Ingrid Bergman and Cecil B. DeMille: Two Obscure Films

You could scarcely find two more widely contrasted film-makers than Bergman and DeMille. Their only common denominator perhaps is that both have been vastly over-rated; Bergman as an artist, and DeMille as a showman. This double-bill of two of their lesser known works, lessening the myth somewhat, should thus be of more interest (and value) to objective historians than to out-and-out admirers of either director.

"Skepp Till Indialand" (Sveriges Folkbiografer A.B., Sweden, 1947) Written and directed by Ingrid Bergman; produced by Lennart Nilsson; from a play by Martin Soderhjelm; photographed by Goran Strindberg; music by Erland von Koch; sets by P.A. Lundgren; U.S. release in 1949, under the title "Frustration". Titles by Walter Ruckersberg, 9 reels.

The Cast: Captain Blom (Holger Olsen); His Wife (Anna Lindahl); Johannes (Birger Malmsten); Sally (Gertrud Fridl); Selma (Hjardis Pettersson); Vaudeville Manager (Ake Fridell); Bar crew (Isaace Kranz, Jan Molander, Erik Hell).

That Ingrid Bergman is not "the world's greatest director" or "the most creative artist in cinema today" (picking two quotes at random) is of course not his fault. The real tragedy is firstly that the cinema is so barren today, and most of the critics so unknowing, that his interesting if somewhat commonplace efforts have been hailed as both artistic and above all, new. So far he has come up with nothing that hadn't been done before, and better, and primarily in the twenties, by such directors as Robison, Leni, Seastrom and Dreyer. The second tragedy is that Bergman has, not too surprisingly, been taken in by all the nonsense, and, like Chaplin in the 20's, has tried to live up to it. The result: his films have become increasingly more pretentious, increasingly more "intellectual", and in equal proportion, increasingly less films. Since his films were always cheaply produced and shy on "production value" (and I'm aware that the use of that term gives the Bergman cult a wonderful opportunity for retaliation), his more recent stress on "ideas" as opposed to "cinema" has been particularly deplorable.

Like so many acclaimed directors, Bergman seemed to do his more vigorous work in his early days. To my mind (and as a non-Bergman admirer, this may not carry much weight) his best works were 1946's "Det Regnar Pa Var Karlek" (a sort of charming semi-fantasy, with a pleasing sense of humor) and 1948's "Hammastad". The latter was sordid in the extreme, but powerful and touching; at least, it seemed so in 1948. It may seem less so today in the wake of a whole decade of illicit sex and fatalism, although the sheer "shock" and nastiness of much of it - especially the abortion sequence - seems to be admirably attuned to today's tastes.

"Skepp Till Indialand" suffers today from this same kind of dating. It was probably never a really good film, and certainly its wholesale misery and despair seems quite pointless, not to say boring. But at least in 1947, this kind of thing wasn't yet cliché. Today one finds it hard to take seriously, and the whole tone of it is somehow summed up in the scene where the hunchbacked son tells his husband's mistress that nobody will ever love him because he is a cripple -- and she tenderly tells him, "You're not a cripple -- just a little deformed!" As gloom piles upon gloom, as the shadows lengthen and the backgrounds seem bleaker and bleaker, the whole film becomes almost as much a parody of a film-noir as was the deliberate parody in Kautner's "Film Ohne Titel". Yet, as a film, it is far more
accomplished, especially in matters of set construction, lighting and photography, than many of his more recent films have been. And despite cliches, the acting, and especially the occasionally quite poetic welding of image and haunting music, do result in worthwhile moments. In fact the film abounds in good sequences; it's a pity that they don't add up to much of a film.

INTERMISSION

"FOUR FRIGHTENED PEOPLE" (Paramount, 1934) Directed by Cecil B. DeMille; screenplay by Bartlett Cormack and Leonore Coffee from a novel by E. Arnot Robertson; photographed by Karl Struss;

With Claudette Colbert, Herbert Marshall, William Cargan, Mary Boland, Leo Carrillo, Nella Walker, Tetuš Konzal, Chris Pin Martin, Joe de Cruz, Minoru Nishida, Terru Shimada, E.R. Jinar, Delmar Costello. 8 reels.

"Four Frightened People" was made in '33 (just before the code cracked down— which accounts for some of the surprisingly raw sex in a '34 release) and released later, in January of '34. Luckily "Cleopatra" came along later in the year to bolster DeMille's reputation. DeMille, in his autobiography, calls the film his only flop. In a boxoffice sense, that isn't strictly true. Since more than one DeMille film, "King of Kings," among others, have never recovered their negative cost. But it is true that it is universally regarded as being his worst film, and while it may not be quite that, it's not far off. In his autobiography, DeMille also pulls a strobridge on us and tries to evade at least some of the blame. It was taken out of his hands he claims, and edited by someone who just didn't understand it. While one can accept that kind of story with a "Creed" or a "Red Badge of Courage," one can't spill too many tears for a "ruined masterpiece" here, and one really feels inclined to offer one's hat to an editor who could make any kind of projectable sense out of this kind of footage! Is it, one wonders, mere coincidence that DeMille the Showman only seems to pay off when he has 2nd Unit Directors like Rosson around to stage his big action highlights for him? When DeMille is alone with his talent, and no spectacle to fall back on, the results can be deplorable. "Road to Yesterday" and "The Volga Boatman," with their cheap spectacles, were indications; "Four Frightened People" is a kind of ultimate statement. (Griffith, Cruze, Brennon, Curtiz, all adept at spectacles, could fall back with ease to an intimate story. But DeMille, it seemed, could not. And this is surprising too, because some of his earlier, pre-spectacle films, particularly the two with Mary Pickford, were well-directed films.) A film as bad as "Four Frightened People" could have killed the career of a less important personality than DeMille. But, bad as it is as a film, uncertain in its wavering between comedy and drama, here and there thrusting an echo of "Male and Female," it is loads of fun at times. Karl Struss' camerawork (and some nice locations) give it a certain production "class"; Marshall and Colbert are always enjoyable to watch. The opening, and certain other scenes, have a certain larger-than-life, stately, silent-day style to them. But most of all it's fun in its insanely over-wrought and unexpected dramatization — the nude love scene, the hysteria when Colbert and Marshall are bound together by the natives, the expected cliches that arrive on cue but explode with such vigor that one can't help but surmise that everyone concerned firmly believes they aren't cliches at all. With twenty minutes trimmed from its running time, "Four Frightened People" would have been a wonderful zesty little film that Nick Grinde or Lewis Collin could have been proud of. As a Prestige "A" film it must be one of the misfires of all time. The trick, perhaps, is to imagine that you're seeing a Mack Sennett film rather than a DeMille, for taken in the right spirit, it's still quite an enjoyable piece of nonsense.

Next Tuesday - 16th - COMEDY & MELODRAMA - SHIELD OF HONOR (1927) with Neil Hamilton; BEAU HUNTES (Harold & Hardy); STILLS FOR THRILLS (Stunt Men) and four fine Warner cartoons - GO FLY A KITE; STUPOR MOUSE; MOUSE HOPPY and TWENTY TREED.

"- WILLIAM K. EVESON - "