

Hildur and the Magician' at the Whitney

About the Film

FILM QUARTERLY · SUMMER 1970

About the only fairy tale films surfacing these days errors hastily dubbed into English and slapped into circuit theaters on week-ends or a fast-buck children's tour. Discerning parents can relax, finally. A good one—some ways a real beauty—has turned up at the Whitney Museum in the current series by new American filmmakers. Titled "Hildur and the Magician," the 90-minute feature will be shown through Jan. 2.

A group of California people, headed by Larry Jordan, the director-writer-photographer-editor, have emerged from a forest with a sensitive, lovely work that must have cost a dime. Exquisitely photographed (in good old black-and-white), threaded by a tactful narration and soothing music, the film gracefully pantomimes the tale of a kidnapped little princess, a wandering fairy queen and a bumbling magician.

As an excursion into never-never land, the picture is never stiff, starchy or self-conscious. Nor are the players. Mr. Jordan has directed his cast, reportedly family and friends, well. Even the costumes show imagination and skill.

The Program

HILDIR AND THE MAGICIAN, written, photographed, directed and edited by Larry Jordan. At the Whitney Museum, shown daily at noon (except Thursday), 2 and 4 P.M., and Tuesday and Wednesday evenings at 6 and 8.

Above all, the picture moves simply, clearly and interestingly, projecting an ethereal spirit. The catch is the length—about 30 minutes too much. But at the movie's best its texture and tone suggest Cocteau's "Beauty and the Beast" and this is high praise indeed. Let's hope we can say soon that here comes Mr. Jordan again.

HOWARD THOMPSON.
NEW YORK TIMES
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Hildur and the Magician, by San Francisco film-maker Larry Jordan, is a feature-length fantasy made on 16mm. It concerns woodland fairies, their queen Hildur, and a madcap foolish magician: the sort of subject we'd hardly expect anybody to bring off, except perhaps the author of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. And indeed Hildur has fatal longeurs. But it remains astonishing because Jordan sustains a delicate and fanciful tale above the razor edge dividing commercial and amateur gossamer. You balk if you pay attention to the story details; they're not quite mythic and not rational either. But Jordan manages to create a fairy world without any fuzzy photography or syrupy music: everything is sharp, clear, yet magical—mostly, I think, because of his exact sense of how little we need be shown to start fantasies going in our own heads. He uses shadowed lighting adroitly; he cuts away lightly from things most would-be fantasy-makers would insist we stare at. Also, perhaps by financial necessity but luckily on artistic grounds, he avoids lip-synch almost entirely. His characters speak, but usually the camera is on their hearers; hence their words hang in the air, atmospherically, unlike the words dribbling from the mouth in synch footage. The trouble is that atmosphere cannot sustain a 95-minute film, and the plot, about Hildur's descent into human form because of a misconcocted potion, doesn't have enough emotional resonance, or enough narrative suspense, to keep us concerned. Jordan argues that the film "grew organically like a plant," without a script, which is a pleasing idea. But I think the analogy must be read otherwise. A plant's development is programmed by its genetic materials, and in the case of a fictional narrative the genetic control must come from a strong script (or its equivalent in the director's mind). To short-film-makers, accustomed to working in briefer lyric forms, structural discipline seems irksome. But no one, in the commercial cinema or outside it, has yet managed to get by without it.—E.C.

ERNEST CALLANBACH



TAKE ONE THE FILM MAGAZINE

MAY 10, 1970
Larry Jordan is one of the filmmakers who make the term "underground" increasingly useless. He has finished his latest work *Hildur and the Magician*, a feature length film having all the aesthetic and technical quality of any of its big studio cousins.

The movie is an entrancing Tolkien-like fantasy about a dying king's daughter who is entrusted to the care of woodland fairies and is subsequently kidnapped by a vengeful gnome and rescued with the aid of a bumbling self-centered magician.

Jordan's creation is very self-consistent and believable. There is nothing in it to say "this isn't true". Most of the shooting was done outdoors and the choices of natural backgrounds are invariably pleasing. All the acting is done silent while a narrator provides the necessary bits of story line, almost as if a minstrel had been given a camera with which to tell his tale. The imagery is very poetic. I suggest the movie for all people who like hobbies.

