

Vicky Krieps and Tim Roth in Mia Hansen-Løve's 'Bergman Island': Film Review | Cannes 2021

The actors star along with Mia Wasikowska in a movie about screenwriters navigating crises of love and career on the island made famous by Ingmar Bergman.

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'Bergman Island' Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

Mia Hansen-Løve's *Bergman Island* begins in the clouds. A plane descends through the white fluff toward its destination in rural Sweden, where two passengers — a couple of filmmakers played by [Vicky Krieps](#) and Tim Roth — will spend the summer nurturing new projects. That airborne starting point feels apt for a movie whose sun-dappled dreaminess belies the existential heft and reach of its themes: art, love, work, memory, identity, gender dynamics, ambition, obsession and the agonizing, exhilarating challenge of simply being alive.

Hansen-Løve's best films, the intimate EDM epic [*Eden*](#) and gorgeous Isabelle Huppert showcase [*Things to Come*](#), capture the ineffable ache and occasional thrill of human experience with such gentle precision they seem to be whispering in your ear. *Bergman Island* achieves a similar magic. It doesn't cohere like those films — one senses Hansen-Løve couldn't quite figure out how to fit all the pieces together — nor is it likely to broaden the director's fan base when IFC Films releases it stateside; the movie's milieu of well-off intellectuals in crisis against a postcard-perfect bucolic Euro-backdrop is nothing if not rarefied. But it's further evidence that no one makes films quite like Hansen-Løve's. Delicate, droll and imbued with a haunting, understated wistfulness, *Bergman Island* wears its layers so lightly it may take you a while to notice just how much it's got going on.

What *won't* take you long to notice is the luminous lead performance by Krieps. For the first time since her breakout turn in *Phantom Thread*, the actress gets to unfurl the full tapestry of her talent as Chris, a filmmaker fighting, in her quiet, dogged way, to climb out from the shadow of two men: Tony (Roth), her partner in life and love, and the sacred monster that looms large over the movie — Ingmar Bergman himself.

The setting is the island of Faro, where that most iconic of Swedish directors shot several films and spent the final years of his life. Our protagonists are there for a writers' residency program that has arranged to put them up in one of Bergman's old cottages, nestled amid dense green woods, near fields of rustling golden reeds and just a short bike ride from pristine Baltic beaches. (Much to Tony and Chris' amused trepidation, it's the house where *Scenes From a Marriage* was filmed.) The pair set up separate workspaces, and hunker down to start their new screenplays. But Chris is unsettled from the get-go. "All this calm and perfection, I find it oppressive," she tells Tony.

Hansen-Løve draws out the differences between the two gradually, through glances, snippets of conversation and slight turns in the narrative that accumulate significance. Tony is an established director with a fervent following; Chris isn't as familiar, or comfortable, with the spotlight. He's relaxed and confident, cranking out drafts with ease; she's plagued by self-doubt and anxiety, battling to get past an outline. He doesn't like to talk about his writing while in the midst of it; she needs to vent and process every step of the way.

The two even diverge when it comes to their touchstone, Bergman. The more detached Tony accepts his well-documented personal foibles (the director had nine children with six women) and embraces the searing despair coursing through his work; Chris has a love/hate relationship with Bergman's movies — after watching his wrist-slasher of a masterpiece *Cries and Whispers*, she wonders if there's sadism in the spectacle of so much suffering — and struggles to reconcile the creative genius with the flawed human. "I don't like when artists I love don't behave well in real life," she admits.

Depending on your perspective, the film's preoccupation with its characters' attitudes toward a giant of European art cinema will strike you as either charming or the ultimate in first-world-problem triviality; I admit to being in the former camp. For her part, Hansen-Løve doesn't

satirize the auteur worship or the commodification of art driving Faro's economy (the "Bergman safari" is a main attraction). Rather, she takes it all in with wry matter-of-factness, wringing sly humor from the esoteric singularity of this ecosystem.

Meanwhile, little bubbles of tension rise to the film's idyllic surface. While Tony is away one day, Chris sneaks a look at his notebook, and finds sexually graphic sketches that seem to surprise her. Soon after, she ducks out of a master class Tony is giving, linking up with a serious-faced Swedish film student (Hampus Nordenson), with whom she swigs cider from the bottle and frolics on a nearby beach. We learn that Chris and Tony have a young daughter together, a fact that alters the story's calculus in crucial ways.

Bergman Island takes its biggest swerve when Chris starts telling Tony about what she's writing, narrating the plot of her screenplay-in-progress as we watch it unfold as a movie within a movie. In these scenes, a touching Mia Wasikowska plays 28-year-old director Amy, who reunites with long-estranged first love Joseph (Anders Danielsen Lie) at a mutual friend's wedding on — where else? — Faro. Amy and Joseph strike up a push-pull affair, their initial encounters possessing a stilted quality that jars, but also feels fitting; what we're seeing, essentially, is a visualization of a rough draft having its kinks worked out aloud. (In its tale of a woman struck low by a flare-up of an old heartbreak, this section of the movie is reminiscent of Hansen-Løve's *Goodbye First Love*.)

In *Bergman Island*'s final act, the boundary between the main storyline and that of Chris' script starts to blur, as do the lines separating past, present and future, fantasy and reality, failure and success. The movie's glancing touch, its refusal to underline things or venture too far in any one direction, is at once a strength — trademark Hansen-Løve — and, perhaps, a slight limitation; there's a sense of the filmmaker tinkering with, rather than tackling, some of her thorniest, most complex ideas.

But such is the simultaneous frustration and beauty of a Hansen-Løve film. And, in this case, any frustration is neutralized whenever Krieps is onscreen. The actress plays Chris as beguilingly childlike, her feelings and impulses — from coltish giddiness to flushed exasperation, mischievous curiosity to melancholy stillness — right at the surface, intensifying and subsiding, arpeggio-like. She and Roth (in terrific, restrained form) create a wholly believable marriage, in which affection and chemistry exist alongside aggravations, insecurities and secrets.

With an economy of camera movement and evocative widescreen compositions, Hansen-Løve and DP Denis Lenoir prove exquisitely attuned to the fluctuating moods of both the characters and the landscapes. (*Bergman Island* was shot on location in Faro.) And, as usual, the filmmaker flaunts a gift for selecting music that pulls us closer to the people in her movies, cluing us in to their inner mysteries and shifting emotional states. (Huppert staring out a car window, bidding farewell to a lengthy chapter of her life as Schubert's "Auf dem Wasser zu Singen" plays on the soundtrack in *Things to Come*, is one of the most casually breathtaking movie moments of the past few years.) Here, songs from Scottish instrumentalist Robin Williamson's ethereal, subtly suspenseful theme "Gwydion's Dream" to ABBA's "The Winner Takes It All" are deployed to poignant, and pointed, effect.

Though Bergman's legacy haunts Chris, Tony and Amy, as well as the forests and shores they wander, Hansen-Løve doesn't take her tonal cues from the Swedish master: Far from the severity and starkness of much of his oeuvre, the vibe here is warm, supple, even as ties fray and tears fall. But if the film is one of the director's breeziest and most pleasurable, it also registers as profoundly personal. Among other things, *Bergman Island* is an ode to a female artist's freedom to derive creative inspiration and sustenance where she chooses — from an idol, a lover, a place, a remembrance, the bracing cleanse of a cold-water swim, or the sweet embrace of her child.