

Home and Memory in Swedish Cinema

Week 4 Screening: *Masjävlar* (*Dalecarlians*) (Sweden/Denmark 2004)

Written and Directed by Maria Blom
Produced by Lars Jönsson for Memfis Film and Film i Väst
Cinematography by Peter Mokrosinski
Film Editing by Petra Ahlin and Michal Leszczykowski
Original Music by Anders Nygårds
Casting by Sara Törnkvist
Art Direction by Annelie Wemstad
Sound editing by Carl Edström and Linda Forsén
Runtime: 95 mins (UK)

Leading players

Sofia Helin	<i>Mia</i>
Kajsa Ernst	<i>Eivor</i>
Ann Petrén	<i>Gunilla</i>
Barbro Enberg	<i>Barbro</i>
Joakim Lindblad	<i>Jan-Olof</i>
Inga Ålenius	<i>Anna</i>
Willie Andréason	<i>Calle</i>
Lars-Gunnar Aronsson	<i>Ingvar</i>
Peter Jankert	<i>Tommy</i>
Maja Andersson	<i>Ida</i>
Alf Nilsson	<i>Tore</i>

Maria Blom (b. 1971) was already a successful playwright and theatre director in Stockholm before she teamed up with producer Lars Jönsson of Memfis Films. Jönsson also 'discovered' Lukas Moodysson, perhaps the best-known of the younger Swedish directors on the international scene. Partly because of Jönsson's connections, Blom has been able to work with experienced filmmakers such as editor Michal Leszczykowski and cinematographer Peter Mokrosinski.

Blom herself is from Stockholm, but her father was born in Dalarna County and is therefore a 'Dalecarlian'. Blom moved to Falun, the largest town in Dalarna (pop 36,500) around the time that she wrote the original stage play 'Dalecarlians' and has lived there ever since. Dalarna (also known as Dalecarlia) is relatively close to Stockholm geographically (i.e. it isn't



Sofia Helin as Mia

in the far North of Sweden) but it is considerably 'distanced' from the capital in terms of culture. It is 'closer' in both senses to Värmland, the county which is the location for the photographs of Anders Petersen and JH Engström. *Masjävlar* was filmed in the municipality of Rättvik in Dalarna (and in a studio in Trollhätten in Western Sweden that makes around half Sweden's features). To get a sense of how Dalecarlia presents itself to the rest of Sweden (and the rest of the world) here is an extract from the Swedish Tourist Board site for Rättvik:

The Borough of Rättvik welcomes you to visit our unspoiled countryside! In our untouched nature you can both experience silence as well as the music and dancing in the Rättvikdansen Folklore Festival. Relish in motor nostalgia, experience song and music in the incredible environment that the international arena Dalhalla offers.

Why not explore our rich cultural heritage by visiting a living "fäbod". Enjoy our folklore costumes and folk dancing, special Dalecarlian paintings, handicraft, church-boat rowing and folkmusic.

Hike or bike along "Siljansleden", have your breath taken away in a toboggan race.

Whisk down the slalom slopes or have a leisurely day at the beach. You can go canoeing, golfing or skiing and live like a Viking for a day, all the year round memorable experiences await you.

(<http://www.rattvik.se/beingatourist>, translation by: Maria Brandes)

Dalecarlians also have a reputation for stubbornness and for not wanting to leave their locality. According to the Cineuropa review by Annika Pham they also have a dry wit – these qualities might also be applied to the inhabitants of some parts of rural Yorkshire!

Blom's narrative sees Mia, a woman in her early thirties who left Dalecarlia 15 years ago and has made a successful life in Stockholm, returning to her home town to celebrate her father's 70th birthday. Instead of a quite family gathering, she discovers that her oldest sister has organised a community celebration on quite a large scale. Early on we begin to suspect that the party will be a disaster, not helped by Mia's father's decision about what he will do with the piece of land he has to bequeath.

Here's Blom's 'Director's Statement':

"I want to show how people take each other for granted, particularly in families – how even though you're close, you don't reach each other. You feel far away even at home.

