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Adventures of a Pordenone Silent Film Fest Guest Pianist

by David Drazin

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Pordenone Silent Film Fest

Our first trip overseas for Carol and me began all wrong. At O'Hare, we were told our flight was canceled because of a jet fuel leak. We were to change gates, expect to miss our connecting flight in Brussels, and have a five-hour layover. Our next ordeal, sleep during Jim Carrey in "Almighty Bruce" during the transatlantic flight. Even without my contact lenses in, sleeping sitting up was spotty. Two drooping dustmops headed down the Brussels airport's moving sidewalk, destination: the horizon. We saw an approaching telephone. How do you call Italy from Brussels? A lady about to pass by helped us.



"Don't worry, everything will be all right," a woman's voice on the other end said reassuringly.

"There's someone else on your flight that's coming to the festival also!"

As we trudged to gate A58 there was only one person sitting there: eighty-two-year-old Al Dettlaff. A.K.A. Father Time, owner of the only nitrate print of Edison's 1910 "Frankenstein."

"This is my 35 mm copy of Frankenstein," he said, pulling an 800-foot reel out of his carry-on bag.

"Cost me six thousand dollars to have it made. And THIS is the original nitrate print!" he said, pulling another can out of his carry-on bag."

"Duh, huh?" I said, as he opened the can and shoved the reel up to my nostrils.

"Smell that Vitafilm! Here, you can hold it. If you look along the edges, you can see Edison's name."

"Wow," I groggily replied, proving if you're Father Time you can cross the ocean with a carry-on bag full of nitroglycerine.

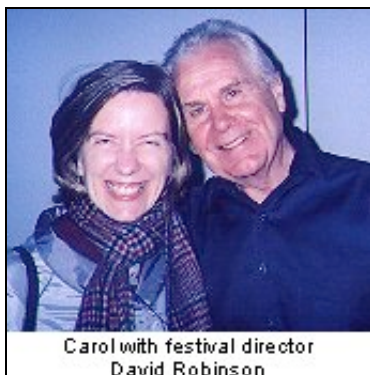
What followed might be called a ticket mixup. Rod Serling missed out on one version of purgatory: to be forced to walk the gleaming hallways of Brussels Airport for all eternity. Unreserved thanks to AI for watching our bags. When finally it was resolved, so nearly was our five-hour layover. Two and a half hours later, the plane landed at Marco Polo Airport, Venice.

We dragged our bags and ourselves through the halls. A German Shepherd puppy was sniffing our bags. We stopped to look at it, unable to lift our heads. I heard men yelling. It was the Italian security men ordering us to exit. We looked for a festival driver who was supposed to take us to the Hotel Moderno in Pordenone. A man resembling Jean Marais held up an eight-by-ten sign. "Al Dettlaff," it read.

Owing to a previous silent film accompanying commitment in Raleigh, North Carolina, we had arrived on Tuesday, the fourth day of the festival. I was a guest pianist. Our wonderful driver spoke no English but a little French, which enabled me to have a conversation with him. I somehow cobbled sentences together. Outside our hotel window, the future festival theatre was under construction. A large repulsive metal orifice was continuously spewing brown glop.

"Looks like Muncie, Indiana out there," I quipped to my wife, Carol.

As we walked out of the hotel to meet the driver again to take us to Sacile, we could at last see that we weren't in Kansas anymore. We started seeing films that night. After five shorts, the feature, "Wunder der Schopfung," by Hanns Walter Kornblum, with marvelous special effects and an exasperating format, had a wonderful freeform accompaniment improvised by Gabriel Thibaudeau on piano and Gunter Buchwald on violin. Incidentally, Mr. Buchwald can play piano and violin at the same time. We had temporarily traded our festival badges for little transmitters with headphones and listened as a woman with a wonderful voice translated the hundreds of titles. It was like being at the United Nations. We were literally entranced, as the jet lag squished us like bugs.



