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1638-1988

NEW SWEDEN

**350th Anniversary
of the New Sweden Colony in
North America**

SWEDISH FILMS

ALF SJÖBERG

Film program organized in conjunction
with the UCLA Film and Television Archives.

A L F S J Ö B E R G
(1903 - 1980)

Introduction

To all too many moviegoers outside Sweden, Alf Sjöberg is merely the director of Ingmar Bergman's first screenplay (TORMENT). Even his capture of the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1951 for MISS JULIE seems forgotten.

Sjöberg, though, embodies the finest elements of Swedish film tradition. All his productions are impeccably performed by actors who knew him from the countless plays he had staged at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre. Each of Sjöberg's screen masterpieces is photographed, edited, and scored with consummate grace and craftsmanship. But his aesthetic brilliance to some degree disguised the passionate idealism of this Swedish master. As Bergman said, he was "fascinated by society and the tensions in society. He always said that the theatre is a weapon, film is weapon, we must use these weapons to change society."

In 1929, he directed a film so unusually promising that it now seems a tragedy that, during the frivolous 1930's, he was not welcomed in Swedish studios. THE STRONGEST told of seal-hunters in the Greenland Sea and their seasonal return to Sweden, and was shot in stunning locations that recalled the best work of Sjöström and Stiller.

Three of the films in this retrospective are inspired by Sweden's greatest playwright, August Strindberg. I say "inspired" because Sjöberg did not merely photograph the stage originals. He introduced fresh scenes into MISS JULIE; he weaved a subtle and affecting romance from the manic core of Strindberg's ERIK XIV. And while tourists to this day can see THE ROAD TO HEAVEN being performed on summer evenings in Dalarna, Rune Lindström's morality play lacks the searing intensity of Sjöberg's screen version.

Sjöberg's prime coincided with a fundamental change in Swedish society.

A bourgeoisie, shored up by strong patriarchal beliefs, was giving way to a wave of liberal sentiments and reforms during the 1940's. ONLY A MOTHER condemned the exploitation of gipsies and farm-laborers, while IRIS AND THE LIEUTENANT mocked a crass and cold-hearted upper class in the face of a new generation's energy.

Oh yes, and TORMENT. It may have been written by Bergman, but the expressionist force and anger of the film stem from Sjöberg, who directed those now familiar actors with a sure hand.



Peter Cowie

PETER COWIE, who is responsible for the texts in this catalogue, has written several books on aspects of Swedish cinema past and present, including a critical biography of Ingmar Bergman published in English, French and Portuguese. He is Editor of the annual International Film Guide, which celebrated its Silver Jubilee with the 1988 edition, and has lectured on Scandinavian film at various universities in the United States.

THE ROAD TO HEAVEN (1942).

Rune Lindström wrote his play, THE ROAD TO HEAVEN, while studying to be a pastor at Uppsala University. Ever since it has been performed annually at Leksand in Dalarna, and stands as a landmark in the provincial folk-art of Sweden. Lindström himself plays the lead in the film version, bringing a fetching naiveté to Mats Ersson, the young peasant whose sweetheart is condemned as a witch. Mats strides off along the "road to heaven" in an effort to prove her innocence. This pilgrim's progress, though, is blighted by the onset of avarice and rapacity; Mats, like Faust, succumbs to the Devil's blandishments and only manages to recant in the nick of time. THE ROAD TO HEAVEN brings to life the rustic paintings of 19th century Dalarna, and Sjöberg's exhilarating pace sustains the parable. The pastoral locations and period costumes reinforce the film's credibility, and must have influenced Bergman when he approached THE SEVENTH SEAL. Wise and poignant, THE ROAD TO HEAVEN may well be the greatest Swedish film of the 1940's.

With Rune Lindström, Anders Henrikson, Eivor Landström.

Directed by Alf Sjöberg.

Produced by AB Svensk Filmindustri, SF.

106 min.



TORMENT/FRENZY (1944)

Bergman had written the screenplay for *TORMENT* even before joining Svensk Filmindustri in 1942. It amounted to an act of revenge against a schoolteacher he'd loathed during his teens. In a wider sense, the film focuses on the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Bergman and Sjöberg use the doomed romance between Alf Kjellin's high-school student and Mai Zetterling's reluctant prostitute as the springboard for a searing psychological study of authority and the complexes that dictate it. Stig Järrel's sadistic Latin master embodies the Nazi personality, which could be found in Sweden as anywhere else during those years.

