



LIV ULLMANN: FACE TO FACE

The Emigrants **(Utvandrarna)**

+ pre-recorded intro by Sarah Lutton, season programmer

Lots of films purport to show us what the past was like. Jan Troell's magnum opus invites us to live there, so all-encompassing is its investment in the lives of its brave souls, who leave 1840s Sweden to make a fresh start in Minnesota's wide-open territory.

Around a fifth of Sweden's entire population emigrated to North America in the second half of the 19th century, and this exodus became a significant element in the national psyche. It was Vilhelm Moberg's four-novel saga *The Emigrants*, published between 1949-59, that subsequently delivered the definitive account of this migratory odyssey and was read by almost the entire nation, inevitably prompting much talk of a film adaptation.

Not, however, from the famously outspoken Moberg himself, who was having none of it, until he saw Troell's extraordinary debut feature *Here Is Your Life*, a 168-minute coming-of-age story set in the first quarter of the 20th century, drawn from the writings of Nobel laureate Eyvind Johnson. Here, obviously, was just the man for the job, and soon producer Svensk Filmindustri, known to international viewers for Ingmar Bergman's prolific output, was embarking on the most expensive project in its history. With an expectant nation filled with anticipation, producers worrying about the budget and a revered author with ideas of his own, one can only imagine the pressure on the thirtysomething filmmaker, who after breaking down the four books into two features, *The Emigrants* and *The New Land*, set out on a yearlong shoot. It helped, though, that Moberg, with his journalist's eye for credible detail, had not only created indelible characters in the central couple – pragmatic, ambitious farmer Karl-Oskar and his loving, God-fearing spouse Kristina – but had also laid out a narrative with a strong through-line from barren rural Sweden to the privations of a long sea journey and further unexpected challenges in seemingly idyllic Minnesota.

Troell then allows us to experience all of this in a manner that seems unencumbered by the familiar button-pushing mechanics of celluloid story-spinning, registering instead a direct, almost unfiltered response to the events shaping these lives – work, hardship, the land, faith, birth, self-respect, companionship and mortality. Much of this is due to his specific working methods, as he was also his own cinematographer and camera operator, trusting in his superb cast – Liv Ullmann regards this as the pinnacle of her career, Bergman notwithstanding – to find their own emotional reality in the moment, and backing himself to be there with his camera to capture it.

In an engaging interview, Ullmann says it was like working with a dancer, so mercurial was Troell's response to each take; and the fact that they were never sure exactly what he was shooting kept the performers alert through every scene. Whether it's the sheer toil of digging boulders out of the ground or guiding a recalcitrant ox through a windy forest path, the kinetic elation of a simple backyard swing, the whys and wherefores of building a log cabin or

the sunlight falling on the couple's blond-haired young family, Troell's camera is simply alive to everything, sometimes peering over shoulders, sometimes still to reflect the power of these remote landscapes on either side of the Atlantic.

The handheld work might remind some viewers of the way the early Dogme films caused a stir merely by reminding us of the very essentials of cinema, yet with Troell there's none of the associated self-conscious theorising. He simply gets on with it – if he needs a long-held static shot he'll lock it down, and even shoot the bustle of crowd scenes with two or three cameras if required. It's a style that's undeniably spontaneous and arguably more immediately expressive than the formal modesty of an Ermanno Olmi or Ken Loach, though at the same time very much in service of the material, never aiming for the painterly effect of the exquisitely mounted tableaux of, say, Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*.

It would be wrong, though, to suggest that Troell's method was simply to record, however sensitively, what was happening in front of him, since that would be to lose sight of the values shaping his formal choices. For a project that started production in 1969, and was released in Sweden in two parts across 1971 and 1972, its ethos is leftwards-leaning but more humanist than anything else, above all offering its characters the dignity of their own beliefs, whether reactionary or progressive. Certainly, the hierarchical oppression of the Swedish society the emigrants leave behind is revealed by the peasants having to learn by heart the seven layers of authority above them, from monarch down to local landowner.

However, for a film that decries the oppression enforced by the Swedish church, it's also largely respectful towards individual faith, with Ullmann's steadfast Christianity contrasting strongly with husband Max Von Sydow's equally resilient sense of agnostic self-determination. At some distance from the sort of roles they played for Bergman, here they create one of cinema's most affecting portraits of a marriage, a union built to last because passing differences matter less than a deep, underlying friendship.

