



## Before the Face of the Sea

Dir. Teuvo Puro | Finland | 1926 | N/C 12A | b&w, tinted & toned | Finnish and English  
intertitles | 1h 40m

Performing live: Jane Gardner (piano), Caroline Salmon (voice, violin and bass viol)

2:30pm on Wednesday 19 March 2025

Screening material courtesy of Finnish Film Archive

*Before the Face of the Sea* (*Meren kasvojen edessä / Inför havets anlete*) is a poetic mystery play shot on location in the Hitis archipelago, an ancient Viking trade harbour in Southwest Finland. The film is based on a Swedish-language novel by Arvid Mörne (1876–1946), a prominent author who was considered for the Nobel Prize. Mörne was a great lyrical poet of the sea and a public figure as an independence fighter and champion of the Swedish legacy in bilingual Finland.

The movie was the first production of the short-lived Komedial Filmi founded by a trio of artists who had broken free from the leading Suomi-Filmi company. Teuvo Puro (1884–1956) and Carl Fager (1883–1962) were veterans who had already collaborated on *Salaviinanpolttajat [The Moonshiners]* (1907), the first Finnish fiction film – and the first fiction film in the Russian Empire. Puro was the first person to receive the highest honour title of *teatterineuvos* in Finnish theatre. Fager was the founder of the profession of art direction in Finland. Despite their theatrical background, they shared a true cinema sense. They were joined by Kurt Jäger (1898–1965), who, having arrived in Finland after the First World War, quickly grew into the country's finest cinematographer in the 1920s.

The high profile cast included Heidi Blåfield (as Heidi Blåfield-Korhonen) (1900–1931), the most beloved Finnish film actress of her times; Kerstin Nylander (as Kerstin Lagus) (1899–1976), grande dame, acclaimed director and a power actress as Lady Macbeth and Miss Julie; and Axel Slangus (1890–1965), a heavyweight on the Finnish and Swedish stage and screen whose last role was in Ingmar Bergman's *Virgin Spring*. Waldemar Wohlström (1879–1964) also acted both in Finland and Sweden (in films by Victor Sjöström and Gustaf Molander).



They were joined by three newcomers playing students disembarking on Shipwreck Island. Urho Seppälä (1900–1961) is the young lead, joined by Kaarlo Kytö (1902–1985) and Ilmari Unho (1906–1961). All had long careers, and Unho became a house director at the Suomi-Filmi company.



*Before the Face of the Sea* is a sinister tale set on the Baltic Sea during the white nights of the Midnight Sun. Arvid Mörne emphasized atmosphere, and the film-makers translated his sea sense into cinematic poetry. They drew from the Nordic legacy of the landscape as soulscape introduced by Victor Sjöström in *Terje Vigen* and cultivated by Mauritz Stiller in *The Song of the Scarlet Flower*. The seafaring lineage was later pursued by Åke Lindman in television dramas such as *Ice* (1972), *Stormskerry Maja* (1976) – and a remake of *Before the Face of the Sea* (1967). Tiina Lymi's remake of *Stormskerry Maja* became the most popular film of the year 2024.

In terms of mystery islands, we are far from the heritage of horror of *King Kong*, *The Most Dangerous Game* or *The Island of Lost Souls*, and nearer to the visions of Brittany by Jean Grémillon in *Gardiens de phare* and Jean Epstein in *Finis Terræ*. In the ominous figure of Pauli of Shipwreck Island (Axel Slangus), however, there is connection with the Justice of Peace, Sir Humphrey Pengallan (Charles Laughton) in *Jamaica Inn*.





*Before the Face of the Sea* is not story-driven, not built for thriller impact. It is a visual meditation, a mood play, and a slowly unfolding tragic revelation. A female figurehead of an old ship guards the sea and its dark secrets. In dreams Kristoffer (Urho Seppälä) is haunted by the ghost of the young Renata (Kerstin Nylander). Ancient habits of magic are still casually obeyed, and there is a lingering suspicion that Pauli's wrecking business is powered with witchcraft.

*Before the Face of the Sea* was the first film screened in the new large palace cinema Capitol (the interior survives as Apollo Nightclub at the Forum Mall) on the main grand boulevard of Helsinki, now known as Mannerheimintie. Critics praised the film and paid attention to an increased use of close-ups ("character shots"). *Before the Face of the Sea* was the most popular Finnish film of the year 1926, and it was sold to Sweden, Norway and Denmark. In palace cinemas a prestigious compilation score was played consisting of selections from *Pelléas and Mélisande* by Jean Sibelius and favourite passages by the Finnish composers Merikanto, Madetoja and Kuula and the Nordic masters Grieg and Bellman.

*Before the Face of the Sea* was never a lost film, but it survived only as unreconstructed and largely damaged footage. Because the screenplay is lost, Mörne's novel became the basis for the continuity. When a preliminary reconstruction was screened in 2010 at the archive cinema Orion, for the first time in generations the film made sense. A long and painstaking restoration project conducted by the professionals at the National Audiovisual Institute of Finland finally resulted in an authoritative digital release version in 2014.

**ANTTI ALANEN**

*Antti is a film historian, critic, blogger and teacher.*