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Some real eye-openers

Preservation fest at UCLA returns in gorgeous style, with a bouquet of unusual finds.

By Kenneth Turan Times Staff Writer

The UCLA Film & Television Archive's Festival of Preservation is at it again. Taking over the James Bridges Theater in the campus' Melnitz Hall today through Aug. 19, the 13th preservation event is once more showing the widest and most exciting variety of films of any festival in the known world, running the gamut from Victor Mature's unmistakable grunts in "One Million B.C." to the experimental efforts of elegant aesthetician Kenneth Anger.

What makes this festival special is not just the pains the archive's restorers have taken to make every print the best one in existence, it's also the care that's gone into the choice of films. Everything screened, starting with the opening night sepia-toned print of "Of Mice and Men," is unusual, unexpected and of maximum interest, from sparkling versions of known classics such as John Cassavetes' "Faces" to unjustly neglected gems like Vitaphone musical shorts of the late 1920s, a rarely seen record of what made the Jazz Age jazzy.

This year, it seems the wonders never cease. Among the joys are a silent film that rivals its Oscar-winning sound remake, a sound film without its world-famous words, amazing special effects spanning several decades, an unlikely film noir faceoff between Humphrey Bogart and Zero Mostel, and a sexually provocative transgender film from 1940. And that is not all.

That silent surprise is a 1928 version of "Chicago," based on the same 1926 play that was the foundation of the Bob Fosse-directed and -choreographed musical that Rob Marshall directed on screen. Not some stilted curio of merely historical interest, this "Chicago" is a full-throated roar, a lively item made with maximum moxie and sass. That is almost all due to Phyllis Haver as the legendary Roxie Hart, "a little girl who was all wrong," a ripsnorting portrait of unapologetic flapper duplicity. A world-class manipulator who could look aloof, angry, angelic and alluring, Haver's Roxie was always heartless and always on stage. It's quite a thrill to watch her work.

Another memorable film of the era is 1928's "The Barker," a gripping slice of Americana with Milton Sills starring as a carnival barker who gets an unexpected visit from his law student son, played by 19-year-old Douglas Fairbanks Jr. The film is notable not only for its racy, pre-Production Code content but because it was initially a silent film, reshot as a half-talkie before it was released.

All silent is the festival's Sunday matinee program of early western shorts called "Wagon, Ho!" Especially notable is the first episode of a 1922 serial called "The Timber Queen" that ends with a spectacular sequence of a woman trapped on a runaway boxcar that was years ahead of its time in terms of believable special effects.

Old-fashioned FX

More by coincidence than design, several films in the preservation fest feature notable effects. "Flame of Barbary Coast" has the romantic rivalry of John Wayne and Joseph Schildkraut for Ann Dvorak interrupted by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, reproduced with surprising fidelity by the strivers at low-budget Republic Pictures.

On the same bill is Republic's "Fair Wind to Java," said to be a favorite of Martin Scorsese, perhaps because of lines such as, "Your silence will cause you pain tonight." The film features Fred MacMurray as a hard-boiled sea captain and Vera Ralston, the wife of Republic's studio chief, as an East Indies dancer resplendent in wind-swept eyebrows and wild earrings. Their actions get the local fire god really, really angry, and breathtaking volcano eruption footage is the result.

Nothing quite this spectacular happens in the Foreign Legion drama "Under Two Flags," but seeing Ronald Colman and Victor McLaglen vie for the charms of Claudette Colbert as a saucy French soubrette named Cigarette is worth any number of fiery explosions, a demonstration of how strong acting can elevate pure genre material.

Doing almost completely without words, though not sound, is a dazzling presentation envisioned by Robert Gitt, the archive's preservation officer. The idea — and it turns out to be an exceptional one — is to show Orson Welles' 1948 "Macbeth" with the dialogue removed but the sound-effects track and the expressive Jacques Ibert score kept intact.

To see the result — shown on the same program with a presentation on Welles and the Hollywood system — is to gain even more respect for what a surpassing visual stylist the director was. Though "Macbeth," shot by John L. Russell, is not generally considered one of Welles' masterworks, experiencing it without words underlines the extent of the director's gifts. Shakespeare's lines may be some of the greatest ever written in the English language, but with Welles' images on the screen, you do not mourn their absence.

Also strong visually are the preservation festival's film noirs, little gems like "The Enforcer," with Humphrey Bogart as a crusading, bow-tie-wearing district attorney and featuring an unlikely Zero Mostel as a nervous bad man caught in Bogart's net.

On the same bill is a genuine noir classic, "The Big Combo," directed by cult favorite Joseph H. Lewis and stunningly shot by John Alton, the absolute master of noir cinematography. Starring Richard Conte as a psychotic corporate crime boss and Cornel Wilde as the dogged cop out to nail him, it's a thrilling experience on all levels.

Perhaps the most unexpected film of the festival is the Hal Roach-directed 1940 "Turnabout," a most unusual romantic comedy starring John Hubbard and Carole Landis as a well-to-do husband and wife who each think the other person has the easier life. Perhaps tired of the bickering, a trouble-making Hindu idol switches their personalities while they sleep. So we get to see a very macho Landis scaring the servants by stomping around the apartment and a swish Hubbard baffling his colleagues at work with his new sensitivity. This is a sex-change comedy before its time that gave the Code people fits but still made it to the screen.

Though the festival is the work of UCLA's entire preservation department, if there is one individual who has been its guiding light, who has tirelessly seen to it that every film restored has a particular reason for getting a new life, it's been Gitt, who has brought both his keen eye for what is drop-dead

fascinating as well as peerless rehabilitation skills to the archive since 1977.

Now, with the promised land of an archive move to the Billy Wilder Theater in Westwood's Hammer Museum in sight for 2007, the man has retired from full-time preservation work and this festival is holding a Tribute to Robert Gitt, hosted by critic and historian Leonard Maltin, on July 29. If you want to enjoy the company of the person who made this event possible, as well as look at clips from his personal favorites, this is something, like the entire festival itself, not to be missed.