

Dancer in the Dark

by Rhys Graham

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Dancer in the Dark (Lars von Trier, 2000) opens with an overture - four minutes of darkened screen filled with grand orchestral sounds written by the film's central actor and composer, Björk. This operatic beginning introduces Lars von Trier's distinctive and divisive foray into the genre of film musicals and sets the tone for the tragic peaks of opera to follow, heights which few film musicals have attained. A solitary heroine with a tragic secret. Unrequited loves. Horrific deaths. Heart-rending music. And none of the joyful releases of the Hollywood studio musicals which defined the genre.

Dancer in the Dark, von Trier's *Palm d'Or* winning follow-up to his *dogme* experimentation, forms the final instalment of what the filmmaker calls his "Golden Heart" trilogy. The trilogy, initiated with the extraordinary *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and followed by *Dogme 1: Idioterne* (*The Idiots*, 1998), is loosely based on a story that von Trier recalls from his childhood about a young girl whose generosity and goodness is 'punished' with great suffering. Each film forms an intricate study of a woman with a 'golden heart' immersed in circumstances that give rise to grave self-sacrifice resembling a modern-day martyrdom. This final part of the loose trilogy connects with certain thematic elements of the preceding films but *Dancer in the Dark*, like *Breaking the Waves* and *Idioterne*, is not necessarily strengthened by the comparison. Instead, it stands alone as a singular and confoundingly brilliant film that, like much of the recent output of von Trier, has already given rise to extreme reactions.

In a recent article for the *Chicago Reader*, Jonathan Rosenbaum dismisses praise for *Dancer in the Dark* and Lars von Trier as largely due to von Trier's "hustling" ability and "publicity stunts", and little if nothing at all to do with his abilities as a filmmaker (1). With all due respect, it is interesting, again, to see von Trier capable of eliciting knee-jerk reactions with his films. Much of the discussion around *Idioterne* and the *dogme* manifesto was vehement, and his opponents frequently reverted to inarticulate personal tirades against von Trier as a way of critically engaging with his films. Perhaps it is because von Trier is interested in raising questions about how we both make and view films that his critics so often respond to his work with fists raised. Yet he asks, what lazy assumptions have we come to make about cinema? Do we need all the visual trappings that we have become accustomed to or can we still invent a cinema that intrigues, involves and

encourages us to be emotionally and intellectually involved with both the finished work and the mechanics of its production (*Idioterne*)? Can we only understand an austere story of spiritual searching and transcendence through a Dreyer-like sparseness, or can we understand it as an audience via a camera-eye that is active, searching and occasionally formless or lost (*Breaking the Waves*)? Or, in the case of *Dancer in the Dark*, can we combine the lightness and frivolity of the musical genre with an intense and extreme emotional outcome? Can we mix and match genres and styles but maintain coherence through a deep emotional connection with the work? These sorts of questions serve both von Trier and his audience.

As a filmmaker, von Trier adopts a more literary style of imposing restrictions and hurdles upon his own intentions (like the *Oulipo* writers might have) so that he has to rely on new modes of invention to tell his somewhat classically tragic narratives. On the other side of the screen, his audiences are rewarded (or frustrated) when they detect in his films certain ways of telling and seeing that are unfamiliar and elusive in a time of a complex audience awareness of most conventions of cinema. Films such as *Breaking the Waves* entranced audiences (who, like me, were not at all 'hustled' by von Trier's previous efforts such as *Zentropa*) with the deceptive and seductive possibilities of film. *Dancer in the Dark* has the same potential, although many people now come to expect either brilliance or fuel for their outrage from von Trier. The film adopts conventions we know but weaves emotional rhythms into the interstices to surprise us as we suddenly swoon or stagger with their force.

Dancer in the Dark, when recounted in the twists and turns of its plot, is pure melodrama. Björk plays Selma, a hardworking Czech migrant who works in a factory in small town, Washington State. She lives in a caravan with her ten-year-old son Gene (Vladica Kostic) rented to them by an all-American couple, local policeman Bill (David Morse) and his wife Linda (Cara Seymour) in whose backyard they live. As Selma struggles to make ends meet, she lives concurrently in two worlds. The first is a world of darkness - she is partially blind with a hereditary illness that will also rob her son of his sight unless she can afford to pay for an operation. Selma keeps this a secret but works night and day, allowing neither Gene nor herself any small reward, saving every penny toward his operation. But the secret becomes a terrible burden as she must pretend to the world - to her fellow employees at the tool-and-die factory, her friends and family, and, more humorously, her fellow cast members in an amateur production of *The Sound of Music* - that she has the ability to see. Amid these hardships, she descends into the imagined second world - a world of light - in which she sings and dances in the musical numbers that she has always loved. In these magical sequences, Selma can never quite escape her surroundings and both the music and her imagined dances are strongly affected by the real world. Rather than the tinkle of pianos and harps, Selma's songs are punctuated by the clattering of machinery or train engines. These songs (sung by Björk and orchestrated in her unique style) are Selma's escape. So, as the events around her begin to descend steadily into tragedy, greater are her escapes into musical fantasy.

