



The Norrtull Gang

Dir. Per Lindberg | Sweden | 1923 | N/C PG | 1h 26m | Swedish intertitles with English surtitles

Original title: Norrtullsligan

Performing live: John Sweeney

5.30pm on Sunday 24 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of the Swedish Film Institute

This screening is dedicated to the memory of Graham Wilson (1966-2023) who loved cinema and music, and was an enthusiastic attendee of HippFest for many years.

Four young women share a flat in the city. They style themselves a “gang” but they’re not criminals, just young people stuck in “pink-collar” office jobs, trying to navigate love, family and friendship while fighting for better working conditions. Pegg, Baby, Eva and Emmy live together in two rented rooms in Norrtull Street in Stockholm, and while in many ways they exemplify the ideal of the “new woman”, they frequently confront the very real limitations of a world that remains stubbornly old-fashioned. Resilient, playful and spirited, the “Norrtull gang” are in many ways like generations of on-screen girlfriends to follow them, but the sexual politics and labour practices of early 1900s Sweden might shock even Carrie Bradshaw.

Theatre director Per Lindberg made a handful of films – his best-known screen work is probably the noirish, tragic *June Night* (1940), in which Ingrid Bergman plays a young woman who moves to Stockholm after being caught up in a sex scandal. Here, almost two decades earlier, Lindberg is already alert to the sexual double standards and gossip that young women contend with. He is a sensitive director of actors and the film has a certain cinematic flair, including the use of overhead shots, and a repeated view of the city skyline. At one point, a shot of the massed ranks of typists toiling at their desks seems to pre-empt King

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Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), and of course, Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960). The film was produced by Bonnierfilm, the short-lived company founded by notable Swedish actor-director Karin Swanström, one of the most important women in Sweden's film history, becoming the head of Svensk Filmindustri.

Norrullsligan was adapted by Lindberg's brother-in-law, the playwright Hjalmar Bergman, from a witty 1908 novel of the same name by the suffragist writer Elin Wägner, one of Sweden's foremost feminist activists, who worked as a journalist before turning to literature. First published as a newspaper serial, *Norrullsligan* was known in translation as *Men and Other Misfortunes*. Many of the crisp intertitles in this adaptation are direct quotes from Wägner's text, but the film does choose to alter the original plot to create a happy ending, which the novelist did not like, but diplomatically conceded that it worked on screen. Arguably, Wägner's original ending would have aged better than the romantic conclusion appended here. However, she praised the film for its realistic depiction of the life of office girls: "there are glimpses of camaraderie and bohemian life... and (a representation) of the emotional world of young working lonely girls and their sorrows, all transposed into the romantic world of the film."

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Tora Teje, one of Sweden's first major film stars who had broken through by playing the neglected wife in Mauritz Stiller's *Erotikon* (1920), plays Pegg, the protagonist of the story. Wägner was moved by her performance, writing, "Tora Teje's face is what you remember best", while other critics found her a little cold, and slyly noted that the star's wardrobe was far too elegant for a secretary struggling to make ends meet. Pegg also brings up her younger brother, Putte, played by the popular star Lauritz Falk in his youthful film debut, and her diary entries tell the tale of her and her gang. Pegg introduces us to her flatmates: the youngest of the group is mischievous Baby (Inga Tidblad), whose boss is a creep, the most sensible, perhaps too sensible, is Eva (Renée Björling), who works for an undertaker, while Emmy (Linea Hillberg) is sadly often confined to her bed with a bad back.

The difficulties the women in the gang face are serious, as is the industrial action they take, but the tone of the film is often lightly comic as it is poignant, as it builds to a sprightly festive finale. *Norrtullsligan* conveys its feminist message with a laugh. In the midst of comic action, watch how preciously the women in the film guard their own spaces in the world, and how often men (including future Hollywood heartthrob Nils Asther as Baby's boyfriend) try to invade those very sanctums.

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Swedish newspapers described *Norrtullsligan* as a “flickornas film”, literally “girl film”, a youthful counterpart to the melodrama of what would be known as the “woman’s picture” in the 1940s. The film is now celebrated as part of Sweden’s silent golden age, and as a precious female-led title within that era. Wägner’s women are young and united, whether staying up all night to sew and chat with their friends, or supporting each other through heartbreaks. Even when the film strikes a muted, melancholic tone, the comradeship and optimism of the Norrtull Gang bursts from the screen: new women, for a new world in sight.

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance critic, curator and film historian. Her publications include BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora's Box, and her website SilentLondon.co.uk is devoted to silent cinema.

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