

SCANDINAVIAN IN NEW YORK

America is a nation of immigrants, and the New York art scene has always been invigorated by the fresh ideas of newcomers from the other side of the Atlantic. Transplanted Scandinavian artists who settle in the Big Apple thrive in NYC—the most cosmopolitan city in the world—which is also home to many of the wealthiest and most sophisticated art collectors.

A group of New York based Scandinavian artists. Photographed in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, exclusively for Nordic Reach by Henrik Olund in September 2005. L-R: Julie Sass, Anders Knutsson, Cecilia Rodhe, Mia Enell, Thordis Adalsteinsdottir and Mats Pehrson



Cecilia Rodhe



Where are you from: Gothenburg, Sweden
How long have you been in NY? I first came here in 1978. Then I lived in Paris for ten years. So, off-and-on for over 20 years.

Why did you come to NY? I came to model for Eileen Ford.
How has NY influenced your art? Well, I think I as a person was first influenced by New York as a melting pot. I have lived in Sweden and in Africa, and there's a rich culture in New York which makes you open-minded and inspires art. I am trying to find something that's true. And it's so endless here, so in amidst all I am trying to find something straight and true.

What has NY taught you? I think that the best New York can give you is something over a long period. Sure, you can become a superstar over night, but... You have to gain strength, an individual strength. Because it's a jungle here, and you have to stay very clear in order to get through. New York teaches you to be street-wise. It'll make you feel alive!
Is there anything "Swedish" in your art? Yes! I think a lot of my art is inspired by Swedish mythology. Subconsciously. The concept of my art is all about that: trolls, forests, nature. The connection to earth. There is something very mythical about the forest. That's my soul.

What materials do you work with? I work in stone, clay, and I paint.
How do you work? Well, I am a stonemason, so it's very physical. It's dirty and hard. A bit like war and peace actually! With my work in stone, it's all about taking away material, about reducing and freeing something that's inside the stone. So I used to always have pre-conceived concepts about what I wanted to do, I am beginning to change this, though. With my painting and when I work in clay, I let it just grow. Because that's not there yet, the way something in stone is. It's more about looking for something that doesn't exist.
What inspires you? I am looking for truth and purity. There's a kind of surrender and prayer that inspire me. Something innocent and pure. My artworks are letters to myself about hope, reminding me to stay hopeful.

How would you describe your work? Searching for truth.
What's your favorite place in NY? Well, now that I live in Brooklyn I very often go down to this little park full of stones by Grand Street and East River. I read and meditate there. You can feel the force of the river. It's a beautiful, cleansing place.

If you weren't an artist then what would you be? Who knows? Maybe a school teacher for kids. I am studying right now for a diploma in art therapy, which is something I've been teaching for a long time. And I like giving back, you know? Teaching kids to express what they feel and not always what they see. I think teaching this way, through art, is a way of helping children getting connected to a rich, creative world. I feel this is a very effective, good tool to use also for people who've been through difficult traumas in life.
How old were you when you knew you wanted to be an artist? 22. I started late. I looked for something... My life when I was younger was very fast and I wasn't really given the opportunity to choose, because I was Miss Sweden when I was 16 and it just kept going. Also, this is not an easy thing to do - art. But it is wonderful. And I love being surrounded with other artists.

Anders Knutsson



Where are you from: Malmö, Sweden
How long have you been in NY? Since 1975
Why did you come to NY? "New York! New York!" As an artist I always wanted to be able to live and work in New York City.

How has NY influenced your art? This could be a ten-page essay. It's enormous how New York has influenced my art – it goes from A to Z. The worldwide span of the best of the best is here. A lot of creative action and juices all the time, there are galleries, lectures and courses you can take in order to continue to educate yourself. You can easily communicate with people of all ages and backgrounds. There's a cross-fertilization in this culture. You can go as far as your ability and talent can take you. There is everything from superstar artists in New York doing detailed drawings, to people who just hang bicycle tubes on the wall. And you can have them in the same show without risking to have someone say you're out of your mind!

What has NY taught you? New York has taught me to be a professional. To focus on having a career and be professional. And to stretch as far as I can. And to not quit! You see, in Sweden people at my age, and even younger, all they talk about is retirement. Here you can keep going and going and keep experimenting.