My dream is that as soon as people leave the movie theatre, they'll call their loved ones and tell them they care. That they'll be a little nicer to each other, especially in family settings, since there's a lot of pressure on those relationships.

But to begin with, I guess I wanted to tell the natives of the province of Dalecarlia a thing or two as well. Half of my family comes from Dalecarlia, from the region around Lake Siljan, and in my opinion, they're real characters up there. It's been fun raking them over the coals. At times I've been so sick of their behaviour, they're so incredibly full of themselves. I mean, they'll buy a summer cottage a half-hour drive from where they live just so they don't have to leave the province. Dalecarlia is Sweden's heartland, and everything about it is fantastic. When one of my relatives came to Stockholm, we went out for pizza – the delicious gourmet stonebaked kind – and when we had finished our meal, this person looked at me and said: "Well, our pizza place back home in Rättvik certainly knows how to make a darn good pizza!"

My intention was also to capture the special brand of humour they have in Dalecarlia, it's simultaneously warm-hearted and slightly brutal. If it isn't served up with a whole lot of love, it just sounds unkind. It's like irony – when someone would say "nice sweater" to you in school without really meaning it. That kind of humour wears you down, it's corrosive.

At the same time, the film is a declaration of love to the people of Dalecarlia. You know, I picked up stakes and moved from Stockholm to Darlecarlia myself. These days I live in Falun and dream of being called a *kulla* (the Swedish word for a female native of Dalecarlia)." (Statement available on www.trustnordisk.com/film/2004-dalecarlians)

Interviewed about her influences, Maria Blom ducked the inevitable Bergman question by saying that she was too

young to really know Bergman's work. Instead she quotes the films of Tim Burton and Cameron Crowe, directors who "dare to be sentimental". But, more interestingly perhaps, she cites Mike Leigh as an influence in the way that he works with actors. She tells us:

"My idea of working with actors is to cast them the opposite to what they are in reality. I like challenges. I do not work with a storyboard. I improvise with actors during rehearsals, then ask the DoP [director of photography] to shoot the way I want the scene to be. So I want the actors to be the characters, nothing more. Certainly not the actors they are in real life."

Mia is played by Sofia Helin who is roughly the same age as Maria Blom and appeared in a play by her when both were in drama school. For the part of Mia she had a dialect coach from Rättvik.

Maria Blom had no experience of filmmaking before she met Lars Jönsson and he persuaded her to make a 'pilot film', a comedy *Fishy*. Never intended for release, this film was eventually shown at the Swedish Film Institute Cinema in 2008 and Maria Blom is considered one of the important women in the film industry (see: <http://www.sweden.se/eng/Home/Lifestyle/Film/Reading/Swedish-women-behind-the-camera/>). Blom is currently back on stage in Stockholm directing her new play *Under hallonbusken* (*Beneath the raspberry bush*) – which sounds similar to Dalecarlians in its set-up.

Reception

Masjävlar was seen as both a critical and commercial success in Sweden. It won three awards at the Swedish equivalent of the Oscars (Guldbagge) and was nominated in four other categories. It also received recognition at festivals in Brussels and Lübeck.

The film rolled out slowly across Europe over a period of five years, eventually reaching a total of close to 1 million admissions. 800,000 of these were in Sweden signalling a major domestic hit. To make a meaningful comparison, *Let the Right One In* (2008), seen in the UK as one of the most important Swedish films of recent years managed 200,000 admissions in the UK but only 150,000 in Sweden. (Both films will have been seen by many more viewers on DVD and TV.) In 2007 Maria Blom made another 'comedy-drama' about an airline steward, *Nina Frisk*, again with Sofia Helin and made by the same production team but this film generated only 88,000 admissions.

Sources

Cineuropa website has a section on the film. Go to this page with links to interviews and background information: <http://www.cineuropa.org/ffocus.aspx?lang=en&treeID=918>

Roy Stafford 11/3/2011