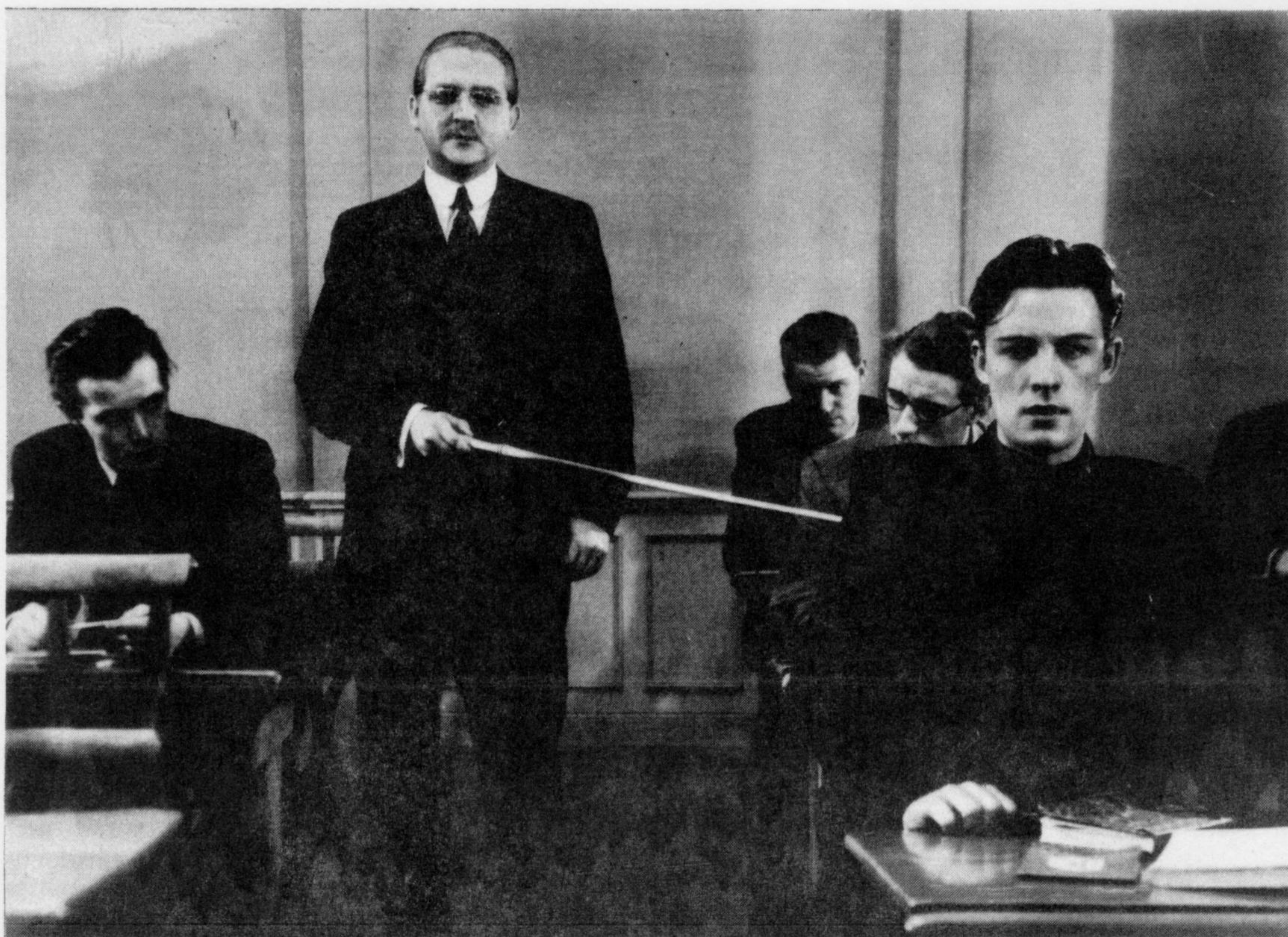
Bergman's early and abiding theme of the rebellious young man, rejecting home and family, seeking release in degradation, colors *TORMENT* from start to finish, but only Sjöberg could have found such arresting visual motifs as the attic where Bertha lives, with its expressionist shadows and the lofty, echoing school where the harsh shouts of the staff smack of the camps.

With Alf Kjellin, Mai Zetterling, Stig Järrel.

Script by Ingmar Bergman

Directed by Alf Sjöberg.

Produced by AB Svensk Filmindustri, SF.



