

Bergman

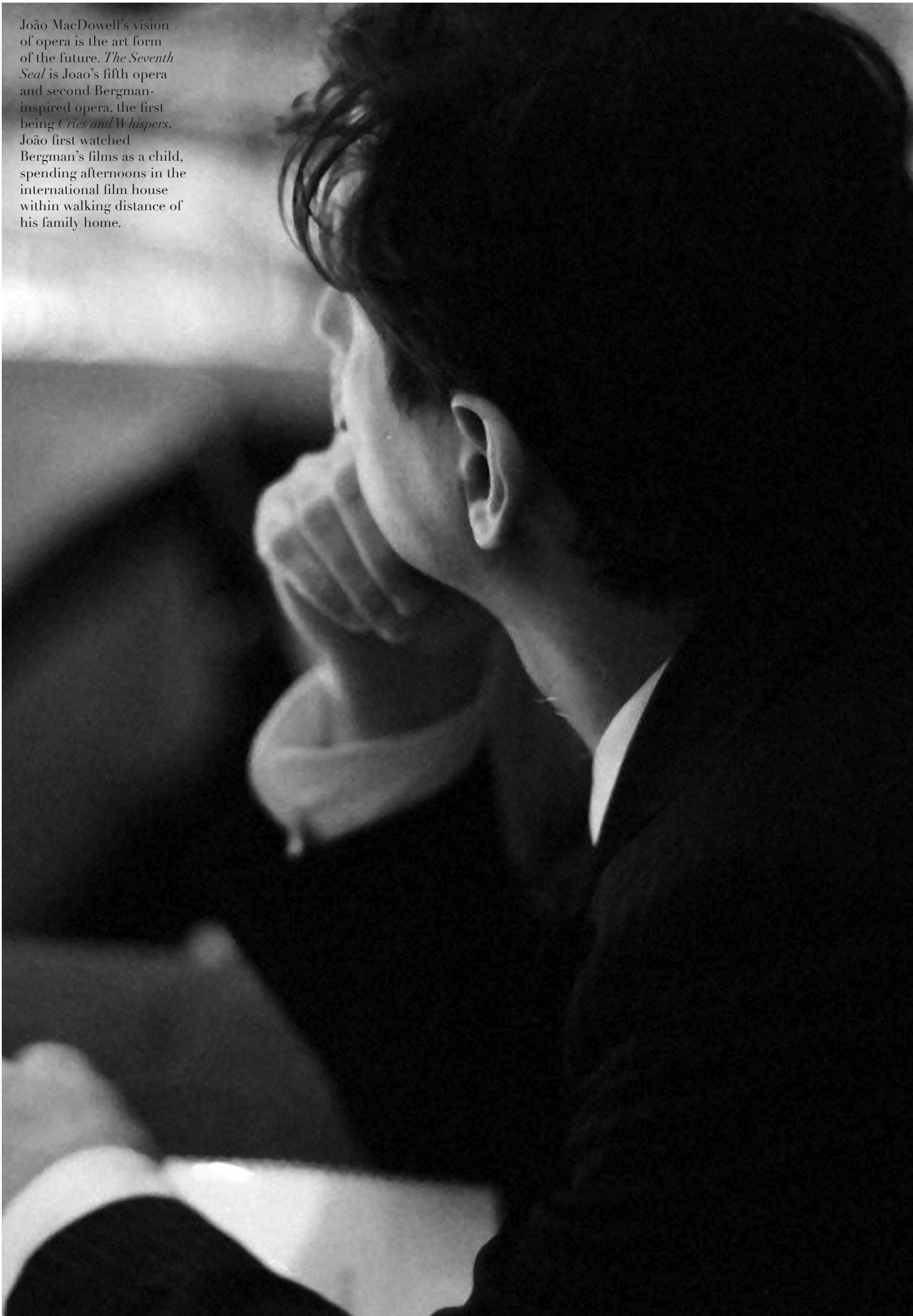
Portrait of João and Interview by Athena Azevedo
Introduction by Helen Beltrame-Linné
Makeup by Leo de Brasília

There seems to be a strong (and somehow enigmatic) connection between Brazil and Ingmar Bergman. It was the São Paulo Film Festival in 1954 that granted the Swedish director his first international award for *Sawdust and Tinsel*. Other countries would soon catch up and show their recognition for Bergman's singular and exceptional talent, but tropical Brazil remains a niche for admirers of Bergman's vast and growing years.

