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Here's Looking at You, Kid

INGRID
BERGMAN
AT 100

Summer 2015





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Here's Looking at You, Kid

30 SCANDINAVIAN REVIEW

*Another look at the luminous Swede,
one of the finest stage and screen
actors of the mid-20th century.*

By Donald Dewey

**This is where Humphrey Bogart delivers the classic line
to Ingrid Bergman in Casablanca (1942).**

GRANGER

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Ingrid Bergman at 26

WHAT IS THERE LEFT TO SAY ABOUT INGRID BERGMAN? Journalists and biographers and film historians have been dipping into Bergman's life (1915–1982) so relentlessly for so long that it is easy to forget that it wasn't always in the public domain. The woman's career, off and on screen, started being dissected so minutely so many decades ago that just about the only survivors from all those labors are her children and a handful of actors from the already-41-year-old *Murder on the Orient Express*. In short, and though many of us are loath to admit it, the world of Ingrid Bergman seems to have warp-spaced away from us to distances we might not have thought possible. It may not be as remote as Planet Garbo, but it is still out there, back in that century they used to call the 20th with an air of self-satisfaction making it sound like the tiniest of steps before infinity. ("My God, man, it's the 20th century!") There is, of course, the record of her many performances—filmed, kinescoped, taped, digitized, hologrammed, whatever technical development preserves them next. That, as we are told repeatedly, guarantees demi-infinity. And with her on that record is just about every leading man who ever mattered—Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant, Spencer Tracy, Gary Cooper, Gregory Peck, Charles Boyer, Bing Crosby, Yul Brynner, Anthony Quinn, etc. And let's not forget those other records in the Congress of the United States that have conserved for posterity the clowns who decided that Bergman running off with Italian director Roberto Rossellini struck a grave blow to the moral fiber of right-thinking Americans. It requires only a slight effort to look up their names so they too can remain as famously attached to Bergman as Bogart and Grant have been. Not up to it? Couldn't agree with you more.

So what is it we don't know yet about Bergman that we might want to know? Was she an elusive, even frosty presence to those closest to her? Did she go about her craft using any specific technical methods or was she

Ingrid Bergman with Roberto Rossellini and their children, Robertino, Isabella and Ingrid.



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one of those purely instinctive (and nonexistent) actors blessed by Nature? Whom did she despise beneath all those smiles? How seriously did she take her status as a Hollywood “star?” How come she tired of the neo-realistic films of Rossellini and ended up back in California? What would answers to these questions reveal about her that we don’t already know? Whatever they are, you can be sure, they would be more part of an argument with already published materials than they would generate epiphanies. This one thinks that, that one was told this, the third one was shown some old letters that confirmed that both this one and that one were right and wrong, leaving it up to some Hollywood sage on *Entertainment Tonight* to sum it all up as “And isn’t that always the way?” Why waste time? If there is anything left unsaid about Bergman, it has nothing to do with the real Bergman. What it has to do with is how we have taken in what she gave us over the years, and unless that included barhopping with her one memorable night in Bomoko, that means how her film and TV appearances struck us individually. And in case you never noticed, there were some curious patterns in her work, both as regards the characters she played and the performers with whom she played them. For instance:

1. An attraction to psychopaths. Bergman consolidated international fame when she moved from Sweden to Hollywood in 1939 for an English-language version of her role in *Intermezzo*, in which she played the protégé of a self-absorbed violinist (Leslie Howard) who had to be watched carefully whenever he had the bow in his hand. Soon afterward, she fell within the orbit of a murderous mill owner (Robert Montgomery) in *Rage in Heaven* and then topped that by walking into the wrong laboratory at the wrong moment to find *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Tracy). That took some getting over until she married Charles Boyer in *Gaslight*. If she had an excuse for that choice, it was that the Boyer character was at least as driven by greed as by unsociable voices in his head, making him relatively humane in the Bergman cosmos. Flash forward to the 1960s and *Aimez-Vous Brahms?* (*Goodbye Again*). Granted the Anthony Perkins character she snuggled up to was only in mild twitchy Norman Bates form and that his Yves Montand competition was hardly a model for touchy-feely attitudes, but which one would have been more likely to creep down to the kitchen after midnight to go digging in the cutlery drawer?

2. Her women had a penchant for going to bed with men she had been forced to settle for. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the two pictures that captured her at her most beautiful and that marked the height of her stay in Hollywood—*Casablanca* and *Notorious*. In *Casablanca* Paul Henreid’s Resistance leader is all very heroic and vital to the Underground, but can we



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Top: Leslie Howard and Ingrid Bergman in *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939), directed by Gregory Ratoff.

Bottom: Charles Boyer and Bergman in *Gaslight* (1944), directed by George Cukor.



