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Swedes in Hollywood before World War II

Greta Garbo was not the only Swedish film actress who felt the lure of Hollywood

BY AGNIESZKA STASIEWICZ

The history of the early American cinema cannot be separated from the history of immigration to the U.S. What would American film have been like without Charlie Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, or Pola Negri? Many actors and directors came to the U.S. looking for fame and fortune and the best of them were offered profitable contracts. Step by step the brightest cinema stars of the world concentrated in Hollywood.

The five biggest movie companies, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Twentieth Century Fox, RKO, Warner Bros, and Paramount were created there. In the 1920s, 75,000 people – actors, directors, producers, technicians, critics, fashion designers, and many others – were employed there. The greatest scenes of the world were recorded there as well. Moreover, in the first years of the twentieth century the U.S. imported a significant number of foreign films, many of which were from Sweden.

After 1923 Hollywood entered a period of uninterrupted prosperity. New, astonishing phenomena appeared: uncommonly high salaries for movie stars, enormous sums spent on construction of sceneries, etc. Considering all this, it is hardly surprising that America attracted both beginners and the most brilliant actors of the time. Many of them were of Swedish origin.

This article refers to the period before World War II. It cannot be forgotten, though, that after the war Swedes did not disappear from the American screen. It is enough to recall such movie stars as Ingrid Bergman, Max von Sydow, Bibi Andersson, or Peter Stormare to reassure us that the immigrants of the first decades of the twentieth century found many remarkable successors.

Pioneers

Swedes came to Hollywood early enough to take part in the process of the American film industry's creation practically from the time of its birth. The first actress of Swedish origin who appeared there at the dawn of the twentieth century was *Linda Johnson Arvidson Griffith* (1884–1949), born in the U.S. Her first steps in the film industry were guided by the famous American Biograph Company. In 1906 she married the well-known director David Wark Griffith. Beginning in 1907 Arvidsson played in over 150 productions. Her most recognized role was Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* (1913), which was described by the English magazine *The Bioscope* as “extraordinary subtle and deeply moving.” Linda Arvidson contributed to the movie industry also as an author. Her memoir about the people of Hollywood of that time, *When the Movies Were Young* (1925),



Anna Q. Nilsson (1888–1974).

contained lots of valuable, although not always objective, information.

The significant presence of Swedes in American cinema began in 1911 when *Anna Q. Nilsson* (1888 – 1974) starred in *Molly Pitcher*. From then on she was regarded as one of the leading actresses in the silent cinema. Nilsson came to America as a teenager in 1907. At first she worked as a nurse, but soon became a popular model. Then her beauty was noticed by film producers. Already in her first movie, Nilsson revealed herself not only as a beautiful woman but also as a very gifted actress and she soon became famous, mostly for her roles in westerns and melodramas.

Unfortunately, her career was seriously shaken by a one-year pause she had to take after a serious horse accident. After treatment in Sweden and Austria, Nilsson came back on the screen in *Babe Comes Home* (1927). But with the dawn of the sound film Nilsson's fame faded. She was offered only minor parts such as a very short scene in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) when she played herself as the movie star of yesterday. She retired in California.

In her finest days Nilsson performed in, among the others, *Seven Keys to Baldpate* (1917), *The Luck of the Irish* (1920), *The Lotus Eater* (1921), *The Top of the World* (1925), and *Babe Comes Home*. She also played a minor role in *An American in Paris* (1951). Anna Q. Nilsson was the first Swedish actress in Hollywood who achieved real stardom and whose name appears on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Among the Swedish pioneer actors in American film industry one of the brightest stars was *Warner Oland* (1879–1938). He became an expert in playing characters from the Orient, obtaining the desired look by contracting eyelid muscles and brushing the ends of his eyebrows up and his moustache down. To that ability he owed the role of a Chinese detective, *Charlie Chan*, which was offered to him by Twentieth Century Fox. This role brought him fame and a large group of admirers, not only



Warner Oland (1879–1938).

in the U.S. but also in China and Japan. The films starring Oland as Chan are considered an important step in cinema history as the longest and most popular series of feature-length films of those times.

Before creating the character of Chan, Oland performed in the well-known *The Jazz Singer* (1927). In the thirties he played in *Shanghai Express* (1932) and *The Painted Veil* (1934) with, respectively, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. In 1937 Oland unexpectedly resigned from his work, returned to Sweden, and died a year later.

Victor Sjöström – the Swedish film school in Hollywood.

Victor Sjöström (1879 – 1960) was a highly talented director and one of the creators of Swedish movie industry; in America he is known as *Victor Seastrom*.

