

New score for silent classic, at Colonial

Back to the future

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BELFAST — Ninety years ago, legendary German Expressionist filmmaker Fritz Lang created a sci-fi classic ... last year, a prolific Maine musician premiered a contemporary score for “Metropolis.” The film and music, performed live, will merge Sunday afternoon, April 30, at the downtown Colonial Theatre.

“Metropolis,” shown with simultaneous performance by Les Sorciers Perdus, will begin at 4 p.m. in the 150-seat Dreamland screening room of the Colonial, 163 High St. Tickets are \$12, \$8 for those younger than 13; note that parental discretion is advised, as some content — including pre-Code hoochie coochie dancing — may not be suitable for young children. That warning may surprise people who think of silent films as just slapstick comedy. But the early years of cinema explored all genres, often in great depth. And “Metropolis” is the mother of all dystopian science fiction ... even those who are unfamiliar with the title have seen its broad influence and would recognize key imagery.

The film pits a futuristic city’s 1 percent against its 99, the latter relegated to living underground when not working themselves to death in a gloriously art directed power plant. Central to the story is a conceit that still fuels the genre — the attempt to resurrect a deceased loved one via robotic artificial intelligence. Said robot, a vision of metal skin, and the towering cityscape have informed cinema for almost a century.

“Metropolis” is one of more than a dozen silent films that composer, performer and educator Mark Tipton has scored since 2008, and his five-parts-for-Sunday combo Les Sorciers Perdus hopes to just fit onto the Dreamland stage. Late last fall, they performed Tipton’s score for Buster Keaton’s “The General” as a quartet at the Colonial, from the floor.

“Everybody has to be able to see the screen,” said Tipton a week before the show. “Once we start, there’s no looking back!”

Tipton said when he and his group first began their silent film series, it was extremely nerve-wracking.

“I think that’s how I got some white hair! But we’ve done it so many times and this group, we’ve been together seven, eight years now.” he said.

Of course, every now and then somebody will miss a cue — a moment where the film and the music have to align exactly. In Tipton’s “Metropolis” score, there are more than 200 of them.

“You have to adjust or else be left in the dust,” said Tipton. “We can’t exactly press pause or yell up to the booth and say ‘hey, stop it, buddy!’”

The monumental “Metropolis” runs some two and a half hours, plus an intermission. The first couple times Les Sorciers Perdus performed it, they put in two intermissions, “which was good for the musicians,” said Tipton, but made the event too long.

“So we have one intermission at about the two-thirds point, for maybe 10 minutes, to let us catch our breath and let people use the restroom and get popcorn,” he said.

There are five Sorciers for “Metropolis” — Tipton on trumpet and keyboard; Don Pride on guitar; Tyler Heydolph on bass; Peter McLaughlin on drums; and regular guest Tracy McMullen on sax and flute.

“We all double on everything,” said Tipton. “There’s even a vocal part, sort of like a folk song, that we all sing. There’s a ring-around-the-rosy scene with the workers, and it just seemed to fit.”

All that doubling makes for a hefty score, some 100 pages. Tipton said it’s the longest he’s ever done “and maybe the longest I’ll ever do.” His latest score, for F.W. Murnau’s 1927 “Sunrise,” will premiere in Waterville in July at the 20th anniversary Maine International Film Festival.

“It’s really a beautiful film, a drama, and very lyrical — it’s not like one of his horror films, and I think it will appeal to a wider audience,” Tipton said.

Not that he hasn’t scored Murnau horror; the well-known “Nosferatu” (1922, Germany) was second in the series. His first silent score was commissioned in 2008 by Portland’s One Longfellow Square, 1915’s decidedly spooky “The Golem” by the German Paul Wegener.

“That’s what got me started. I chose ‘The Golem’ because I thought visually it was very interesting and the story’s cool. But I had no idea about the rights and had to figure that out as I went along,” he said.

That education came at a cost; Tipton cannot perform his 2012 score for Charlie Chaplin's "Gold Rush" (1925, USA), due to a cease-and-desist order from the famed filmmaker's estate. Chaplin wrote his own score for his set-in-The-Yukon comedy; by the mid-1920s, many silent films had tailor-made music. But in the early days of cinema, accompaniment was improvised. Tipton, who grew up in South Portland and had fallen under the spell of silents thanks to Chaplin's "City Lights" from the unusually deep classic collection at a local movie rental store, learned about the art firsthand while in grad school from no less than Vince Giordano.

"I was just a starving college kid, going to the New School for classical trumpet, and I found out about him from the grapevine, auditioned, got in with the band," said Tipton.