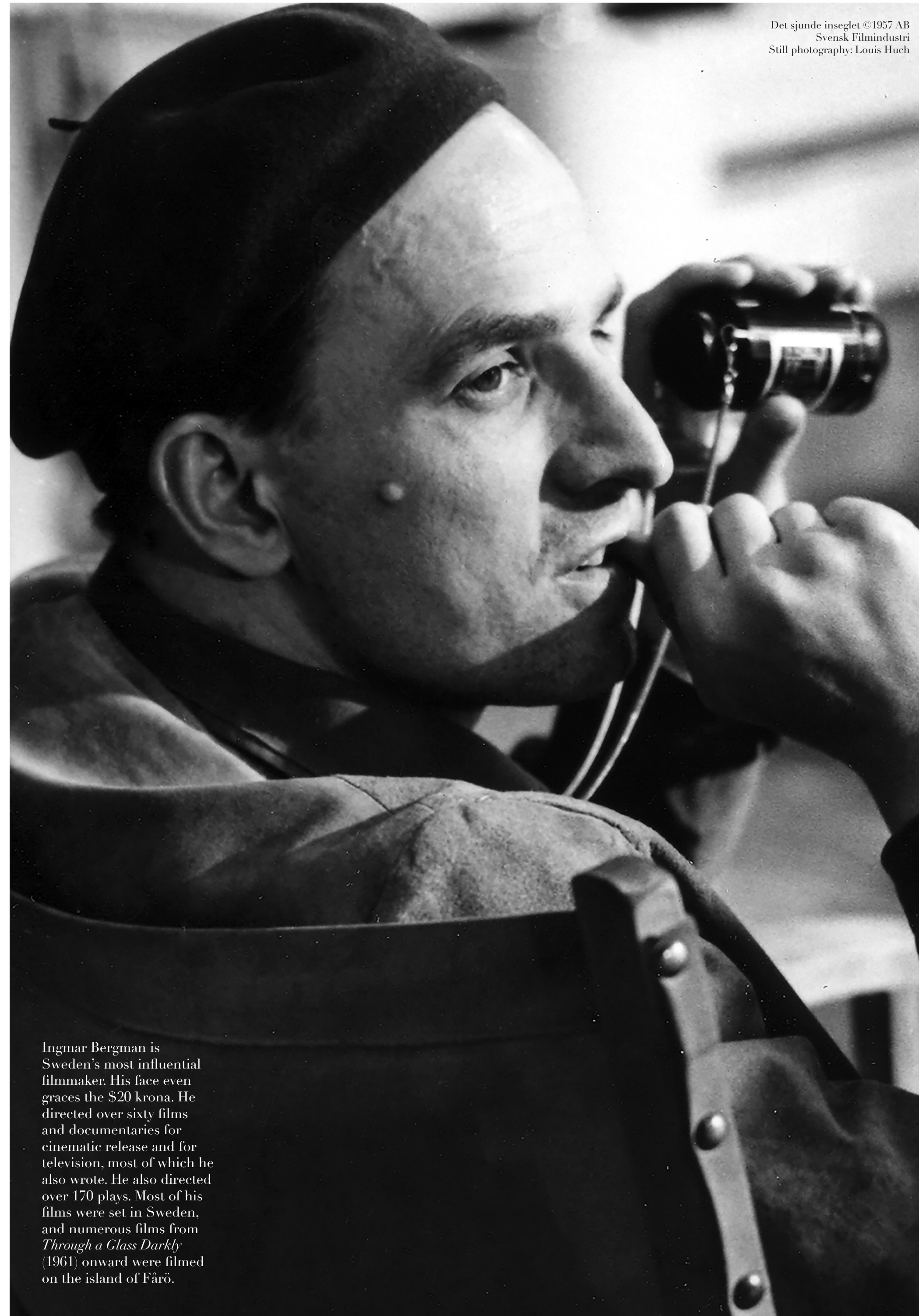
João MacDowell's ambitious adaptation of *The Seventh Seal* is a clear example of one Brazilian's devotion to the great Swedish master. After his first experience with *Cries and Whispers* in 2014, MacDowell now takes the Brazilian Opera one step deeper into the Bergman world, turning *The Seventh Seal* into a contemporary opera. Sixty years after the release of the film, the Brazilian composer has followed the clues that an extremely music-influenced Ingmar Bergman left embedded in both script and film, and translated this icon of contemporary culture into a fresh format, which will attract new audiences to Bergman's work.



João MacDowell's vision of opera is the art form of the future. *The Seventh Seal* is Joao's fifth opera and second Bergman-inspired opera, the first being *Cries and Whispers*. João first watched Bergman's films as a child, spending afternoons in the international film house within walking distance of his family home.



Det sjunde inseglet ©1957 AB
Svensk Filmindustri
Still photography: Louis Huch



Ingmar Bergman is Sweden's most influential filmmaker. His face even graces the S20 krona. He directed over sixty films and documentaries for cinematic release and for television, most of which he also wrote. He also directed over 170 plays. Most of his films were set in Sweden, and numerous films from *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) onward were filmed on the island of Fårö.

