

# INTERIOR: NIGHT

**EIGHT DECADES ON, VICTOR SJÖSTRÖM'S  
THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE  
RETAINS ITS CHILLING CHARGE**

The 1921 Swedish silent film classic *The Phantom Carriage*, directed by Victor Sjöström, is handsomely presented now on dvd with a powerfully evocative new film score by KTL, the sonic collaboration between Stephen O'Malley and Peter Rehberg.

Although Sjöström (1879-1960) may be better known for his last acting performance as Professor Isak Borg in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), he was actually one of the towering figures of Swedish [and Scandinavian] cinema, both as an actor and a director. Between 1912 and 1915 alone he directed some 31 films (of which, apparently, only three still exist).

*The Phantom Carriage* is one of the most famous of Sjöström's Swedish films. A supernatural fantasy, it is drawn from the novel by Selma Lagerlof, in which a legend is told that the last person to die on New Year's Eve will be destined to drive the Phantom Carriage, collecting dead souls for the coming year. Photographed by the great Julius Jaenzon (who later was to teach Bergman's cinematographer Sven Nykvist) the film is marked by some very handsome in-camera special effects.

Sjöström's powerfully realist performance, as the drunkard David Holm, is quite terrifying in its utter cruelty and sadism, both to the people who surround him and to his wife in particular, and this makes his actions at the film's end all the more deeply moving (and here the musical score finds the embodiment of this great descent).

*The Phantom Carriage* earned Sjöström an invitation from Samuel Goldwyn to go to America, where he stayed a total of seven years (between 1923-1930, directing under the name of Victor Seastrom) and made a further three masterpieces: the very remarkable *He Who Gets Slapped* with Lon Chaney; *The Scarlet Letter* and, perhaps his greatest, *The Wind* with Lillian Gish. Later, after he returned to Sweden, Sjöström was appointed artistic director at Svensk Filmindustri and would come to help out the young fledgling Ingmar Bergman on several occasions, particularly during the making of his very first film *Crisis*.

The great challenge offered in this edition of *The Phantom Carriage* is the musical score by KTL. Here, you will *not* find music that trots happily beside the images with deft little phrases and quotations as we've come to expect, alas, from too many silent film scores (whether for piano or, sometimes, even orchestra). Rather, our two musicians have struck boldly and with



immense brush strokes to create a vast fresco of music *and* sound within which the psychic atmospheric pressure is, right from the opening images, pitched to a maximum (which may well not be comfortable for all ears, but which is, nonetheless, remarkable).

Like Munch's painting of *The Scream* there are huge swatches of restless blacks and swirls of agitated colours that penetrate, bend and warp around one's being. *The Phantom Carriage* is a metaphysical howl of a soul's journey though the darkest of nights.

These notes were written exclusively for Tartan Video's KTL Edition of *The Phantom Carriage*, available now at £15.99 ([www.tartanvideo.com](http://www.tartanvideo.com)). For more on KTL, visit [www.myspace.com/ktlrule](http://www.myspace.com/ktlrule). Thanks to Paul Smith.

The Brothers Quay are artists of singular vision. They work across all media and live in London and various territories of the imagination. See also p.34.

By the Brothers Quay