Carol with festival director
David Robinson

David Robinson, the festival's director, had called me the week before the Pordenone festival. He was in Chicago for the International Film Festival, discovered that I lived in town, had found out I was to be a guest of the festival only shortly before, and hoped we would be coming to the Landmark Cinema to see his Charlie Chaplin program and meet with him. I was thrilled to be getting a spontaneous call from Mr. Robinson, as I had been a fan of his ever since the 1970s, when I bought a copy of his "The History of World Cinema." In fact, we were planning to see the Chaplin program, and we

were happy and surprised that he provided an avenue to meet him.

Early on Wednesday we bumped into him in the festival office, in Sacile.

"You're playing today," he offhandedly remarked, giving me an exciting bit of butterflies.

"How about a photo opportunity?" I requested, and took a snap of him with Carol.

Later, I was introduced to the orchestra pit of the Zancanaro Theatre. A grand piano with a television set sitting on the right of it awaited. Far above was the screen, too high above me to watch, thus the set. Luckily, I was accustomed to this arrangement. At the Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago, I'm provided with a small monitor on the piano to watch the film as I play, as the piano is right up against the wall with the screen.

To calm myself down before playing, I slugged down a shot of bourbon I had brought along, generously provided in the Hotel Moderno's frigo bar. This is a small fridge in the hotel room kept stocked with bottled water, juice, pop, beer, wine, candy, and little tiny bottles of booze. You're expected to keep a tally on a given sheet of what you consume. Days later, I was embarrassed to ask one of the festival office staff if this was included. Nope! You buy that.

David Robinson reached down into the pit to give me a good-luck handshake, and we were off!

The first films I played for were "The Mystery of the Hindu Image"(1914), directed by and starring Raoul Walsh, and the feature "My Lady's Lips"(1925), directed by James Hogan, written by John Goodrich, and starring Alyce Mills, William Powell with Clara Bow, Ford Sterling and Mathew Betz. These were two quite solid and interesting films throughout and a good opportunity to play for.

The next day we saw "Frankenstein 1910" presented by Al Dettlaff, wearing a three-corner hat and otherwise dressed as Father Time. The audience response...baffled though ultimately indulgent. The film was accompanied by Phil Carli based on a cue sheet discovered by Al. A one-reeler like Frankenstein is cake for the super-talented Mr. Carli. What's really great is when you get to hear Mr. Carli play for a film he respects! He gives them all the full treatment, regardless.

Next we visited the School of Music and Image, which was being held once a day in a sixteenth-century church. I had the opportunity there to meet Neil Brand and Gunter Buchwald. Phil Carli and Gabriel Thibaudeau, whom I knew from playing for Cinevent, were there, too. Neil Brand was coaching a woman pianist from Holland and an Englishman, who took turns on a grand piano accompanying Buster Keaton in bits of "The Three Ages," shown with a video tape on a television.

On a side street in another ancient church was the film fair, where dealers had tables of books and memorabilia for sale. Al Dettlaff was there selling his DVDs and exhibiting his nitrate print of "Frankenstein" on rewinds. He was kind enough to present us with a DVD.

Later that same day, I played twice for the paper print version of "Judith of Bethulia" (1913), starring Blanche Sweet, at the Theatre Ruffo. The Ruffo doesn't have an orchestra pit. The grand piano is to the right of the seats as you face the screen. Mysteriously, the print was missing the last reel. It evidently hadn't been delivered from the Library of Congress. The first time, the lights went up after reel three. Nobody moved at first, expecting the rest of the film. Slowly, the truth dawned and people reluctantly filed out. For the second time, I'd half-imagined they'd add the last reel or reels from the 35mm version, also shown the same day, which is edited differently. But no, it was the same again. I noticed the regard for the film among the English speakers within earshot was not too high, but I've always considered it to be a very good film, ever since I got the Blackhawk 8mm version as a young teen, which is the paper print version, exactly the same as what I was playing for.



On Friday I played for David Robinson's program "Chaplin Redivivus," or brought back to life, as he explained. He had mentioned this program in his first phone call to me in Chicago. It was in three parts. The first part was all that survived (about two reels) of a Jackie Coogan feature called "Circus Days." The second was the gala premiere of Chaplin's "The Circus" in 1928 at Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Part three was "Ralph Barton's Camille," 1926, a remarkable two-reel home movie that had sixty celebrities in it, including Charlie Chaplin three times. Barton was a cartoonist who had done the original drawings for "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." The hard part to accompanying this film was that as the celebrities appeared, David Robinson was going to announce their names. In the audience were Charlie and Oona Chaplin's eldest son, Michael; his nephew, also called Charlie; and their friendly entourage.

