



Susanne Bier: A Filmmaker with No Scarcity of Laurels

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Director Susanne Bier

Source: IMDb (All Images for Reference)



One of the most renowned contemporary directors today is Susanne Bier. With a string of popular films and television series under her belt, this Danish filmmaker is currently in high demand across the globe. Some of her most popular works include the films *Bird Box*, *After the Wedding*, and *In a Better World*, as well as the television series *The Night Manager*, *The First Lady*, and *The Undoing*. With numerous award-winning hits both in Danish and English, Bier has made history as the first female director to have received all four of the Academy, Golden Globe, Primetime Emmy, and European Film Awards, an achievement that earned her the honorary European Achievement in World Cinema Award from the European Film Academy. The film *In a Better World* earned her Academy, Golden Globe, and European Film Awards, and the series *The Night Manager* earned her Primetime Emmy and Golden Globe Awards, alongside many other prestigious ones like the Robert and Bodil awards. She has also served as a jury member at festivals of repute like the Berlin and Tokyo International Film Festivals.



Susanne Bier

Source: Les Kaner, Wikimedia Commons



Bier as a member of the International Competition Jury at the Tokyo International Film Festival

Source: Dick Thomas Johnson, Wikimedia Commons

Bier studied art at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, architecture at London's Architectural Association, and film at the National Film School of Denmark. Her highly acclaimed legacy can be easily traced even to here, with her graduation film *De Saliges* (1987) winning the first prize at the Munich Film School Festival. She started her professional directing career with several music videos and commercials, and a few moderately received feature films like *Freud's Leaving Home* (1990), *Family Matters* (1993), *Like it Was Never Before* (1995), and *Credo* (1997). Her Danish breakthrough came with *The One and Only* (1999), a romantic comedy about two couples becoming parents for the first time. It earned the Robert and Bodil awards and several Danish Film Academy awards. Considered one of the harbingers of a new and more modern wave of Danish romantic comedies, it was a huge box office success and remains one of the most successful domestic films released in Denmark.



Stills from Bier's films *The One and Only* and *Brothers*

Source: MUBI & European Film Awards



After another moderately received film, *Once in a Lifetime*, one of her most notable films, *Open Hearts*, was released in 2002. This was also a story of two couples, albeit ones whose regular day-to-day lives are thrown for a loop by a car crash. With wins at the Robert and Bodil Awards and even the International Critics Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, this was probably the work that opened up Bier's work to international audiences in a way that was quite memorable and hard to ignore. Also, the film was made in the more minimalistic Dogme 95 style and gained the accreditation of Dogme film #28. Dogme 95 is an avant-garde Danish film-making movement pioneered by the Dogme 95 collective consisting of renowned directors Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, Kristian Levring, and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen. With an intention to 'purify' cinema, the movement was based on the Dogme 95 Manifesto that listed a Vow of Chastity consisting of ten rules like only color films with no special lighting, usage of only hand-held cameras, and shooting on location only. Despite its lack of longevity (there are only 35 certified Dogme films), the movement is quite well-known across international filmmakers and audiences alike. The international focus on the Dogme movement at the time could have helped further the reach of *Open Hearts*, but the Critics Award's note with the award suggested that it was the film that helped further the reach and growth of the movement itself.



The Dogme 95 Certificate for *Open Hearts*

Source: Dogma 95, Wikimedia Commons (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0)

Bier's next works were also well-received and awarded, like *Brothers* (2004), *After the Wedding* (2006), *Love is All You Need* (2012), and *A Second Chance* (2014). Her 2010 film, *In a Better World*, a thriller about a Swedish doctor commuting between his Danish home and his work in a Sudanese refugee camp, is one of her most awarded works. It won Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy and Golden Globe Awards, several awards at the European Film Awards, and festivals like the Rome and Thessaloniki International Film Festivals, Sevilla Festival de Cine, and Black Nights Film Festival.



Poster for *After the Wedding*

Source: IMDb

Bier directed her first American film, *Things We Lost in the Fire*, in 2007, and her second, *Serena*, in 2014, both of which performed moderately well. An interesting case here is the 2018 post-apocalyptic horror thriller *Bird Box*. Although this film has been widely considered not the best of films (or even a copy of *A Quiet Place*, as evidenced in the meme after this paragraph) by both audiences and critics, it was one of the top contenders on the list of most-watched films on Netflix within a month after their release. The film retains the third spot on this list and stands nominated for Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects at the Visual Effects Society Awards, and Best Film with Non-Theatrical Release at the Artios Awards. The film inspired several memes (which drove up the viewership of the film) and a viral blindfold trend that resulted in several government and company warnings against the trend, especially after a teenager drove blindfolded and crashed her car in Utah.



