



Sweet life, sour ending



CELEBRATED: Ekberg, who died at age 83 in Roca di Papa, near Rome, was the ultimate male fantasy with her pouting lips and a daring dress sense.

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The Swedish star, Anita Ekberg, — who died on Sunday — was, along with Marilyn Monroe, one of the most admired pinup girls in a world that was just getting over the catastrophic World War II.

In the spirit of utter relief, Europe and America were ready to celebrate. Sex and freedom emerged through girlie magazines that men ogled at. And Ekberg was perfect for this mood of liberated fun.

Ekberg, who died at age 83 in Roca di Papa, near Rome, was the ultimate male fantasy with her pouting lips and her daring dresses that seduced and titillated through an endless stream of images.

She was, however, best known for her arrestingly sensual scene in *La Dolce Vita*. Wading into the tourist hotspot of Rome's Trevi Fountain in a strapless black dress, she almost froze to death in the cold waters of February when the film, directed by Federico Fellini, was shot.

On top of this, her co-star, the dashing and debonair Marcello Mastroianni, was drunk, which helped him to keep warm. But he was stumbling, necessitating repeated takes. Finally, "they had to literally lift me out of the water, because I could not feel my legs", Ekberg had once said.

However, the uncomfortably icy experience was worth it all. The scene of

Ekberg dancing in the water and splashing it all around, cooing all the time, "Marcello, come to me", is one of cinema's most iconic romantic moments. *La Dolce Vita* won the Palm d'Or at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival and the Oscar for Best Costumes.

But all this allure has — much to the chagrin of the Italian authorities — led to dozens of tourists jumping into the Trevi Fountain trying to copy Ekberg's magic moment.

In 1996 after the death of Mastroianni, the fountain was turned off and covered in black as a mark of honour to one of the most captivating performers.

Playing a movie star, Sylvia, in *La Dolce Vita* — chased by the paparazzi (the first time the term was used), including a pleasure hunting tabloid journalist, essayed by Mastroianni — Ekberg shot into immense fame, her voluptuous figure and whispery voice adding to her image of a siren who seemed unattainable. Not just to that journalist, but others as well.

Once a photographer, Felice Quinto, clicked Ekberg kissing a married producer at a Rome night club and followed her home. She went in and came back with a bow and arrow. One hit him on his hand. She then knelt and gave him a punch in his groin. The shocked man winced in pain. However, Quinto still managed to sell those pictures to tabloids the world over. Such was Ekberg's charm and importance then.

She was as renowned for her style as she was her romances with major stars of

Pedro Almodovar

The Spanish master, Pedro Almodovar, has begun working on his next film, *Silencio*. The title denotes the main element which provokes the worst things that can happen to a woman, the female protagonist in this case.

In an interview to *Financial Times*, he described the movie as "a return to the cinema of women, of great female protagonists, and it's a hard-hitting drama, which excites me".

Almodovar, who has been often casting his favourite actors like Penelope Cruz and Antonio Banderas, is planning to move outside this circle. The script of *Silencio* does not quite suit these artists. (In fact, Cruz owes a lot of her fame and success to Almodovar, and there was a time when it was rumoured that she was in love with him — till she got involved with Tom Cruise, a relationship which lasted three years. She is now married to Javier Bardem — whom she first met at the shoot of *Jamon Jamon* in 1992.)

Silencio will be all about strong women — in the tradition of films like *Volver* (where Cruz's character murders her husband and puts the body inside a huge freezer) and *All About My Mother*. An equally strong woman-centric movie, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988, nominated for the Best Foreign Language Oscar), has just been adapted to stage. It is on in London with Tamsin Greig essaying the lead.

As much as *Silencio* will be a strong female oriented film, it will also be narrated with a touch of comedy. Almodovar has always maintained that though comedy is looked down upon as a lesser genre, it is in fact superior. His examples have been Ernst Lubitsch and Billy Wilder, whose comic roles were just classic.

Almodovar — who makes movies in Spanish — shot into limelight as writer and director at the time of *La Movida Madrilena*, a cultural renaissance which followed the death of the country's dictator, Francisco Franco. The helmer's first works were wonderfully evocative stories about political and sexual freedom.

the era like Frank Sinatra and Gary Cooper — though these relationships were never confirmed.

Ekberg married twice — first to actor Anthony Steel from 1956 to 1959 and then to actor Rik Van Nutter from 1963 to 1975. She had no children.

Apart from her most celebrated appearance in *La Dolce Vita*, Ekberg was also known for her roles in *War and Peace* with Audrey Hepburn, *Artists and Models* with Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin and *Paris Holiday* with Bob Hope. She tried, but lost out on the part of Honey Ryder in the first James Bond movie, *Dr. No*.

A former Miss Sweden, Ekberg clinched a Golden Globe for Most Promising Newcomer for one of her first Hollywood forays, the 1955 thriller *Blood Alley* with John Wayne and Lauren Bacall.

Ekberg was born in Malmo, Sweden, on September 29 1931, the sixth of eight children. In 1951, she was crowned Miss Sweden, and went to the US to vie for the Miss Universe title.

She did not win this, but instead got a

Yet, when Almodovar was asked to direct *Brokeback Mountain* — with full artistic freedom and a right over the final cut — he stepped back, because he was not comfortable with that one scene of gay sex. It eventually went to Ang Lee.

Winner of Academy Awards for *All About My Mother* (1999, Best Foreign Language Film) and *Talk to Her* (2002, Best Original Screenplay), Almodovar has made several riveting films — some of which were *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), *High Heels* (1991), *Live Flesh* (1997), *Bad Education* (2004), *Volver* (2006), *Broken Embraces* (2009) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011).

Dealing with complex issues centring on melodrama, pop culture, irreverent humour, desire, passion and family, the auteur has also been a great boxoffice appeal



CHANGED SCRIPT: Pedro Almodovar

contract with Universal. She landed small parts there and also appeared in Bob Hope's television serials — where her curves were "fodder for jokes".

Over five decades, she made over 50 films. By the late 1970s, her career was just about over. Her most recent role was portraying Ingrid in the Italian television series, *Il Bello Delle Donne*, produced by Silvio Berlusconi's Mediaset.

In contrast to her early and middle life, Ekberg's last years were one of suffering. She broke her hip when her pet dog knocked her down. And when she was in hospital, her house was robbed and also damaged in a fire, and according to the Italian media, she died lonely and penniless.

It was a sad end to one of the best known pinup girls whose sexy magnetism drew men like nothing else. And she partied and partied as if there was no tomorrow.

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