This emotional intimacy is not only a tribute to both actors' ability to inhabit the lives of 19th-century farming folk, it also highlights Troell's strengths as his own editor – ready to stay on a shot that bit longer if a performer is truly in the zone, yet prepared to cut briskly away from the most heated dramatic moments in a way that increases their momentary potency. Only Steven Soderbergh in recent years has put on such a multi-hyphenate display, though the gentle 84-year-old Troell remains the soul of modesty.

His films, then, must speak for themselves, and they do so to allow audiences outside Sweden to luxuriate in their full majesty. Those coming to them for the first time will surely feel, like the settlers on screen, the frisson of discovering a far-off and wholly captivating new landscape.

Trevor Johnston, *Sight & Sound*, November 2016

THE EMIGRANTS (UTVANDRARNA)

Director: Jan Troell
Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri
Producer: Bengt Forslund
Production Manager: Curt L. Malmsten
Screenplay: Jan Troell, Bengt Forslund
From a novel by: Vilhelm Moberg
Photography: Jan Troell
Editor: Jan Troell
Art Director: P.A. Lundgren
Costumes: Ulla-Britt Söderlund
Music: Erik Nordgren
Sound Recording: Sten Norlén, Eddie Axberg
Sound Re-recording: Berndt Frithiof

Cast

Max von Sydow (Karl Oskar Nilsson)
Liv Ullmann (Kristina)
Eddie Axberg (Robert)
Svenolof Bern (Nils)
Aina Alfredsson (Märta)
Allan Edwall (Danjel)
Monica Zetterlund (Ulrika)
Pierre Lindstedt (Arvid)
Hans Alfredson (Jonas Petter)
Ulla Smidje (Danjel’s wife)
Eva-Lena Zetterlund (Ulrika’s daughter)
Gustaf Färingborg (Vicar Brunsander)
Åke Fridell (Aron)
Agneta Prytz (Fina Kajsa)
Halvar Björk (Anders)
Arnold Alfredsson (church warden)
Bror Englund (Mans Jakob)
Tom C. Fouts (Pastor Jackson)
Peter Høimark (2nd mate)
Erik Johansson (Captain Lorentz)
Staffan Liljander (Landberg)
Göran Lundin (1st mate)
Ditte Martinsson, Lasse Martinsson, Pelle Martinsson,
Annika Nyhammar, Yvonne Oppstedt, Linn Ullmann (children)

Sweden 1971
191 mins + intermission

LIV ULLMANN: FACE TO FACE

The Emigrants (Utvandrarna)

Sat 16 Apr 14:10 (+ intro by Sarah Lutton, season programmer); Sun 24 Apr 13:45

The New Land (Nybyggarna)

Sat 16 Apr 18:50; Sat 30 Apr 12:40

Face to Face (Ansikte mot ansikte)

Sun 17 Apr 14:15 + intro by Sarah Lutton, season programmer

Persona

Sun 17 Apr 18:40; Mon 25 Apr 20:50

Autumn Sonata (Höstsonaten)

Mon 18 Apr 18:20; Tue 26 Apr 18:10 (+ extended intro by Melanie Iredale, Director, Birds’ Eye View)

Saraband

Tue 19 Apr 18:20; Sat 30 Apr 20:50

An-Magritt

Wed 20 Apr 18:20

The Wayward Girl (Ung flukt)

Thu 21 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by Anna Smith, film critic and broadcaster)

The Passion of Anna (En passion)

Sat 23 Apr 14:20

Faithless (Trolösa)

Sat 23 Apr 16:40 (+ intro by Nellie Alston, freelance programmer and member of T A P E Collective); Wed 27 Apr 20:00

Miss Julie

Sun 24 Apr 17:50; Fri 29 Apr 20:20 (+ intro by Elaine Wong, short film programmer, BFI London Film Festival)

Shame (Skammen)

Wed 27 Apr 18:00

Scenes from a Marriage (Scener ur ett äktenskap)

Sat 30 Apr 17:15

In cultural 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://www.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

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.