

Scandinavian Film Festival L.A.

Take 5/Take 10

The Five Nordic Countries gear up for Take 10 of Scandinavian Film Festival L.A. Northern Lights for Melrose Heights—

By James Koenig—Founder/ Director Scandinavian Film Festival L.A. reflecting on nearly a decade of Nordic Film in “Tinsel Town”

The incredible influence of moving images is undeniable—the screen shapes us, dresses us, fires our imaginations, changes our language, speaks volumes without language, projects the unspoken language of the heart—of love, of hate. Moving images beguile us, lie to us, lead us on, proffer progress or propaganda, offer awareness, or blinders, stop wars, start wars—culture wars, give voice to unwritten history, hold a mirror up to make us uncomfortable, make the invisible visible, give us hope, redemption and release! Of course, sometimes images just entertain and pacify—and take us from the mundane, turn our brains to mush, and let us have a moment of “zoning out” or “it’s NOT the economy stupid” as we escape, or grunt and engage in cosmic kickboxing—good vs. evil. One of the most incredible phenomenon of contemporary history is the dance between human culture and film culture. In this dance, both individual identity and commonality come into focus. And that is why I love to read subtitles and why I founded Scandinavian Film Festival L.A. which just completed its ninth year at the Writers Guild Theater in Beverly Hills. The festival pivots around screenings of “Oscar” submissions and additional current feature films, shorts, and documentaries from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. It all started in a darkened theater at a kid’s matinee.

I was a dramatic kid—no wonder I ended up with so many involvements in those things we lump together as “the arts!” When I was in kindergarten or first grade I so believed in the moving images I saw in cartoons that I went on top of our garage and jumped off with an open umbrella in lieu of a parachute. Hey—it worked in the cartoons. Fortunately it was onto a pile of sand and I didn’t break anything. (There was no Take II! I was not destined to be a stuntman.) Much of my life is orchestrated with the wonders of making music as a singer, director, teacher, writer, and arts advocate. But truthfully the same elements that make for good music—make for good film. Hmm it was somewhere between church and Mighty Mouse that I developed an interest in “classical” singing. Well, I guess singing Mr. McGregor in a children’s production of Peter Rabbit at the reknowned Dallas Theater Center wasn’t quite yet “classical” singing—but it was a “taste.” Storytelling—image, action, and reaction. I still remember how astonished I was when a little kid saw me after a performance and looked both scared and outraged. The power of performance—of connecting with an audience, of moving an audience (in that case moving that kid to kick me in the shin!)

For me, in film, indeed, in the arts—the answer to the question “Guess who’s coming to dinner?” should be “The truth!” It was over a decade ago that I was invited to a screening of Liv Ullman’s directorial debut film “Sophie.” Although I am not of Scandinavian heritage I had become involved in Scandina-

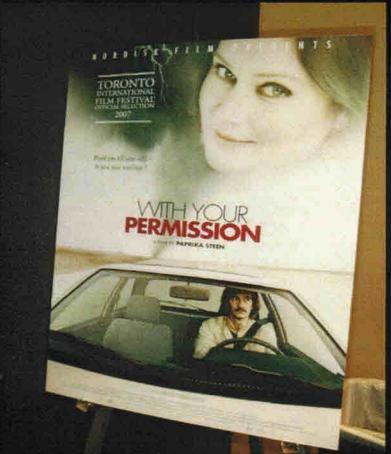
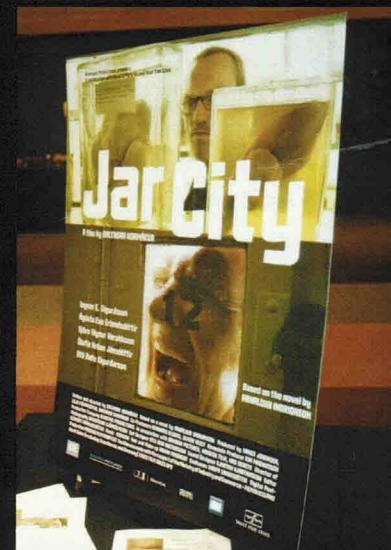
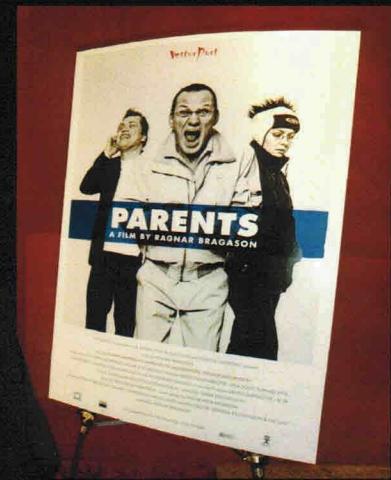
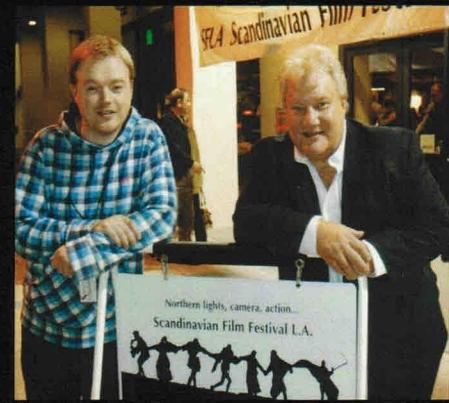