Athena Azevedo: In *The Seventh Seal* Bergman explores the role of the artist through the actor and musician Jof. How do you relate to this character?

João MacDowell: Jof is the clown. He is also the visionary, the songwriter, the poet. He and his wife Mia portray the troop of starving actors on the road. They seem to represent Bergman’s hope in the face of death and despair. These poor traveling performers are present in many of Bergman’s films. In many ways, that is the life of all of us artists hoping to find redemption in the moment of communion. *The Seventh Seal* is the film that is usually described as a very dark serious philosophical parable of apocalyptic dimensions. For me, it was interesting to find that the longer I spent with the text and as I became very intimate with each frame of the narrative, Bergman’s story became more and more a comedy to me. I can see the filmmaker and the crew having fun doing it. I see the little private

jokes planted here and there. The story makes sense because we have a troop of actors who manage to find humor and dance even in the darkest of times. Human society needs people like us. At dark and fearful times, like the ones we live in, where thoughts of doom prevail in our subconscious minds, that’s when it’s most important for us to have art. It’s a measure of the greatness of the spirit in all of us performers, no matter how small.

AA: Twice you stayed on Bergman’s estate on the far-off and rugged island of Fårö, in the Baltic Sea. Not even the Swedish are privy to this kind of access. What was it like and what did you work on there?

JM: The artistic residencies at Bergman’s estate on the island of Fårö in the Baltic have been a very spiritual experience of affirmation on the artist’s path. It was validation from a spiritual master, and transformation on a deep level, as if reaching to the depths of my own expression as an artist. In the first summer

I was there, I finished composing the opera *Cries and Whispers*. In the following year, I presented an instrumental based on the opera at the opening ceremony of Bergman week. That was a very special moment for me. During the same summer I also started writing the music for *The Seventh Seal*.

AA: You are the artistic director of the International Brazilian Opera Company (IBOC), which is the producing non-profit for *The Seventh Seal* opera. It seems so funny that a Brazilian composer and a Brazilian focused opera company would champion an operatic adaptation of this Swedish film. What is the connection between Sweden and Brazil?

JM: There is a cultural tie between these two distant countries. There are many Brazilians working with the Bergman legacy in Sweden. Brazil is also the country that licenses the most of Bergman’s work for theatrical productions it is a mysterious connection. Some explain it by the fact that Swedish filmmakers in the 50’s

had immigrated to Brazil and taught a generation of professionals, while also bringing attention to the achievements of Swedish film art. Of course, it is an honor and a great challenge to be working with the text of a writer who is of Shakespearean importance, certainly one of the greatest dramaturges of the 20th century. Part of the challenge was studying the language and listening to the music of it so that I could find melodies that made sense with the original text.

AA: What is the long-term vision for *The Seventh Seal* opera?

JM: It is a grand opera in scale, even though we have designed it to make the most use of an orchestra and cast of modest size. I hope the Opera goes on to tour many countries and becomes part of the repertoire. We are currently negotiating premieres in Brazil and New York for 2018, as part of the Ingmar Bergman centennial celebrations.

AA: Following in Bergman’s footsteps is quite the challenge. How do you manage it?

JM: It is a very humbling experience. There is the risk of being paralyzed by admiration for this great sensitive artist who was so influential to me in my formative years. The only way to get the work done is to leave all of that false sense of self-importance behind and at the same time let the drama and the story guide me. In many ways this may be the best music that I have written so far, and yet still the most fluent and easy work that I have written for the operatic stage. It is as if Bergman’s hand is always guiding me, I just need to listen very carefully and follow his lead. The quality of his writing is unbelievable. The hardest part is leaving elements out, there’s always something that I wish I could use but due to limitations of the format with the music there’s a lot of great lines that I just need to choose and in that moment it becomes a melodic choice. I have been very lucky to have some amazing collaborators

such as Bengt Gomér, who has been working closely with me as a dramaturge and Sophie Sorenson, who has been fundamental both in helping edit prosody and coaching the singers in the Swedish pronunciation. Some of the changes that we made were necessary in the adaptation, always trying to keep in mind that a loyalty to the spirit of the drama should be more important than to literal elements of the form.

Bergman’s generous personality opens the door. He has this vulnerable courage to deal with the greatest themes, at the same time exposing the frailty of our existence and the comedy of our anxieties. Humor plays a big part in it. Not the open slapstick kind of humor, but a more subtle one, as in accepting the fact that there is no “final truth”, and living with the humor that reveals Beauty in the uncertainty.

