

Fanny and Alexander, 1982



“It’s all acting anyway... One role follows the other. The thing is not to shrink from them.”

Credits

Director and Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman

Cinematography: Sven Nykvist

Costumes: Kristina Makroff, Marik Vos

Cast: Gunn Wållgren (Helena Ekdahl), Allan Edwall (Oscar Ekdahl), Ewa Fröling (Emilie Ekdahl), Pernilla Allwin (Fanny), Bertil Guve (Alexander), Börje Ahlstedt (Carl), Christina Schollin (Lydia), Jarl Kulle (Gustaf Adolf), Pernilla Wahlgren August (Maj), Mona Malm (Alma), Käbi Laretei (Aunt Anna), Jan Malsmsjö (Bishop Edvard Vergerus), Harriet Andersson (Justina), Erland Josephson (Isak Jacobi), Mats Bergman (Aron), Stina Ekblad (Ismael), Gunnar Björnstrand (Philip Landahl), Anna Bergman (Hanna), Lena Olin (Rosa)

Production Background

Bergman’s last feature film was also his longest and most extravagant, requiring international funding to supplement the Svenskfilmindustri production. The director shot a five-hour version (the rendition he regarded as definitive) for Swedish television that was shown in 1983. Bergman returned to Stockholm following five years of self-imposed exile in Munich after the Swedish authorities exonerated him of all charges of tax evasion that had culminated in his humiliating arrest inside the national theater as he was directing a play. He announced in advance that this would be his final film, citing his age and the exhausting work of making movies. “*Fanny and Alexander* is the sum total of my life as a filmmaker,” Bergman said at the time. But in fact, he went on to write several screenplays that were directed by other people (including Liv Ullmann), directed a second documentary film about Farö and other shorter films for television, including the much-admired *Saraband* (2003), starring Ullmann and Erland Josephson, reprising their roles from *Scenes from a Marriage*.

Although the work was indeed taxing, overseeing a cast of eighty actors, shooting over a long schedule in three different locations, Bergman remained in high spirits throughout the production. He was delighted to be back home: speaking his own language on the set (and finally widely accepted as a

national treasure), surrounded by his professional friends and family (including two ex-wives and two children in the cast), happily married for more than a decade (to Ingrid von Rosen, who served as a credited administrator on the film), and relatively free of the personal anxieties that had plagued him since his youth. The images remain—Alexander’s rebellious expression, the malevolent pastor, the specter of death and the presence of ghosts, the unhappy marriages—but they are balanced within a celebratory, beautiful, and magical framework where “*everything is possible.*” Like Oscar Ekdahl, Bergman loves “this little world.”

Fanny and Alexander proved to be a financial and artistic success, winning four Academy awards.

Cinematic Techniques

After an experimental period that began with *Persona*, Bergman has returned to a “classical” style, which includes a chronological narrative, high production values signified by the elaborately detailed costumes and sets, an emphasis on mise-en-scène rather than editing, and narrative closure. *Fanny and Alexander* remains an “art film” largely by virtue of its *auteur* and its foreign language.

1. Camera movement: Bergman employs a fluid camera within the Ekdahl home, following the festive activity and dramatizing certain moments. Note, for example, the beautiful tracking shot backwards as Oscar reads the Bible during the first gathering and the panning shot around the enormous table in the finale. The camera remains static when the scene switches to the pastor’s residence in the second half.
2. Costumes and Mise-en-scène: With a relatively exorbitant production budget, the film is immeasurably enhanced by the detailed period settings and costumes. Bergman emphasizes the contrasts among the four settings—the Ekdahls’ home and summer chalet, Pastor Vegéus’ dungeon-like residence, and Isak’s bizarre shop—through expressive production design. The color scheme shifts from the burnished splendor of the Ekdahl mansion to the implacable gray stone of Bishop Végerus’ apartment.

Questions for Discussion

1. Elaborate on Bergman’s description of this film as a summation of his career. What images, characters, and themes have recurrently (obsessively?) appeared in his earlier work? Is there any development in the director’s treatment of these auteurist elements?
2. The role of Ismael is played by a woman and the role of the pastor’s mother is played by a man. What purpose does this androgynous casting serve?
3. Which character represents the moral center of the film?
4. How does Gustaf Adolph’s stirring speech in the finale about “the little world” serve as a commentary on Bergman’s aesthetic philosophy?
5. The epilogue depicts Helena reading from Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*, published in 1901 and directed on stage by Bergman at least four times. How does this passage also resonate with both the narrative of *Fanny and Alexander* and Bergman’s understanding of his own art?