IRIS AND THE LIEUTENANT (1946)

The frivolous young officer's life of Alf Kjellin's Robert in this movie corresponds in a way to the yuppified world of Wall Street of the City of London. Robert's father owns a chain of shoe stores, but his monetary success had made him a smug and intolerant father-figure. When Robert falls for Iris, a housemaid of his aunt's, he finds himself frozen out by the family. Sjöberg detested the immobile class system represented by the Motander family in IRIS, and sees in the young lovers some hope for a future that's more egalitarian in terms of both money and emotions. But there's an aching, melancholy tinge to the affair that reminds us of Bergman, and also of Lean's BRIEF ENCOUNTER from the previous year.

Underlying it all runs a note of guilt as a consequence of Sweden's somewhat sanctimonious neutrality during World War II. Perhaps it's also the presence of Alf Kjellin and Mai Zetterling from *TORMENT*, although they transcend the symbolic nature of their roles and come across as vivid, vulnerable personalities.

With Mai Zetterling, Alf Kjellin.

Directed by Alf Sjöberg.

Produced by AB Svensk Filmindustri, SF.

86 min.



ONLY A MOTHER (1949)

The Swedish welfare state did not spring into being overnight. The Social Democrats had won power in 1932, but even into the late 1940's many unjust practices survived. In ONLY A MOTHER, Sjöberg dramatizes the plight of the so-called statare - agricultural workers who lived together in gipsy-like communities and who were exploited (or at best tolerated) by the big landowners. They were paid partly in cash, partly in kind. Rya-Rya (played by the young Eva Dahlbeck) suffers the typical life of a statare, giving birth to one child after another and eventually dying from sheer fatigue and lack of hope. But ONLY A MOTHER never becomes a sombre tract. From the vigor of the country dance at the start of the movie, Sjöberg finds the pulse of this bucolic tragedy, and makes excellent characters of the drunken husband, Henrik, and the cynical, grasping steward. Nothing can take the film away from Eva Dahlbeck, however. She dreams not only of her vanishing youth but also of escape from the toil and humiliation of her life on the farm. One can well understand why Bergman cast her in his great films of the 1950's.

With Eva Dahlbeck, Ulf Palme

Directed by Alf Sjöberg.

Produced by AB Svensk Filmindustri, SF.

99 min.



MISS JULIE (1951)

Sjöberg took his life in his hands when he filmed one of Sweden's greatest plays, MISS JULIE. He accorded the work the respect it deserved, while embarking on a series of audacious experiments that makes his award winning production a movie in every sense. The convulsive, erotic struggle between Miss Julie and her father's groom is not restricted to a single kitchen, as it is on stage. Sjöberg gives us the full glory of the Swedish summer night; Göran Strindberg's camera glides through the sun-dappled parkland around the manor-house as well as glaring in merciless close-up at Jean and Miss Julie as dawn advances and their passion turns bitter. By giving the Count a significant role, and recreating the lovers' childhood, Sjöberg validates the psychological basis of the play. Both Miss Julie and her lover are weighed down with complexes from their past and from their upbringing.

Anita Björk remains one of the great Miss Julies, and was but a single vote away from winning the Best Actress Award at Cannes in 1951, when the film itself shared the Palme d'Or with De Sica's MIRACLE IN MILAN.

With Anita Björk, Ulf Palme, Anders Henrikson.

Directed by Alf Sjöberg.

Produced by AB Svensk Filmindustri, SF.

90 min.



KARIN MÅNSDOTTER (1954)

Eldest son of the great 16th century Swedish king, Gustav Wasa, Erik XIV was an unfortunate ruler. In the hands of advisers like Göran Persson, he drifted towards insanity, and ended his days imprisoned in Gripsholm Castle, Strindberg wrote a play about this monarch, with whom he had much in common, not least a fractious attitude to the opposite sex. Erik's most famous mistress, Karin Månsdotter, met him when she was only 14 years of age. She came from a simple background, and bore Erik a daughter. Sjöberg, as he did with MISS JULIE, fills out the story, and imagines what might have happened to Karin after the death of her king.

