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The sounds for silence

Pianists improvise live music for old movies

By Craig D. Lindsey - Staff Writer

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It's that time of year again, when Laura Boyes welcomes one of her out-of-state kinfolk into her home.

The film curator for the N.C. Museum of Art will have her brother David Drazin as a guest this weekend. And he is a very special guest, for tonight, he will once again offer his services as a pianist to the museum.

It goes like this: Drazin, 52, is what is known as a silent film photoplay pianist. He is also a musician, known for playing blues and jazz and playing piano at a ballet school during the day. But the man is mostly known for adding live, improvised accompaniment to old, silent movies.

What: "The Son of the Sheik" with David Drazin on piano

When: 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: The Sunrise Theater, 250 NW Broad Street, Southern Pines

Admission: \$10 (matinee), \$15 (evening), \$8 (students)

Details: 910-692-3611;

pianoman-031309.ART0.03132009.

What: "College" with Erich Lieth on piano

When: 7 p.m. March 28

Where: Century Center Cinema, 100 N. Greensboro St., Carrboro

Admission: \$4

Details: 883-7472;

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Drazin, who lives in Evanston, Ill., does most of his celluloid piano-playing in Chicago. (According to Chicago Magazine, which recently named him one of the 29 people who make films happen in the Windy City, he improvises as many as 12 live scores a month at the Gene Siskel Film Center and other venues). He's been coming to Raleigh for the past eight or nine years to help his older sister out and tickle the ivories when she needs music for a film she's playing.

Tonight, he'll add accompaniment to the 1928 film "The Man Who Laughs," starring Conrad Veidt as a royal heir with a horribly disfigured face (think The Joker). Boyes, who calls the soundtrack to the film "a horrible, sentimental, really terrible accompaniment," needed some fresh music if this was going to play in her auditorium.

Enter David.

"David's a very agreeable person, you know," Boyes says.

"If I ask him to play something, he's always happy to do it. I try not to be bossy, you know. As an older sister, it's hard to avoid sometimes," she says, starting to crack up. "I try not to be."

Playing the museum isn't his only gig in North Carolina this weekend. He'll do on-the-spot scoring for two screenings of "The Son of the Sheik," starring Rudolph Valentino, on Saturday at the Sunrise Theater in Southern Pines. (The Sunrise folk piggy-back with Boyes in bringing Drazin down here.)

Drazin doesn't mind coming to the Tar Heel State and entertaining moviegoers, considering he's been doing his type of performing since he was a senior in high school, when he played music during silent films screened by his old-time radio club.

"One time, at a library," Drazin recalls in a phone interview, "they were showing 'The Mark of Zorro,' and there was a piano right next to the screen. So, I just asked if it would be all right if I tried to play. And since they

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were't going to use records or anything, they said, 'OK, go ahead. Try it.'"

Since he began playing for silent films professionally in the mid-'80s, Drazin has provided music for the biggies of the silent

era: Keaton, Fairbanks, Pickford, Lang, Hart. When he has seen the movie in advance, he knows what he's going to play. When he hasn't seen the movie, he just wings it. Either way, Drazin is a man who can play nonstop, off the top of the dome, for hours. He was called on to add piano to "Les Vampires," a 10-part serial from 1915. "And I played for that in one day," he remembers. "It's like 9 1/2 hours." He also played 4 1/2 hours straight for outtakes from "iQue viva México!," a Sergei Eisenstein film he never finished.

While taking on gigs like this could be seen as draining, even insane, Drazin takes particular glee in noticing how much audiences dig it. "Well, the feeling I get is that when people see it, they're sort of, in a way, shocked that they like it as much as they do. It's like, in a way, they're starved to see something like that, because if it isn't shown, how do you know that it exists?"

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