

## THE FIRST YEARS OF THE DANISH CINEMA

### The first film showings and the first cinemas.

A deceased colleague of ours, a Danish film historian, once said that Denmark was the country with the largest production of films in proportion to its population. This statement does not, however, prove valid for every period in Danish film history but it is true that there always has been a considerable film activity in Denmark.

The film came to Denmark fairly early. Only six months after the invention was made, the first showing took place on the 7th June 1896. By way of comparison may be mentioned that Norway saw the moving pictures for the first time as early as the 6th April of the same year, when the German brothers Skladanowsky presented their bioscope pictures in Cirkus Varieté in Kristiania (Oslo). In Sweden it did not happen until the 28th June of the same year, when Harald Linkilde from Denmark showed Lumière films in the summer theatre of Malmø in connection with an industries fair. On the same day the fourth Scandinavian country - Finland - had its first showing. It was in Helsinki where an agent to Lumière presented the new invention.

It was a painter by the name of Lauritz Vilhelm Pacht (1843-1912) who introduced the moving pictures in Denmark. He was a well known man in the Copenhagen entertainment world. In 1896 he became director of the "Copenhagen Panorama" which was housed in a wooden pavilion in the town hall square in the town centre. He had earlier that year during a visit to Paris been to see Clément Maurice's cinema in Grand Café and had at once been thrilled with the new invention. Through Maurice he got hold of a projector which was probably not a Lumière make. As far as I know, Lumière did not start selling his apparatus as early as that. But Pacht managed to buy some Lumière films.

The premiere then took place on the 7th June. The show included apart from the moving pictures also dioramas, wax figures and optical illusions. Pacht named the new invention "Kinoptikon", probably to match the neighbouring "Panoptikon".

The event was mentioned the following day in one of the leading papers of Copenhagen, "Politiken", whose reporter gave a detailed review. Here is a quotation:

"You sit in the darkness gazing at a large piece of white canvas. Then it begins. Life gets onto the canvas and various fashionable scenes unfold themselves to us... A railway train rolls by, fast at first, then slowing down and going directly towards the audience. The station-master - conceited as all station-masters - appears. Porters jump about, doors

are opened, ladies and gentlemen alight, others get on, the train moves again and drives away..."

This was the impression that Lumière's famous film of the approaching train made at the first showing in Copenhagen. The event aroused interest not only among the common people - on the 10th June King Christian IX, the Queen, their children and their suite arrived to see the moving pictures. The papers told the following day that especially the children had enjoyed themselves. Altogether, Pacht did not lack the attention of the newspapers. Two weeks after the premiere a dramatic fire destroyed the projector and part of the wooden building. It soon turned out to be caused by an electrician who had been sacked and wanted revenge. Pacht reopened already the 30th June with a new projector and new films. Nevertheless, the moving pictures did not yet become a real success with the public. It was considered more or less a curiosity and was only taken up at intervals by Pacht. There is, however, a review of a new programme in Panorama as late as the 28th December 1897. On that occasion Pacht showed for the first time some shots from life in Copenhagen. Especially a take of a turn-out of a fire engine had appealed to the reporter.

Pacht was not the only one to go in for the films. Four days before the premiere in Panorama the brothers Skladanowsky came down from Norway, where they as mentioned had presented their invention. They showed their bioscope-pictures in the famous pantomime theatre in Tivoli in Copenhagen and did well enough to keep the show on for a whole month. No such luck did follow the Frenchman Charles Marcel who presented his kinematograph in the concert hall of Copenhagen on the 7th July 1896. His show was met with ruthless criticism and was on only for two days. He continued to Stockholm where his flop repeated itself. He seems to have been a sort of an outsider. Though he advertised his "Parisian Kinematograph", his programmes consisted mostly of American kinoscope pictures of Edison make. Such pictures were hardly fit for projection onto a screen and that was probably the reason for the reporters' complaints about extremely shaky pictures and lack of motion.

The next man who seriously went in for the films was Lars Peter Elfelt (1866-1931), who later became photographer to the King. About 1897-99 he arranged showings of his own films - which I shall deal with later - and of Lumière films. His projections took place in Hafnia Panorama - a room at the back of the building where the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain shop is now - on Amager Torv in the shopping centre of Copenhagen. From 1901 onwards he had a license to show moving pictures in 27 Frederiksberggade - the building where now the cinema of The Danish Film Museum is located. Like the showings in Pacht's Panorama the moving pictures

were only part of Elfelt's programmes. He also showed lantern-slides, for instance, and his showings were not regular daily performances advertised in the papers - in other words it was not a real cinema. We did not get that until 1904, and were thus behind both Sweden and Finland. Finland was the first Scandinavian country to get a cinema - "Jorden rundt" - which opened in 1901, then Sweden followed on the 27th July 1902 with a cinema called "Arkaden" in Gothenburg. Denmark's "Kosmorama" in Copenhagen opened on the 17th September 1904 and finally Norway got "Kino" in Oslo on the 1st November 1904.

"Kosmorama" was situated in the elegant shopping street, Østergade, in No. 27 and was founded by Constantin Philipsen (1859-1925). As a young man he had shown "moving" lantern-slides and was among Pathé's first customers. In 1903 he arranged film showings in the St. Thomas-premises at Frederiksberg but did not have a real cinema before he opened "Kosmorama". Philipsen's cinema got right from the start a fine publicity and people flocked to the place. The success induced others to establish cinemas both in Copenhagen and the provinces. One of these was to play an important part in the history of the Danish cinema - "Biografteatret" - situated in 47 Vimmelskaftet in Copenhagen. It was opened on the 23rd April 1905 by Ole Olsen, who started our first feature film company the following year.

#### Early Danish films.

Peter Elfelt, whom I have already mentioned was the first one to make films in Denmark. He got a camera in 1896 and began shooting "newsreels" of the Royal Family as well as the everyday life of the citizens.

Film historians have often wondered why the photographers of Lumière, who went all over the world to collect material, never came to Denmark. I suppose the reason must have been that Elfelt was on the go very early so that Lumière felt there was not much to do here.

Elfelt was not only the man behind the first newsreels ever to be taken here but also a pioneer in the field of feature films. In 1903 he made the first Danish feature called "Henrettelsen" (The Execution), taken in the arcades of Christiansborg Castle in Copenhagen and dealing with a bleak story about a little dressmaker who came to a sad end. The film lasted one minute. Elfelt did not, however, repeat his attempts in this genre.

When Nordisk Films Kompagni was established three years later, the production of features got going. The director, Ole Olsen (1863-1943) had for a number of years been a business man in the field of entertainment. His first connection with the films dates back to 1899 when he showed moving pictures in Malmö in Sweden. He did not have any success there, though, but was nevertheless convinced about the financial possibilities of the films.

Shortly after the opening of his cinema he began selling films. It soon proved difficult to meet the demand and thus it lay near at hand to make some films himself. Ole Olsen got his first camera - of French make - in January 1906. He did not have to wait long for an opportunity to bring off his first scoop. On the 29th January King Christian IX died and Olsen got the idea of filming the castrum doloris and funeral. The result was a film of 250 meters which got an enormous success at the showings in his cinema in Vimmelskaftet, and this led to his plunging into production of feature films.

Nordisk Film's first feature had its premiere on the 26th March. The film was a farce of 100 meters called "Opløb på Frederiksberg" (Crowds at Frederiksberg) or "Professorens Morgenavis" (The professor's morning paper). It was directed by a conjurer by the name of Louis Halberstadt, and it was natural that our first film was a farce, this being the most popular genre at the time.

Compared to other film producing countries we were a little behind in starting a production but it did not take Olsen long to catch up. In June 1906 he bought a site in Valby in the outskirts of Copenhagen for his studios - and this is the same site where Nordisk Film has its studios today. Olsen established the same year a film printing factory at the Copenhagen harbour. By the end of that year more than 100 films, half of which were newsreels, had been through the factory.

The early period of Danish cinema is almost entirely the story of one single man - Ole Olsen. Competitors did, of course, appear - from about 1908 - but never represented any danger to Olsen until after 1918. This was due not only to the better quality of Olsen's films but also to the fact that he ran his business with much more efficiency. Right from the beginning he realized the importance of having agents abroad and thus get a market for his films there. In an interview from the 25th August 1906 he said: "I have already established an extensive export of Danish films... and I have already six branches abroad." To give an idea of the extension of his export, I can mention that a film from 1907 "Løvejagten" (The Lion Hunters) was sold in 259 copies abroad.

The tough business methods of Ole Olsen can be illustrated by an incident in 1910. Another Danish company "Fotorama" had made the first long film in Denmark (600 meters). It was called "Den hvide Slavehandel" (In the hands of the impostors) and dealt with the danger that young girls encounter in the big city. It was a big hit in Denmark but as "Fotorama" did not have good connections abroad, they were unable to sell it outside Denmark. Ole Olsen immediately made a film with exactly the same story and thanks to his agents he sold it abroad, and for a long time he got the credit for being the producer of the first long feature film.

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