

Wild Strawberries / Smultronstället, 1957

“Where is the Friend I seek where'er I'm going?”

Johan Olof Wallin, 1819 hymn

Major Credits:

Director and Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman

Cinematographer: Gunnar Fischer

Music: Erik Nordgren

Cast: Victor Sjöström (Isak Borg), Bibi Andersson (Sara), Ingrid Thulin (Marianne), Gunnar Björnstrand (Evald), Naima Wifstrand (Isak's mother), Jullan Kindahl (Agda), Gunnar Sjöberg (Alman), Gunnel Broström (Berit), Gertrude Fridh (Karin, Isak's wife), Åke Fridell (Karin's lover), Max von Sydow (Åkerman, gas station owner)

Production Background:

Wild Strawberries was created during a particularly busy and stressful time in Bergman's life. In addition to directing plays at the state theater in Malmö, he was still brooding over the collapse of his third marriage (to Gun Grut), the recent breakup with Bibi Andersson, and his ongoing estrangement from his parents. And yet, the film was produced during the same year as another of his masterpieces, *The Seventh Seal!* Bergman wrote the script while he was hospitalized for nearly two months for a psychosomatic illness, ostensibly an ulcer. He consciously gave the protagonist, Isak Borg, his own initials but created him in the image of his father, Erik Bergman. Years later, he came to see the film as truly belonging to Victor Sjöström, the 77 year old patriarch of Swedish cinema and young Bergman's mentor at Svensk Filmindustri. Like the wagon that transports the desperate troupe through the storm in *The Seventh Seal*, the hearse that appears in Isak's dream at the beginning of the film is an homage to Sjöström's silent classic, *The Phantom Chariot* (1921), which Bergman has described as “the most remarkable film” he has ever seen.

Sjöström was ailing and cranky throughout the production, often missing his lines and complaining about the lateness of the hour. Bergman had a secret pact with Ingrid Thulin so that whenever the old actor flubbed a scene, the director would blame Ingrid. But Sjöström could also be charming on the set, particularly when in the company of Bibi Andersson. Bergman had worked with nearly all the cast before (including Sjöström, who had played a role in *To Joy*, 1949), many of whom—Andersson, von Sydow, Björnstrand, Thulin—continued to thrive under his direction. Here he cast his first daughter as one of the twins; his first wife also appears as part of the boating party glimpsed on the pier.

Wild Strawberries was another smashing success, winning the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and capturing critical praise throughout Europe and America. For international cineastes, 1957 marked the beginning of the Bergman Years.

Cinematic Qualities

1. Cinematography: Bergman and DP Gunnar Fischer chose a fast film stock for the dream sequences (especially noticeable in the first one) to create harsh contrasts and a form of abstraction associated with the 1920s style of German Expressionism. Contrast this nightmarish effect with the use of slow stock to produce a softer, more nuanced gray scale in the final vision Isak dreams at the end of the film. Both dreams are haunting, but for very different reasons.
2. Close-ups: Sjöström was an experienced actor (44 credits, as opposed to 55 as a director), and Bergman relied on his expressive face to convey the back story the old doctor had been repressing in his public life. The greatest of these close-ups—and, indeed, the very last image of Sjöström on screen—occurs at the end, the slightly low angle shot of Isak gazing out at his parents fishing on the rocks. “A moment of grace,” Bergman called it, and an unforgettable instance of film art.
3. Music: Unlike the somewhat garish, theatrical musical effects in *The Seventh Seal*, Erik Nordgren’s music here is subtle, almost subliminal in its effects. Note, for example, the six ascending harp chords that accompany the final close-up of Isak.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the film’s ultimate assessment of Isak Borg? Is he the arrogant, cold-hearted fraud seen in the mirror Sara holds up to him? Is he, as Alman accuses him, a doctor who has forgotten his first duty and is “guilty of guilt”? Or does he deserve the affection young Sara and Marianne bestow upon him at the ceremony in Lund?
2. Like *The Seventh Seal* and the forthcoming *The Magician*, *Wild Strawberries* can be accurately described as a *road trip*. What are the conventions of this movie genre? How is Isak transformed by his long day’s journey into the past?
3. Bibi Andersson plays two roles in this film; both Sara’s appear at first to be readily recognizable characters, and it is easy to miss how they subtly change due to their contact with Isak. Trace the development of both characters to suggest how they define a shift in comprehending the protagonist.
4. In later years, Bergman would be acknowledged as a great director of women (see *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers*, for examples). Here, Ingrid Thulin’s portrayal of Marianne is crucial to understanding Isak. Although she is neither the film’s “star” nor the “leading lady,” her performance plays a crucial part in affecting the audience’s regard for Borg. How does she become a credible purveyor of her father-in-law’s character? Compared to the more allegorical figures that interact with the protagonist, what human qualities does Thulin bring to the role?