

At a Theater Devoted to the Past, Silents Are Golden

By EDWARD BALL

LOS ANGELES
IN THE ON-AND-OFF RIVALRY BETWEEN New York and Los Angeles, two cities often unhappy with each other but decidedly in love with themselves, Tinseltown has scored a small cultural victory. In January, a 250-seat theater called Silent Movie reopened after 11 years to become the sole commercial outlet in the country that screens only films from the silent era. While most of New York's film revival houses have gone out of business, killed off by home video, real estate prices and competition from the multiplexes, Silent Movie does a brisk trade by wrapping early Hollywood in camp glamour and offering it to a city where the horizon of memory normally extends only as far as last month's box-office hit.

Three nights a week, behind a humble facade on North Fairfax Avenue, not too far from Hollywood, a sort of rhinestone ritual unfolds. To the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance" on the sound system, Laurence Austin, the theater manager (sometimes wearing a tuxedo), walks ceremoniously down the aisle. Pausing before the gold lamé curtain that covers the screen, he offers a few show-business anecdotes to the audience before introducing the evening's program of one- or two-reelers starring the likes of Harold Lloyd, Lillian Gish or Lon Chaney. And because the truest signifier of defunct Hollywood is a keyboard accompaniment, when the lights go down, a musician in period costume improvises to the action.

It's all as if Al Jolson, appearing in "The Jazz Singer" in 1927, never parted his lips to say, "You ain't heard nothing yet," the dare that announced the talkies. Thus far, the formula has worked: Silent Movie, initially open on weekends only, soon added Wednesday screenings. At a retrograde \$5 a ticket, the house is often full. "We're in the black," Mr. Austin reports. This Wednesday's program will be Erich von Stroheim's extravagant "Wedding March" (1928) and Rudolph Valentino's "Society Sensation" (1918).

Silent Movie is a longstanding hub for Los Angeles cinephiles. The theater, Mr. Austin says, "was first opened by John Hampton on

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Feb. 25, 1942, the night the Japanese presumably bombed Los Angeles. The anti-aircraft balloons were up there, and they fired off the artillery guns; they thought the Japanese were coming, but they weren't. Meanwhile, John was trying to show a silent picture."

Hampton, a film collector, and his wife, Dorothy, operated Silent Movie for 37 years, never swerving from early-movie programs. According to Mr. Austin, who was a friend of

Silent Movie finds an audience by wrapping early Hollywood in camp glamour.

Hampton's for many years, "John's interest was in silent films. He never went for the talk films, just didn't like 'em."

The theater closed in 1979, but in the mid-1980's, Mr. Austin took up the celluloid torch. He began organizing screenings of silent films in a church in the San Fernando Valley, north of Los Angeles. "When John passed away in 1990, I started talking to Dorothy about restoring the theater. We reopened on Jan. 18, 1991, with 'King of Kings,' a film John wanted to show before his health forced him to quit." His widow shares duties as manager of the box office, where the vintage telephone on the wall seems right in keeping with the movies being shown.

On her weekend shift, the pianist Sydney Lehman wears a Prohibition-era dress as she watches the screen with one eye while improvising on the keyboard. "In the early days, big theaters would have a small orchestra," says Ms. Lehman, who plays an average of two and a half hours a night. "And a lot of films were shipped with compilation scores, which were like musicians' cue sheets for the action." Most of those original scores are lost or unavailable, she notes.

"I avoid harmonies and melodic patterns that appeared after 1930," she adds, "so it can get very ragtime and Fats Waller-like. But just as often I rely on classical music. Sometimes I'm driving along and hear a theme on a classical station, and I'll use it that night."



Virginia Lee Hunter

The 49-year-old Los Angeles theater, where Harold Lloyd, Lillian Gish and Lon Chaney are still in their heyday.

In running the theater, Mr. Austin seems at times to be turning the pages of Hollywood history. "My mother, Ethyl, worked for Cecil B. DeMille for 30 years as his lady tailor, making all his clothes down to his BVD's. My father was at Warner Brothers. As a child, instead of getting a fire truck or bicycle, I wanted films. My parents got me a projector, and I started collecting movies."

Silent Movie programs often rely on Mr. Austin's now-sizeable cache, and he also taps the holdings of libraries and other sources.

The American film industry actually started far from Hollywood, at studios in and around New York. Manhattan was once the

capital of second- and third-run movies, but a thriving commercial revival house nowadays is a rare thing. Many of New York's revival screens have also gone dark in recent years: the Thalia, the Metro, St. Mark's Cinema, the Bleecker Street Cinema. According to Charles Musser, a silent film scholar and the author of "The Emergence of Cinema": "The revival function has been largely taken up by video rentals, as well as museums and institutions like Anthology Film Archives and the American Museum of the Moving Image."

While New York has several such film retirement homes for silents, Los Angeles

does not, Mr. Musser adds. As a consequence, assuming equal interest on both coasts, a theater like Silent Movie, which does well in California, might not succeed in New York.

Moreover, the mock-show-biz trappings of Silent Movie are the unmistakable signs of Los Angeles urbanism. People with links to the silents sometimes stop in before the shows, like Eleanor Keaton, the widow of Buster Keaton, who shares memories of her husband with audiences.

Then, of course, there's the aura: "We have an usher with a red coat and flashlight," Mr. Austin says. "We try to give it the flavor of the era gone by, you know." □