

Max von Sydow (1929-2020): The long shadow of a great actor

By Paul Bond
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For more than six decades Max von Sydow, who died March 8 aged 90 at his home in Provence, France, was a standard bearer for serious, thoughtful acting in a remarkable range of work.

Indelibly associated with Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman (*The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, *The Magician*, *The Virgin Spring*, *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light* and others) from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, von Sydow also appeared in a host of blockbusters and more or less serious Hollywood efforts such as Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), Penny Marshall's *Awakenings* (1990), Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) and Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010).

The future actor was born Carl Adolf von Sydow into a middle-class family in the southern Swedish city of Lund, where his father lectured in folklore at the University, meaning he “heard more fairy tales than the average child.” This, with his natural shyness, “prompted my imagination and led to an interest in make-believe.”

On a school trip, he saw a production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which triggered his interest in acting. By 15 or 16, he knew what he wanted to do, which was not pursuing the law career his family intended.

During two years of military service he decided to change his name. “After the war Adolf was not a good name,” he said, and Carl Adolf seemed difficult to remember. He took the name Max from “a fictitious flea ... that could perform all kinds of tricks” in an army revue routine.

In 1948, he began at the Royal Dramatic Theatre School in Stockholm. Before graduation he had already made appearances in two films by Alf Sjöberg, including a version of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1951).

At 6'3" he was physically imposing, but with an emotional restraint to his performances. He attributed this in part to being an only child: “Not having brothers and sisters to fight with, or ever hearing my parents quarrel, I grew up unused to any kind of outburst at all, and when I first became interested in acting it was a real problem for me. I didn't know how to tackle displays of emotion.”

His solution was a simplicity that stood him in good stead in films. Even in a Bond film (*Never Say Never Again*, Irvin Kershner, 1983), a Dario Argento *giallo* (*Sleepless*, 2001), or the high-camp schlock of *Flash Gordon* (Mike Hodges, 1980), everything is economical. He was never showing off.

After drama school, he established an impressive theatre reputation, being granted the Royal Foundation of Sweden's Cultural Award in 1954. The following year, in a move which would shape his career, he joined Malmö's municipal theatre. There he met Bergman.

That Malmö company, including Gunnar Björnstrand, Ingrid Thulin

and Bibi Andersson, came to form Bergman's core film repertory company. Between 1956 and 1958 Bergman directed von Sydow as Brick in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Peer in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and Alceste in Molière's *The Misanthrope*, among other roles.

They also made the first of their 11 films together, *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957). Von Sydow gives a defining performance as the 14th-century knight Antonius Block. Returning with his squire (Björnstrand) to a country gripped by the plague, the disillusioned Block loses his faith. When Death (Bengt Ekerot) comes for him, Block challenges him to a game of chess. He is playing for the resolution of his personal turmoil.

Von Sydow thought that the Bergman parts he played reflected Bergman's inner tensions. “There are those who want to believe but cannot, and there are those who believe like children and it's no problem for them at all, and there are those who do not want to believe, and there are the strains between these various characters and their conflicts, which are all probably conflicts within Ingmar himself.”

Despite its much-parodied austerity, there are lighter shades in von Sydow's performance that give the film real depth. Bergman allowed von Sydow's range full rein in some of his finest films. In *The Magician* (*Ansiket*, 1958), he was a largely silent travelling illusionist and—in critic Jonathan Rosenbaum's phrase—“one of Bergman's many ironic self-portraits of the artist as resentful outsider.” In *The Virgin Spring* (*Jungfrukällan*, 1960) von Sydow was a mediaeval landowner plotting revenge on the men who raped and murdered his daughter.

There were few who would have denied von Sydow's seriousness as a performer, even as certain critical voices were raised against the Bergman ensemble's angst-ridden, postwar existentialism, especially as the 1960s wore on. Critic Andrew Sarris, for example, in a review of *Hour of the Wolf* (1968), argued that “von Sydow the actor seems to bring out the worst in Bergman the thinker ... a yearning, yawning mysticism.”

Range always mattered to von Sydow: “It is very boring to be stuck in more or less one type of character.” It also drove his approach to character. He did not identify himself with a role, although he did “become involved” with parts while playing them. He found it “a virtue to do things which are not of myself.”

This refusal to be constrained is to his credit and emphasises the constant striving for artistry in even his silliest work: “I want variety, and I have had it, but at times it's been difficult and tough to achieve because people have a tendency to typecast you. If you have been successful doing one thing, they want you to copy that success all the

time. And I hate that.”

