



DANCING IN DENMARK | elaine ash talks with LARS VON TRIER

Thirteen years after graduating from the Danish Film School, Lars von Trier's hand-held film *Breaking the Waves* won a Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival and earned a Best Actress Academy Award nomination for Emily Watson in her first film role. Critics were surprised at the success of von Trier's amazing little film, but even more at the change in his writing. A melodrama just wasn't expected from the same writer, who, along with Niels Vørsel, created the icily controlled Hitchcockian thriller, *Zentropa* in 1992. Helena Bonham Carter expressed prevailing sentiments best, by saying, "I had no idea how talented Lars was. His other stuff [before *Breaking the Waves*] seemed rather cold and stylistic."

The warming of Lars von Trier began with *The Kingdom* (1994) a mini-series shot in his distinctive, hand-held style. Von Trier's low-gore horror-serial was set in a real hospital and produced on a miniscule budget featuring effects nobody would call special. But the characters riveted Europeans, and the series' real heroine was a fifty-plus hypochondriac who padded the vast hallways in her bathrobe, searching out the ghost of a little girl murdered decades-before by her doctor-father.

Von Trier completed his literary reversal by 1995, with the creation of a set of rules called Dogma (or Dogme, in Danish). Partnered with writer/director Thomas Vinterberg, the two writers swore off glitzy special effects and production techniques that they claimed were camouflaging weak stories and crowding out real acting. Internationally published, the Dogma rules provoked as many filmmakers as they influenced. But von Trier and Vinterberg triumphed over their critics with simple films that won critical and commercial success.

After writing and directing *The Kingdom Part II*, Von Trier wrote *The Idiots* (1998), in less than a week. His latest film, *Dancer in the Dark*, stars Icelandic

diva/composer Bjork as Selma, a nearly-blind, single-mom, factory worker, and legendary French actress, Catherine Deneuve as Selma's friend Cathy.

Though it's being described as a musical, the film transcends the boundaries of that genre. Members of the audience at the Cannes Film Festival reportedly were "shaken" when the house lights went up. Unusually and relentlessly tragic, *Dancer* seems more the bastard child of grand opera than cousin to the American musical. Despite controversy and mixed reactions, the film won the Golden Palm at Cannes, and seems positioned for an Oscar nomination. I spoke to von Trier by telephone from his home in Denmark, which he never travels from because of acute phobia of confined spaces, including theaters.

How did you start writing *Dancer in the Dark*?

I thought I would like to do an execution scene and then I put the story together. It was actually intended to be a remake of *Breaking the Waves*. We call it style, you know, if you repeat yourself.

Why an execution scene?

I remembered *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote's film. In that film, this poor man who's going to be hanged is in a harness. And this I put in my script. And then my stenographer called me from the state of Washington saying that they only use that in Texas. But they had something else and she was standing right next to it. Collapse boards they call it. It's not that everything has to be exact, [because] you can never match real life. But I could never have invented a board like this. Never in my life could I have thought of that.



You did a lot of research and got coverage from American readers?

Oh yes. I had conversations with American lawyers and people who knew how things were back then. I had a very big problem getting Selma convicted in the courtroom. People reading said there wasn't a chance I could get a blind woman executed. And then I had to change the crime and put in a lot of evidence for the court. I found out that it would be really bad for her to say something good about the Communists. So I put that in. And then it also helped that she didn't flee her country because she wanted to flee her political system. She actually came to get the operation for her son. Research can help you [shape] characters.

You're writing a new script right now...

I'm preparing and I haven't got the slightest idea. I'm putting up a lot of difficulties for myself. For example, I put up those *Dogma* rules, and they changed the whole film. I have changed a lot over the years with my approach. I'm writing stories simpler and simpler. In my earlier films we made a very complex script and storyboards. Even the edits we storyboarded before the film was shot.

Are you referring to *Zentropa*?

Yes, especially *Zentropa*. Everything was planned. The bad thing about that is when you go out and film it, you can only reach seventy percent of what you have dreamt. And then it's kind of depressing. But if you do the opposite—only writing a sketch and keep the story simple, then part of the script work is with the actors. Because they put things into it, you get something instead of losing. *Dogma* taught me to make a stronger bond with the actors and use them in a better way. Now, I would like to move to more abstract film again.

Was there a big switch from writing *Zentropa* to writing *Breaking the Waves*?

I changed, yes. But in all my films the scripts are quite close. All the stories

are about a realist who comes into conflict with life. I'm not crazy about real life, and real life is not crazy about me. After *Zentropa*, I had the idea to make an emotional film. It was quite a cynical decision, in that sense. Although I took it very serious[ly]. It wasn't a joke.

David Morse quoted you as saying, "My script is shit, do the subtext."