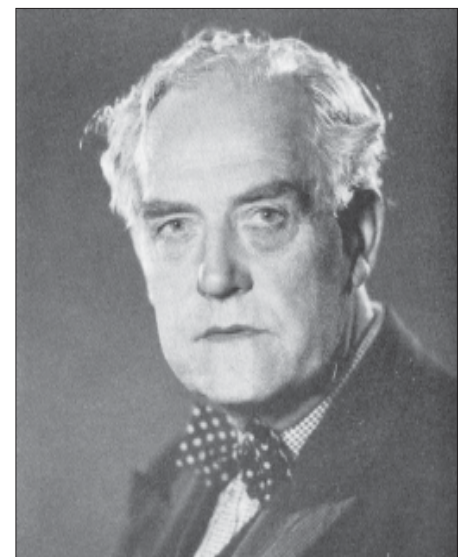
In the first decades of the twentieth century Scandinavian films were very popular in the U.S. American audiences were thrilled to experience their melancholic atmosphere, exoticism, spellbinding folklore, and the subtle play of light and semitones. These features were clearly visible in the works of Victor Seastrom. He treated film as a branch of culture close to poetry and in this spirit he created them, making nature one of the most important “characters” and passionately introducing mystical and supernatural phenomena into his works. These features, typical for Swedish film of that time, are also visible in his American works.

In 1923, already a successful director in Sweden, Seastrom came to America. Between 1924 and 1930 he directed nine films with the most famous stars of the time, among them Lillian Gish (*A Scarlet Letter*, 1926, *The Wind*, 1928), Greta Garbo (*The Divine Woman*, 1927), Lon Chaney, and Edward G. Robinson. Seastrom's first American work was *He who gets slapped*, but the most significant one was *The Wind* starring Lillian Gish and a very popular Swedish actor, Lars Hanson.

In *The Wind* Seastrom was faithful to his principle of simplicity of plot and characters. Delicate idealist Letty, righteous Lige and cunning Roddy, strong Cora and cordial Beverly mesh into a suggestive and clear composition. The end of the film, though, is not convincing. The main character suddenly declares love to her husband whom she previously despised and decides to stay in the land of winds, although she has hated it until then. Moreover, she claims not to be afraid of the storm anymore when a moment before she was close to death with fear.

Seastrom himself didn't plan this banal and inconsistent ending. In the original version Letty, in the claws of madness, runs outside into the sandstorm and dies. Such an ending, though, didn't seem attractive enough for an American audience, so Seastrom was made to change his vision and introduce a classic Hollywood happy ending. Such incidents were not uncommon.

Despite this incident, the American experience left a remarkable mark on the works of Victor Seastrom. Under its influence he directed, among the others, *A Scarlet Letter* with Lillian Gish and Lars Hanson, giving one of the best-known masterpieces of American literature a place on the screen. Gish praised highly Seastrom's vision in this film: “I felt that this film should be directed by a Swede. Swedes are



Victor Sjöström / Seastrom (1879–1960).

spiritually closer to our Fathers' Pilgrims . . . than contemporary Americans He perfectly understood the soul of this story and . . . turned out to be an excellent actor, the best I have ever worked with."

In an interview from 1924 Charlie Chaplin described Seastrom as "the most outstanding director of the world." And indeed, he achieved immortal fame as a master of silent cinema. Yet, in the era of sound films, his style started to be considered anachronistic. In 1930 he returned to Sweden where he played in the films of other directors (including in *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*) by Ingmar Bergman).

The Divine Greta.

"What, when drunk, one sees in other women, one sees in Garbo sober" – Kenneth Tynan.

1925 was a turning point for the Swedish-American film. That year 20-year-old Greta Lovisa Gustafsson (1905-1990) left her Swedish homeland on the steamship named, prophetically, *Drottningholm* ("The Queen's Isle"). In Sweden Greta appeared on the screen in the role of Countess Elizabeth Dohna in *Gösta Berling's Saga* directed by Mauritz Stiller. Several months had passed, though, before the actress, now recognized all over the world as Greta Garbo, found a job in America. For after seeing *Gösta Berling's Saga* Louis B. Mayer from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer offered a contract only to Stiller and only reluctantly invited the latter's young protégé.

