Swedish cinema enjoyed its first (and considerable) peak in the years prior to and including 1920, and retreated as an influence in world cinema after 1924. At that time, Hollywood pillaged it of its top directorial talent, Mauritz Sieljar and Victor Sjöstrom, its biggest stars - Lars Hanson - and its most promising newcomer, Greta Garbo. For a small industry to be robbed of its key talent was nearer fact, though oddly Sweden was flattered at rather than embittered by the attention from Hollywood. Certainly good directors remained, Gustaf Molander especially, but for the remainder of the silent period, Sweden marked time, turning out less ambitious films primarily for home consumption. With the coming of sound, their limited outside market seemed to be cut even further. Initial Swedish talkies were strong on song and often strong on dialogue. Cuts from the thirties wore on, but in the forties Sweden turned its back more on more on one of its major assets its landscape, and retreated to the studios, turning out comedies, romances and dramas which gave Swedish audiences a plethora of the Swedish language, but not much else. Although some of these films got into U.S. release, they carried little prestige, and many of them got here rather belatedly; some of the Ingrid Bergman films for example were brought over only after her Hollywood success. However, and largely due to the work of one director, Alf Sjöberg, the Swedish film began a renaissance during World War Two, although obviously its impact could not be felt internationally until after the war. Not only was Sjöberg quite possibly Sweden's finest director, but he was also responsible for introducing Ingmar Bergman to film as scenarist of one of the Sjöberg films. Tonight's program offers a quick cross-section of the Swedish sound film: a typical home-consumption production from the 30's, some special prestige films from Sjöberg that marked Sweden's artistic revival in film, and a Danish/Swedish co-production, c. 1957.

Directed by George Schneevoight; from the novel by J.A. Frili; Swedish dialogue with English subtitles; 90 mins. With Aime Taube, Ingemar Haraldsson, Siri Schneevoight, Trygve Larsen, Peter Hoeglund, Carl Deurrell, Aake Ohberg Hendingren.

Although technically a Danish film, "Laila: En Saga" is typical of the Swedish landscape films more prominent earlier in the 30's, and is filmed on Swedish territory; indeed, it was the first sound film to be made in the Imap country, and considering the difficulties that must have been involved, it is a surprisingly polished production. Clearly real buildings (churches, stores, huts etc.) are used rather than sets most of the time, and this occasionally throws lighting or camera speed a trifle off-balance, but it is a small price to pay for the added sense of realism. "Laila", as used in the title, appears here in its more commercial form. The authentic sagas date back to Viking days and beyond, and were heroic tales, built both on history and legend, often spanning years and great distances, like the Greek odysseys. Eventually the term was pressed into use in Swedish popular literature to describe Scandinavian equivalents of The Edna Ferber family chronicles. With "Laila", it is used quite inappropriately, much as the word "spice" was frequently used on American westerns that were nothing of the sort. It is a Griffith-like tale of class-distinction, its main departure from Griffith being in that the exciting flight from wolves is used as an establishing plot sequence early on, rather than as a melodrama climax. It's not an especially eventful tale, but the novelty of landscape, wild life - and the life and customs of the nomads - keep it constantly interesting. Ironically, one of its major assets is also, in a sense, a shortcoming. Aime Taube, its lead, is a fresh and inviting personality - a beautiful girl who is something of a combination of Leo Reifenstahl and Ann Miller. But she lives and breathes a star persona, and in fact was best known at the time for bubbling comedies and musicals. It's hard to believe that a girl as beautiful and poised as she wouldn't very quickly tell the scrappy herdsmen that pursue her to get lost, and head for Stockholm and a career as a top fashion model. That reservation apart, she's a charming player, and a ruggedly healthy-looking one too.

Ten Minute Intermission

RINALDSEJJ (THE ROAD TO HEAVEN) Sweden; Wife Film, 1942) Directed by Alf Sjöberg; Scenario by Sjöberg and Rune Lindstrom from the play by Lindstrom; camera, Gustaf Polte and Gosta Roosling; Art Direction, Arne Akerman; Music; Olof Malmstorg, Hugo Bjoroe.

