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The Cleveland Silent Film Festival Celebrates 1926

by Mike Telin

Before there was a sound track on the film there was plenty of great live music being performed in front of the screen.

Beginning on September 15 The Cleveland Silent Film Festival and Colloquium — a celebration of the expressive power of early cinema accompanied by live music — will launch its fifth edition with half a dozen films, five of which are celebrating their centenary.

This year's Festival will feature some outstanding musical talent that will bring the historical films to life. To see the lineup and purchase single tickets and Festival Passes click here.

The Festival kicks off with *East and West* (1923) on Tuesday, September 15, at 7:30 pm at the Cinematheque at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

Early in her career, Yiddish theater star Molly Picon traveled to Vienna to make films. The earliest to survive is East and West, a blend of comedy, romance and cross-cultural collision. Picon plays a young, Americanized Jewish woman whose independent outlook clashes with the Old World traditions of her Eastern European relatives.

The screening will feature original music composed and performed by klezmer violinist Alicia Svigals and silent film pianist Donald Sosin.

“Svigals and Sosin tour a number of Jewish-themed silent films, and *East and West* is their only comedy,” CSFF founder and executive director Emily Laurance said during a Zoom conversation.. “Donald is a fine silent film pianist who is very much in demand, and Alicia is a noted Klezmer violinist and co-founder of the Grammy Award-winning band The Klezmatics, so she’s been on the scene for a while.”

3 Bad Men (1926) will be screened on Wednesday, September 16 at 7:00 pm in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Directed by John Ford, the story follows three outlaws who inadvertently rescue a young woman (Olive Borden), and become her unlikely protectors after her father is killed. George O’Brien co-stars as a young settler drawn into their struggle against a corrupt sheriff.

Noted John Ford expert Grafton Nunes will introduce the film at 6:30 pm. Pianist Jackie Warren will perform an improvised score.

“I wanted to show this film because it’s one of Ford’s great Westerns,” Laurance said, “I also knew that Grafton Nunes would be enthusiastic about introducing it. And when I connected with Jackie Warren, I found out that she’s very enthusiastic

about Westerns and played for melodramas growing up in Colorado. This isn't something she does that often, but it's something that she's tickled to do. So it's exciting to be able to work with her."

The General (1926) screens on Thursday, September 17, at 7:30 pm at Cleveland Grays Armory.

The story is based on actual events during the Civil War in which Union soldiers commandeered a train called "The General." The film's narrative centers around two elaborate locomotive chases that include some of Keaton's most daring and famous stuntwork.

"We wanted to show it because it's one of Buster Keaton's best works. It ranks near the top of the American Film Institute's list of silent films. It's also a crowd favorite," Laurance said.

Screening the film provided Laurance with the opportunity to work with Gray's Armory Museum and schedule a performance by Donald Rankin on the Wurlitzer Theater Organ. "We have not worked with Donnie except to have him as a panelist on Silent Film Music last year. It's nice to be able to bring him in. He lives in Ravenna, but he mostly tours nationally, so he doesn't play that often in this area."

The Johnstown Flood (1926) screens on Friday, September 18, at 7:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium.

In 1889 the South Fork Dam above Johnstown, Pennsylvania failed, killing 2,209 people. Director Irving Cummings dramatized the event in The Johnstown Flood*. The movie is noted for its innovative special effects in depicting the film's disastrous events. Historian Robert A. Harris notes that "the importance of The Johnstown Flood to film history is difficult to overstate."*

Laurance said that this screening includes a score by silent film musician Rodney Sauer for an instrumental ensemble.

A Page of Madness (1926) will be shown on Saturday, September 19, at 2:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium.

Directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa in collaboration with artists of Japan's experimental "School of New Perceptions," the film draws on German Expressionism, Noh theater, and melodrama. Rapid montage, superimposition, and distorted imagery immerse the viewer in the troubled inner world of its characters.

Laurance said that the plot centers around a man whose wife is in an insane asylum, and he takes the job of the janitor there in order to be near her.

"It's a tricky film to program. It's very abstract expressionist and at the same time it's a psychological melodrama. It has no intertitle, so everything is told visually. There was a tradition in Japan at the time of having a narrator which we will only be able to do through an introduction of the plot."

The CSFF screening features an original score by James Praznik performed by the No Exit New Music Ensemble — James Praznik (keyboards), Katalin La Favre

(percussion), Cara Tweed (violin), James Rhodes (viola), Nicholas Diodore (cello), and Gunnar Owen Hirth (clarinet).

The Festival concludes with Herbert Brenon's *Beau Geste* (1926) on Sunday, September 20, at 2:30 pm in Gartner Auditorium.

The story centers on the bond among three English brothers whose lives are disrupted by the disappearance of a precious family heirloom, leading them to the French Foreign Legion and the battlefields of North Africa.

Rodney Sauer will lead an ensemble including himself on piano, Emily Cornelius on violin, Robert Nicholson, on cello, Ben Chen on clarinet, and Larry Herman on trumpet/cornet in his newly-compiled score that he created for the film.

In retrospect, Laurance acknowledged that there are many presuppositions about silent film. "There are a lot of caricatures of it partly because it's associated with a very specific block of time in the past, so it can sometimes seem irrelevant. But the genre itself makes experiencing the film so much richer in its open-endedness."

She likened silent film to ballet. "It is all about gesture and movement, but is not about words and is so much richer for the music. Silent film is very much like that. And when people start to think of it as film without synchronized sound, they often discover how much it moves them in ways that other art forms don't necessarily do."

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