Ingrid Bergman in *Joan of Arc* (1948) with José Ferrer and directed by Victor Fleming.

forget for a second that, whatever the plot has to say about who met whom first, he is very much a rebound choice? *Notorious* is far more explicit on this plot point; in fact, it is the plot. Nobody in the history of acting had a talent for purring dialogue more than Claude Rains did, but how long could that prove sensual when the bastard pushing her into the relationship (Cary Grant) with him was more her style, whether or not he was helping her be poisoned to death? In terms of anything for love, Bergman's character in this



LEFT AND RIGHT: RKO RADIO PICTURES / PHOTOFEST © RKO RADIO PICTURES

Ingrid Bergman in Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), starring opposite Cary Grant.

Alfred Hitchcock picture was open to far more sacrifice than Bogart's at the end of *Casablanca*. And what were the marriage arrangements making her character get together with the antipathetic Joseph Cotten in *Under Capricorn* and the intensely dull Fritz Weaver in *A Walk in the Spring Rain*? What weighty dowries had made those weddings tolerable? The inevitable intrusion of a second man (as with Cotten in *Gaslight*) might have suggested adultery on the screen, but it mainly signaled relief in the orchestra.

It helped . . . that one of those virgins was a Catholic nun sharing the screen with Crosby.

3. She was so adept at playing virgins that, though they made up a very minor percentage of her portrayals, they stuck to her public image as if Americans had a dire need to believe that all Swedes weren't conceived during an orgy. (This was comparable to the fact that Marcello Mastroianni played a Latin Lover maybe five times in the 140-odd films he made but, at least for talk show hosts and the Page Sixes of the world, never managed to shake that persona.) It helped, of course, that one of those virgins was a Catholic nun sharing the screen with Crosby in *The Bells of Saint Mary's* and that they shared an innocent rooting interest in the St. Louis Browns. In *Joan of Arc* she didn't even need the distraction of an extinct baseball team, there being voices in the sky rather than in the heads of her men friends. In *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* she was too busy whistling and hoofing it over mountains with an army of Chinese children to escape the Japanese to worry about any voices at all. As in *The Bells of Saint Mary's* and *Joan of Arc*, and later on in *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Golda*, a crucial key to her character in *Happiness* was sensible shoes.

4. She had a taste for vengeance. Her most histrionic moment on the screen was probably when she was contemplating getting even with Boyer in *Gaslight*, but she played many other characters who could never forgive wounds. In *Saratoga Trunk* she lived only to settle the score with a proper white family that had destroyed her Creole mother. In *The Visit*, she came back decades later to remind Quinn and his fellow townsmen that they had made a lethal mistake with her when she had been younger. In *Murder on the Orient Express* she was one of those joining in the community sing of knifing Richard Widmark for past offenses.

5. She had problems with older women. Many of them distrusted her youth glowing with mature responsibility. How could this not signal enviable competition for those hanging on to their venerability as a final social cachet? In the case of Leopoldine Konstantin in *Notorious*, it meant poisoning her to death slowly enough so that no one noticed. In *Anastasia* it meant submitting to wily interrogations by Helen Hayes that showed that Czarism and the KGB had their points in common.

6. She didn't have problems with younger women because, with the exceptions of Susan Hayward in *Adam Had Four Sons* and Goldie Hawn in *Cactus Flower*, they were rarely to be found on the screen with her. Even the still-teenaged Angela Lansbury had to be practically made up as Jessica Fletcher to elbow her way in. Since no one was going to be looking at some starlet while Bergman was coming out of the projector, why write useless roles?



TOP AND BOTTOM: PARAMOUNT PICTURES / PHOTOEST © PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Top: Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), directed by Sam Wood.

Bottom: Gregory Peck and Bergman in *Spellbound* (1945), directed by Alfred Hitchcock.



Ingrid Bergman in *Stromboli* (1949), directed by Roberto Rossellini.

7. Her leading men were usually laconic to the point of curtness. There were no emotional Jimmy Stewarts or searching Marlon Brandos exchanging dialogue with her; she needed stoic opposite her, a central calm equal to her own. That didn't have to be reduced to a Gary Cooper "Yup," but she was far more able to deal with that, to a flattering screen degree, than with erratic emotions. Better even the phlegmatic aloofness of a George Sanders in *Strangers* since that didn't tamper with her self-control. In the exceptional instances where her co-stars didn't increase her sense of command, it was because they (Yul Brynner, Anthony Quinn) were totally imperious, and she could deal with that. If they hadn't learned that manner from her, she was soon enough going to learn it from them.

Funny how all these patterns crisscross each other over such a wide range. One might almost think that the Ingrid Bergman of our lives was at bottom an enormously gifted actor.

Donald Dewey has published 33 books of fiction, nonfiction and drama. His latest books are the novel *The Man Who Hated History*, published by Olympia, and the biography *Lee J. Cobb: Characters of an Actor*, published by Rowan & Littlefield.