Garbo's first American part was in *The Torrent*, a banal melodrama, which nevertheless could not hide her extraordinary talent. Although at first the "Swedish colony in Hollywood" considered the film a disaster, media and audience appreciated the debut of a beginning actress. *The Torrent* created the image of Garbo and the type of roles she was offered for many years. They were usually love stories with a tragic end. The actress herself was not satisfied with this cliché. She said she could not notice anything interesting in silly

melodramas. Still, she managed to create fascinating characters even in the most banal and unimaginative stories.

At first, finding herself in a completely new environment, she felt intimidated and lost. She didn't know the language and the media showed no interest in a taciturn Swedish girl. In her next movie, *The Temptress* (1926), she appeared as a femme fatale and this image was received enthusiastically by American audiences. While in Sweden her movies were seen as awkward, in the U.S. they were admired for their intriguing "refined animalism."

Her next role, in *Flesh and the Devil* (1927), was still close to this image. Yet, in contrast to the banal *Temptress*, this movie was filled with mature eroticism. This was a completely new phenomenon in American cinematography and it became a symbol of the Swedish actress for many years. Although the simple plot of *The Temptress* was far from brilliant, and Garbo's acting style had not yet achieved its highest level, this film was the beginning of her unbelievable career in the U.S. Also, the next productions starring Garbo, *Love* (1927) (based on *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy) and *Wild Orchids* (1929), were very successful. It is worth mentioning that the first of these movies had two endings: tragic – for Europe and parts of America, and happy – for other American areas and for all distributors who preferred it.

With the growing popularity of sound films came also the anxiety about Garbo's future on the screen. She spoke with a low, husky voice with a foreign accent making many mistakes. But The Divine Garbo triumphed also in this field. Her first "speaking character," in *Anna Christie* (1930), was as a former prostitute whose Swedish origin built a proper excuse for the actress's accent. After the success of *Anna Christie* Garbo was famous enough to pick and choose her roles.

For sound films she developed a new style of acting which was called somnambulant or enigmatic and un-



Greta Garbo (1905–1990).

realistic. Mystery was Greta's company also in her private life: she neglected all the Hollywood rules by travelling incognito, avoiding interviews, photographers, and autograph seekers. "I want to be alone" – she repeated in most of her films and it seemed to be true also for her private life.

In the beginning of the thirties Garbo performed in three films: *Mata Hari* (1931), *As You Desire Me* (1932), and *Grand Hotel* (1932). The latter was awarded an Academy Award for Best Film and Garbo herself was acclaimed as "the best actress who played in this concert of stars." After *Grand Hotel* she suddenly left for her old homeland without prolonging her contract with MGM.

During her stay in Sweden Garbo read the biography of the seventeenth century queen of Sweden, Christina, which was recommended to her as perfect material for a movie. She laid down precise conditions: she would sign a new contract with MGM only if they created a film about Christina starring Greta Garbo. What is more, she wanted to be guaranteed the right to participate in no more than two productions per year and for each of them she demanded \$250,000. When all her conditions were accepted, the Swedish star began the second phase of Hollywood life with the main role in *Queen Christina* (1933), directed by Rouben Mamoulian.

Garbo's most important film

Queen Christina is one of the most important films in the history of Swedish-American cinema. The Hollywood production about the Swedish queen with one of the most famous Swedes of all times in the main role was a fascinating enterprise, although it was far from a financial success.

In *Queen Christina* we see an interesting summary of the Swedish social and political situation. In the first moments of the film the audience's attention is drawn to the presence of the peasants and the middle class in the *Riksdag*. In the seventeenth century these two groups, besides the noblemen, and clergy, were represented in the parliament, and their position was relatively high against the background of Europe of that time. The dominant role in the country belonged, though, to the aristocracy which is clearly visible in this film. Their powerful position was established after Gustav Adolf's tragic death. Christina feels unbearably limited by the noblemen around her, who try to control her every step. She can resist them only by abdication.

Most fascinating is the psychological portrait of the queen. Raised like a boy, wearing men's clothes even in the parliament, deeply devoted to her homeland and people, at the same time she longs for something unknown: for Spain – the homeland of art, sun, and light, for love and freedom. She feels torn between a sense of duty, the spiritual inheritance from her hero-father, and the desire to be happy herself. After she met Antonio, she has been seen wearing dresses, but above all, she begins to wonder if it is worthwhile to sacrifice (or maybe waste) her life for others. She doesn't let misfortune discourage her and after Antonio's death she sets off for Spain alone.