While it is probably quite unfair to judge, sight unseen, I suspect that the original play on which the film is based must have been, despite its sincerity, too austere a distillation of religious beliefs in the rather Sandmanian manner. Remember how superbly Sjöberg opened-up Strindberg's play "Miss Julie" without in any way robbing it of its power, one suspects that he has performed exactly the same function here.

--over--
Sjöberg was of the theatre, and after an initial film in the very early sound period, returned to the theatre until resuming a film career in the 40's. He obviously respects and uses the traditions of the stage, but "Himlaaspelet" is pure film, with its roots in the silent Swedish film and in German fantasy. It is no longer a religious tract, but a mixture of fantasy, legend and parable, done with an over-riding dignity and good taste. Just as one can recognise the influences of others on him, so, quite certainly, can one recognise his influence on Bergman and others. And of course, the influences go in both directions at the same time ... much of "Himlaaspelet" seems to derive from Dreyer's "Vampyr", but one can also recognise much of Dreyer's "Day of Wrath" deriving from "Himlaaspelet". Nor is it difficult to recognise American influences on "Himlaaspelet"; Sweden's neutrality would have made access to Hollywood product, even during the war, at least a possibility. One can't help feeling that Sjöberg may well have seen "Citizen Kane" and most especially William Dieterle's "The Devil and Daniel Webster", the latter film a parallel not only in theme but in several individual sequences. And the final grim and macabre reel is a direct throwback to Sjöstrom's finest film, the 1920 "The Phantom Charriot". But none of these influences should be interpreted as lazy borrowings; rather they are inspirations which are woven superbly into the complex tapestry of the whole.

In some ways, "Himlaaspelet" is rather typical of many wartime European films, both from neutral countries and by those under Nazi occupation. By returning to the past and legend, as the French did in "Les Visiteurs du Soir", they were able to avoid the problems of taking a stand on contemporary conditions, yet the abstract themes of the battles between Good and Evil enabled subtle yet not clearly identifiable anti-Nazi propaganda to be inserted.

Some of the religious byways of "Himlaaspelet" are a little difficult to unravel, due to the puritanical and self-purging nature of much of Scandinavian religion (and philosophy and literature too) but it hardly matters. Perhaps the one weakness of the story is the rather too easy manner in which the hero strays from the right path to the evil path. There seems insufficient motivation, and the matter is not helped by the rather weak look of author-actor Lundstrom. It is unfortunate that our familiarity with Hollywood type-casting makes us regard him almost as a Gil Elvgren type, a second-banana in musicals. But that is hardly Lundstrom's fault; he is an excellent actor, and his performance - and makeup - as the older man is superb. And by Western standards, the actresses playing Mary is far too much of a Lolita - but these minor flaws are more than offset by the excellence (and physical suitability) of the actors playing God and Satan.

Not least of the film's skills is the way that it convinces one that one is seeing a "HIT" picture, although that was probably not its intent. One feels afterwards that one has witnessed a large, sprawling tapestry - yet maximum use is made of exteriors and genuine buildings, and the art direction for interior scenes uses space, light, and a few simple props (a table, a floor strewn with straw) that evoke atmosphere superbly, without ever having to build any large sets.

The film is leisurely in pace, but (naturally, since it deals with a man's whole life) covers a great deal of ground, and builds in dramatic momentum as it progresses. When I ran it earlier this week for some students, the result was rather surprising; most found it impressive, but "depressing". That is the one word I would never have used for it; exhilarating perhaps, even soothing. The only people who should truly find it "depressing" are those who have led evil lives... which perhaps doesn't speak too well for today's students.

"Himlaaspelet" has not been in theatrical distribution in this country for at least 20 years, and is virtually a forgotten film, rather strangely in view of the prestige (and accessability) of Sjöberg's "Torment" and "Miss Julie". Prints have virtually disappeared, and we were lucky indeed to find this survivor - a little worn, but on the whole in good shape; its only defect being that perennial problem of Swedish films, white subtitles printed on frequently white background.

As a postscript to "Taille", I might add that while it was made essentially for home consumption, it proved such an unexpected hit at home that it was exported experimentally, and did surprisingly well (at least in terms of critical response) abroad, including the U.S. It was also so popular at home that it was remade some 15 years ago, virtually unchanged in plot, but filmed in color.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx.10.55
(No discussion session)