"can I copy your homework?"

"yeah just change it up a bit so it doesn't look obvious you copied"

"ok"



A Still from *Birdbox* and a Meme about the Film

Source: Variety & The Ringer



The television series is also another strong forte of Susanne Bier. Her first popular English-language work was the 2016 British television series *The Night Manager*, which won two Emmy and three Golden Globe awards, among several other wins and nominations. She also directed the 2020 HBO series *The Undoing*, which was nominated for several awards and won the Critics' Choice Award for Best Supporting Actor for Donald Sutherland. This series more or less cemented Bier's position as "one of the most in-demand directors in TV and film, male or female" (Lewis, 2020). Another series directed by her is the 2022 Showtime series *The First Lady*, an anthology series depicting the lives of former US First Ladies Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Ford, and Michelle Obama. Despite being nominated for multiple awards and receiving praise for its themes, costuming set design, and acting performances, the series was severely criticized and ended up getting canceled after one season. Audiences have to wait and watch to know what the next work Bier has up her sleeves is.





Television Series Directed By Bier:

Promotional Images for *The Night Manager* and *The First Lady*, and A Still from *The Undoing*

Source: Amazon UK, JioCinema & The New York Times



Susanne Bier is a name that has inspired several aspiring filmmakers and has an impressive legacy. Her films have also inspired several remakes, most notably *Brothers* (an American film remake and a Danish opera adaptation composed by Daniel Bjarnason), and *After the Wedding* (an English-language remake that premiered at Sundance). Some of the notable characteristics of her films include the exploration of questions of morality and traditional family frameworks. As she has shared in interviews, the moments that capture her interest the most are when her characters are forced to step outside their comfort zone and weigh their ethical constitution and moral compass in correlation to a sudden disaster that breaks down any remaining semblance of a sense of security. As a result, the pressures of globalization and impending disasters often weigh heavily on the minds of characters in Bier's films. The importance of portraying human resilience and dignity is an oft-recurring theme in Bier's works, especially inspired by the experience of Bier's Jewish family surviving the Second World War. Her mother's family had emigrated from Russia and her father's family from Germany, both forced to come to Denmark to evade antisemitic persecution. However, they were soon forced to flee to Sweden during the Danish Resistance Movement and returned to Denmark only three years after the war ended.



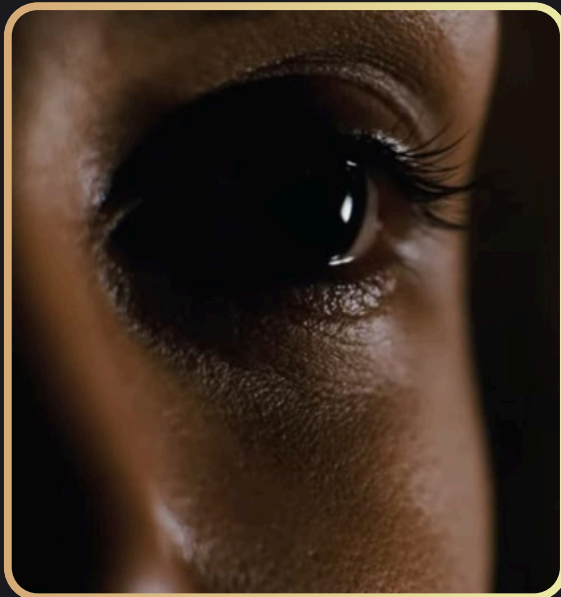
Bier at the 2011 Miami International Film Festival Career Achievement Tribute Dinner for her

Source: Miami Film Festival, Wikimedia Commons



Her films also have a certain 'visual code' defined by the use of shoulder cameras and a more 'random' and freer style of editing that is inconsistent with the traditional continuous editing style. A notable feature here is the emphasis on closeups in her works, particularly extreme close-ups on singular body features or parts like eyes, fingers, and lips, especially in scenes where characters undergo extreme emotional duress. She has shared that she makes sure to have repeated takes from multiple distances of these scenes while shooting to ensure that she can isolate certain expressions or movements and highlight the story using those. Also, despite her heavy employment of tragic themes, she doesn't overly dramatize major events, rather choosing to 'flatten' dramatic events, and tends to wind up her films on a slightly optimistic note. This might result in a perception that not much is happening in the scene; however, this directing style is believed to be more faithful to the dramatic structure of ancient Greek theater. With a unique directing style informed by her family's experiences and employing such engaging techniques, Susanne Bier thus remains one of the most popular and impactful female directors across the globe.





Closeup Shots from *In a Better World*, *Love is All You Need*, and the Trailer for *Things We Lost in the Fire*
Source: The Days Ordained & YouTube Screenshots from Amblin & Nordisk Film



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