

2017 Kansas Silent Film Festival puts W. C. Fields in the Spotlight

In its 21st year, the Kansas Silent Film Festival's mission is to provide an entertaining and educational forum for silent films and it's one of the few free film festivals to do so. Every year, on the last weekend in February, from Friday night through Saturday night, come rain or snow or shine, the festival showcases films from the silent era with live musical accompaniment. All films are shown on a big screen like they were originally, and most are shown on film with a DVD being shown, if necessary.

The 2017 Kansas Silent Film Festival will put comedian, juggler and actor W. C. Fields into the spotlight with two of his rarest features along with a variety of other films headed for the Topeka, Kansas event. The 2017 edition of the KSFF will be staged at White Concert Hall on the Washburn University campus on Friday night, February 24th and all day Saturday, February 25th. The event is free and open to the public. All films will be shown on the big screen with live musical accompaniment.

Friday night starts off with the 1923 short film, THE NOON WHISTLE starring Stan Laurel. Before there was Laurel and Hardy, Stan Laurel had a good career acting in films. Here, he's something of a pest, antagonizing lumber mill foreman James Finlayson past the breaking point in this comedy from producer Hal Roach. Organist Marvin Faulwell and percussionist Bob Keckeisen provide the live musical score.

The second short features one of the great movie Charleys - Charley Chase - in the 1926 comedy, CRAZY LIKE A FOX. Charley plays a guy trying to get out of an arranged marriage and he plans to do it by coming up with a "crazy act" that will surely put off his future in-laws. The girl of his dreams (Martha Sleeper) is also trying to elude an arranged marriage. Oliver Hardy has basically a walk-on role here as one of Chase's crazy-act victims. Music is provided on piano by New Hampshire's Jeff Rapsis.

Friday evening's feature film, IT'S THE OLD ARMY GAME also comes from 1926 and stars W. C. Fields. When you think of Fields today, chances are you don't think of a silent movie. Fields in a movie without that great voice? Yes, indeed. W. C. Fields came to film already well known by audiences as a popular vaudeville performer. Throughout his film career, he would mine the wealth of vaudeville gags and sketches he created - tweaking them, enlarging upon them, then wrapping a story around them. Fields plays a druggist who is besieged on all sides by his family as well as his customers. He has a lovely clerk who works for him at the store played by Kansas-born Louise Brooks in her fifth or sixth film (six of her films were released in 1926). Her character catches the eye of a con artist hence the name of this film - an old con artist's phrase. The rousing musical score is proved by special guest musician Ben Model, who makes his living playing piano or organ accompaniment for silent films.

Saturday morning begins with a special presentation at 9:00 am for early risers. This is part of a series of documentaries. The official KSFF morning session starts at 10:00 am with THE CARTOON FACTORY, a cartoon short from 1924. One of our first animated stars was Koko the Clown, who was the creation of Max Fleischer, a true pioneer of the animated cartoon in the U. S. His series, entitled "Out of the Inkwell" featured a combination of live action and animation. Fleischer had a long and influential career and was one of the few true rivals to Walt Disney. Live music will be supplied by organist Marvin Faulwell.

Originally titled "The Hazards of Helen", THE ADVENTURES OF HELEN – Episode 1 "The Wild Engine" is part of a serial produced originally between 1914 and 1917 and it makes up the second short. It was the longest non-feature length series ever filmed - 119 12 minute episodes in all. ADVENTURES was a reissue of these titles which combined two episodes to fill out each 20-minute chapter. The original star was Helen Holmes, a plucky actress who did her own stunts. She was later replaced by two other 'Helens', who continued in the series. Music will be provided by Marvin Faulwell.

Saturday morning's feature film is THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED, produced in 1926 and one of the first feature-length animated films ever made. PRINCE ACHMED is a German film based on the folk tales of "One Thousand and One Nights." Achmed, goes through many challenges, all in the name of love. The film's creator, Charlotte "Lotte" Reiniger created the entire film using silhouette animation with shadow puppets, cut-out figures and scenery all being manipulated for the camera frame-by-frame, a painstaking process which took Reiniger roughly three years to complete with the help of many artists. The film was first released with color tinting which was lost when the original nitrate prints deteriorated. Thanks to German and British archivists in the late 1990s, the film's color tinting has been restored. Jeff Rapsis will present another rousing live piano score. This is an excellent film for introducing children to silent films.

