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Pop & Hiss

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Sparks' Ron and Russell Mael bring a staged version of their radio drama 'The Seduction of Ingmar Bergman' to the Los Angeles Film Festival.



High on any list of not-in-this-lifetime cinematic scenarios would be a movie musical starring Swedish auteur **Ingmar Bergman** as a fugitive in a high-drama police chase. Through Hollywood.

Yet that's exactly what transpires in "**The Seduction of Ingmar Bergman**," a musical theater piece created and performed by long-running L.A. art-rock band [Sparks](#) that will be a key element of this year's [Los Angeles Film Festival](#)

The work was commissioned by Swedish national radio and broadcast there in 2009, and will be presented for the film festival in a dressed-up stage reading, a world premiere presentation that Sparks' founders — brothers **Ron and Russell Mael** — look at as “a film to be.” Finnish actor Peter Franzen will take the title role and Ann Magnuson will have a key part among about a dozen players.

Part concept album, part radio drama, part opera, part Hollywood satire, “The Seduction of Ingmar Bergman” applies Sparks' signature brand of outrageous subject matter, barbed humor and expansive-yet-catchy pop music in exploring what might have happened had Hollywood come calling on Bergman in the wake of his critical breakthrough in 1956 at the **Cannes Film Festival** with “**Smiles of a Summer Night.**”

“I've had harrowing experiences inside a theater in ways the filmmakers never intended,” said Canadian director **Guy Maddin**, a longtime Sparks fan who has signed on to direct the film version and will take part in Saturday's presentation at the **John Anson Ford Theatre** in Hollywood.

“When I went to see ‘Matrix 2,’” Maddin said, “I barely got out of the theater without committing suicide. It wasn't the [Wachowski] brothers' fault; it was just the mood I was in. But I've been taken places, places I hadn't wanted to go. I've been turned into a fugitive by the moviegoing experience.”

And that's at the heart of “The Seduction of Ingmar Bergman,” which fantasizes about how the man hailed as one of the movies' greatest visionaries might have responded to the financial temptations and artistic compromises of working in Hollywood.

Those are issues the Mael brothers have wrestled with at times over their own four-decade career, during which they found their way into the pop mainstream with their early MTV-era hit “**Cool Places**” with **Go-Go's** singer **Jane Wiedlin**. More often, they've surfed pop's fringe with ambitious, quirky albums such as 1974's “Kimono My House,” 1982's “**Angst in My Pants**” and 2003's “**Lil Beethoven,**” in which they abandoned the rock band guitar-bass-drums format while still striving to capture rock's core elements — high energy, infectious lyric and musical hooks and liberating spirit — using largely orchestral instrumentation.

Sparks is lionized far more in Europe and Japan than in the U.S., hence the commission from Swedish national radio.

“To their credit, they said, ‘Musically you can do anything you want; we won't restrict you in any way,’” Ron Mael, 62, said as he sat next to Russell, 57, at a favorite coffee shop in West Hollywood on a recent morning. “The one stipulation they put in was that there had to be some connection in some way to something Swedish.

“Our knowledge of Swedish culture is kind of limited,” Ron said. “Bergman was one Swedish thing that we both knew about and were kind of passionate about.... Also, having Bergman in a musical is an interesting idea.”

The story is set in motion when Bergman, back in **Stockholm** after his triumph at Cannes, indulges an impulse to experience “escapist art of the worst sort: a typical American action film.”

When it's over and he exits the theater, Bergman finds himself on Sunset Boulevard, where he's chauffeured to a meeting with a slickly conniving studio executive, a role sung by Russell, whose operatically inclined voice was a significant influence on Queen's Freddie Mercury.

After L.A. Film Festival program director Doug Jones heard the recorded version of the work last year, “I immediately thought, ‘Wouldn't it be great to do something with this at the festival?’”

“It's such a wild fantasy of ‘What if?’ ...It gets to that underlying notion so many people have to deal with it at one point or another in their Hollywood career: staying true to their own vision, staying true to their art,” Jones said. “The use of Bergman is so great, because of all the world's great directors, you really think that if someone was not going to be seduced by Hollywood, it would be Ingmar Bergman.”

Maddin, too, thinks that as absurd as it may sound, there's a certain logic to the Maels' conceit.

"Apparently before he died, Bergman said he really enjoyed 'Sex and the City' and 'Armageddon,'" Maddin said. "No matter what his taste, at a certain point, at a moment of triumph such as when this 'Seduction' is set in 1956, it makes sense that there'd be a crisis in confidence.

"I've been through that myself: It's when you have your greatest success that you seem to be at your most vulnerable," Maddin said. "I like the fact that they knew, either instinctively or overtly, to place this at the moment of his greatest earlier triumphs, and then pull rug out from under him."

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--Randy Lewis

randy.lewis@latimes.com