Carl Dreyer (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928, *Ordet*, 1955) was a famous [Danish] director, who spent many years on each script. He started with eight hundred pages and then cut down and cut down and ended up with sixty pages or something like that. So the whole process was simplifying. For actors to work with character, maybe the words in the script should never be said. We had exercises in this film where I would simply say, "Now let's do it again and not use any words from this script." I can tell from that if everybody knows what we're doing and what the conflict is. I get them to try to say it with their own words.

So you can pinpoint exactly what the actors are clear about or what they don't get.

Absolutely. I developed this technique over the last five or six years. I shoot a scene in many different ways, shades, angles and intentions, and then in the editing put the whole thing together. Now that I'm working on video, with one hour of tape, I just go on filming for the whole hour without stopping and then discuss and suggest that the actors do it a little differently. Or suggest that what they came up with here and here could be used there. I remember a very good example of this when I worked with Bjork and David [Morse] on this scene where they're sitting in the trailer, and he's saying he doesn't have any money, and she's talking about going blind. We shot about one hour and it was very intense and extremely good. Bjork was suddenly changing the pace and getting excited. I said to David, "When she does this, go with her." I sat alone with the two actors and the camera, and it came to life. The script is not alive when I write it. The process where it comes alive comes after, when I do it with the actors. When I know who [the cast] is going to be, then I may

the scene make final cut?

Bjork made [Selma] more grown up. I had something in mind that was closer to [the character of] Bess in *Breaking the Waves*. Bess was always fooling around and making strange faces. It didn't work for Selma.

Let's talk about genre. You seem to have created a tragic musical melodrama for the proletariat. I've never seen anything like it before.

My films are a little dark, right? So if I should make a musical it would be dark too. My first idea was to make more of an opera than a musical. An opera typically has a melodramatic story. All the emotions come from the music and the singing. I was eager to try to use them because



people have been crying at the operas for many years. I suppose some people think it's bad taste. It's never really used in film. It's a little strange that in other countries they have melodramatic musicals, but for western audiences it's uncommon. In my view, musicals were always closer to operetta, which normally is a lighter story.

Are you thinking about genre or are you a genre-breaker?

Yes, I am thinking about them. And trying my best to take them very seriously. I hate films that make fun of genres or other films. I prefer deconstructing, 'cause then you're just taking parts of the film and putting it in a little box and saving it. Genres are the genetic material we have for film, so we can put it together [respectfully] in different ways. Maybe we can invent new genres. I'm sure this can be done.

At the end of the script, there are notes about the musical numbers. For the *In the Musicals* number, you write, "This is where all of Selma's pent-up musical clichés blaze up. This is where the idea of the musical must ring forth loud and clear. It must be so beautiful that it hurts, drawing on anything to hand. We must dog down to the ultimate clichés. And they cannot lie! Everything is so simple here that un-truth has no place."

Shit. You really have some inside documents there. This was between me and Vincent Patterson. I have learned that if you want people to contribute, then you should give them as much information as possible. I also wrote a little text that you probably also have called Selma's Manifesto. It was a text of five pages about where these songs and dances came from, so Bjork and Vincent could work from this paper. It's very difficult to write a musical. It's not something that you just phone somebody and ask how do you write it.

Your female characters are three-dimensional and loaded with emotional dynamite.

What allows you to create women characters like this when so many writers fail?

I have this very good friend who is a writer and he tells me that one way of writing is to take yourself and divide yourself into different characters. He says this is typically the way I write. I can see some logic in that. I use myself in these women although I wouldn't have liked them as men. I've always been surrounded by strong women, you know. I'm not concentrating on giving a portrait of a woman. I see them as quite complex and human.

What's your favorite scene in the script?

The scene that we talked about earlier in the trailer. You have to be excited when you write. I write extremely fast when I'm excited, and when I'm not, I don't write anything at all. I did a script for this Dogma film I did [*The Idiots*]. I wrote it in three and a half days. Other [scripts] have taken years. In the *Dancer* script, if you find that scene in the trailer, you'll see that it's not close to the words [on screen], but somehow it was clear enough to ignite the actors. That's what I'm most proud of.

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birthday... that's the kind of mom he has for himself. I'm sure he'd rather have another." Selma's likeability is compromised at this point, because she's lying. Just a scene or two before, she's gotten out a hidden envelope bulging with cash and added her day's pay to it. Not knowing this, Selma's friends buy Gene a secondhand bike so the boy can "have the same as everybody else."

Just when it looks like Selma's heading for *Mommy Dearest* territory, von Trier delivers the bomb:

BILL

Now you know my secret, Selma.

Selma nods. Her gaze grows distant. There is a moment's silence. She looks at him.

SELMA

I also have a secret that nobody knows.

Bill looks at her quietly.

SELMA

I am going blind. I'm not blind yet, but soon, maybe even sometime this year.

She smiles to herself. She looks at Bill, who is aghast.

SELMA

Oh, it's not as bad as it sounds. I've always known it would happen. It's a family thing. That's why I came to

America. Because in America they can give Gene an operation.

She sits there a moment.