After a lunch break, the Saturday KSFF schedule will resume with Kansas' own Buster Keaton in the short film, THE BOAT from 1921. Buster shines in this story of a man determined to get his personally-built boat out to sea. With his family helping him, the boat finally makes it to the dock and sinks immediately! This is classic Keaton - fighting the elements, inanimate objects, just about everything that gets in his way including his loving family. Live music will be provided by organist Marvin Faulwell.

Saturday afternoon's first feature is 1927's BARBED WIRE starring Pola Negri, making her KSFF debut. This Polish-born star of silent films caught the eye of Hollywood with her director Ernst Lubitsch and they arrived in Hollywood in the early 1920s, leading the way for other European directors and actors wanting to make it big in America. In BARBED WIRE, Negri plays a French farm girl whose family has sacrificed much for the war effort. Her farm is being used as a German POW camp and her hostility toward the prisoners is strong until one prisoner shows his humanity and changes her mind. British actor Clive Brook co-stars and Clyde Cook provides some laughs.

The live music score will be played by organist Marvin Faulwell and percussionist Bob Keckeisen. *This film will be introduced by Sergio Delgado, an author from Lenexa, Kansas who has written a new biography about Pola Negri.*

After a short break, a KSFF tradition will continue with the showing of the short, THE CARDINAL'S CONSPIRACY directed by D. W. Griffith. In the past 21 years, the KSFF has tried to always include a film by Griffith, often referred to as the 'Father of Film'. This short is the earliest film in our festival and will feature a live music score by Jeff Rapsis.

The late afternoon feature will be 1920's WHY CHANGE YOUR WIFE? from director Cecil B. De Mille. Based on an original story by his brother William, De Mille weaves together a story about marital discord and its repercussions. With a great cast led by Gloria Swanson, Thomas Meighan and Bebe Daniels and some great set pieces and fashion, this is one you won't want to miss. A divorcee tries to improve herself for her wandering ex-husband as he becomes disillusioned with his mistress. Before the biblical epics, De Mille made some fantastic smaller-scale films, many with Swanson, one of his favorite collaborators. Live music will be provided by special guest musician Ben Model.

For the most part, the KSFF is about movies, great music, and camaraderie among fellow enthusiasts. Because the festival is free, patrons can come and go as they like depending on the films. The annual KSFF Cinema-Dinner will take place between the afternoon and evening shows. Dr. Harriet Fields will be the guest speaker. Tickets must be purchased in advance since this event does sell-out quickly. Details about Dinner tickets and other updates are available at the KSFF website – kssilentfilmfest.org

Saturday night presents a line-up of shorts and features beginning with BE REASONABLE, a very fast-paced 1921 short produced by Mack Sennett featuring Billy Bevan with Sennett bathing beauty Mildred June and the Keystone Cops! An elaborate chase scene was used to provide the finish for nearly every Sennett short and this one is no exception. Jeff Rapsis will supply the pulse-pounding music.

The second short is 1925's MAID IN MOROCCO starring Lupino Lane whose short films never disappoint in terms of action and hilarity—his stunts alone are worth spending time with. Here, his bride-to-be is kidnapped for a caliph's harem and Lupino must jump into rescue mode to save her. The bride is played by Helen Foster, a native of Independence, Kansas whose career as a leading lady peaked in the early 1930s. Pianist Ben Model will provide the rollicking live music score.

1926's SO'S YOUR OLD MAN starring W. C. Fields and Alice Joyce is the final feature film for the 2017 KSFF. *"Fields was at his best constructing intricate sequences of gradually mounting frustration."* This pretty much sums up the heart of every W. C. Fields movie you'll ever see. This is one of Fields' best silent films and one filled with great moments "of gradually mounting frustration."

Fields plays small town inventor (and imbibor) Sam Bisbee, whose daughter is romantically involved with the son of the town's wealthiest, haughtiest family. Bisbee has developed an invention he believes will make his fortune: a shatter-proof windshield, but can he convince anyone to invest in it? The film co-stars an up-and-coming youngster from Olathe, Kansas, Charles "Buddy" Rogers, who would later marry America's sweetheart, Mary Pickford. Organist Marvin Faulwell and percussionist Bob Keckeisen will provide the musical score. Fields' granddaughter, Dr. Harriett Fields will join us once again to talk about her famous grandfather.