

Everlasting Moments: The world to be explored and preserved

Joanne Laurier
30 April 2009

Directed by Jan Troell, screenplay by Niklas Rådström

At the age of 77, Swedish director Jan Troell is one of Europe's more distinguished filmmakers. A four-decade career has produced works such as *The Emigrants* and *The New Land* (both with Liv Ullmann and Max von Sydow), epic films made in the 1970s that followed Swedish emigration to America in the 19th century. Combining a serious approach to history with a lyrical photographic style, Troell's films have placed him in the upper echelon of modern Swedish cinema, along with Ingmar Bergman and Bo Widerberg, both now deceased.

In a March interview with the *New York Times*, Troell explains that his deliberate method of working is in part to blame for his output of only 12 features in 43 years, but adds that it "has taken a very long time for several films to be financed, mainly because I have not been what film companies are usually looking for."

In his latest film, *Everlasting Moments* (*Maria Larssons eviga ögonblick*), a 2009 Golden Globe nominee for best foreign-language film, Troell shares the director of photography credit with Mischa Gavrjusjov. The film, set in the first two turbulent decades of the 20th century, follows the exploits of a struggling working class family in southern Sweden and the intersection of art and life.

Troell relies mostly on natural light and vignettes saturated with detail to tell the story of Maria Larsson (Maria Heiskanen), a Finnish-born woman and wife to Sigge (Mikael Persbrandt), a flamboyant, militant docker, who struggles semi-successfully to stay on the good side of the Temperance Society. The couple has seven children. Their eldest daughter, Maja (Callin Ohrvall), is the film's perceptive narrator.

During a bitter longshoremen's strike, Maria tries to pawn a camera she had earlier won in a lottery. Shop owner and photographer Sebastian Pedersen (Jasper Christensen) encourages Maria to keep the camera, providing her with instruction and supplies. She photographs her children and creates her first "everlasting moment."

Meanwhile, Sigge is battling British scabs on the docks,

drinking and womanizing to ease the stress. He rebukes Maria for crossing class lines by performing menial chores for an unpleasant upper middle class family and is alternately threatened and fascinated by her foray into photography.

Maria, on the other hand, sees Sigge's life-and-death battle with the authorities as jeopardizing the immediate welfare of their children. She views her attraction to the miraculous technology in much the same way ("I don't want it [the camera]. It's as if the pictures take over. I forget I'm a mother") until neighbors beg her to photograph their loved ones. When Sigge is arrested during the strike and falsely accused of planting a bomb on the British strike-breaking vessel, Maria sees the possibility of both earning some money and indulging an irresistible urge.

Maria photographs mass demonstrations—we see an image of red flags waving through her camera lens. This is a time when people in the prisons and on the streets sang "The Internationale."

Five years pass. With the onset of World War I, nationalism comes to the fore. The Swedish flag is more prominent, along with men in uniform. In fact, comments Pedersen dryly, "Uniforms are the rage this year."

In a remarkable sequence, Maria attempts to photograph a shadow puppeteer as a zeppelin ominously darkens the sky. Troell, in a single image, anticipates the ability of the various great powers to terrorize civilian populations through aerial bombardment. Sigge goes off to war, and then comes home again, unscathed.

A family outing to the movies, the new rage, almost ends in tragedy, as Sigge unleashes a torrent of frustration and anger on his wife. Maria finds solace in the gentility of fellow photographer Sebastian. She is encouraged by Maja to forsake tradition and obligation and leave Sigge, an act she seriously contemplates.

Everlasting Moments is a rarity: an artful attempt at weaving together history, psychology and culture. The well-sketched characters possess emotional depth. These are human beings. The recurring shots of the working class

neighborhood are especially affecting. The director doesn't sneer at people.

In regard to the more complicated and difficult historical questions, Troell tries to strike a balance, even if he doesn't quite pull it off. More on that below.

The film is also unusual in the sense that it sees art not above life, but coming out of life. Whether the director is entirely conscious of it or not, *Everlasting Moments* points to a set of historical conditions—including mass social struggle and technological revolution (camera, motion pictures, aircraft, automobile)—and personal circumstances—access to culture, a rich emotional life—in which creativity flourishes. Art is not simply about the inner life here.

The film's point of view is best articulated by Sebastian: "What do you see as you look through the camera, Maria? You see a world, there to be explored—to preserve, to describe." One of Maria's most striking photographs is that of a dead girl laid out in a coffin while children peer at her through a window. Life and death are graphically brought together in one image.

To its credit, the film allows for certain mysteries and ambiguities: Was the death of Maja's friend and classmate a suicide? Was the suicide of Sigge's anarchist friend caused by political discouragement or by disappointment in love?

The real Maria Larsson was the great-aunt of Troell's wife, Agneta, who began recording interviews with Maria's daughter, Maja, in 1986 and finished before Maja's death in 1992. "I, too, realized," said Troell, "this was unique material about life in Sweden at the turn of the 20th century. The description of the importance of photography really gripped me, as I have been a devotee of still photography since the tender age of 14. The fantastic Fellini-like galley of characters also fascinated me, so did the social perspective [that of a poverty-stricken, working class woman].

"When I grew up in Limhamn, it was a working class suburb on the outskirts of Malmö, and even though my father was a dentist, and I hailed from a different social class than that of my playmates and therefore had an outsider's perspective, I have no problem recognizing the people and the milieu in which the story takes place (even though the actual events took place in Gothenburg). It was for many years a dream for me to make a film that takes place in precisely such an environment as this, a film story that affords me the opportunity of drawing on my own childhood feelings and memories."

The film speaks to Troell's personal commitment to represent working class reality and the facts of Swedish social life. Unfortunately, however, all the complex issues are not solved by his sincerity, which is unquestionable. Class and historical pressures also have their say.

Those perhaps find their sharpest expression in the manner in which the director privileges the scenes in which Maria leaves her harsh daily life and steps, albeit briefly, into Sebastian's photographic studio. This seems to be a universe apart. No doubt, for her, those moments come as a great relief and even a solace, but that inevitably raises other matters.

Everlasting Moments loses its equilibrium, so to speak, in these scenes. It wants to be fair to Sigge, to root his brutality in the brutality of his work and everyday life, but it can't quite offer as much understanding to him and his workmates as it does Maria and her photographer friend. One might say that Troell is appreciative but skeptical about (and more distant from) Sigge's world-changing socialist ambitions and feels Maria's attraction for photography—and her private moments—more concretely, sensuously and immediately. The political disappointments of the last century must come into play and the temporary receding of working class political activity into the background. Would this film have had the same emphasis if it had been made, for example, in 1921 or 1935? One tends to think not.

On the other hand, in its focus on a period full of social struggles, *Everlasting Moments* may also reflect something that is returning to the scene, even if the filmmaker is only partially aware of that.

In any event, there is a feeling for history in the film, which makes reference to a number of fascinating events and figures.

(One of the latter was Anton Nilson, the young man who helped sabotage the British ship where scabs were being accommodated during the 1908 dock strike. For his part in the sabotage, which killed one strikebreaker, Nilson—a socialist who had been inspired by the 1905 revolution in Russia—was sentenced to death. Mass pressure eventually led to his release, and in 1918 Nilson went to the Soviet Union, becoming a pilot in the Red Army. He later expressed support for Trotsky against Stalin.)

Everlasting Moments is evocative and rich, its almost inevitable weaknesses are bound up with some of our objective contemporary problems.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact