



## SILENT CINEMA

# Gösta Berling's Saga

### Gösta Berling's Saga (Gösta Berlings saga)

Director: Mauritz Stiller

Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri

Screenplay: Mauritz Stiller, Ragnar Hyltén-Cavallius

Based on the novel by: Selma Lagerlöf

Photography: Julius Jaenzon

Art Directors: Ragnar Bratten, Vilhelm Bryde

Cast:

Lars Hanson (*Gösta Berling*)

Gerda Lundequist (*Margareta Samzelius*)

Jenny Hasselquist (*Marianne, daughter of Melchior*)

Greta Garbo

(*Elisabeth Dohna, wife of Count Dohna*)

Oscar Bergstrom (*Master Julius*)

Theodor Buch (*Ruster*)

Ellen Cederstrom (*Countess Martha Dohna*)

Hilda Forsslund (*Margareta's mother*)

Otto Elg-Lundberg (*Major Samzelius*)

Sixten Malmerfelt (*Melchior Sinclaire*)

Karin Swanstrom

(*Gustafva, Melchior Sinclaire's wife*)

Torsten Hammarén (*Count Henrik Dohna*)

Mona Mårtenson (*Countess Ebna Dohna*)

Sven Scholander (*Sintram*)

Svend Kornbeck (*Christian Bergh*)

Hugo Rönnblad (*Beerencrutz*)

Knut Lambert (*Rutger von Örneclou*)

Jules Gaston-Portefaix (*Anders Fuchs*)

Albert Stahl (*Uncle Eberhard*)

Anton de Verdier (*Cousin Kristoffer*)

Axel Jacobsson (*Lilliencrona*)

Jan de Meyere (*Löwenborg*)

Edmund Hohndorf (*Kevenhüller*)

Birger Lyne

Signe Enwall

Tom Walter

Sweden 1924

206 mins + interval

Digital

With live piano accompaniment by John Sweeney

Restored by the Swedish Film Institute in 2022

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

+ intro by writer Paul Joyce

Some stories lend themselves well to a three-hour running time and the episodic saga is perfect for it. The word saga might imply stodginess but in fact the time speeds by in Mauritz Stiller's final great work for the first 'golden age' of Swedish cinema, *Gösta Berling's Saga*. In Britain it was called *The Atonement of Gösta Berling* in an attempt to explain the central thrust of a sometimes confusing plot. The film is based on a celebrated novel of 1891, by Selma Lagerlöf, the first woman to win the Nobel prize for literature whose speciality was 19<sup>th</sup> century Swedish society. The novel has a host of characters and subplots, loosely connected, which come together in the denouement. The story centres on a young, defrocked priest called Gösta Berling, played by Lars Hanson. Having been cast out of his parish for drunkenness, he wanders the land in search of some meaning to his life, during the course of which three women fall in love with him, with devastating consequences. The last of these, and the instrument of Gösta's redemption is the as yet unknown Greta Garbo, coached Svengali-like by Stiller for the role, and even though she hasn't developed the style that would make her a huge star in America, the legendary radiance is clear to see. Julius Jaenzon's photography of Lars Hanson and Greta Garbo is exemplary, but this is also extended to the interiors – the great house at Ekerby is shot with its ceilings in view for example, an innovation that wouldn't be repeated till *Citizen Kane* in 1948. However, the most spectacular set piece is the pursuit of the lovers by wolves in their horse drawn sleigh across a vast frozen lake. Stiller builds the tension by focusing on the trivial conversation between the pair although we have spotted the wolves in the distance. The camera pulls out to show the wolves almost upon them, then shows them savagely ripping apart a fur thrown from the sleigh. This is clearly not a special effect but quite real and genuinely terrifying.

In attempting to synthesise the rich content of the novel the film becomes slightly disjointed. It could be a consequence of missing material in the film – it was cut down and re-edited several times – but most of the full running length has been recovered. Another explanation could be that the author had some approval of the script and perhaps she had been unable to give up certain scenes or characters. There are certainly plenty of them, although the absolute stand out is the character of the mayor's wife, played by Gerda Lundequist, an independent, spirited woman, a natural leader of men who would not be out of place in an Arthurian legend or a great Western epic. It is she who finally draws together the hero and heroine, which break their cycle of despair and moral crisis. Lagerlöf complained about the film saying Stiller had watched too many bad serials, but it is precisely those pleasures which are to be found in the film serial that lifts the film out of the ordinary – the great spectacles, the sense of immersion in story and character that the long running time bestows. This kind of long spectacular adventure with exotic locations and romantic characters would become hugely popular in the following years and would encompass some of silent cinema's highest achievements.

Bryony Dixon, *100 Silent Films* (BFI/Palgrave, 2011)

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*Gösta Berling's Saga* – the tale of a drinking priest who joins a group of cavaliers past their prime, lodged by the colourful wife of an army major – was director Mauritz Stiller's third adaptation of the writings of Nobel laureate Selma Lagerlöf. She had been pleased with *Herr Arnes pengar* (*Sir Arne's Treasure*, 1919), but not too happy with *Gunnar Hedes saga* (*The Blizzard*, 1923), as she thought Stiller had taken far too many liberties with her source novel *En herrgårdssägen* (*A Manor House Tale*). After reading the script of *Gösta Berling's Saga*, she consented to her name being mentioned in the credits as having authorised the adaptation; something she later regretted after watching the final film, as several changes had been made to the script after she had approved it.

When shooting began in August 1923, two of the major female parts – Elisabeth Dohna and her sister-in-law Ebba Dohna – had still not been cast. Stiller contacted his directorial colleague Gustaf Molander, who at the time was also the head of the school of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. Molander advised him to engage two of his students, Greta Gustafsson and Mona Mårtenson. Stiller followed his colleague's advice, and during the shooting the young Greta Gustafsson changed her family name to Garbo – the rest, as we say, is (film) history!

Garbo's performance as the Italian wife of the dim-witted son of a count stands out (even though she only first appears towards the end of part I), and her horse-sleigh ride with Lars Hanson on the frozen lake while being chased by wolves is an iconic scene in the history of Swedish cinema. Gerda Lundequist also gives a memorable performance as the master of ceremonies at the mansion where the cavaliers are staying.

The film originally premiered in two parts, a week apart (part I was released on 10 March 1924, with part II following on 17 March); and for this most recent restoration, the two parts are again being screened separately (as in the original, part II begins with a brief recap of the events in part I).

Jon Wengström, *Il Cinema Ritrovato* (2024), [festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it](http://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it)