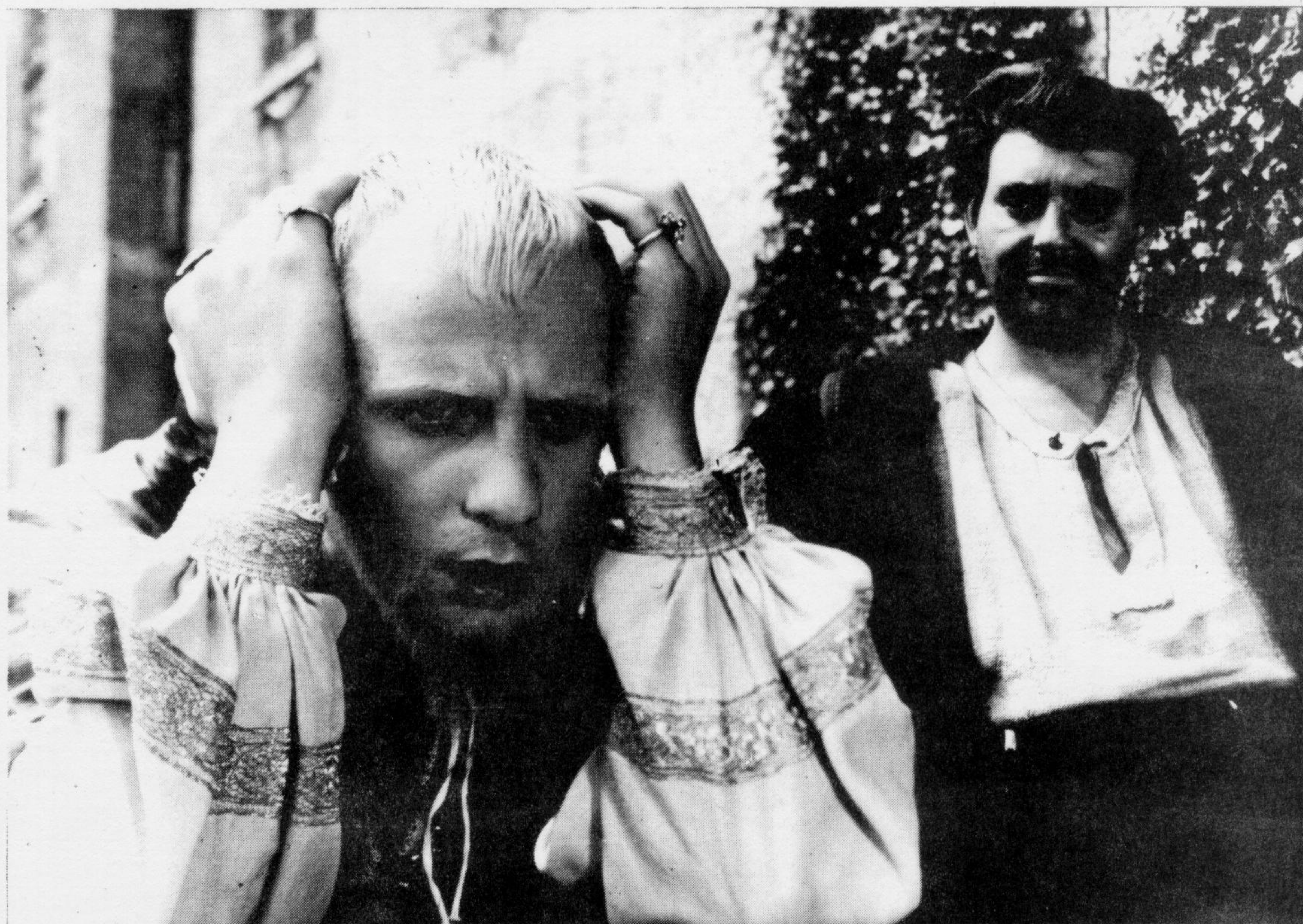
Like all Sjöberg's work, KARIN MÅNSDOTTER deals with the social divisions that societies artificially and arbitrarily impose upon themselves, in all countries and all centuries. Erik and Karin reach out to each other across this gulf, and thanks to Jarl Kulle and Ulla Jacobsson their relationship looks tender and authentic. The splendid castles of Gripsholm, Kalmar and Uppsala give the movie a lived-in look, too.

With Ulla Jacobsson, Jarl Kulle

Directed by Alf Sjöberg.

Produced by AB Svensk Filmindustri, SF.

102 min.



THE FATHER (1969)

Once more, Sjöberg pays homage to Strindberg. *THE FATHER*, written in 1887 in less than 3 weeks, met with a derisive press when it appeared in print later the same year. But Sjöberg has always perceived that beyond Strindberg's insufferable and obsessive misogyny there dwells a supreme dramatist whose control of mood and understanding of psychology to rival Ibsen's. Sjöberg like Bergman always relied upon actors from his theatre world. Georg Rydeberg, the army Captain tormented by his wife like a hapless bull in the arena, was better-known for his stage work than his screen performances, but here his brooding intensity suits the role of "The Father" - a title containing all manner of resonances. As Laura, the wife, Gunnel Lindblom proves she can act away from Bergman's cinema, her feline smile leaving us in no doubt who will win this particular battle of the sexes.

With Gunnel Lindblom, Georg Rydeberg.

Directed by Alf Sjöberg.

Produced by AB Svensk Filmindustri, SF.

color

98 min.

