

THE PASSION OF ANNA (EN PASSION). Dir. Ingmar Bergman. Sweden, 1969. 101 mins.

The commercial trailer shows a series of haunting images and poses a single question: “Has Ingmar Bergman made a picture about his cast, or has his cast made a picture about Ingmar Bergman?” One would have to answer that the rhetorical chiasmus creates a false dichotomy. Bergman is totally in control: we hear his voice-over narrative at key points and his off-camera questions to each of the four principal actors. At the same time, he is telling a story very close to his own. Only a few months earlier, he had lived on the island where his point-of-view character lives (the tiny Baltic Sea island of Faroë) and had lived with the actress who plays the actor’s lover. His background story left room for the cast to improvise at key moments, notably at their one dinner together. The result is the free-flowing, slice-of-life movie released as *A Passion* in England and as *The Passion of Anna* in the U.S.

The word *passion* has a double meaning: it refers to deep emotion or a source of emotion, but also to great suffering, originally that of Jesus on the cross. All of those meanings are operative here, especially for the religious Anna (Liv Ullmann). She may suffer the most, physically and mentally, but the suffering extends to her lover Andreas (Max von Sydow) and indeed to the people and animals on their island. Anna and Andreas meet at the home of her old friends Eva and Ellis (Bibbi Andersson and Erland Josephson). Both Anna and Andreas are unattached – she widowed, he separated from his wife – but they seem incapable of real attachment. He seems unable to open up, and she unable to accept the truth that she says is so important. They become romantically involved in events off screen to which the unhappy and unstable Eva is perhaps the best guide. They carry the baggage of past events, the exact content of which never becomes clear. They are haunted by dreams and daydreams, Anna’s in black and white, which they are also unwilling or unable to share. Finally, they are both caught up in events on the little island, where someone is committing atrocious acts of animal cruelty. We never learn who is to blame for the acts themselves, but we can see how they mirror the inner turmoil in the protagonists, much as the war atrocities in Bergman’s *Shame* and the horror scenes in *The Hour of the Wolf* invoke inner realities.

As a director, Bergman was famous for giving his actors the freedom to create their characters. His main Swedish actors were fiercely loyal to him and therefore worked together in one film after another. Ullmann played opposite von Sydow in *Shame* and *The Hour of the Wolf* (both 1968). Josephson acted with them in the latter film, and Andersson with Ullmann in *Persona* (1966), a pivotal film that questions where one person’s identity leaves off and another’s begins. Bergmann also used the same cinematographer, the late and great Sven Nyquist, whose lingering close-ups do much to create the film’s sense of intimacy.

Audiences have been frustrated by the plot’s indeterminacy, which made *The Passion of Anna* a post-modern film before its time. The main question that audiences have debated is the old red herring of creative writing classes: should a story with an incoherent plot be considered excellent because real life is incoherent? One has to fall back on the stock response: it can be tolerated if the characterization is brilliant. Even if the characters’ stories are imperfect, without clear beginnings or endings, few filmgoers would say that the film lacks psychological tension and insight. When the image of the indecisive Andreas dissolves in the film’s final moment, we have to think that his character has dissolved in the process.

Perhaps the answer to the movie trailer’s question (who is telling whose story?) came in *Faithless* (2000), a film directed by Liv Ullmann and starring Erland Josephson as Bergman in Bergman’s own story of literary ghosts.

Tom Willard, Department of English