

THE SERPENT'S EGG

Directed by Ingmar Bergman
(1977) Arrow Academy Blu-ray

The Serpent's Egg remains something of an anomaly in the career of Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. In the mid-1970s, Bergman went into tax exile after a particularly nasty, almost Kafkaesque experience with the Swedish government, eventually making his way to Germany, where he was offered a production deal he couldn't refuse by mogul Dino De Laurentiis: a massive budget and creative carte blanche.

The resulting film was considered a failure by critics at the time, if not an outright fiasco. But, if approached with the proper sex of expectations, *The Serpent's Egg* can best be appreciated as a grim character study of dispossessed performers in the throes of physical and psychological decline, caught up in the wake of social and historical forces far beyond their control. In a word, the film is sort of like *Cabaret* as directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

The film is set in Berlin in the fall of 1923, with the specter of Hitler's Munich beer hall putsch looming over events, and playing a key role in the dour, downbeat finale. The film opens with erstwhile acrobat Abel Rosenberg (David Carradine), a Jewish-American expat, discovering his brother's suicide. Bereavement soon sends Abel and his sister-in-law Manuela (Liv Ullman), a cabaret performer, into a downward spiral of alcoholism and prostitution.

Abel, for his part, believes his trapeze act will be nothing without his brother's participation, so he refuses an offer of work from the owner of the newly prosperous circus where they used to perform. This scene tidily sets up the idea that, in the midst of rampant unemployment and hyperinflation, the German people can still be assuaged by a regular helping of "bread and circuses"—even if the bread happens to cost a billion marks a loaf! It also allows Bergman to work in references to the virulent Anti-Semitism already at work steadily poisoning the German body politic.

Against Abel and Manuela's increasingly corrupt and nihilistic demimonde (however strikingly it may have been lensed by legendary DP Sven Nykvist) stands the official world of law and order as represented by Inspector Bauer (Gert Fröbe). He's looking into a series of suspicious suicides, one of whom may very well have been Abel's brother. Stern, yet surprisingly amiable, Bauer is a figure straight out of an early Fritz Lang crime film. (At one point, he even mentions an Inspector Lohmann, who featured in both *M* and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*.) And Bauer isn't the only element that suggests a direct through-line to the cinema of Fritz Lang.

The picture's final act turns this tawdry world upside down, with a major revelation concerning a peripheral character played by Heinz Bennent, who now steps forward to take his place as a very Mabuse-like master criminal bent, not upon world domination, but on some extremely sadistic psychological experiments. This sequence turns the medium of film back upon itself as an instrument of voyeurism and torture, akin to the infamous prologue of *Persona*, but the effect here is much closer to Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, if it had been filmed by Josef Mengele. The finale lets Bergman explicitly fold in history (Hitler's failed putsch) with a terrible ironic distance between what the characters think and what we know, to our sorrow and chagrin, is still to come.

Arrow's Blu-ray features an HD transfer that's identical to the one included by Criterion in their *Ingmar Bergman's Cinema* box set, but Arrow's release nevertheless stands out for two reasons: First of all, the Criterion disc also has Bergman's other English-language feature, *The Touch*, on it as well, thereby reducing the bit rate proportionately. As a result, the Arrow disc looks a bit brighter and sharper overall.

Criterion only provides one of the extras that were produced for the earlier MGM DVD, whereas Arrow has ported them all over, as well as added one substantial new supplement to the package: "Bergman's Egg" is a nearly half-hour appreciation from author and critic Barry Forshaw, who provides an extensive overview of Bergman's career from *Torment* to *Fanny and Alexander*, touching on thematic preoccupations that would turn up again in *The Serpent's Egg*. Chief among these are the artist considered as an endangered species, the individual pitted against society and social authority, the milieu of the circus or theater, and the archetypal weak, whining "Bergman male" who consoles himself for his existential misery by sullenly bullying his woman.

David Carradine's audio commentary combs through his experiences shooting *The Serpent's Egg* on location in Munich, emphasizing his fraught working relationship with Ingmar Bergman, who he describes as both "loveable and hateable." Carradine goes into much more detail here than in the somewhat overlapping "Away From Home" featurette. The latter features further talking head comments from Liv Ullman, who believes Bergman was overwhelmed by the creative possibilities provided to him by *The Serpent's Egg*'s big budget, courtesy of producer-mogul Dino De Laurentiis, and author Marc Gervais, who positions *The Serpent's Egg* as a postmodern film. Gervais turns up again for the featurette "German Expressionism," in which he claims that *Serpent's Egg* might be best approached as Bergman's attempt at recreating a self-aware 1920s German film in the manner of G. W. Pabst or Fritz Lang, not as a "Bergman film" along the lines of *Persona*.