Is there anything "Swedish" in your art? I think there's a lot. The obvious thing is my interest in light. Emotionally, spiritually and symbolically. That is a

rich and endless subject matter. I've got a sense of taste and design from Sweden. I enjoy producing and curating exhibitions and I feel I have a sense of what things should look like as a whole.

What materials do you work with? Phosphorescent pigment, acrylic, oil, linen, stretchers, canvases. Typical painting material. For the past 5-7 years I've been working with performances as well, these performances have three equal components: sound, movement, and light. Like a jazz trio, the luminous performance trio must be able to blend their talent and energy with the other performers to create a "performance of the moment" dynamic.

How do you work? I don't really have a routine. I work on inspiration or from project to project, like a commission or something. Then I take a breather and go on to the next project. I am not a multi-task person- that is hard for me.
What inspires you? Well, great art inspires me! It's very inspiring for me to live and work here in Brooklyn. The people, the artists who live here are intimate friends of mine. The challenge of exploring the concept of light and performance is inspiring, too.

How would you describe your work? I think I would describe it as bringing hope and inspiration to people. Inspiration to live, to explore, to not be afraid of the unknown. And to also understand that with the light comes also the darkness. The shadow is part of us. The darkness of our times and our age – to understand that. To live and to understand this.

What's your favorite place in NY? I think the Brooklyn Botanical Garden is one of the most inspiring places for me. And I am fortunate to be just a 10-minute bike ride away. So I go there a lot.

If you weren't an artist then what would you be? I can't really think... Maybe a museum director... no they just collect money. Maybe a curator or an installer.

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be an artist? I didn't know until I came here. In Sweden it was never very serious.

Sol Kjøk



Where are you from: Lillehammer, Norway
How long have you been in NY? I came here in 1996.
Why did you come to NY? To study at the Parsons School of Design.

How has NY influenced your art? Everything in my life was always fast and after I came here it accelerated and became even faster. You have to be on your

toes and all. But my artwork has become slower. It's like a touchstone – a way for me to stay grounded.

What has NY taught you? Well, this is the first place where I've really ever felt at home. Even though I was born in Scandinavia I never felt a belonging there. And I've lived in Paris, in Austria, and in Colombia and although I enjoyed it I always felt I had to keep on going. But in New York I feel like "This is where I want to stay." It has all I want. Diversity, other people who share my passions... It's close to the ocean and people come visiting all the time. It's the perfect base camp. Virtually everyone comes to New York sooner or later.
Is there anything "Norwegian" in your art? I'm constantly having US critics say my art resembles that of Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland, which I thought was just crazy! But I also never really paid attention to his works. Then last summer when I was in Norway I decided to go have a look at his things, and I saw that there really are some affinities. I also happen to be related to him, so maybe it's in the genes! When people here talk about me as a Norwegian artist I just resent that, because I do in no way represent the Norwegian art scene.

What materials do you work with? Oil, pencil, colored pencils, I'm not that crazy about watercolors, and I developed an allergy to acrylics.

How do you work? It's a 4-step process. I tell stories with my paintings and I believe that in order to tell these stories I have to first feel them in my own body. So I prepare with performances in the studio, with ropes suspended from the ceiling, which I can use as tightropes, and there are huge balls... I work with friends of mine and direct them in various poses, which I then photograph, the more tough things I do myself – like walking the tightrope - and have people photograph me doing this.

The second step is that I cut figures out of these photos and play around with them. Sometimes I had an idea prior to the posings and so I just reconstruct these ideas with the photos, other times new constellations are formed.

The third step is that I draw from these photos. These drawings are sometimes finished products in themselves. The last step is that these drawings are the underpinnings to my paintings.
What inspires you? I am a long-distance runner, and when you run for hours you enter a meditative state where images and ideas are allowed to pop up. My work is all about being present in your body, so anything that is physical with a potential of injury, where you feel alive will inspire me. But ideas can come from anywhere. Other artists rarely inspire me, because that's not life, it's their view of life.

How would you describe your work? My art is a story about love and about being present in one's body; a comment on the paradoxical co-presence of the supposed opposites of spirituality and carnality.

What's your favorite place in NY? My roof! There's also a place by the river close to where I live, where I go when I want to be alone. The funny thing is, a lot of people go there to be alone so there we are, being solitary in a communal situation! One guy plays the sax there. I also like heights, so I like the Empire State Building! I would love to be invited to do the Empire State Run-Up (a race up the stairs of the Empire State Building).

