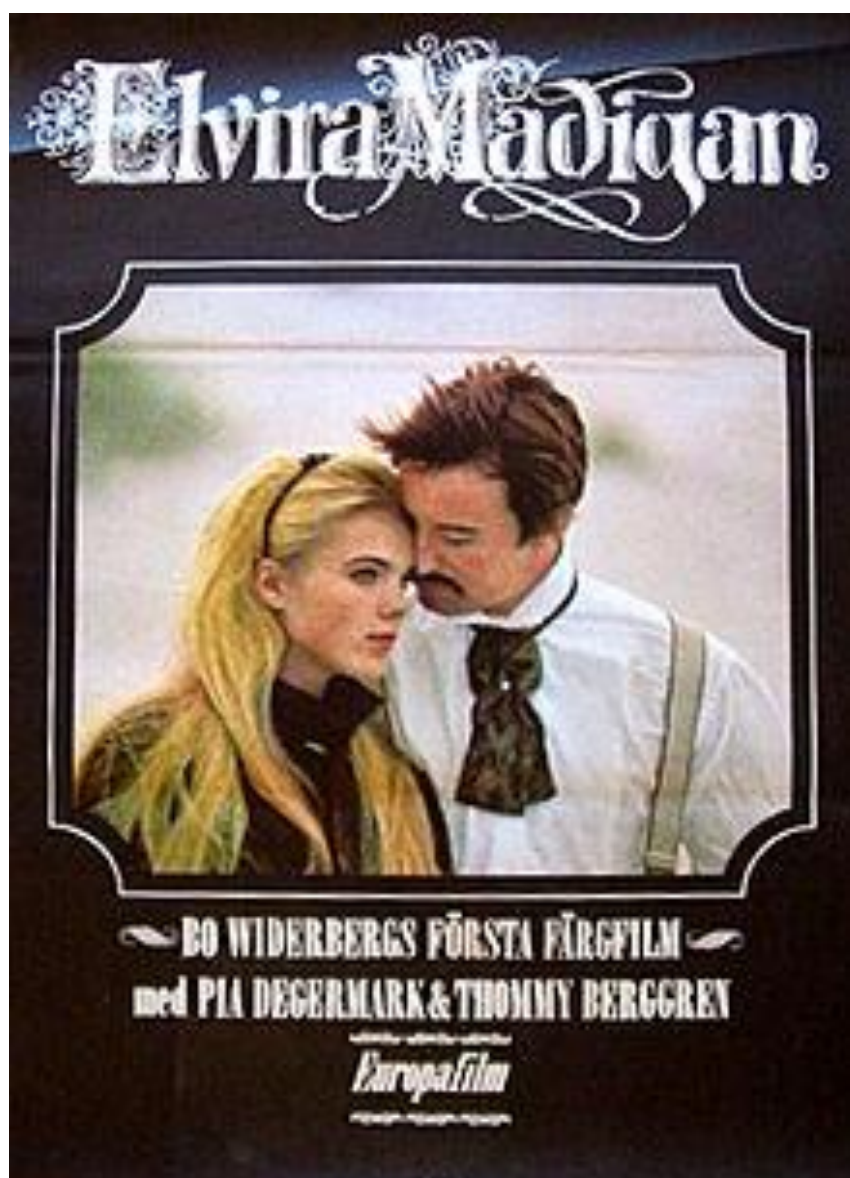


# Elvira Madigan



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

Directed, edited and written by Bo Widerberg. Produced by Waldemar Bergendahl. Cinematography by Jorgen Persson. Original Music by Mozart and Vivaldi. Costumes and Art Direction apparently uncredited.

Cinematic length: 90 minutes. Production Company Europa V Films. Cinematic release: April 1967. DVD release 2004. Rating 90%.

All images are taken from Wikipedia Commons Wikimedia and get Google. These images are used following requested permission steps.

Written Without Prejudice

### Cast

Pia Degermark - Hedvig Jensen, known as Elvira Madigan.

Thommy Berggren - Lieutenant Sixten Sparre. A Swedish Count

Lennart Malmer – Lieutenant Kristoffer

Cleo Jensen - Cleo

### Review

Upon its release in April 1967 many critics commented that *Elvira Madigan* must be either the most beautiful film ever made or a strong contender for that title. There can be no quarrelling with those opinions. Four out of five settings were in rural Sweden, the other was in Denmark and all are filmed in bright summer weather. Lush green forests lit by dappled sunlight, fields of yellow grain, castles and concert halls, crystal clear brooks, pale blue ponds, immaculate villas and farmhouses... The music matches; this is remarkable as it was a last minute replacement for a commissioned score director Bo Widerberg disliked. The exquisitely beautiful music of Mozart and Vivaldi seems just right. It seems a point that Widerberg makes is that tragedy can unfold against an idyllic background. It can also unfold on young, good looking, well intentioned and optimistic people.

