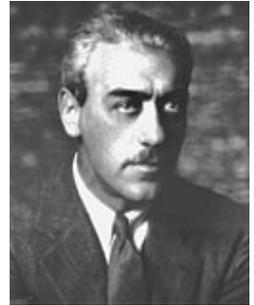




Stiller, Mauritz (1883-1928)

by Deborah Hunn

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A portrait of Mauritz Stiller by Arnold Genthe. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Swedish film director Mauritz Stiller's principal claim to fame is his discovery of an unknown actress, Greta Gustafsson, whom he renamed Greta Garbo. However, this flamboyant gay Svengali to a legendary lesbian star also deserves recognition as a key figure in forging a national cinema that was eventually to become notable for its progressive treatment of sexuality and desire.

Born Moshe Stiller in Finland in 1883, the son of Polish Jewish parents who died when he was five, Stiller was raised by family friends, the Katzmans, who were haberdashers. As a youth he attended Hebrew school, took violin lessons, and apprenticed at his foster parents' business until he was conscripted into the Russian army. Rather than serve, he escaped to Sweden.

Suffering from tuberculosis and poverty, the young man used money offered for a health cure to travel to Stockholm, where, checking into a top hotel, he posed as a dapper, successful German director. The daring scam garnered the connections necessary to embark on a career as a director, writer, and occasional actor in the burgeoning Swedish film industry.

Over two decades Stiller created works in various styles, from social realism to historical adventure and romance. Among his films are such titles as *Mother and Daughter* (1912), *The Modern Suffragette* (1913), *Alexander the Great* (1917), and *Erotikon* (1920).

Stiller's major triumphs, however, came in his innovative, poetic film versions of Swedish Nobel laureate Selma Lagerlöf's sweeping and intense epic novels. Lagerlöf voiced objections to Stiller's experimentalism, but the films are better for the director's resistance to slavishly literal adaptations.

Sir Arne's Treasure (1919) was followed by *Gunnar Hedes' Saga* (1923). In *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1924), Stiller cast as the heroine a shy, inexperienced ingenue who, under his guidance, gave a performance that caused a European sensation.

Seizing the moment, Stiller negotiated a contract for Garbo with MGM. He accompanied her to Hollywood, but constant bickering with studio bosses led him to be passed over as director of her first American film. He was sacked while directing her second, *The Temptress* (1926).

His fierce control over his once compliant protégée rapidly diminishing, a depressed Stiller returned to Sweden, where he died of pleurisy in 1928.

While playing on arrogant charm and sartorial elegance to manipulate his actresses (some of whom, including Garbo herself, he may have been romantically involved with), Stiller was also known for his homosexual liaisons, including a rumoured failed affair with a Danish set designer, who committed suicide.

Although his films do not overtly reflect on same-sex desire, his technically innovative explorations of dark

themes and emotions helped forge a film culture that was later to produce the likes of Ingmar Bergman.

Moreover, Stiller's role in shaping one of cinema's great queer icons should not be underestimated: "Don't bother about your friends," he advised Garbo at the outset of their association. "When I finish with you, you will have no friends, but rather admirers everywhere."

It is not difficult to see, emerging from this almost Wildean *bon mot*, the Garbo who was to become legendary for wanting "to be alone." Ironically, however, despite some twinges of guilt, one of the earliest friends she learned not to bother with was Stiller himself.

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