

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

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## Laila (1929)

HippFest Commission: Thursday 21 March 2019

**Performing live: Marit Fält and Rona Wilkie**

George Schnéevoigt was born in Copenhagen in 1893. His Danish father was a musician and his Finnish mother was a photographer. He lived with her in Berlin for much of childhood, before returning to Denmark as a young man to become a filmmaker. As a director at the Nordisk studio, he directed several films, but he also worked as a cinematographer, most notably on some beautiful films by Carl Th. Dreyer (you can see one film they made together, *The Parson's Widow*, at Hippfest on Saturday 23 March 2019). It was when working as a cinematographer on a film called *The People of the Wilds* (1928), a melodrama set in the Sami community in northern Norway, that he was struck by the inspiration for his *Laila* (1929).

With the help of Norwegian producer Helge Lunde, Schnéevoigt was able to make *Laila*, an adaptation of a popular novel about the Sami people by author J. A. Friis. At the time, the indigenous Sami people, who lived in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, were the targets of a certain amount of racial prejudice – traces of which you can see in the finished films. Nevertheless, Friis's novel took a slightly more sympathetic view, and had proved a big success. It had first been written as individual stories under the title *From Finnmark: Descriptions*, but Friis added more chapters to create a cohesive novel named *Lajla*, using the adventures of a young woman to tie the story together.

Schnéevoigt also wrote the script for the film, which is remarkably faithful to the novel, although it is set in an indeterminate time period, unlike the book, which is clearly placed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The heroine, Laila, is a romantic young woman, with a strong connection to her home and the earth itself. She is Norwegian, but as a baby she is rescued and adopted by some Sami people. Eventually she will have to choose not just between the culture of her birth and of her upbringing, but between two lovers, one Norwegian and one Sami.

Laila is played by Swedish actress Mona Martenson, who had previously attracted attention appearing alongside Greta Garbo in Mauritz Stiller's *The Saga of Gösta Berling* (1924). She did not follow her co-star to Hollywood, but had a successful career in Scandinavia instead, especially in silent films. *Laila* offered her the greatest role of her career, and as you'll see she makes for a captivating heroine. Norwegian character actor Tryggve Larsen plays her adoptive Sami father – a popular stage star although often typecast as a villain. His role in *Laila* was probably his best-known film work, and he reprised it for the talkie remake in 1937 (also directed by Schnéevoigt).

The first of Laila's two suitors is Mellet, played by Norwegian actor-director and renowned leading man Henry Gleditsch. He went on to be a figurehead of the Norwegian resistance

during the Second World War, and was sadly executed by the Nazis in 1942. Harald Schwenzen, another Norwegian actor, classically trained, plays his rival, Anders. Aside from *Laila*, his best work on film is probably the wonderful Knut Hamsun adaptation *Pan* (1922), which he both starred in and directed.

Schnéevoigt enlisted another Danish cinematographer, Valdemar Christensen, to shoot *Laila*, and the photography in this film is frequently breathtaking. While the interior scenes were shot at the Nordisk studio, the exteriors were filmed on location in the far north of Norway and the scenery looks spectacular. Watch out too for some stunning action sequences, including a thrilling boat-ride on white water and a dramatic attack by wolves.

Schnéevoigt secured his reputation with this beautiful film, and was considered the leading Danish director during the early sound period. Although he wanted to make more films, his career went into decline after 1942. Having made *Laila* twice, he fought for a chance to direct a second, colour remake in 1958, but that project fell to another director. He died in 1961, with an illustrious, if curtailed career to be proud of. *Laila* may well be the high point though, a movie that film historian Caspar Tybjerg has called “the crowning achievement of Norwegian silent cinema”.

**By Pamela Hutchinson.** *Pamela is a freelance writer and film critic. She edits the website [SilentLondon.co.uk](http://SilentLondon.co.uk) and her books include *Pandora's Box (BFI Film Classic)* and *30-Second Cinema*.*

Dir: George Schnéevoigt | Norway | 1929 | N/C PG | b&w | English intertitles | 2h 26m plus 20m interval

With: Mona Mårtenson, Peter Malberg, Tryggve Larssen, Harald Schwenzen

Screening material courtesy Flicker Alley