*servants*)

John Melin (*butler at Madame Armfeldt*)

Ulf Johanson (*man at lawyer's office*)

Anders Wulff (*Fredrik, Desirée's son*)

Viveca Heister

Birgitta Hellerstedt

Einar Söderbäck

Sweden 1955

109 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**Smiles of a Summer Night**

Sun 9 Jan 16:00, Thu 20 Jan 20:50, Tue 25 Jan 18:10

Bigger Than Life

Mon 10 Jan 14:30, Wed 19 Jan 18:05 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large), Wed 26 Jan 20:50

La Grande Illusion

Tue 11 Jan 18:15, Sun 16 Jan 12:40

Citizen Kane

Tue 11 Jan 17:50, Thu 27 Jan 18:00

Casque d'or

Wed 12 Jan 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic and historian Pamela Hutchinson), Sun 23 Jan 13:10

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Sat Thu 13 Jan 18:10, Mon 17 Jan 18:20

Twelve Angry Men

Fri 14 Jan 14:40, Mon 24 Jan 18:20, Fri 28 Jan 18:20

Letter from an Unknown Woman

Sat 15 Jan 15:40, Mon 31 Jan 20:45

Ordet (The Word)

Tue 18 Jan 20:30

Shadow of a Doubt

Sat 22 Jan 12:10, Tue 25 Jan 14:30

Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta)

Wed 26 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by lecturer and writer Dr Julia Wagner), Sat 29 Jan 13:00

Les Enfants terribles

Sun 30 Jan 15:15

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