

Silence is Golden

Mark Trompeteler writes about recent showings of silent movies, including a magnificent screening of Ben-Hur by the BTS 'special events' team at the newly refurbished Royal Festival Hall.



Cinema Technology readers are treated to a plethora of information and articles about fast changing developments in our industry, and the latest technologies and strategies in exhibition and distribution. We also know that many readers are also pleased to hear news and learn of the history of our part of the industry – former film and sound formats, the restoration of old movies and re-opening of old cinemas.

The Silent Era was the time when the art and technology of film production, distribution and exhibition was first created and developed – and it is within this sometimes neglected era that we can still find so much to appreciate and treasure. The experience of attending a screening of a great silent film with sympathetic music accompaniment is one that can really further inform our sense of the history of our industry – whether we are in film production, distribution or exhibition.

It seems that London is now offering many opportunities to be able to experience the wonder of seeing silent classics projected properly, in big auditoria, as well as other interesting locations.

The 1922 film "Nosferatu" (Dracula) directed by F. W. Murnau was shown at the historic Temple Church at Inns Court on Wednesday 20th February in the evening. This was the church of the Knights Templar and is now part of the Da Vinci Code tourist trail. Within the atmospheric surroundings of this church the film was shown to the accompaniment of David Briggs on the church organ. The same church offered the silent version of "The Phantom of the Opera" to audiences in 2006 accompanied by the same organist.

Rivalling the long tradition of the National Film Theatre in offering showings of silent films The Barbican Centre Cinema is now billing itself as "the home of Silent Cinema in London", a much needed development in view of another

venue's amazing recent policy decision. The Cinema's programme for the first six months of 2008 featured a significant season of silent films including:-

"Flesh and the Devil" with the Carl Davis symphonic score

"East Meets West" with live music accompaniment

"On Our Selection" with Neil Brand on piano

"The Wind" with the Carl Davis symphonic score

"The Passion of Joan of Arc" with the live premiere of a new score

"Stella Dallas" with piano accompaniment

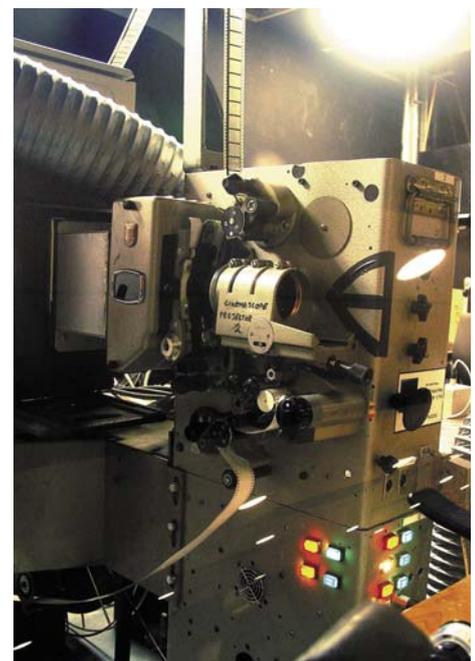
If there was a highlight of the spring season of silent films in London then for me it was the April 19th screening of the 1925 version of "Ben-Hur" at the wonderful recently refurbished and massive 2,800 seater auditorium of the Royal Festival Hall. With Carl Davis conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra to a near sell out house this was a screening of very real

grandeur that the great silents used to enjoy in a previous time. The magnificently restored print came from the specialist restoration company Photoplay, and was originally produced by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill. It featured many sequences in the original tinting conventions of the time with some significant sequences in early two colour Technicolour.

Projection was provided by Bell Theatre Services, and their intrepid special event projectionists team of Steffan Laugharne and Barry Wright faced some real projectionists' challenges on the night. Ian Nichol of Network Data Technology, who handles IT for BTS attended to give them additional support. The projection team used an especially adapted Philips FP 20 projector with the print spooled onto a tower. The film and aperture were in the movietone aspect ratio, an early aspect ratio of the mid and late twenties and very early thirties. The team were projecting across a 46 metre throw to give a 32 feet wide image using an unusually long 125 mm focal length lens.

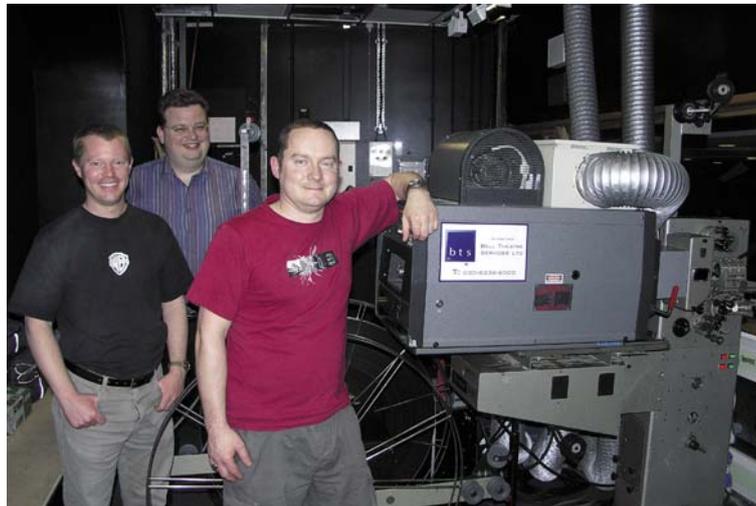


In Nosferatu (1921) tinting was used to provide special effects, with a blue 'day for night' sequence showing Dracula carrying out his nocturnal activities. The blue tint meant that it was safe for Dracula to be up and about, but the yellow daylight was bad for his health. Thanks to Grant Lobban.



The projector was fitted with a three blade shutter which gave no flicker on projection but the reduction in light output caused by the extra blade was compensated by the use of a 7 kW Xenon lamp. This was water cooled with a convenient beer barrel safely placed not too far away from the projector which I was firmly assured was full of circulating water and not warm beer. The projector was also adapted in order to work at variable film speeds of between 18 and 23 fps. The variabilities of silent film production and exhibition meant that in the running time of "Ben-Hur" its various sequences had a total five different frame speeds between them. Steffan had to smoothly execute a total of 17 different frame speed changes during the running of the film and was aided by a cue sheet listing the sequences and their varying speeds. At the same time Barry had to adjust the framing on almost every scene change due to the varying camera apertures used in the 1920s. The projection team did a brilliant job and Carl Davis and the orchestra were magnificent as always. The screening ended with rapturous and very long applause from the audience.

The evening however was bittersweet because repeated shouts of "why!?" came from the audience when Kevin Brownlow and Carl Davis announced in a pre-screening conversation that this particular venue will no longer be screening silent film classics. Neither Kevin Brownlow nor Carl Davis seemed able to offer any explanation to the shocked audience for this amazing RFH policy decision. One wonders if the fact that a symphony orchestra is involved at each screening might categorise these events as music events in the eyes of the RFH rather than film or visual arts events. Perhaps in the music hierarchy at South Bank they are



L -R. Steffan Laugharne, Ian Nichol, and Barry Wright from Bell Theatre Services provided the special projection arrangements for Ben Hur at the Royal Festival Hall

taking the decision to compartmentalise the contemporary film scores of Carl Davis as of minor niche interest and not serious enough in music terms. The rapturous audiences who attend these very popular screenings do not miss the point that these screenings are just as much incredibly important visual arts and cinema events as they are music events.

Not to be outdone by London the 11th British Silent Film festival was held at the Broadway, Nottingham in early April. The festival featured a selection of British, American and World silent films including a 1927 Cecil B. De Mille first version of



"Chicago", which was a film adaptation of the stage play that was later to become the Bob Fosse musical.

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