This is not to give away the ending, because at the beginning we are told that the young couple Hedvig Jensen (Pia Degermark) a famed circus performer known as Elvira Madigan and Sixten Sparre (Thommy Berggren) a Swedish

Count and lieutenant of cavalry, committed suicide in July 1889. Widerberg bases his story on their last months. In the first scenes they seem as far away as possible from being suicides. On an idyllic summer day they lie under a tree, exuberant in their love and carefree. In the next scenes we see roll call in Sixten's cavalry unit where his commander and troops appears puzzled by his absence and the also puzzled circus ring master asking for Elvira Madigan. These very brief scenes are all that is depicted of their life before the elopement. They have just run off together after finding true love: we are in the world of the united couple, the world of happily ever after. We do not see how they met, how or they decided to run off together. We are in a land where dreams come true – for a time.



Even in this idyll food has to be paid for and as their money runs out they begin to become desperate. After one narrow escape they sense that they will never be able to settle down. Sixten will be pursued and jailed for military desertion. When Sixten's friend and fellow officer, Lieutenant Kristoffer (Lennart Malmer) tries to warn Elvira of the cost and the consequences she replies "There are times when you don't question the cost." Indeed she does not. In this idyllic world reality intrudes every time Sixten stares at his dwindling money which decides the pattern their lives. The world exploits them when it can. Elvira sells a portrait of herself cheaply, believing the artist to be an unknown French cripple. We see the signature of Toulouse Lautrec. When she applies to entertain as a tightrope walker at a village fair, it turns out that she is





*Almost every shot in the film is as beautiful as these two are.*



wanted for erotic dancing, followed by prostitution. Sixten's bashing of one of the creeps saves her, but ensures that she remains unpaid, while they are permanently starving.

The forest can be beautiful, but its beauty can be unsustainable as Elvira finds out when she tries to scavenge nuts, berries, and mushrooms there. She ends up on her hands and knees vomiting. She is the first to realise that they have no choice but suicide and she tells Sixten "You know what we must do" the film's last words. She is shown catching a butterfly in freeze frame and two shots ring out.



*The graves of the lovers*

These young lovers express so much of the youth rebellion and idealism of the 1960s. Elvira recalls her horrible childhood memories of being in the siege of Paris in 1870-71 and expresses her distaste for war and the military world. She is joyful when Sixten cuts off the buttons and braid on his military coat. In conversation with a stunned Kristoffer he explains that he has changed; he now takes the woman's view of war and soldiering and rejects both. Elvira looks forward to a day sometime in future when there are no classes and people can live as they wish. She seems to be living the 1968 graffiti 'TAKE YOUR DESIRES FOR REALITY' without realising how dangerous and devastating such ideas can be. When Kristoffer tells her that she has helped Sixten betray

Sweden she responds by telling him that her parents are Swedish and Danish, and her step-father is American so she has no national loyalties and the lines on national borders are like the lines on her hand, meaningless, the hand must be what counts. Widerberg caught the mood the ambience of the time that was permeated with those ideas (1967 not 1889) so well that fifty years on watching this film the youth of that time can recall our idealism, not faded, or disillusioned, but with the freshness and hope it once held. These ideas are expressed with an optimistic 1960s sweet sincerity that once the film is over, now seems poignant, given what the world has become. We continually see what happens to people who do not fight and much of the fighting is not done by armies, but by gangs and solitary religious fanatics. We live in a world where feminism has gone from a vision of a peaceful egalitarian world, to one where most feminists are no different to men who are after power and careers. Many armies are now controlled by women, who in their youth were peacenik feminists. Internationalism and Elvira's dream of a world without borders has fuelled the twenty-first nightmare of what has happened when tens of millions of refugees rushing to the west for survival and/or money for their demanded better life.

The film caught a popular mood, gaining 520,000 admissions in Sweden alone, despite Sweden having a population of under eight million then. Even allowing for tourists and second time watchers, around one in sixteen Swedes went to the cinema to see it. This was despite the way the film was retelling an earlier 1943 Swedish version and competing with another cinematic version that same year. In the US and Canada it initially gained over two million 1967 dollars, a remarkable figure for a film without widespread publicity or distribution, mixed reviews and puzzlingly, no Oscar nominations. As Pia Degermark's voice was dubbed because it sounded so Swedish and her character was Danish, this may have been a cause. The academy does not seem to like dubbed roles.

Pia Degermark won at Cannes for being the best Actress and Widerberg was nominated for best director. The National Board of Review gave it the best foreign language film of the year award and BAFTA the best cinematography award.

In the spring of 1967 when this film was released the hippie dream of dropping out and living in sensuality was taking hold and the Beatles were singing 'All You Need is Love.' Clearly, although his film has 1889 characters permeated with the idealism of the middle 1960s, so sympathetically portrayed, Widerberg ultimately had a different, sadder, but truer viewpoint.





*Bo Widerberg 1930-1997*