If you weren't an artist then what would you be? There was never another option, really. Most kids draw when they're little, I just never stopped. I started at age 2. Then my parents weren't very supportive and they kept saying "You can't do this." And so it

took some time for me to develop enough confidence to do it. I was in my mid-twenties when I finally was able to discard these negative feelings. On the other hand, when I finally came out in the art-world I was used to rejection and never expected anything, so I wasn't hurt that way.

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be an artist? Very young.

Julie Sass



Where are you from: Odense and Copenhagen, Denmark

How long have you been in NY? 7 years
Why did you come to NY? I came to study painting. To get an MFA at NYU.

How has NY influenced your art? Well, I think I was originally interested in the New York art scene from the 1970's. I wanted very much to investigate that. I was interested in Clement Greenberg, the art critic. I've learnt a lot from a large number of New York artists. And my degree from NYU has provided me with analytical skills with which I can see my work and how to work.

What has NY taught you? The combination of academics and studies and the people I have met here have shaped what I think and how I do things. In Denmark it's more relaxed, you're left to dwell in whatever you want to do – which is good, too. But here I've gotten some form of systematic knowledge of art.

Is there anything "Danish" in your art? Americans say I have some kind of Nordic light (laughs) I am not so sure about that. Some of the way I work, the way I think, is more Scandinavian. But my work, I don't know. The European way of dealing with paint is dealing more with the space. Here in America they are more about the surface. I think my work is a combination of both. I am interested in space, not just the space in the art work itself, but the space where it is exhibited or installed. I am interested in architecture and how to place a painting in a different space. To get it out of the little white cube of a gallery to, say, the street.

What materials do you work with? Oil, acrylics, different kinds of markers. I use both matte and shiny surfaces.

How do you work? I tend to vary my work process – I try to never do the same over and over. Of course there are boundaries, such as I always start by stretching the canvas. Sometimes already when I do the gesso (foundation) I start to think about the painting, mak-

ing some marks. I write a lot before I start, to get ideas down. Sometimes I have a real sketch.

What inspires you? I like very much the philosopher Merleau-Ponty's writings about Cezanne. His way of thinking which is based on phenomenology. I look at painting the same way. Another philosopher that I like is Yves Alain Bois. Then of course I am part of the world, and everything I see I take in and get inspired by as well. Lots of art inspire me - there's a Canadian artist and set designer, Moira Dryer, whom I like a lot.

How would you describe your work? I see my paintings as constructions rather than paintings, and I use them to expand my ways of thinking. I really see painting as a way of thinking. Sometimes I think of my work as anti-formula as opposed to some painters who do the same painting over and over. I see my work as an investigation.

What's your favorite place in NY? The roof top garden at the Met. I love to be there, it's silent and you can feel the wind and see the city. It's magical.

If you weren't an artist then what would you be? When I was a kid I wanted to be an inventor!

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be an artist? Well, it sort of grew on me. I took more serious art classes when I was nineteen. I got into the academy late, when I was twenty-four.