The assuredness and weight of his performances may have led some to underestimate the investigative work that lay behind them. He often used “interesting” when talking about what he looked for in his work: “I enjoy my work very much when it’s interesting and, fortunately, it’s been mostly interesting ... I really don’t know myself too well.”

He said he had frequently failed to retire because “something interesting came along.” However, in old age he faced a different casting limitation, being offered “grandfathers, or old fathers who are nice people but not terribly interesting. Most of the time they’re not very well, and very often they die on page 36.”

Bergman encouraged this exploration and invention. Von Sydow called him “a great enthusiast with a head full of imagination. He was always going against the traditions. But he was a wonderful teacher and a great leader of actors.”

Sweden’s relatively small scale of film production enabled Bergman to develop an intensely cohesive collaboration with cast and crew. This demanded intellectual involvement because, von Sydow said, Bergman’s work “deals with much deeper and more philosophic questions than the average movie.”

This encouraged von Sydow’s greatest screen quality, his sense of mental depth and activity: “I am considered to be an intellectual actor and I also am one inasmuch as I want to be aware of what I am doing.” He admired Method actors “who seem to be so very real,” but that was never his technique.

He initially resisted invitations abroad, because it was possible to combine theatre work in Malmö with filmmaking in Stockholm. In America, he said, “you either work in Hollywood or you live somewhere else and you work for the legitimate theatre.”

This also slowed the stylistic transition from theatre to film. With hindsight von Sydow recognised the declamatory theatrical style of his early Bergman performances and the stylised character of Bergman’s scripts. This was largely swept aside by the rapid spread of television across Sweden.

He was finally persuaded abroad to play Jesus in George Stevens’s dull and star-filled *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). The Hollywood work that followed—which he often accepted—varied widely. Beginning with *The Quiller Memorandum* (Michael Anderson, 1966), he laboured under the obligation of playing a stock Nazi character foisted upon many European actors.

The flipside was more impressive examinations of similar themes, like Stuart Rosenberg’s *Voyage of the Damned* (1976), about the attempted escape from Nazi Germany of the SS St Louis.

He was rescued from some early poor Hollywood films by further work with Bergman, including *Hour of the Wolf*, *Shame* (1968) and *The Passion of Anna* (1969). Many of his lesser films remain watchable, like Laslo Benedek’s psychological horror *The Night Visitor* (1971), with an exceptional cast including Liv Ullmann (also introduced to audiences by Bergman), Per Oscarsson and Trevor Howard.

His gravitas also brought von Sydow work that his performances redeemed, like William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973). That performance rests on the conscience-searching of his Bergman roles. He remained amused that *Exorcist* audiences would react with horror at his name: “I was the good guy!”

Hollywood casting of European actors as villains, coupled with a weakness for sometimes foolish blockbusters, brought him plenty of work, but even in high-profile but otherwise indifferent films he was rarely less than compelling.

Never a comic actor, his acting evidenced instead a slyness and humorous warmth. This seems to have been one of the stimuli for the science-fiction work—asked about *Flash Gordon*, he said he had enjoyed the comics as a child—but also enabled the Bergman-obsessed Woody Allen to use him brilliantly in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). Few other actors could have delivered the line “You missed a very dull TV show about Auschwitz” with quite the same aloof composure. It is more hilarious for being played straight.

Von Sydow used the work on fantasy/science fiction franchises for which younger audiences may know him to allow him to continue making more serious pieces, often back in a Sweden from which he was increasingly remote—he became a French citizen in 2002—or with long-term Swedish collaborators. Bille August, who directed him in *Pelle the Conqueror* (1987), reunited him with Bergman for *The Best Intentions* (1992), where he played Bergman’s maternal grandfather.

He also worked again with Swedish director Jan Troell (they made 7 films together in all), with whom he and Ullmann had worked importantly in the early 1970s (*The Emigrants*, 1970; *The New Land*, 1971). Von Sydow persuaded Danish producers to back Troell’s *Hamsun* (1996), a biopic of Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun (von Sydow). It had been shelved 14 years earlier because its portrayal of Hamsun’s rationalisation of support for Hitler was considered too controversial.

He also returned occasionally to the theatre. Some of the Broadway runs were unsuccessful, but his 1988 Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* for Jonathan Miller at the Old Vic was widely acclaimed. He had first played the part for Bergman in Malmö. He said he felt at home on the stage, but that working on film allowed him a closer proximity to the audience.

It was that emotional intimacy that made his performances so compelling and watchable. He carried not just the authority of technical mastery, but an accompanying aspiration for artistry learned in his formative years, where “you were allowed to be involved in some kind of artistic project which could be a flop and yet still be justifiable if it carried artistic weight and ambitions.”

There is something to be learned from that.

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