Silent Sherlock

Sunday, March 24 2019, 4:00pm
North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, Skokie

Tom Nazziola composer and conductor

Featuring original scores to the films:

Sure-Locked Homes (1928)
featuring Felix the Cat
Director: Otto Messmer

Fadeaway (1926)
featuring Koko the Clown
Producer: Max Fleischer

Intermission

Sherlock Jr. (1924)
Director: Buster Keaton
Buster Keaton as The Projectionist/Sherlock Jr. Katherine McGuire as The Girl Joe Keaton as The Girl’s Father Erwin Connelly as The Hired Man/The Butler Ward Crane as The Sheik/The Villian Ford West as The Theater Manager/Gillette

Performance time approximately 1 hour 30 minutes

Silent Sherlock Families to the Phil supported by

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Tom Nazziola (b. 1966)

Tom Nazziola is the composer, orchestrator and music director of The BQE Project. His music has been performed in France, Ireland, Slovenia, Guatemala, Croatia and throughout the United States—as well as broadcast nationally and internationally on radio and television. His score for BQE's Golem was featured on John Schafer's New Sounds (WNYC); his compositions have also been aired on NBC, ESPN, ABC and CBS.

Nazziola’s orchestrations have also found an audience. He is responsible for the opening ceremony for the U.S. Open; he was also commissioned to orchestrate Edward MacDowell’s Woodland Sketches for a performance by the New York Philharmonic with guest artist Garrison Keillor. He has served as head orchestrator and conductor for Broadway Asia International’s Race for Love and Reel to Real - both of which premiered in Huaibou, China. Nazziola has received numerous awards, including “Winner of the 2017 Percussive Arts Society Composition Contest,” Julia Schwabe Award, and the Erich Parker Parent’s Choice Award. He has received commissions from VocalEssence, Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts, American Composer’s Forum, Cantori NY, Rutgers University, and the New Jersey Youth Symphony among others. Nazziola is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music and is currently pursuing a PhD in composition at Rutgers University.

Sure-Locked Homes (1928)

Since 1919, Felix the Cat has entertained audiences around the world with his zany antics and is touted as one of the greatest cartoon characters of all time. Making his mark during the silent era of films, the anthropomorphic black cat was a hit almost immediately and his popularity benefited from a strong merchandising presence that placed his image on plates, cups, toys, postcards, clothing and more. In fact, a Felix the Cat papier-mâché doll rotating on a turntable was one of the first-ever images broadcast on television when RCA started testing the new technology. His distinctive look – rounded black body, white eyes and giant grin – combined with regular revivals in film and television in the last 100 years, make Felix one of the most recognized and well-loved cartoon characters in history.

In Sure-Locked Homes, Felix finds himself outside after nightfall and increasingly frightened by ordinary things in the dark. He seeks shelter inside a house, but once inside he realizes he’s not alone. Scared out of his wits, he finds himself chased by large shadows, shapes that keep changing and weaving their way towards him (Felix was always known for his child-like imagination). As he tries to run, hide and fight the shadows, the music plays up the growing sense of dread and perceived danger Felix is feeling, without ever losing the sense of whimsy attributed to the character. Bright mallet lines accompany the cat’s fearful shivering and slow strings build tension until the twinkling, playful piano and light flutes bring the trademark Felix humor back to the fore.
Fadeaway (1926)

The technique of rotoscoping, whereby an artist creates an animation by tracing live action film, was originated by Max Fleischer. His first original character using the technique was a clown, tracing the footage of his brother Dave in a clown costume. After thousands of hours and tests refining his work, Koko the Clown was created in 1918 (although he didn't receive the name Koko until 1924). The clown gained prominence through the Out of the Inkwell series of shorts created by Fleischer first for Paramount and later for the Goldwyn studios. The series featured Koko being drawn by Fleischer (appearing in live-action as "The Artist") and pulling pranks on his creator and going on adventures — often escaping into the real world. This mix of live-action and animation together was extremely popular with audiences; at the same time Walt Disney was creating the Alice comedies with a young actress (initially Virginia Davis) in animated Alice in Wonderland style adventures. For 11 years, Out of the Inkwell, and later Inkwell Imps, featured Koko's adventures across 62 and 56 films respectively. Koko was temporarily retired in 1929 for legal reasons, though he did make a brief comeback from 1931-1934 appearing in films alongside other Fleischer Studios characters Bimbo and Betty Boop.

