

C I N E M A

It's a complicated friendship



Margarethe von Trotta is known for making films that explore the importance of relationships between women. Yet her pictures are a far cry from the "buddy" films that examine friendships between men. Von Trotta not only delves into the emotional needs for best friends and confidants, but also the conflicts that arise because of these needs — conflicts in relationships with men, with families, with husbands and lovers.

"Sheer Madness" explores these themes with even more complexity than in Von Trotta's previous features. The two women are Olga (Hanna Schygulla), a self-possessed professor of women's literature, and Ruth (Angela Winkler), a withdrawn woman who paints black-and-white copies of art masterpieces.

They meet at a party thrown by a mutual friend. Ruth keeps to herself and to her husband Franz (Peter Striöbeck), a friend of Olga's husband Dieter (Franz Buchrieser), from whom she is separated. The sullen Ruth disappears with a clothesline and Franz fears she will kill herself, as her brother did while she was a child. It is Olga who saves her.

Franz encourages the budding relationship, as Ruth has no women friends. She has practically withdrawn herself from the world, afraid to answer phones and embarrassed to show her works to anyone. Olga gives Ruth self-confidence as Ruth opens up to her. We find that Ruth herself was once a teacher and paints her own original work. Olga gives Ruth encouragement to throw off her dependency on Franz, and this is where Franz intervenes.

The relationships in "Sheer Madness" are complex and by no means easily attributed to "good guys" and "bad guys." It would be too easy to ascribe the Olga-Ruth union to a mother-daughter relationship, but the elements are there. Olga nurtures and assures Dieter (a theatrical

director always in need of her opinion), Alexij (whose musical career is this side of nowhere), and her son, who cannot seem to relate to anyone else (most especially his father. Ruth is nurtured and guided, by Franz, by her mother, by Olga.

Yet the central friendship between Olga and Ruth is positive because it is constructive. Franz deeply loves Ruth but fears her increasing independence and her growing bond with Olga. To Franz, this relationship has "systematically alienated" Ruth from his affections.

Everyone advises Olga and Ruth to step out of their relationship, but the two women discover they need each other. Finally, in Ruth's most self-assured move, she travels to Cairo with Olga to teach women's literature, and meets back up with her husband at the house where she first met Ruth. Now the balance has changed, however. Franz does not dominate, he attacks, and Bruno (the head of the house) agrees. Yet his attack on Olga, which erupts into a physical confrontation, alienates Ruth from Franz, and Franz must apologize (sincerely, I believe) so she can coax Ruth out of her withdrawal.

"Sheer Madness" is not a happy tale. The narrative is punctuated by black-and-white sequences which seem to come from Ruth's consciousness (similar to her art reproductions). The inserts show Franz walking through an empty house and finally finding Ruth hanging from a rafter in the attic. It isn't clear whether the scenes are flash-forwards, premonitions or fantasies, but they put a fatal tone into the film.

However, Von Trotta also celebrates what the relationship between Olga and Ruth can be at its best. Specifically, the Cairo scene shows two women working and teaching as equals. Earlier, at a party, Olga's lover Alexij plays a request and Olga begins to sing "But Will You Love Me Tomorrow," first to Alexij, then turning to Ruth who has come to her side.

By Sean Axmaker
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