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HIMLASPELET (THE ROAD TO HEAVEN) Sweden; Wive Film, 1942). Directed by Alf Sjoberg;
Scenario by Sjoberg and Rune Lindstrom from the play by Lindstrom; camera,
Gosta Folte and Gosta Roosling; Art Direction, Arne Akermark; Music:
Lills-Dror Moderlundh; 105 mins.

With: Rune Lindstrom (Matt); Eivor Lundstrom (Marit); Anders Hendrikson (God);
and Holger Lowenadler, Gudrun Brost, Anita Bjork, Arnold Sjostrand, Emil Fjellstrom.
(as Satan); Nils Gustafson, Hugo Bjorne.

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 *stern* Scandinavian
manner. Remembering how superbly Sjoberg 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.

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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 "Himlaspelet" is pure film, with its roots in the silent Swedish film and in Germany 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 "Himlaspelet" seems to derive from Dreyer's "Vampyr", but one can also recognise much of Dreyer's "Day of Wrath" deriving from "Himlaspelet". Nor is it difficult to recognise American influences on "Himlaspelet"; 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 Chariot". 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, "Himlaspelet" 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 "Himlaspelet" 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 Lundström. It is unfortunate that our familiarity with Hollywood type-casting makes us regard him almost as a Gil Lamb type, a second-banana in musicals. But that is hardly Lundström's fault; he is an excellent actor, and his performance - and makeup - as the older man is superb. And by Western standards, the actress 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 "BIG" 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 evokes 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.

"Himlaspelet" 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 accessibility) 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 a frequently white background.

As a postscript to "Laila", 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. Eversom

Program ends approx. 10,55
(No discussion session)