Budd Wilkins

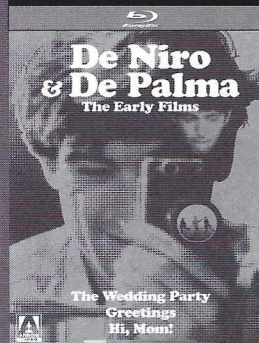
DE NIRO & DE PALMA: THE EARLY FILMS

GREETINGS (1968)

THE WEDDING PARTY (1969)

HI, MOM! (1970)

Directed by Brian De Palma
Arrow Video Blu-ray



Much has been written about the collaborative efforts of Robert De Niro and Martin Scorsese, a union which has yielded nine films to date. (I even wrote a book, *The Films of Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro*, about them.) But far less focus is given to De Niro's four collaborations with helmer Brian De Palma, mostly because of the amateurish nature of them (excluding their later, more polished effort *The Untouchables*.) But now, at long last, their joint efforts are given the royal treatment in a new three-disc box set from Arrow called *De Niro & De Palma: The Early Films*. The

films included are *The Wedding Party* (1969), *Greetings* (1968), and, *Hi, Mom!* (1970). The films, all black comedies, are a mixed bag, with both artists trying to find their footing and discover their own creative styles and voices.

The first film in the set, *The Wedding Party*, was actually shot in 1963 (or '64, depending on the source) but wasn't issued until 1969. (It was finally released after De Niro and De Palma had already made a splash with their second film, *Greetings*.) The farcical black-and-white film was a joint effort between three director/producers: Sarah Lawrence theatre director Wilford Leach and proteges De Palma and Cynthia Munroe. The film features debut performances from De Niro, Jennifer Salt, Jill Clayburg, and William Finley, who would go on to appear in several other De Palma films including *Phantom of the Paradise* and *Dressed to Kill*. In this early outing, De Niro (mistakenly billed as "Denero") appears in a supporting role. (The leading man was an actor named Charles Pfluger, who apparently disappeared shortly after.) The film isn't particularly good, but it has its moments. It's more of a curiosity really; a chance to see the icons as fledgling novices.

The second movie is *Greetings*. By the time the duo got around to this production, De Niro had appeared in four films. This, however, would be his first appearance in a major role. *Greetings*, the first movie to receive an X rating from the Motion Picture Association of America, is an episodic comedy consisting of short sequences that noted *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert likened to Laurel and Hardy bits. They really have no rhyme or reason in terms of story (there is none), and exist solely for the sake of the comedy.

All three of these collaborations were shot in pieces and then combined to make feature-length films. Because of this, the third film, *Hi, Mom!* feels a bit slapdash, like two separate films tacked together. The first half, focusing on De Niro's character (the same character he played in *Greetings*) making voyeuristic sex films, is the better of the two, featuring some great improvisational sequences by De Niro and Allan Garfield. The other half is a bit of a mess. It finds De Niro's character getting involved with a group of black nationalist revolutionaries. It's an interesting concept, but it feels jarring and disjointed. Not only do the two halves feel like completely separate entities, but their tone and pacing are dramatically different.

None of this should detract would-be viewers. These films are (somewhat) fun and feature some interesting early acting and filmmaking choices by the artistic icons. Aside from watching for entertainment value, these early works of De Niro and De Palma are fascinating to watch simply to observe the artists' growth and evolution. Despite having theatrical distribution, all three films are essentially college thesis projects. They occasionally show brief flourishes of the great artists these men would become, but they weren't there yet. Think of this Arrow set as a trio of curiosities and historical documentation more than anything else.

The films look impressive on high-definition Blu-ray. Arrow has pulled out all the stops, assembling a package filled with additional material. There's a new audio commentary for *Greetings* by Robert De Niro: Anatomy of an Actor scribe Glenn Kenny. There is also an appreciation by filmmaker Howard S. Berger and a new interview with producer Charles Hirsch. Cineastes and fans of these two great artists should be quite pleased with this offering.

Andrew J. Rausch