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## FILM

# Composer revives forgotten film, instrument

By Frank Gabrenya

Dispatch Film Critic

How do forgotten movies come back to life? Here's one answer:

A year ago, Dennis James, former resident organist at the Ohio Theatre, was at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, touring with a restored silent film. On the side, he was experimenting with a theremin, an early electronic synthesizer invented by a Russian in the 1920s.

According to James, he told the director of the German Film Museum of Munich that "in the best of all possible worlds," there would be a silent Russian movie with fantasy sequences that he could revive and score on the theremin.

The director suggested James look for *Aelita*.

James looked and found an all-but-forgotten 1924 avant-garde Soviet film by director Yakov Protazanov. Through contacts and research, he located fragments of the original music score and talked the Soviets into striking a mint-condition 35mm print from the original negative and substituting English titles.

Now James is touring with the revived film, accompanying it on the theremin in a score reconstructed from generic Soviet silent movie music of the era. He and two other musicians will perform the score in a screening at 8 tonight in the film/video theater of the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts.

"Although the theremin wasn't used for the original score, it is perfect for *Aelita*," James said in a phone interview from Minneapolis, where he performed *Aelita* at the Walker this week.

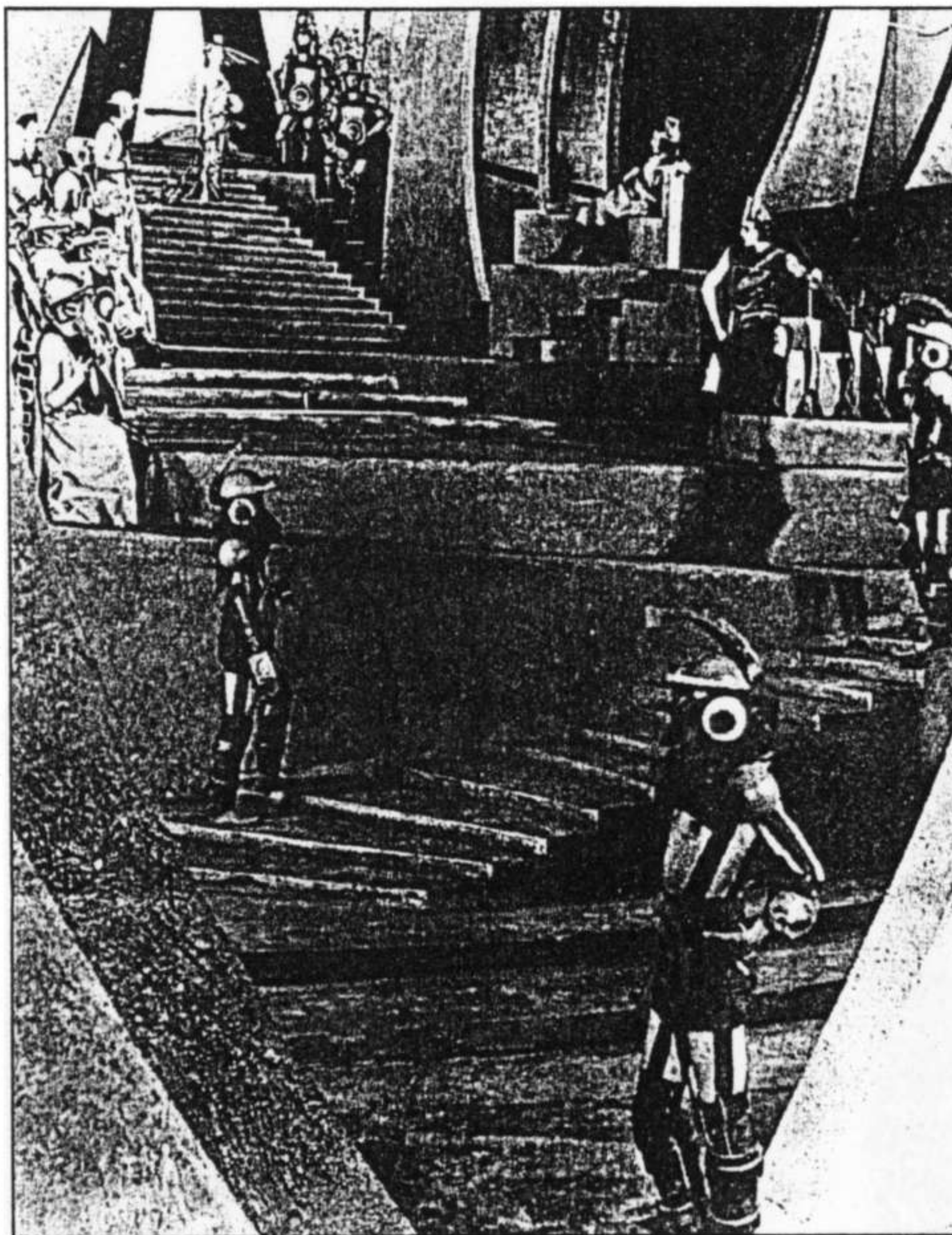
The theremin was named for its inventor, Leon Theremin, a Soviet physicist. Theremin's creation, which made its debut in 1928, is an electronic instrument that is played by waving the hands over its two antennae. The hands enter an electromagnetic field that controls the tone of the sound created.