vian related events subsequent to life experience and musical involvements in the Nordic countries. The film is about an ill-fated “mixed” love between a 29 year old Jewish Dane and a gentile. The film did not have a North American distributor and wouldn’t be coming here. I thought—“how many excellent films are ‘out there’ that we never get to see.” The idea of a Scandinavian Film Festival started growing. I had been to random screenings at this or that big festival or on a college campus with ten people in the audience—where it was usually a rescreening of a classic Bergman. Surely, a lot of excellent film making has gone on in the Nordic countries since the early Bergman films. The film world lost the great Bergman, who for many years WAS Scandinavian film, this past year. In the footsteps of Fanny and Alexander, humming an Autumn Sonata, and inspired by Pelle the Conqueror and Babbette’s Feast, My Life as a Dog, and The Path Finder, I determined to start a Scandinavian film festival-- Scandinavian Film Festival L.A. I was determined that it should be a visible, useful, and current representation of Nordic film culture—here in mythical Hollywood--the film capital of the world. Certainly Nordic films were included in other larger festivals—but I determined to put a real focus on the work of Nordic film makers and to offer fertile soil for networking along with the opportunity of an annual immersion into Nordic film culture.

It has been a wild ride—literally. After the festival was written about in Oslo’s Dagsbladet newspaper as “the place” to see Nordic film in Hollywood, I was invited to a festival way above the Arctic circle in the Sami town of Kautokeino in northern Norway. A non-filmic highlight was going on a 60 km snowmobile trek with Nils Gaup, the director of the 1987 Oscar nominated The Pathfinder and his reindeer herding buddies. I had had a major surgery three months before and thought “I’m either going to pop open on a snowdrift or have an amazing adventure. The “power of film” highlight of the stay was a small documentary called “Lesbian in Kautokeino”—the personal story about a young woman from the town who “came out” and while living far away in Oslo was homesick and decided “Why should I have to live ‘somewhere else’ to be who I am.” She returned to her hometown and made a documentary of her return and “coming out” experience there. Controversy arose in the town since a “blotto” local (and former boyfriend) had been filmed slurring rude comments and had a temporary court injunction trying to stop the screening. When the court injunction was lifted—the whole town came to see the film. At the end—during Q & A – an elder of the people—an 87 year old Sami woman in colorful Sami clothing with the pointy upturned shoes stood to her full height of about 4’ 9” said “I think she is very brave to tell her story and we are a better community for it.” It was very moving...

Not a year of the festival has gone by when we haven’t seen Oscar nominations in one category or another—including 7 “Best Foreign Language Film” nominations. But for me, it’s not really about the race for “King Oscar”—it’s about excellence in film making and the opportunity to really experience our common humanity through the film culture of a part of the world and to share something special with Los Angeles audiences. It’s our equal opportunity to learn about ourselves and others. To me, film is an important marker of both individual (and national) identity—and our common humanity. In the celebration of ethnicity, identity, and community it is important that we don’t form a circle with our backs turned on the world—but that we face ‘outward’ and expand our circle. We help expand the circle with our annual residency of Nordic film in Hollywood.”

photography by Savanna Star Ommaha



Scandinavian Film Festival L.A.

Take 5/Take 10

con't

It's quite interesting. There are more and more stories of immigrants coming out of a traditionally rather homogeneous part of the world. There are new questions, new challenges and opportunities—and new eyes! A wonderful young Norwegian director—Hisham Zaman is a Kurdish Norwegian. When we screened a critically acclaimed Swedish film about a young teenage Russian girl being marketed for prostitution in Stockholm someone said "I don't know why they film in that part of Stockholm. It's not very picturesque." I said "I don't know anywhere where child sex-trade is picturesque, or crime, or poverty. But it's a sad part of reality—and telling the tragic story at least makes it less possible to "turn a blind eye." And there is always—in any culture—the battle of belonging—what comprises the definition of "nationality"—tribal exclusiveness or cultural affinity. Battle of Jericho or not—there are still walls that need tumblin' down! The films we screen deal with a wide range of subject matter, attitudes, and issues. In Nordic folklore—awful trolls hide under bridges to scare people! If you call it by name it goes away and you get across the bridge. Confronting difficult issues, even demons, as Danish director Peter Schoenau Fog said, can sometimes have the effect of "calling a Troll by name and it goes away."

Scandinavian Film Festival L.A. will hopefully not go away! We're already planning our 10th anniversary year! Part of our audience is from the various Nordic immigrant communities. But at least two



thirds of our audience are L.A. film lovers and industry professionals. This is a film savvy town! Some come back year after year, and others walk in the door and experience something new for the first time. One writer called Scandinavian Film Festival L.A. "the place where Nordic film winters in Southern California." I like that-- A wonderful film writer/critic Diane Sippl called our festival "Glögg for the Soul!" (Glögg is a hot spiced wine-based drink that puts a definite glow on chilly Nordics in frostbitten climates!) And, by the way—there's plenty of romance, and, despite rumors to the contrary, good—if dry—humor as well. I guess laughter is another universal! I've often joked that we're the festival that serves Prozac instead of popcorn. But we've done well without either one, actually. And the films aren't so dark that we've needed a counseling team in the lobby. We keep people happy there with a great Nordic Café and wonderful spread at our opening gala done by Norwegian American Chef David Larson of Taste is Everything Catering. (www.tasteis.com)

In a town where there are film festivals are not in short supply, ours has been called "a classy boutique festival" that is a favorite with the erudite and neophytes alike. We were cited by L.A. County as an important new addition to the Los Angeles cultural scene. But suddenly we're turning 10! Our goal is to make the world both a little larger—and a little smaller—all on the big screen.

What does any of that have to do with starting a Scandinavian Film Festival in Los Angeles? Well—it IS a little like jumping off the garage roof and believing the umbrella will work as a parachute!



photography by Savanna Star Ommaha