The plot of Fadeaway is typical of Koko the Clown stories. Max Fleischer, "The Artist", pulls Koko and his companion Fitz the dog from his inkwell. On this occasion, The Artist decides to pull a prank on Koko, tricking him with 'Fade Out Powder' which makes the images disappear not long after they are drawn. Hilarity ensues as Koko and Fitz eventually steal the Fade Out Powder for themselves, escape from the animated world, and cause mayhem in the real world. Nazzola's score highlights the fun and lightheartedness of the cartoon. Jaunty piano melodies bring to life the world of the 1920s and the ensemble uses their instruments in non-traditional ways to achieve an almost sound effect tone — from quirky percussion stings to punctuate a joke to pizzicato strings to highlight a movement. In this way Nazzola is able to recreate some of the feel of those initial early cinema experiences with accompaniment and sometimes sound effects created live in the theater, but with the depth and nuance of a larger ensemble.

Sherlock Jr. (1924)

"He was, as we're now beginning to realize, the greatest of all the clowns in the history of cinema" – Orson Welles

Actor, comedian, film director, producer, screenwriter, and stunt performer Joseph Frank "Buster" Keaton was one of the greatest film stars of the silent era. Known for his deadpan expression and physical comedy, Keaton has two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and an Academy Honorary Award conferred on him in 1959 and his legacy is still seen in cinema today. Keaton's skills as a storyteller were honed during the age of vaudeville; born into a performing family (his father was partners in a travelling show with the great magician Harry Houdini), he began performing stunts at the age of three and earned the billing "The Little Boy Who Can't Be Damaged". In 1917 he met and developed a partnership with Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle who introduced him to the increasingly popular world of film. He appeared in 14 Arbuckle short films, and quickly learned the mechanics of the camera to become Arbuckle's second director and 'gag man'. In 1920 he was given his own production unit and began making his own films. Sherlock Jr. was made during his most artistically brilliant period of filmmaking between 1920 and 1929. His work is distinguished by his dedication to being a visual storyteller. At the time most silent films used an average of 240 title cards to 'tell' the story between the action. Keaton was determined to let the action tell the story and saw each moment as an opportunity for creative storytelling with unique, expressive gesturing and well framed stunts. In fact, all the 'gags', or stunts, are filmed in one shot with no cuts meaning Keaton himself is actually falling from the building or jumping through trick walls.

Sherlock Jr. follows the story of a shy film projectionist who is also studying to be a detective. "Don't try to do two things at once and expect to do justice to both," warns the opening panel. His attempts to impress his sweetheart by presenting her with a gift he pretends costs more than he paid backfires when he is framed for the theft of her father's pocket watch and the gift is used as evidence against him. Separated from his love, he dozes off while projecting the afternoon movie and dreams he is suddenly within the action of the film. Not only that, he is playing the greatest detective of all time, Sherlock Jr., and both his sweetheart and the villain are involved in a great mystery. Through a series of happy accidents, and with the help of his trusted assistant Gillette, he manages to avoid being murdered, save the day and win the girl. As Sherlock Jr. he is a suave and successful detective, but can he solve the real life mystery to get his happy ending? Filled with stunning cinematography, Nazzola seamlessly blends the score with the action and enhances the comedy. Featuring contrasting scenery including city streets, a beach, the North Pole and a windy desert setting, the music transports the audiences to far-away places with a colorful palette of violin, piano, bassoon, upright bass, flute/clarinet and percussion.