

"Ordet"

The purpose of Calvin's film program is to augment local theater attendance. The Film committee's intent is not to promote foreign films or to replace the neighborhood theater but to present an overall view of the cinematic art. The committee selects exceptional films that are no longer or never were available to the Grand Rapids audience. These film "classics," along with the fickle world of current cinema help to present a well-rounded view of the major art of the twentieth century.

Just because Calvin has shown a majority of foreign films does not mean that foreign films are by nature greater than American films, but simply that they have been less available. Compared with the star-studded Cinema-Scope Technicolor sex-and-violence-au-go-go Hollywood extravaganza, the imported product is simply a poor fish. It is doomed to live out its short American life in small art theaters playing to a motley group of cinema enthusiasts and street buses.

Ordet is a case in point. Some excellent foreign films (*La Dolce Vita*, *La Notte*) have become American box office hits because they featured international stars involved in international hanky-panky. But *Ordet* has none of these. It is slow, black-and-white, Danish, religious, intellectual, and worst of all, has a minimum amount of sex. Consequently, this Danish masterpiece played in a few major US cities and meekly crept home.

But *Ordet* deserves to be seen, especially by an audience that calls itself Christian and collegiate. *Ordet* is set in a small Danish farming village divided by religious factions. There are those which embrace a more joyous life-affirming brand of Protestantism, and there are those of the strict black-shoe variety who equate sin with pleasure. The story focuses on a family of three sons belonging to the more liberal sect. The eldest son has become agnostic, the youngest son wants to marry a girl from the death-seeking sect, while the middle one is deranged and believes he is Christ. The father questions the justice of God in a Job-like fashion. The basic concerns of Christianity become lost in family quarrels and denominational bickerings, until a miracle occurs.

The devout wife of the eldest son dies in childbirth and lies in an open coffin. The insane son says he will raise her from the dead, but no one will listen. Finally through the faith of the wife's little daughter he commands her to awaken, and she obeys. It is a hoary old trick,

made hackneyed by use and abuse. Only a great director like Carl Theodore Dreyer could have pulled it off.

Ordet is a director's film, as was *Los Olvidados* shown here earlier this year. But Dreyer has none of Bunuel's volatility. The viewer gets a sense of complete control in a Carl Dreyer film; there are no missteps, no lapses, no mistakes. Rather, the film gives Dreyer's view of the world just as Dreyer envisioned it. Each shot is constructed with infinite precision, and each picture is a visual treat.

Regrettably, Dreyer's faults are almost as spectacular as his assets. All of Dreyer's films move at a painfully slow pace. It is this two-step beat of a funeral march which makes *Ordet* not only pondering and powerful, but also somewhat boring. One of the most devastating accusations that can be made against a movie is that it does not move, and Dreyer's films rarely move. *Ordet's* intellectual and visual intensity transforms this liability into an asset, but it will still never appeal to the John Wayne syndrome.

Ordet is not only an aesthetic but a moral high point in Carl Dreyer's work. A film-maker for over sixty years, Dreyer had preoccupied himself with a dark fate-filled vision of the world. His early films, *Leaves from Satan's Workbook*, *Joan of Arc*, and *Day of Wrath*, had pictured a narrow-minded and oppressive church. But in 1954 he spoke the *ordet* (word) about the church and faith. He spoke about a simple faith great enough to topple denominations and work miracles. Despite all the church's efforts, it has never been able to hide the essence of Christianity. In that fact lies the power of the trite "miracle" trick. Dreyer makes one realize that God does not exist because there is a miracle, but that God exists and therefore there can be miracles. Dreyer uses an old trick to tell the old story. It is a difficult thing to do, but once done it is shattering.

Ordet is open to many other interpretations. Some have seen it as an ingenious allegory on the death and resurrection of Christ with the two natures of Christ, physical and spiritual, each represented by a different character. Others have seen it as a story about the problem of suffering, others ecumenicity, others faith. Whatever interpretation one adopts, one thing is certain: Carl Dreyer is a master story-teller and it is regrettable that he is so little known. Let the John Wayne fans say what they will, *Ordet* is a very moving picture.