The result is the sort of wavy whine that we've come to associate with eerie outer-space effects. It was used in a number of Hollywood films, notably Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (in which the instrument is billed in the credit as being introduced) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

But, James said, its inventor intended it for much more than effects.

"Theremin believed in 'technology for the service of art.' When it was introduced, it was internationally hailed and predicted to replace radio. Theremin even dreamed of an all-electric orchestra," James said.

Part of the dream was that people would have theremins at home and learn to play them, since, as the advertisements exaggerated,



File photo

Scene from *Aelita*

playing them was as easy as whistling.

Not so, said James. Control is one of the biggest handicaps, since heat and humidity can affect the sound of the theremin.

"Last night at the Walker," James said, "I entirely lost the bottom octave late in the film."

If the theremin never made it into the average home, it successfully invaded concert halls. Leopold Stokowski integrated it into performances and transcribed pieces for it.

James said a woman virtuoso performed on the theremin with major orchestras.

But the instrument proved difficult to master, and it disappeared into music trivia. Theremin's ideas were vindicated in the mid-'50s when Robert Moog created his first synthesizer and revolutionized electronic music.

Meanwhile, Theremin returned to the Soviet Union in 1938, after a lengthy stay in the United States, and was sent off to Siberia by the

## AT A GLANCE

■ *Aelita*, with live accompaniment conducted by Dennis James, will be screened at 8 p.m. tonight in the film/video theater of the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts.

■ Tickets are on sale in Mershon Auditorium until 6 p.m. and one hour before showtime.

■ For information, call 292-0330.

Stalin regime, exiled for being corrupted by Western influences.

James said Theremin, now in his 90s, is living in Leningrad. James has yet to meet the inventor, but he has invited Theremin to attend a performance of *Aelita* next year in London.

James' revival of the theremin almost overshadows his resuscitation of the rare avant-garde feature. The movie is about an engineer who becomes fed up with misery on Earth after his wife is murdered. He escapes to Mars in his own flying machine, along with the detective who suspects him of the murder. On Mars, the hero falls in love with Aelita, the planet's ruler, and finds himself in a new revolution, Martian style.

James plays conventional Soviet film music during the Earth scenes, saving the theremin and other electronic instruments for the Martian scenes.

The movie never has been considered one of the giants of Soviet cinema, although it boasts highly stylized sets and costumes. James said some of its intrigue comes from the director's "jaundiced view of collectivism."

Protazanov was a leading director before the revolution, specializing in literary adaptations. He had been working in Berlin and Paris, but was called home when Lenin decided to revitalize the national film industry as a way to spread the dogmas of Soviet socialism.

Protazanov went home but apparently wasn't all that convinced. James said *Aelita* is marked by a cynical view of collectivism. In the pre-Stalin days, that wasn't a capital crime, and Protazanov's movie was released.

The giants of Soviet cinema — Eisenstein, Pudovkin and the rest — blossomed soon after with their dynamic images of the revolution. *Aelita* passed into history as a one-of-a-kind experiment.

Now the movie is receiving its first international attention in more than 60 years and, James said, a reappraisal by film historians.

"Some are taking a closer look at it," he said. "What I usually hear is: 'Where has this movie been?'"