Hal Aigner

• Larry Jordan teaches filmmaking at the California College of Arts and Crafts, U.C. Berkeley and the Art Institute. Now 35, he left Harvard 13 years ago to act, but quit that almost immediately and came to San Francisco to make films. He has since produced more than 20, starting with psychodrama, going through personal, family-oriented films, and on to highly accomplished animated collages, notably *Duo Concertantes* and *Our Lady of the Sphere*.

He recently finished a feature film, *Hildur and the Magician*, a beautifully composed tale complete with a dying king, fairy queen, beautiful woodland nymphs, a fumbling magician, an evil gnome and a young child that is caught in the middle of their follies.

SAN FRANCISCO MAGAZINE
• HAL AIGNER •
NOV. 1969

The Magical and Mystical: Larry Jordan's Animations

By Hal Aigner

A CINEMATIC PLUNGE into the magical and the mystical, the fanciful and the surreal, are in the offing this week as "Hildur and the Magician," a feature length fairy tale film, and "Our Lady of the Sphere," a skillful animation, are presented by Larry Jordan on an infrequent double bill.

Jordan, 34, is one of the most prolific and accomplished—and probably least recognized—stalwarts of the Bay Area independent film community. He is a gentle, friendly person who lives with his wife, Patty, and daughter, Lorna, in the shaded recesses of San Anselmo, where he now produces most of his works. He is also the head of the San Francisco Art Institute's film department.

Since 1953, he has created more than 20 films; beginning with psychodramas, moving through family oriented movies and portraits of his friends, and on to animations and narrative story films. "Hildur" and "Our Lady" represent some of his best work.

For Jordan, films usually start from "a whispered word or from a thing you wake up with in the morning." "Hildur" was born out of whimsy when Patty and a friend, John Graham, were fantasising about exploring parts of their personality with film. Graham, in particular, wanted to explore the fool side of his nature.

From this skeleton of an idea, Jordan was able to produce a script, choosing in his wife's terms, "real life characters we knew and giving them allegorical characteristics."

As with all good fairy tales, "Hildur" satisfies certain primordial desires, primarily, to transcend the limitations of time and space—usually achieved by magic—and the need to interact with other intelligent, living beings.

The story begins with a dying King entrusting his young daughter to the care of a fairy Queen. The Queen, in a thoughtless act, punishes a forest gnome for an imagined offense, and the gnome, in revenge, kidnaps the young girl.

The fairies must seek out the aid of an egotistic, fumbling magician (played by the would-be fool John Graham) and the tale then moves through a series of comic and tragic vignettes which resolve into several unexpected conclusions.

One of the strongest themes of the film is compassion, expressed only by the King's daughter and symbolized by a tear shed for the luckless gnome. This tear takes on magical potency but is for all practical purposes useless because of the magician's insensitivity.

Following a delightful dinner at his home, Jordan recently talked at length about these two works.

"If people are not interested in compassion, there's no way that they're going to understand that tear," Jordan said. "The child wept that tear because she sorrowed at the gnome being punished. It was a purely gratuitous act.

"This tear was a distillate of compassion, and things that revolved around it never become completely resolved. Compassion has never in this world completely taken over and changed things. Yet, it's probably the most powerful latent force in the world."

"Our Lady of the Sphere" is one of the many unique animations Jordan creates from old steel engravings, some of which he uses for background, others he cuts up for characters and figures.

He takes full advantage of the tendency of disparate objects to take on new meaning and form new relationships when they are brought into close proximity or when their usual context is changed. While these film collages link together a myriad of symbolic forms in new combination, the smooth, lyrical progression of the work result in a powerful sense of wholeness and totality.

"My direction in animation is really following an earlier tradition in experimental filmmaking," Jordan said. "It's picking up a surrealist thread. I think of it as being very traditional. It's a natural, when you look at Max Ernst's collages, that these can move."

"What I've become aware of is that common objects, when taken out of their usual context, become anything. Suddenly they're fraught with all kinds of potential. They become super real or surreal because they're on their own," he continued.

"Put a lot of objects together in a world where they are out of their usual context and they sometimes do very humorous things, or very strange things, or very beautiful things."

While he was creating "Our Lady," Jordan was reading the "Tibetan Book of the Dead," and the film reflects his vision of the post-death world which the human consciousness enters after leaving its mortal frame.