One day, Bill, whose wealth has been bankrupted by the excesses of his wife, learns of Selma's savings. Intent that no one will learn of his losses, he steals her money just as she has earned enough to pay for Gene's operation. Neither Kathy (Catherine Deneuve), Selma's closest friend whom she works with, nor Jeff (Peter Stormare), the man who loves her without requite, are aware of her pain or her loss,

so neither can help. Alone, Selma attempts to get her money from Bill. In a sequence of brutal tragedy, she kills him but regains her money. After his bloody death, during a musical interlude, Bill returns to life to sing and dance with her. As soon as Selma returns from her imagination, she runs away with her money. Jeff drives her to the hospital for the blind where she pays for Gene's operation, but soon after she is taken to gaol. The final parts of the film are relentlessly grave, as Selma is dragged through the courts and vilified for being a migrant, an outsider, for being greedy, thieving and murderous. Throughout all of this she refuses to concede her secret, terrified that the knowledge will affect Gene adversely. She is sentenced to death by hanging and spends her final weeks on death row in the custody of a sympathetic gaoler. Finally, she takes a steady march to her own death, her imagination resiliently singing and dancing, as she is hanged with her secrets intact, Gene's sight saved, her decline into darkness complete, her material salvation sacrificed, and her spiritual salvation assured.

The intermediation of fantasy and reality is a consistent theme throughout von Trier's recent films and his well-publicised *Dogme* declarations. Where the *Dogme* 95 manifesto seeks to break down artifice and fantasy in order to return to a closer, if more playful, "truth" in cinema, his own films focus on characters who rely on or are afflicted by complex emotional fantasies that help them to endure their circumstances. Selma, with her constant escapist fantasies, is the most generically familiar expression of this idea, but the enforced artificial reality of the 'idiots' and their commune, and Jan's (Stellan Skarsgaard) damage induced fantasies in *Breaking the Waves* are part of the same exploration. Visually, *Dancer in the Dark* moves effortlessly between two extreme states - that of the pure fantasy of the musical numbers and the documentary realism of the narrative.

It is clear that von Trier is interested in creating characters that he can then dissect at their most vulnerable, most fraught moments. It is perhaps this that led Björk to suggest that he is an emotional pornographer. But this is also an admirable quality in a time of often emotionally evasive narrative film. Von Trier, undoubtedly, takes his cinema and the performances of his actors to the limits of emotional endurance. It makes for confronting, relentless and grim material and, in the case of Björk in *Dancer in the Dark*, it also makes for one of the most intense and extraordinary performances in recent film history. Björk as Selma has been dismissed on a number of occasions as simply playing herself. This seems an absurd detraction given that every performer can be accused of this (yet, who does accuse Bruce Willis of playing the same lunkhead or Tom Hanks of acting the same dippy romantic?), and also overlooks the fact that Björk's performance traverses ground that clearly is not 'herself'. She is a distinctive performer with a singular appearance, accent and expression, and perhaps this distinctiveness encourages a narrow-minded critical dismissal. Her performance of a woman waiting for her own death, while doing her best to uphold one simple value that she has clung to through endless hardship, is heartbreaking. To his credit, von Trier creates the time and space for this performance to slowly reveal itself. Clearly, for the well-publicised turmoil on set, Björk's performance has been taken to depths that are difficult to watch. The sequences in which she kills Bill, and the final moments prior to her death, have the sense of such emotional realism that it is quite bizarre that 'Selma' could be mistaken for an internationally acclaimed musician from Iceland with no connection to a blind Czech factory worker, save that of music. Instead, I think it is the intense performance of an actor with a strong emotional

connection to the film, both creatively and emotionally. There is no doubt that this intensity makes the film difficult to watch, and screenings so far suggest that many have difficulty handling the dark depths of the story. Interestingly, the lightness and seductiveness of the musical numbers do not necessarily alleviate the impact of the drama but co-exist as an imagined state that ironically enhances the tragedy of the events.

