

## Interview: Cinema Icon Liv Ullmann Directs ‘Miss Julie’

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- [1890](#) [2]
- [50th](#) [3]
- [August Strindberg](#) [4]
- [Chicago International Film Festival](#) [5]
- [Colin Farrell](#) [6]
- [Cries and Whispers](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Ingmar Bergman](#) [9]
- [Interview](#) [10]
- [Ireland](#) [11]
- [Jessica Chastain](#) [12]
- [Joe Arce](#) [13]
- [Liv Ullmann](#) [14]
- [Midsummer Night](#) [15]
- [Miss Julie](#) [16]
- [Norwegian](#) [17]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [18]
- [Persona](#) [19]
- [Samantha Morton](#) [20]
- [Scenes from a Marriage](#) [21]

CHICAGO – Evoking the name Liv Ullmann is to bring back one of the more glorious and creative periods of Scandinavian cinema, especially the films of Ingmar Bergman. The actress has directed her seventh film, the passionate adaptation of an August Strindberg play, “Miss Julie,” featuring Jessica Chastain and Colin Farrell.

Ms. Ullmann’s film was the opening night feature of the 50th Chicago International Festival, and will be released in New York City on December 5th, and selected cities thereafter. Written by famed playwright August Strindberg, and adapted by Ullmann, the three person drama takes place in 1890 at an Irish baron’s estate. Two characters – a male valet and mistress of the manor – have a sexually tense struggle to reconcile their feelings for each other. Ullmann conjures up a charged and tragic atmosphere, and the three actors – Jessica Chastain, Colin Farrell and Samantha Morton – give memorable performances.



Liv Ullmann at the 50th Chicago International Film Festival

*Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

Ms. Ullmann was the daughter of a Norwegian engineer, and lived in Toyko, Oslo, Canada and New York during her childhood. After doing stage work in the late 1950s, she began a notable film career and collaborated with the virtuous Swedish director Ingmar Bergman ("Persona," "Cries and Whispers"). She was often called the director's muse, and worked closely with him until his death in 2007. She directed her first full length feature in 1992 ("Sofie"), and "Miss Julie" is her first directorial effort since 2000.

HollywoodChicago.com got a few moments with Ms. Ullmann, the legend and the muse, at the 50th Chicago International Film Festival. Her thoughts on directing, Bergman and men are contained in this brief encounter.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** When you adapted the play into a screen treatment, what were you understanding about how you were going to take it from stage to film?

**Liv Ullmann:** I thought there were possibilities that you can't have on stage, because you can see the whole thing, as you experience it on stage, but the camera can also see the full face in close-up, and expose the duality. If a wide shot or a full body shot can show one angle of a claustrophobic kitchen, the face can perhaps show the opposite.

And in adapting it into a screenplay, I can use Strindberg's words, but also put a few of my own in, and not go against what he said. Strindberg hated women, and expressed this before he wrote the play, so it was easy to add in something he didn't write, when she said she felt like a nobody..

**HollywoodChicago.com:** This is your fifth feature film, but first in 14 years...

**Ullmann:** Yes, I was surprised that so much time had gone by. I was doing a lot of stage acting in that period, and have directed a number of stage plays.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Okay, so what motivated you to this project? Was it something you'd always wanted to do or did you just gravitate towards it?

**Ullmann:** I wanted to direct a film adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's 'A Doll's House.' I had the funding and Cate Blanchett, but she got pregnant and couldn't do it, so Kate Winslet stepped in for a couple years. But then Norway didn't come through with their portion of the funding. I just withdrew from it.

I got an offer to do a part of a three-director movie, and each of the short films had to be about a femme fatale. I couldn't do that, but I went back to them with 'Miss Julie.' Maybe they thought she was a femme fatale, I don't know. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So why that play in particular?

**Ullmann:** I had directed Cate Blanchett on stage in 'A Streetcar Named Desire' and so much of that play was colored by 'Miss Julie.' I thought I'd love to get into this character. That's how the decision became 'Miss Julie.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you began as an actor, what traits have you picked up from film directors that you've applied to your technique?

**Ullmann:** I'm very good for actors, because I was a bit embarrassed by being an actor – this world of need and here I am being an 'actress.' [laughs] I never took it too seriously as a title, but I did love to act, and loved working with good directors. When I wrote one of my first scripts for a Danish company, they also asked me to direct it. I never even thought I could be a director.

I actually called Ingmar. He said, 'oh yes, you can direct.' So for the first week or so I was on the other side of the camera, watching the actors, and just imagined the possibilities. It was about the creation. That's when I realized what acting really was. And I'm a good director, because they know they have the freedom to be creative, and can trust me. What is best for them, that is what I use.



Colin Farrell and Jessica Chastain in 'Miss Julie'

*Photo credit: Wreckin Hill Entertainment*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In your years of experience, what do you love about the personalities and sensualities of men, and what do you dislike most about them?

**Ullmann:** Men are not good at listening. You're good at listening. You're not interrupting me so maybe you're listening, you see me and understand me. I find that men will interrupt me a lot, and not understand what I want to say. Since my father died when I was six years old, my early impressions of men were about how they provided for us and gave us safety.

As I had more experience in my adult life, I found them to be more vulnerable than women. And if you can learn to understand them, they are wonderful people, if they don't have to macho and do all that. I believe they are more vulnerable and get in touch with that side of themselves



much easier, if they dare to open up for you. That is why it is fun to be a director. Ingmar used to say it was easier to work with women, because they undress their feelings more than men. I find that men will do the same thing for me, as a woman director, and we can find things about them that are just so beautiful.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did you have that relationship with Colin Farrell in ‘Miss Julie’?

**Ullmann:** Yes. I looked into an incredible soul. He dared to do this film without being a macho man, but by showing the real vulnerability of someone who wants to move up in life, and dares to really show it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Was Ingmar Bergman the type of person where the thing that made him great, also had the power to destroy him?

**Ullmann:** If he had been a woman, that greatness would have destroyed him. No woman could have lived their work as much as he did, and demanded so much without consequences, and have someone else take care of the children. He lived a very self-forgiving life. Because he was a man he could do that, and everyone respected him and thought he was great, including me. He gave everything to the creative work, as a writer, director and caregiver for actors.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What do you think now about your legacy in association with him, as his muse, and the effect on cinema history?

**Ullmann:** I’m very proud, and still don’t understand why he wanted to work with me so much, after we met each other. I asked once and he said. ‘don’t you understand, you’re my Stradivarius.’ I do believe he was a genius in his art, and as I read a script now to adapt for the stage, he was also a thinker and a philosopher – that is why he will last. The art of cinema will always come back around to him.

He did need me, and probably because I saw in him what I just described. That connection won’t be as recognized in his overall work – but he gave me a creative life, because of my life with him.

*“Miss Julie” opens in New York City on December 5th, and in select markets thereafter. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Jessica Chastain, Colin Farrell and Samantha Morton. Adapted for the screen and directed by Liv Ullmann. Not Rated.*



[22]

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- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/august-strindberg>
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- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/colin-farrell>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/cries-and-whispers>
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