

Warmth from Scandinavia

By KEVIN THOMAS
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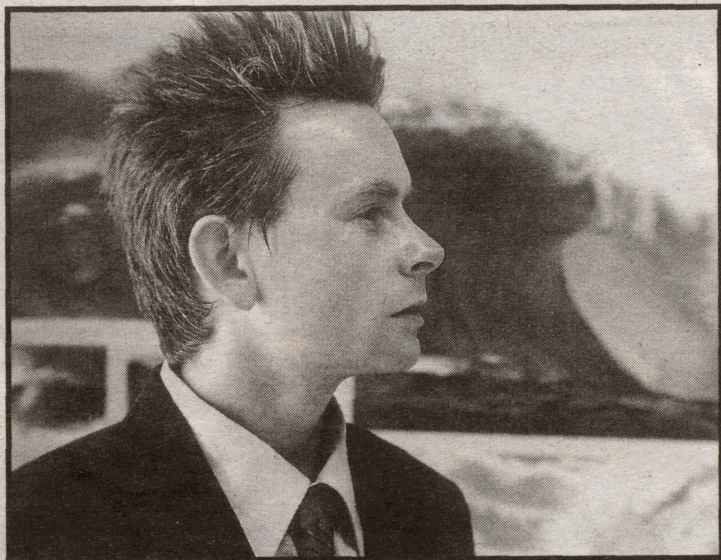
FROM the cold climes of the Nordic countries comes a series of films marked by exceptional warmth. The Scandinavian Film Festival L.A. is composed of 10 foreign feature entries for the Oscars, and the three previewed all are marked by authentic concern for simple kindness and humanity — qualities as welcome as they are rare on the screen.

Erik Poppe's "**Hawaii, Oslo**" gets the festival, which runs Friday through Sunday at the Writers Guild Theater, off to a great start. On the hottest evening in Oslo, a small group of people converges on a city square just as an ambulance strikes a pedestrian. From this point, director Poppe moves back to the previous day to reveal how a dozen individuals, most of them at a point of crisis, ended up at the scene of the accident — and how most of their lives will forever be changed.

Poppe takes one of the oldest plot devices and, through rich imagination and characterization, transcends mere coincidence to attain a wondrous poetic level. The workings of fate reveal love and dreams at their most desperate and poignant. So intensely motivated are his characters — and so believably acted — that "**Hawaii, Oslo**" never smacks of contrivance.

Hawaii is the name of a bar where 25-year-old Leon (Jan Gunnar Roise), a patient in a mental institution granted a brief leave, hopes to reunite with the girl who saved him from drowning exactly a decade earlier on his birthday. Hawaii, USA, is the place where Leon's convict brother, Trygve (Aksel Hennie), dreams of escaping to. Inside the ambulance are a couple, Frode (Stig Henrik Hoff) and Milla (Silje Torp Faeravaag), and their newborn, who will die of a heart defect if they don't swiftly raise enough money to take him to America for a risky operation. A third story involves a suicidal faded pop star (Petronella Barker) who is confronted with her two young sons, whom she hasn't seen in 11 years, at their father's funeral, only to discover they face the immediate prospect of being separated and sent to orphanages or foster homes.

The film's key figure, however, is the saintly Vidar (Trond Espen Seim), an orderly at the mental hospital who is greatly concerned about Leon's welfare. He gives the film a spiritual, otherworldly dimension, representing the power of love and sacrifice to affect the destinies of others.



MESMERIZING: Jan Gunnar Roise stars in "**Hawaii, Oslo**," which opens the 10-film festival at the Writers Guild on Friday.

Scandinavian Film Festival L.A.

When: Friday to Sunday. "**Hawaii, Oslo**," 8 p.m. Friday; "**As It Is in Heaven**," 6:30 p.m. Saturday; "**The Dog Nail Clipper**," 8 p.m. Sunday

Where: Writers Guild Theater, 135 S. Doheny Drive, Beverly Hills

Cost: \$40 for opening night gala including buffet reception; \$75 for festival pass that includes all screenings including opening night; \$15 admission opening night, \$10 all other screenings

Info: (323) 661-4273 or www.asfla.org

Intimate, graceful, with an evocative score for piano, "**Hawaii, Oslo**" smoothly accumulates a mesmerizing effect.

Rejuvenation

Another strong entry is Kay Pollak's "**As It Is in Heaven**," a robust crowd-pleaser that has no shortage of sentimentality and humor, which serve to set off some grim truths about closed-minded, hypocritical Christian fundamentalism and spousal abuse. Michael Nyqvist portrays Daniel, an internationally renowned conductor whose hectic schedule drives him to a collapse. Without understanding exactly why, he returns to the village in northern Sweden he left at age 7. Since he performs under a stage name, nobody recognizes the 40ish man as a former resident. Nearly everyone is excited about having a celebrity in their midst, especially the local minister (Niklas Falk), who persuades him to direct the church choir.

Daniel unexpectedly rediscovered the joy of creating music

he feared he'd forever lost. At the same time, his inspirational powers unleash the emotions and dreams of his choir members with unexpected consequences. The minister soon proves to be a killjoy threatened by the collective lifted spirits of his choir, instilling rebellion in his own wife (Ingela Olsson) and self-assertion on the part of a gifted singer (Helen Sjöholm) regularly abused by her hard-drinking husband. In the meantime, Daniel finds himself buoyed by and attracted to the vibrant Lena (Frida Hallgren), the most free-spirited, independent-thinking individual in the community.

Pollak, who is returning to films after an 18-year absence, shamelessly draws out his ending to milk it to the last drop, but his tactic pays off.

More unusual than either of those two films, Markku Polonen's "**The Dog Nail Clipper**" is a ruefully sweet tale about the capacity for kindness. During World War II, a young Finnish soldier, Mertsi (Peter Franzen), is shot in the head, leaving him blind in the left eye, afflicted with a nervous tic and periodic memory lapses. Despite his brain damage, he's determined to try to earn his living. He crosses paths with a kindly elderly man (Ahti Kuoppala), apparently visiting the town where Mertsi lives in an institution, and while talking of his beloved dog, says her only imperfection is troublesome spurs that grow on her paws. The old man jokingly gives Mertsi a work order to clip the dog's spurs, and he takes it very seriously.

From this exquisite, wise and deeply felt film it's easy to see why Polonen has been praised for capturing both the melancholy and joy in the Finnish mentality.