Believe me, I sweated a couple of bullets as the author of "Chaplin, His Life and Art" led the program with Michael Chaplin's father, Charlie, on the big screen doing the dance of the rolls while wearing street clothes. I had managed to play hot jazz occasionally for parts one and two of the show. For quite a while during Ralph Barton's Camille I told myself not to use the sustain pedal, to only play notes that I could hold with my fingers to underscore Mr. Robinson's speaking. Still, there were a couple of opportunities to heat it up in Camille during shots of downtown New York City. Anita Loos and John Emerson got the most screen time. After the program, Carol took a picture of me with Michael Chaplin, whose family lived in the Chaplin mansion in Vevey, Switzerland. She mentioned to him that we planned to visit friends in Geneva after the festival. Our friends had arranged a trip to Montreux for Monday.

"I'll be home on Monday," he said. "Why don't you stop over? Not quite believing our ears, we said we'd be glad to.

On Saturday, the final day of the festival, I played for "A Fair Rebel" (1914), with Linda Arvidson, Charles West and Dorothy Gish. It was directed by David Miles and supervised

by D.W. Griffith. Al Dettlaff made a special effort to come in to see the picture and hear me play. The paper print quality was not the best for this one, though I liked the film. Perhaps it had been made simultaneously with "The Birth of a Nation" since it used a lot of Confederate and Yankee costumes and gear.

That night they had the grand finale, at which they gave awards to deserving preservationists. Gunter Buchwald told me all the pianists were to go up onstage soon and take a bow. At this point, I met the other regular accompanists: Donald Sosin, John Sweeney and Antonio Coppola. It was very exhilarating to go onstage with them all and share in a tremendous ovation.

Then they showed "Napoli Che Canta," 1926, a marvelously tinted and restored two-reeler by Roberto Leone Roberti, Sergio Leone's father, accompanied by a modern trio and a special vocalist, Giuni Russo. Even this was not the end. There was one more film. Instead, we were invited to a party held across from the location of the film fair. After food and drink with our new pals my internal clock went off, and we walked back to the Zancanaro in time to catch the last shuttle bus to Pordenone.

Without knowing what to expect on arriving, I ended up playing for five programs and had worked every day we were at the festival. Federica Dini and the festival staff were more than wonderful with helping us, and take it from me, we needed a lot of help. I felt fine playing the piano, but after the shows I was totally zonked. It was impossible for us to see all the great films they showed.

Thanks to our good friend in Geneva, who was very diligent in driving up the mountains and stopping to ask directions, we succeeded in visiting Michael Chaplin at the Chaplin estate. I had the honor of improvising on Charlie Chaplin's piano in their sitting room, meeting Mr. Chaplin's wife, two of their seven children and three of their little doggies. A picture of Charlie and Oona was on the mantel. The family was in the process of moving out of the house, and to Gruyere, as the house is going to be turned into a museum. The piano will stay. One of the daughters could be heard practicing her singing exercises. Mrs. Chaplin brought in a tray of tea and cookies.

"You'll have to be the mother," she said to Mr. Chaplin.

I blabbed on and on to Michael Chaplin about my own memories of first seeing his father's films, and my European grandfather's memories of seeing "The Kid" when it was new and how he laughed so hard when I showed him the Blackhawk 8mm print of "The Immigrant" in their living room, and how my father laughed during "The Circus," and were there any alternate takes of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin saved from their scene together in "Limelight," and does he personally find the alleged humor of silent comedies funny? He does. But he seemed most comfortable talking with our friend about economic conditions in Geneva, about which we know nothing. So as not to be rude and steal too much time from him, we started to take our leave. We thanked him so much for opening his doors to us. I started to turn the front door knob, and then the lock back and forth, but the door wouldn't open.

"We're locked in," I lightly stated.

Michael seemed to struggle a bit with the door, but at last it opened and we said farewell. Halfway to the car, I turned and took a photo of Charlie Chaplin's house. I'm sure we'll never forget when the gates first swung open.

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