Thordis Adalsteinsdottir



Where are you from: Reykjavik, Iceland
How long have you been in NY? 6 years

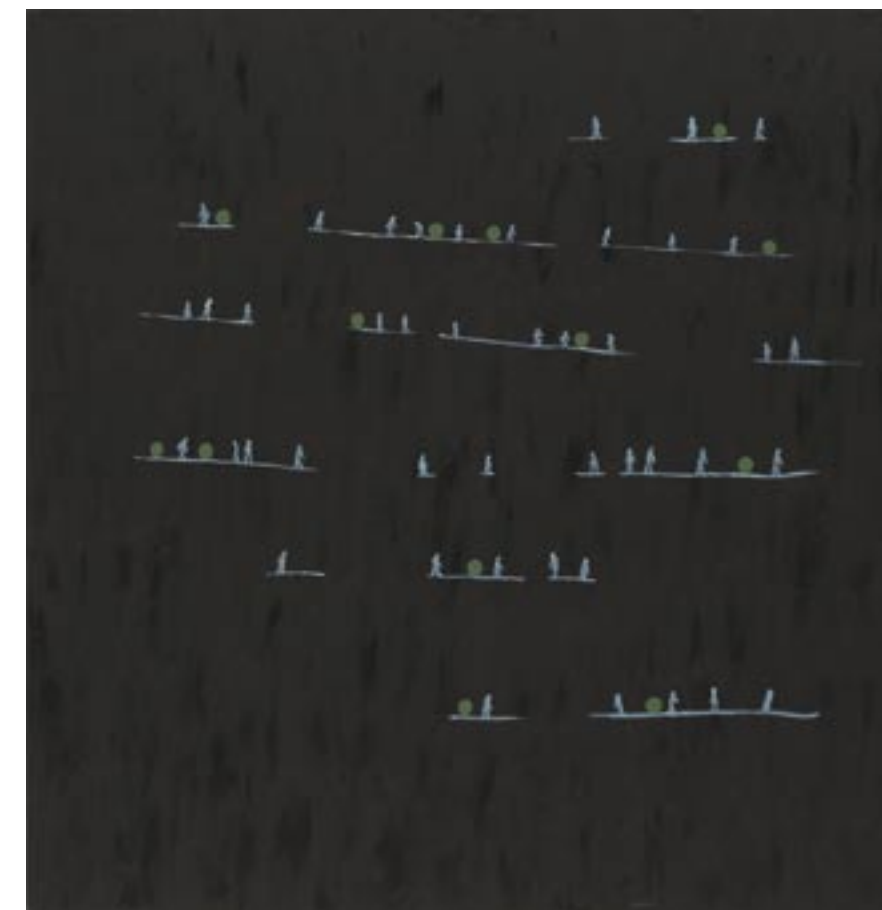
Why did you come to NY? I came to visit and to check it out to see if maybe I wanted to live here. I wanted something adventurous. After one week I called my job in Iceland, I worked as a waitress then, to say I wasn't coming back. Then I applied for a visa and for a school (School of Visual Arts).

How has NY influenced your art? In New York there are so many ideas, not just one thing. There are so many people and opinions. This has given me more freedom to work the way I want to work.

What has NY taught you? It's very trying to live here alone. I don't want to say that it has made me stronger, because that's such a cliché, but it has made me independent.
Is there anything "Icelandic" in your art? Probably. You can't avoid it; it's where you come from. But I am not trying to have it be like that. American critics say that there's something Icelandic or Nordic in the



Clockwise from upper left: "NY#7," Julie Sass; Snapshot from a show with 'After Dark,' – part of an upcoming show of works by Mats Pehrson; "Red Silk Cottonwood," Anders Knutsson



Clockwise from upper left: "Owen in the bathtub," Thordis Adalsteinsdottir; "La Peur," Cecilia Rodhe; "Darkland," Mia Enell; "String of Beads 28," Sol Kjøk

space in my paintings, the colors, and the light. But I think everything you've done reflects in your work, without your planning it. My work is probably influenced both by Iceland and New York.

What materials do you work with? Oil, acrylic, video. Sometimes, but rarely, I draw too.

How do you work? I start thinking, and it's not like I have to sit down to do that. Actually ideas come to me at any time. I try to work every day. But sometimes I just have to take a break from the studio a couple of days to get experiences from the outside. I usually have a very clear image in my mind on what I want and when it's finished it usually looks like I planned it to. I am very meticulous.

What inspires you? Daily life. Imagining things and reading. I like to imagine situations. Also, communication I have with friends and other people. Sometimes I see something and it fine-tunes inside me what it is I want. It doesn't necessarily have to be something I like. It can be just a particular color, which can inspire me to do something. Also art inspires me, the German expressionists for example.

How would you describe your work? I'm going to quote Gustav Klimt: "If anyone wants to find out anything about me as an artist, then he should have a good look at my paintings and try to find out from them who I am and what my intentions are."

What's your favorite place in NY? The East Village, it's so nice and laid-back.

If you weren't an artist then what would you be? If I weren't an artist I would probably work with animals.

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be an artist? 15.

Mia Enell



Where are you from: Gothenburg, Sweden

How long have you been in NY? Seven and a half years.

Why did you come to NY? For the art scene.

How has NY influenced your art? There's a lot of art here, which also means that there's a lot of good, interesting art, too. Of course, there's also a lot of good art in Stockholm and Paris, too. But New York is so much bigger with a much wider international exchange. I mean the contemporary art history is based in New York City. In spite of the fact that it is so intense here, I think I work with more peace.