SELMA

He will have his operation when he is eleven. They told me not to tell him beforehand. That can make it worse. I almost have the money now.

BILL

So you made up that story about sending money to your dad?

SELMA

(shakes her head) I never knew my dad.

GENE

That's why you put in all those hours. You've been saving up to pay for Gene's operation?

SELMA

Well, it's my fault.

BILL

How come?

SELMA

I knew he would have the same bad eyes as me, but I had him all the same.

Bill looks at her. She is quite relaxed, and she nods a little to herself.

SELMA

But now I have saved up almost enough money. I

must hurry and get the rest before my own eyes go.

All the clues fall into place. Everything that's gone before—the yelling, the slap, deceiving the doctor, Selma's tough stance on the birthday bike—pales next to the sacrifice Selma quietly makes every day, without complaint. She may appear clumsy and badly behaved on the outside, but this scene reveals the purity of Selma's heart.

So why is *Dancer In the Dark* weirding-out some audiences? Maybe we've grown unused to full-strength tragedy. With rare exceptions, such as *Pennies From Heaven*, remade in 1981, American musicals resemble operettas, with light, whimsical storylines. As Selma says, "In musicals nothing dreadful ever happens." Forget that there's no lady wearing a metal bra, holding a spear, and yodeling. *Dancer in the Dark* is a monumental tragedy, and audiences suffer on an operatic scale in their theater seats as Selma is jailed and executed. Opera-goers have always remarked about the benefits of watching ultra-tragedy, citing that by comparison, personal problems seem small, and they feel uplifted after the lights come on.

The librettists of grand operas knew this and loaded their stories

with controversy; enough to make an exec looking for a feel-good story run screaming from the room. They knew people would pay good money to sit through the most horrifically heart-rending stories. For example, in *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg, produced in the early '20s, the hero, a poor soldier, stabs the woman he loves to death (she's the mother of his illegitimate child), after finding out she's been tricked and seduced by a heartless jerk. *Wozzeck* is considered the most influential opera of the twentieth century.

In *La Boheme* (1896), still a modern-day favorite, young artists struggle in the heartless city. Mimi dies of sickness and starvation in her garret. Similar elements made *Midnight Cowboy* great. *Rent* owes a tip of the libretto to this one too.

When readers care about characters on the page, the more they engage with the emotional depths and climaxes of a story. Opera can be a gateway to great tragedies that have survived over generations and still command audiences. Maybe *Dancer In the Dark* signals a new wave of tragic musicals. Regardless of genre, von Trier's skillful rendering of his tragic heroine, Selma, is a good example for all character-driven scripts.

—ELAYNE TAYLOR

— AGENT'S HOT SHEET CONTINUED —

going to find less work. Any kind of bias, whether it's racial, or age, or anything, is just bad. But, at the end of the day, it's hard to sue because of it, especially in this case."

Says Marty Bowen of United Talent Agency, "I hope no one's being singled out because of ageism. I think that would be a travesty. But sometimes credits, for whatever reason, just don't match where the business is going. It would be great to have been a writer on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, but unfortunately, that's not going to get you onto *Friends*. I think if that's the audience [the network is] looking for and that's the characters they're writing, unless you have some credibility in that world, it's going to be difficult to find work. So I don't think it's a question of age; I think it's just a question of what you know."

Milissa Brockish adds, "In an ideal world, experience should count for something and the net-

works would still want an experienced writer on the staff or as a show runner, because, ultimately, people who have very little experience writing on a TV show just don't know all the ins and outs of what makes a good script. Yes, they have great young voices, but there's no amount of experience that goes with it. I hope that experience counts for something, but, in the end, I don't know how much evidence the writers have, and I think age discrimination is hard to prove."

Least you think that union negotiations and lawsuits are the only battles in Tinseltown these days, a different type of fight is also gearing up. It's waged not in court houses and on picket lines, but in print and TV ads. It is, of course, the multi-million-dollar blitz for Oscar glory. While our panel universally admits that 2000 has been a rather ho-hum film year compared to 1999, there are still a few standouts that deserve recognition. Milissa Brockish and Nicole Clemens both cite *The Con-*

tender as, well, a contender. "*The Contender*'s Gary Oldman and Joan Allen will no doubt be getting Oscar nods," predicts Clemens. "*Billy Elliot* was also phenomenal."

"I'm really interested in *13 Days*, in terms of Oscar potential—of course, I'm biased!" says Marty Bowen, who represents the film's writer, David Self. "I think *Erin Brockovich* is going to do really well. I think *Unbreakable* is going to do really, really well, too."

"I thought that *Requiem For A Dream* was brilliant filmmaking, but a movie that I would not necessarily recommend to most audiences," says Emile Gladstone. "It was pretty tough to take, but I think Darren Aronofsky is one of the filmmakers I have the most hope for. When he starts directing mainstream movies, I think that we're going to start seeing a level of filmmaking that we're not used to, that audiences are starving for."