

About « JOE HILL »

By Mårten Blomkvist

The international hit "Elvira Madigan" (1967), based on a true story about a Swedish drama of passion at the end of the 19th century, made Bo Widerberg one of the most sought after European film directors. It was only a matter of time before he would be doing filming in USA.

"Joe Hill" was the project that brought him over. It turned into a powerful film, against all odds, for the filming process was extremely difficult, to the point that the film was officially called off a month into shooting.

As with "Elvira", this was a true story. Joe Hill was originally Swede Joel Hägglund (1879-1915), who with his brother arrived in USA 1902. Hill became engaged in the workers movement, and wrote rousing songs for them, setting new lyrics to Salvation Army-hits. The organization Industrial Workers of the World met with hard resistance from employers, who used all means to hold back the creation of unions. 1915 Hill was sentenced to death, accused of a murder during a robbery gone wrong. The trial was geared to result in a guilty verdict, and met with protests from around the world. Nevertheless, Hill was executed on November 19.

The subject was a natural for Widerberg, who had started out wanting to put working class people and their struggles on the screen, having looked for them in vain in contemporary Swedish cinema. Widerberg was also keen to shoot the Norman Mailer novel "The deer park", a dream that stayed with him over the years, but finally "Joe Hill" was decided on, a co-production between Widerberg and Paramount. Widerberg-favourite Thommy Berggren starred as Hill.

Being suspicious of big and powerful Hollywood-studios, in November 1969 Widerberg arrived for shooting in New York with basically a small Swedish team. Widerberg wanted to do this in his own way, without assistance from Hollywood. The only native help was three students from Berkely, none of them New Yorkers.

Widerberg was fresh from the triumph of "Ådalen 31" (1969), also depicting historic events, also shot on location, where the people of Ådalen had provided enthusiastic help during the shooting, turning out as extras, finding the right clothes in their attics, and so on. New Yorkers were different. Nothing was free. As soon as a street was rigged to look like NY 1910, the Venetian blinds were coming down in the windows in view.

They were not 1910. The line producer, Widerberg-veteran Walle Bergendahl, had to start running up and down stairs, handing out one dollar bills to get the tenants to cooperate.

At one point, the team came back after lunch to find that the camera - they had just the one - was snatched. A local undertaker was approached; the production rented part of his large store for wardrobe, and had noticed he seemed well connected. He did some asking around, and after some time two members of the team were guided up to the roof of a building. There was the camera. Unharmed. Shooting could begin again.

Setbacks like that added up. Every shoot seemed to take for ever to achieve. Gradually, Widerberg lost hope. By the beginning of December he was back in Sweden, announcing it all a failure.

But the shots that were achieved actually looked good. So in January 1970, shooting began again.

A small company, Sagittarius, part of Canadian liquor producer Seagram, took over production responsibilities. Paramount would be the distributor for USA. With Sagittarius, the production got an office in New York and things started running more smoothly. Costly filming in Utah, where Hill met his end, was cancelled. Sweden provided, for example, the prison where Joe is held, as well as the execution ground.

It still continued to be a problematic production, with, to Hollywood, an erratic and even slightly hostile director. In Cannes, the film received the jury prize. But in the American film industry, the interest in Bo Widerberg cooled with "Joe Hill".

All of this can't detract from the beauty and power of "Joe Hill". In the images, you see a director determined to compete with Elia Kazan, John Ford and Jean Renoir. Joe Hill once declared himself "a citizen of the world" - Bo Widerberg very much considered himself a citizen of the movie world.

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