The cinematography of Robby Müller (*Breaking the Waves*, *Paris, Texas*, *Dead Man*, *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai*) is gritty but embraces the loss of depth and colour saturation inevitable in digital video, opting for an observational documentary approach to the film. This works to bring us closer to the action, tuned as most audiences are to accept a certain 'real'-ness to DV images, and the closeness creates an uncomfortable intimacy as the melodrama takes a turn for the worst. Von Trier and Müller's observational style also makes for one of the more hard-to-define successes of the film which is to marry a new DV-realist tradition of photography with the excesses of the song and dance number. One of the most discussed technological elements of the film has been the use of 100 simultaneously rolling cameras to shoot the musical numbers. This concept, equal parts techno-gimmick and innovative exploration of the impact of DV on performance (begun in Vinterberg's *Dogme 2: Festen*) serves two purposes. At once, the use of 100 cameras concealed within the set, draws attention to the means of production, and creates a new space for viewing the musical numbers. The viewer is aware while watching the dance numbers that the cameras are directly avoiding an interaction with the movement of the dance numbers. Each change of camera perspective is an abrupt leap around the perimeters of the space in which the dancing occurs. Sometimes the camera is like a voyeur peeping in on Selma's dream-dances, viewing through the spokes of a bicycle, from behind a factory machine, through a window; sometimes the camera has the distance of a surveillance camera watching action pass through the frame. True, each camera is not necessarily figured for elegant framing, but as a composite whole, the energetic movement from camera angle to camera angle as the dancing unfolds creates a spatial priority favouring the choreographed numbers. There are no tracking shots as dancers fall into step behind the camera. Instead, the dancing occurs, on screen as in Selma's imagination, and the cameras loop and circle around this movement maintaining a sense of completeness or coherence for each song sequence as it unfolds. It is the realist camera of von Trier's recent works imposed onto the most anti-realist of cinematic sequences.

Each musical moment is heightened in colour and therefore distinguished from the almost monochromatic bleakness of the remaining scenes, but the transitions between styles are always triggered by onscreen action or diegetic sound. Von Trier suggested in the press kit for the film that, "I thought it would be interesting to put the documentary style up against the musical but I believe that I act from admiration for the way musicals are - I'm not trying to subvert or destroy anything. I'm trying to make it richer by somehow importing true emotion. It's such a beautiful cocktail, emotion and music." Von Trier's respect for the musical is most clearly seen in his use of Vincent Paterson as choreographer. Paterson, who also appears in the film, has been one of the pre-eminent choreographers in recent years, working primarily with artists like Michael Jackson and Madonna on large-scale dance productions, both live and in music video. His dance sequences embrace the reactionary approaches of von Trier but maintain a rhythmic and

musical allure that are usually captivating. The courtroom dances, in particular, confuse with their ability to entice the audience while our hearts ache with Selma's predicament.

While the notion of a gruelling musical tragedy set to the sounds of Björk directed by Lars von Trier seems truly incongruous, *Dancer in the Dark* succeeds exactly where it should fail. Von Trier lovingly extracts elements from the musical tradition and refigures them into a decidedly anti-American narrative performed by an international cast. The setting, shot in Sweden, set in America's north-west, peopled by an international cast is a dreamscape in which the emotions and interactions suggest a 'realism', while the physical reality is constantly undermined by the transition into Selma's imaginary dance numbers. Von Trier cannot be underestimated as a unique director, nor can his influence in using new methods and new technologies in creating cinematic landscapes go unrecognised. He employs a confident and reckless approach to integrating the kind of narrative and image over-saturation that makes up the viewing experience of much of his audience. Yet, in this recklessness, he keeps an undivided attention on his 'emotional pornography' which, in this case, means laying bare that which most films conceal through artifice and stylistic flourishes: the potential depths and heights of human emotion. The performances are consistently impressive, though Björk's rawness sits more comfortably (for all their conflict) with von Trier's style while Deneuve, Stormare and Morse seem somewhat overshadowed. *Dancer in the Dark* will undoubtedly polarise audiences but it should be seen if only for the purposes of collecting ammunition before weighing into the debate. This marriage of a scrutinising documentary approach to the joyous excesses of the Rodgers and Hammerstein is unlikely, brilliant and almost certainly a landmark in recent cinema.

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Endnotes:

(1) Jonathan Rosenbaum, "[Doing the Hustle](#)", *Chicago Reader*, uploaded 27 October 2000 

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