Said band is The Nighthawks, and Giordano is the Grammy Award-winning go-to for early 20th-century popular music. Familiar to filmgoers for both soundtrack and on-screen appearances, the band came to small-screen prominence on HBO's "Boardwalk Empire."

In addition, Giordano is a Jazz Age music historian and collector ... so much so that he famously has two houses in Brooklyn, stuffed with sheet music — a whole stash of which arrived while Tipton was in the band.

"He said, 'By the way, if you want some extra work, I just bought out Shea's [Movie Palace] Buffalo theater's entire collection of silent film music' — which was something like 20,000 scores, it's insane" said Tipton.

So he started to catalog them, spending a few years at what is an ongoing task. He said Giordano talks about donating it all, "to Princeton, he said, maybe, or NYU, some place that can actually take care of it and appreciate it."

As he catalogued, Tipton started to study the scores and take in what theater musicians did to accompany silent films.

"A lot of it early on was just snippets — like a little bit from this Grieg piece, a little classical music, maybe a popular tune and they got into, well, maybe we'll write, like, these little excerpts that sort of go with a storm. Those got repeated and got totally cliché, that's what they did," he said.

Once true scoring began, small orchestra and piano reductions followed for the smaller markets. And "they weren't all great," said Tipton, depending on the pianist and his or her ability to sight-read and to follow along with the score as they were playing.

"So it ended up being a lot of improvisation," Tipton said.

There is some improv in his own silent scores, but most of it is regular notation.

"We play jazz, generally; there's definitely elements of jazz, classical music and rock — jazz and rock, mostly," he said.

There also are a few musically-rendered sound effects.

"There's a few times in the score where there's, like, a warning alarm, so we have fun with that," he said.

After a number of years serving as executive director of the Portland Conservatory of Music, Tipton is having fun being a full-time musician again. It means a lot of time on the road — even more so for him than for the other Sorciers, who are based in Southern Maine.

"My wife got a job in East Machais, so we live in Machaisport. But we're this close to finding a home in the Ellsworth area, and that will make it a lot easier," he said.

Like most working musicians, Tipton teaches and performs, a lot. He teaches at Bowdoin College and will be at the University of Maine Orono in the fall a few days a week, augmenting its jazz program. He studied classical music, so used to play a lot with orchestras for ballets and the like.

"But I compose a lot, and that's sort of where my mind's at now — new stuff and jazz," he said.

Coming up on a decade of silent film scoring and performing, Tipton and Les Sorciers Perdus — the name was suggested by a Parisian friend when Tipton "was looking for a name that was evocative of creative souls searching for truth and beauty throughout time, with a feeling of the old world meets the new" — are committed to that work. Tipton is looking to expand its geography, maybe into Boston and New Hampshire. And they have other projects, as well, including a recent album, "Alchemist's Dream." Earlier this month, they were part of the Back Cove Contemporary Music Festival at Portland's SPACE gallery.

"We were working with a poet named Alan Brooks. He's a wonderful man, has been kind of reclusive for a while, up in Lubec in a little cabin," Tipton said. "I wrote a four-movement piece based on four of his short poems. So we have that sort of a contemporary music side."

They also have an educational side. Tipton and the Sorciers do workshops on silent films with students from elementary school through college. He said they find it very rewarding.

“We’ll do comedy shorts, really silly slapstick stuff, and they love it! One kid, he got obsessed with Keaton, this 7-year-old kid in the 21st century,” Tipton said. “They’re all over YouTube now; that helps, too. Suddenly you have all these silent film fans.”

The last time *Les Sorciers Perdus* played the Colonial, there was a good crowd and Tipton thinks this one might be a full house.

“I’d like people to give silent film a chance, because there’s a lot in there that they don’t expect,” he said. “They’re just as complex as modern films.”

And while 148 minutes might sound daunting, it’s no longer than the latest James Bond flick and has a lot more to offer.

“I like to think it’s worth it. And I feel the ending is universal,” he said.

The film is still a few minutes shy of the original, having been chopped down over the years. But earlier this century, prints found in Argentina, Australia and New Zealand led to a restoration effort that added many scenes — and two descriptive title cards for scenes too damaged to include. The result, titled “The Complete Metropolis,” was released in 2010 and is what will be screened at the Colonial. The Kino Video DVD and Blu-Ray also includes the original score, which Tipton has heard. He calls it a product of its time “and charming in that way,” but he also credits it with making the film restoration possible.

“That was how they pieced together a lot of the scenes, because they had the original score and it had little notes and that’s what helped them put it back together,” he said. “So music wins in the end!”

For more information about Tipton — whose resume includes the Burning Man Festival — and his music, visit marktiptonmusic.com.



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