"There are all manner of phenomena experienced in this world," he said. "It can be terrifying if the person, before death, has no instruction about what to expect. 'Our Lady' is kind of a guide to that world."

Both these works will be shown, for one night only, by Canyon Cinematheque at 8:30 p.m., Tuesday, at the San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut street.

A Tour With Brakhage

Underground Movies Are Alive Along the Pacific

by P. Adams Sitney

After 15 months in Europe, I had lost contact with the most recent aspects of American avant-garde film-making. For our own education and as part of a project for a soon-to-be-announced center of non-narrative cinema, Stan Brakhage and I took a film-seeing tour of San Francisco. There we discovered at least half a dozen good and relatively new film-makers and two old masters, both of whom seldom, if ever, show their work in New York.

To begin with the best, the masters are Jordan Belson and Larry Jordan: each showed us at least one masterpiece, that is, a film to be numbered among the fluctuating score, at most, of works of high art ever made with film.



LARRY JORDAN

Larry Jordan's great film can be discussed more easily, though it is enigmatic to the core. It seems that a few years ago he wanted to film a ghost story and shot a feature's worth of material. The film failed. Months later under new inspiration he returned to his footage, abandoned plot, and created "The Old House Passing." It is not at all a literary film, but its tradition is surely that of Strindberg in his dream plays, George MacDonald, and Hawthorne. Time seems folded in this film, so that two families might simultaneously and without sharing occupy the old house. Somewhere in the dark of the film is a crime, an infanticide, a curse, or a murder which is healed by love and by the extraordinary delicacy of a scene of blowing bubbles in a graveyard. Now that I have mentioned this last scene I am all the more amazed at how Jordan manages to get away with such potentially dangerous material.

Although his work is little known here, Jordan is one of the most prolific film artists around. We saw at least 20 of his films while in San Francisco without exhausting the oeuvre. He wasn't always the master of the delicate. His early films were often blatant failures and many of his more recent works are clearly experimental, provisional. Perhaps his apprenticeship to Jess Collins and Joseph Cornell helped him to master so the tact of cinema. (I should add here in passing that Jordan showed us a film of Cornell's not included in his great and only film show here six years ago—"The Midnight Party"—a collage of children at a birthday party, probably the "east side kids," and a circus film—which is Cornell's finest film and Cornell is surely the great unknown film-maker.) Jordan's other important films are dreamy cut-out animations—"Hamfat Asar," "Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by a Doorway," "Gymnopedies"—studies—specifically one on Rodia's mosaic work—and portraits—"Johnny," "Big Sur:

The Ladies." In "The Old House Passing" he brings the subtlety of these tiny and perfected works into the shape of a big story and he makes the real, at least, phenomenal world of actual photography exude the spirit of Max Ernst or August Strindberg.

About the Filmmaker

Born in 1934, Larry Jordan began his filmmaking career in 1952 while an undergraduate at Harvard University. Since then he has made some 30 short films and 2 features. Currently residing in San Anselmo, California, he is chairman of the Film Department, San Francisco Art Institute; Instructor in Experimental Film, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland; and Instructor in Advanced Filmmaking, University of California Extension, San Francisco. A visiting lecturer on film at Fairleigh-Dickinson University, University of Michigan, and the University of Colorado, he is also the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Major collections owning his films are: The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.C.; The Film Museum of New York, N.Y.C.; California College of Arts and Crafts Library (and its associated schools); New York City Library.

Major exhibitions (by invitation) include: The Museum of Modern Art *Retrospective of American Cinema* in New York City and Tokyo; Traveling Avantgarde Film Library (visiting 5 European countries); New York Film Festival, Lincoln Center, N.Y.C., 1969 (a one-man retrospective show as part of the special event *West Coast Filmmaking*); International West German Short Film Festival, Oberhausen, 1969 (Museum of Modern Art's selection for American entry); and Robert Flaherty Seminar, 1969.

Awards received for his films include: Bronze Medal, 1958 Brussels International Experimental Film Festival; 1st Prize, 1966 Art Institute of Chicago Film Festival; 3rd Prize, 1968 Bellevue Film Festival; 1st Honorable Mention, 1968 Yale Film Festival; Diploma of Merit, 1969 International West German Short Film Festival, Oberhausen; and 2nd Prize, 1969 Ann Arbor Film Festival.