What has NY taught you? I am a person who takes time to evolve. But it feels as if you are allowed to try things in New York and maybe you don't make it right but you are still allowed to try again. In Sweden there's perhaps a feeling that you must get it right the first time. But here you're allowed to try things spontaneously. This can, of course, backfire, you can be a big success here one day then the next day it is forgotten, just like if you do something that is not so good. New York has a short memory, and there's no time for the small stories here. **Is there anything "Swedish" in your art?** I think maybe this past year, yes. In art there's a certain weight—a connection with the deep and serious. I feel that we aren't afraid of this, the serious in Sweden. And hand-in-hand with that is the humor. I think of Ingmar Bergman, for example. And I think the ability of using this duality in art is something very Swedish. I know it is important to me. To not be afraid to get close.

What materials do you work with? Painting, drawing, video, photography.

How do you work? I work constantly. All the time. I listen to the inside. Every now and then ideas come to me, they bug me. It's like a strong visual picture from inside that suddenly surfaces, and it can happen when I go shopping for example. And I must do it immediately to get it out. I can also sit down, if there's a project, and think and think until it comes. I do so much work with practical things, on the computer, and time in the studio is precious.

What inspires you? It depends. Both banal things as well as more serious things.

How would you describe your work? I choose the media that corresponds the best to what I want to do whether I paint, draw, or photograph. This way of working comes natural to me and permits me to see my work from different angles.

What's your favorite place in NY? I want to say Central Park but I don't go there very often. My gym? Also, the Hudson River.

If you weren't an artist then what would you be? I tried my best not to become an artist. Both my parents were artists and so I knew what it was about, I was always in the studio and I grew up visiting all museums in Europe. My Mom neither encouraged nor discouraged me. She just wanted me to be happy!

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be an artist? 19 years old.

Mats Pehrson



Several New York galleries represent Scandinavian artists; one is solely devoted to the promotion of Scandinavian art, the Trygve Lie Gallery www.trygveliegallery.com

Where are you from: Karlstad, Sweden

How long have you been in NY? Since 1986.

Why did you come to NY? First spontaneously. I'd been here on a trip a year or so before. Then I came to do window displays.

How has NY influenced your art? Well, I document New York through my snap shots of New York City streets so of course New York really does influence me. It's just a given for me. New York influences me daily. Every day.

What has NY taught you? I don't really know! I've spent most of my adult life here in New York and although I am absolutely Swedish it has formed me. It's very difficult to answer. I am so totally shaped by New York, that I don't know what kind of person I would've been had I not come here. **Is there anything "Swedish" in your art?** Maybe "Hallandsgatan!" I don't know. I just completed a trilogy about the three focal points of my life: "Life on Mott Street" where I live, "Up and Downs on Wall Street" where I have my studio, and "Hallandsgatan" where me and my wife go when we go to Sweden.

With my abstract work there might be something subconsciously and latent Swedish. Americans sometimes point out that I use Nordic colors. The light. Ten years ago, though, I did an exhibition about runic letters, and of course that was very Swedish on a conscious level. I went back to my roots!

What materials do you work with? Right now a lot with my camera, taking snap shots of street scenes, which I then transfer to water color paper and canvases with chemical solvents. But I also work in oil, acrylic, marble dust, charcoal.

How do you work? At irregular intervals and with no set times. I work best in the evenings. I work intensively at periods followed by other periods when I don't work at all. **What inspires you?** New York. Every day.

How would you describe your work? I have two lines of work. My abstract paintings, with structure and hidden signs. And my work documenting street life.

What's your favorite place in NY? It depends on my mood. Right now, for example, I like to go down to Battery Park, which is no more than a 7-minute walk away from my studio, and just sit there and read and drink a cup of coffee. It's a good place to take a breather, to sit there by the water. I have to actually force myself to get out of the studio.

If you weren't an artist then what would you be? When I was younger I had thoughts of becoming an architect.

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be an artist? I've known since I was a teenager. I've always been doing this. 🍷

Breakthrough for Finnish actress in "About Sara"



Although she is still virtually unknown in her native country, Helsinki actress Linda Zilliacus is making a splash across the Baltic Sea in Sweden. Zilliacus, 28, stars in a gripping new movie called "About Sara," which was released nationwide in Swedish cinemas on November 11. The Swedish-speaking Finnish actress dominates the movie, which tells the story of 10 years in the life of an ambitious young woman, her search for love, a family and happiness. Alexander Skarsgård, a rising star who has worked nearly as much in the USA as in Sweden in recent years, also has an interesting role.