Garbo's next roles brought her immense success. The second screening of *Anna Karenina* (1935) was announced to be the best foreign film during the International Film Festi-

val in Venice, and Garbo received the award for the best female role of the year from the New York Film Critics Circle. After *Camille* (1936) with a famous death scene, the king of Sweden, Gustav V, called her "ingenious Garbo." For this role Garbo was nominated for an Academy Award and received the award *Litteris et Artibus* from the king of Sweden. In *Camille* Garbo's acting achieved extraordinary maturity. Moreover, her English accent improved a lot without losing any of its exotic timbre.

In 1939 the Swedish star played in her first comedy *Ninotchka*, directed by Ernst Lubitsch and advertized with the slogan "Garbo laughs." In 1941 she performed in *Two-Faced Woman*. This film, an attempt "to Americanize" the Swedish actress and to adapt her acting style to the changing tastes of the American audience, turned out to be a complete disaster. This ended Garbo's career. Fearing another failure, the Swedish goddess of cinema never again appeared on the screen.

This early "retirement" became a significant element in the emergence of the Garbo legend. At the age of 36 she joined the circle of immortal cinema stars. Never before had any actress gained such fame. She was one of the few who played equally with grace and *artism* in both silent and sound films. She became one of the greatest stars in the history of cinema and the most famous Swede in Hollywood.

The "Leopard Woman"

Directing and acting was by no means the only contribution Swedish immigrants made to the history of American cinematography. There were also many technicians, instructors, cameramen, costume designers, inventors, and others. One of the most original Swedish contributors to the development of Hollywood was *Olga Celeste* (1887–1969), whose real name was Knutson. She came to the U.S. as a young girl to start her career as a circus rider. There she



Olga Celeste (1887–1969).

learned how to handle wild beasts and soon was known as the "Leopard Woman" as she became famous for training leopards. In the beginning, she and her cats performed together in Vaudeville. Then she entered the film industry, above all as a tamer and a stand-in.

Olga Celeste was the first woman to train and control the leopards which performed in films, and she herself performed in the most dangerous parts. The best known productions "starring" her cats were *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* and *Bringing up Baby*. In the latter one, one of Celeste's leopards played with Katherine Hepburn, who got on with the cat very well. In contrast, Hepburn's film partner, the famous Cary Grant, feared it. Hepburn's secret was a special perfume with a scent that calmed the beast. During the film production, the well-trained leopard wandered freely among people until it "attacked" its partner, Hepburn, annoyed with her rustling dress. Yet, just behind the cameras waited the Swedish tamer who calmed her "pet" at once.

Conclusion

The presence of the Swedish immigrants in American cinematography in the beginning of the

twentieth century made an extraordinary contribution to the development of its leading position in the world. Not only did many of them create original film styles and images but they also transplanted many achievements of Swedish film onto American screens.

Victor Seastrom introduced the exotic Scandinavian features into his Hollywood productions but also used many elements of culture, landscapes, and tradition typical of American reality. He devoted his talent and experience to convince American audience that film is a real art. Greta Garbo brought on the Hollywood screens the new, brilliant style of acting, exceptional individualism, the mystery of the great star, and also a piece of Swedish history. Linda Griffith, Anna Q. Nilsson, and Warner Oland, although nowadays largely unknown, achieved in their finest days the status of stardom in Hollywood. And last but not least, Olga Celeste contributed her talent to create movies "starring" wild cats, so attractive to American audience.

Once again, I want to emphasize that the figures presented in this article are by no means the only Swedish immigrants in the Hollywood world at the beginning of the twentieth century. We cannot forget such actors as Nils Asther or Lars Hanson, who in their finest days conquered the American (especially female) audience and played with the greatest stars of their times. Also, the popular actresses of Swedish origin,

like Shirley Grey or Jean Rogers, ought to be mentioned here. Moreover, Hollywood appreciated not only Swedish actors and directors, but also screenwriters, cameramen, inventors, and many other specialists.

The remarkable position of Swedish people in Hollywood not only played an important role for American culture, but also for their compatriots in the U.S. Moreover, thanks to their achievements, Sweden and Swedes were more recognizable and respected in American society.

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Editor's note: The ancestry of actors Greta Garbo and Warner Oland among others can be found in *24 Famous Swedish Americans and their Ancestors*, published by the Federation of Swedish Genealogical Societies in 1996. Some of the others are Signe Hasso, Tuve Nilsson Haselquist, John Ericsson, William H. Rehnquist, "Buzz" Aldrin, Mamie Eisenhower, Eric Wickman, and Charles Lindbergh.

The book is now out of print, but the SAG editor has a few copies for sale. <sag@etgenealogy.se>

Picture from "Svenskarne i Illinois" by Peterson & Johnson. 1880.



Chicago in 1833.