

## Piano Accompaniment By...

David Drazin lends his composing and playing talents to silent films.

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**T**he selection of a silent film, *The Artist*, for this year's top Academy Award probably pleased pianist David Drazin more than most movie fans.

A huge part of Drazin's career involves providing live piano accompaniment for showings of historic silent films that likely inspired production of the Oscar winner.

The pianist, who is based in Chicago and has traveled numerous times to perform at the Detroit Film Theatre, returns Saturday, March 17, to enhance melodically *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, made in 1919 Germany from a screenplay by Jewish writers Hans Janowitz and Carl Meyer and directed by Robert Wiene, a Jew who left Berlin after Hitler came to power, moving to Budapest, then London and finally Paris, where he died in 1938. Janowitz, who died in 1954 in New York, and Meyer, who died in 1944 in London, both became pacifists after their experiences during World War I.

The horror movie follows a carnival sleepwalker (Conrad Veidt) who murders at the direction of the demented Dr. Caligari (Werner Krauss), and its unraveling explores the boundaries between sanity and madness.

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David Drazin: "Now that *The Artist* has won Best Picture, I think everyone should pay more attention to silent films."

attention to silent films than ever before and see the real items," says Drazin, 55, explaining his outlook during a recent phone conversation from his home.

"For me, the photography is very interesting as it goes back to people and places aside from the stories. While actors are shown in the moment of portraying a character, there's always the element of their real world that's exciting.

"With remarkable clarity, there are people who are far removed in time and space [from the present day]. While watching movies from the 1890s or early 1900s, in which there are no telephones or cars, I can get the feeling of breathing with the actors."

Drazin says he never gets tired of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, an example of German Expressionist cinema as it represents internal psychological states.

In it, writes film critic Roger Ebert, "The actors inhabit a jagged landscape of sharp angles and tilted walls and windows, staircases climbing crazy diagonals, trees with spiky leaves, grass that looks like knives. These radical distortions immediately set the film apart from all earlier ones, which were based on the camera's innate tendency to record reality."

"It's like experiencing the arts movement of that time firsthand," says Drazin. "It can be a bit abstract."

As Drazin plays for each film, for the first or any subsequent time, he makes up the music on the spot. He doesn't believe that anybody knows what was played to enhance silent films during original screenings.

"A lot of what I play involves working improvis," explains Drazin, who has been composing music since elementary school. "It's never totally new because I'm always myself, but I actually can't play the same way twice.

"Developing music on the spot is my favorite kind of work, and playing for the length of movies is what's different. A song tends to be three to five minutes, but a movie can be 90 minutes.

"There needs to be a lot of variety. In

a sense, I'm reading the picture and converting it into song."

One extended performance experience stands out for the pianist. It came after he accompanied a Charlie Chaplin program at a film festival in Italy, where Michael Chaplin, son of the legendary actor, was in the audience.

"Michael Chaplin invited my wife, Carol, and me to the family home in Switzerland, and it was very exciting to hang out with Michael and his wife and play jazz on Charlie's piano," the film musician says.

Drazin originally was introduced to a variety of music by his mother, a piano performer and teacher, and his father, a guitarist and trumpet player. His mom was his keyboard mentor until he turned 13 and began studying with a jazz musician.

While earning a bachelor's degree in music from Ohio State University, focusing on jazz, Drazin began playing for silent films shown at the Cinevent festival, a program to which he returns yearly.

After moving to Chicago in 1982, the musician was hired as accompanist for silent pictures at what has become the Gene Siskel Film Center, which has showcased a limited number of Russian Jewish silent films, such as *Jewish Luck*.

"There are a few scattered Jewish films from the silent era, but Jewish characters turn up in all kinds of movies," explains Drazin, who had his bar mitzvah service at a Conservative synagogue.

Drazin describes his day job as playing for ballet classes. Another regular commitment happens Friday evenings, when he appears with J.J. and the Jazz Masters at Chicago's Hyde Park Ramada Inn.

In a special project, Drazin composed the original piano score recently used for a short film with sound, *Junk Palace*, developed by puppeteer Lyon Hill. He has recorded while playing for silent films and made those selections available.

Drazin humorously relates to the Motor City with his song "How I Wish I Was an Automobile," written for the sketch comedy troupe Famous in the Future and recorded on *Here's an Old Favorite I Just Made Up*.



A poster for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919/Germany): In a well-known book on film, *From Caligari to Hitler*, the art historian Siegfried Kracauer argued that "the rise of Nazism was foretold by the preceding years of German films, which reflected a world at wrong angles and lost values."

His interest in nostalgia carries over into his free time with collections of old films, records and newspapers. The hobby started after

a childhood search for historic comic strips.

"I've been fortunate to do quite a few projects with the DFT," Drazin says. "There was one time when they had a theatrical reading with Jeff Daniels and Sigourney Weaver, and I played music for people coming into the theater." □

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* will be shown 4 p.m. Saturday, March 17, at the Detroit Film Theatre in the Detroit Institute of Arts. \$5/free with DIA membership or museum admission. (313) 833-4005; tickets.dia.org.