The feature film's director, Uganda-born Othman Karim, discovered lead actress Linda Zilliacus in her role as Marja in "Ondskan" (Evil), last year's Swedish candidate for an Oscar, and he wanted to know more about her.

"She has magnetism, a charisma that enchanted me, despite her relatively small part in "Evil." So when we stumbled upon her name when we were auditioning I knew that we had to try her. She came over from Finland, and as soon as I saw her, I knew: 'That is Sara."

Indeed, Linda Zilliacus is totally convincing as independent-minded Sara, whose two first close relationships with men fall apart. It takes a catastrophe, the death of a child, to finally defrost her frozen heart. In real-life, the Swedish-Finnish actress Linda seems much more harmonious than the hapless character she portrays: she is happily married to Tobias, director of Helsinki's Viirus theater, and has two young children.

During the filming, Zilliacus was sometimes frustrated and annoyed with the complex and sometimes self-defeating character of Sara:

"She (Sara) is really not a perfect person. She does such stupid things that sometimes I just wanted to scream: Don't do that, don't say that."

Nevertheless, there are many people who will recognize themselves in the main character, a complicated woman who aims to have it all—successful career, a loving husband and a child—and feels that in the end she can only rely upon herself to achieve these goals:

"She (Sara) doesn't trust anybody, and therefore she can't love anybody because she is so afraid of becoming dependent on someone. I think the Nordic countries are full of Sara's," the young actress explains in an interview with Nordic Reach after the press screening. "There are many expectations and demands placed on young women today," says Linda, "but the biggest expectations are the ones we make for ourselves."

Zilliacus shares the screen in "About Sara" with Alexander Skarsgård, age 29, a major rising star in the Swedish cinema heaven. Skarsgård plays Sara's heartthrob boyfriend and first husband Kalle, a megastar in soccer team Malmö FF. Kalle is a young man who appears to have everything, but success and fame has come so quickly and easily for him that he hasn't had time to form a clear idea about his own identity.

"He (Kalle) can't really connect with his problems or with his feelings. So his way to escape from the problems in his relationship with Sara is sort of to shut down, to imagine that those the problems don't exist."

Skarsgård says that he can personally relate to the character of Kalle because of his own experience as a precocious child actor.

"I started when I was very young, I was 7 when I did my first feature, and when I was 13 I found myself in a situation that was similar to Kalle's situation. I was 13 and entering puberty and all that, and you're lost, a kid like that is lost... its natural because you are becoming an adult from a kid. At that time I didn't

have a clue about what I wanted to do with my life or who I was. And that isn't wrong, because that is the way kids are. But it became a problem because I read about myself in newspapers and heard gossip about myself, and people talking. And I couldn't deal with that situation.

"That led me to quit acting for 8 years. I just wanted to be one of the guys, and find out who I was before doing magazine interviews explaining who I was. I was fortunate because I didn't have parents who pushed me in any direction. When I said that I wanted to quit for a while, they said, ok, do what you want to do."

Alexander, who is single, is part of an unusual family. His father, Stellan Skarsgård, is one of Sweden's greatest male actors. His younger brother, Gustaf, is also an popular Swedish actor. Do any of his other three siblings plan a career on the silver screen?

"I don't know, there is quite a big gap. I am 29, Gustaf is 25, and then I have another brother, Sam, who is 23, and he is studying to be a doctor. The others three are still so young that is too early to tell."

Alexander Skarsgård played the roommate of actor Ben Stiller in the Hollywood film, Zoolander (2001), and he has a larger role in an as-yet-unreleased American film called "Kill Your Darlings."

"It is a dark comedy. I haven't seen it yet because it is still in editing. It's a road movie, and I play a transvestite who tried to commit suicide. A cool role, I love it. It's a road movie about me and another woman who tried to commit suicide, and a guy who picks us up."

Skarsgård isn't the only one connected to "About Sara" with strong ties to the USA. Director and scriptwriter Othman Karim, who emigrated from Uganda to Sweden as a child, moved to the USA at age 18 to study cinematography at Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, California. He ended up working in America for 10 years, including a stint at Steven Spielberg's company, Amblin Entertainment.