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Another version of 'Faust' at film festival

After decades of updated "Fausts," the San Francisco International Film Festival is offering a version of the classic morality play in a novel context: silent, black and white, with live organ accompaniment on the Castro Theater's mighty Wurlitzer with German subtitles and simultaneous English translation.

Unintentionally, it turns out to be deliciously comical, a new twist to the classic legend.

"Faust," usually done as a grim Gothic tale in which humor and horror intertwine, has been fair game for theater, movie and opera producers.

Our sympathies usually lie with the aged philosopher and alchemist who makes a pact with Satan, but it's the fascinating interpretations of Satan, in the form of Mephistopheles, that capture our imagination. We've heard him sing in French and English and have seen his mocking malevolence projected in many different ways: smug, vain, sly, suave, arrogant and playful.

On the opera stage Cesare Siepi made him slick and smooth, Ezio Pinza played him as charming. American Conservatory Theater's Mephistopheles last year appeared in such guises as Hitler, Dracula, Ed Sullivan and a surfer.

A New York City Opera production directed by Frank Corsaro had the Devil (the celebrated bass Norman Treigle, who had played the role at least 200 times) materialize as a cadaver, then as a gypsy fortuneteller, then Don Juan, then a soldier of fortune.

The version at the film festival marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of F.W. Murnau, the silent cinema's preeminent poet of

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light and darkness. (Hundreds of patrons were turned away from the first American screening of the newly restored and tinted print of Murnau's "Nosferatu" at last year's festival).

The screenplay is by Hans Kyser, based on Goethe, Marlowe and German folk sagas. Charles Gounod's 1859 opera version, which drew on the Goethe text, features old Meph as a suave gentleman, dashing in his long cloak and single-plumed cap. Only the plume remains in this stunning visualization that will play at 7 p.m. March 26 at the Castro Theater in San Francisco.

The festival program describes it as a "print of overwhelming visual beauty."

"Faust" is not a rare film, and this version doesn't really add any unfamiliar footage; but for decades all the prints in circulation in the United States have been dreadfully murky. Seeing the Munich print is like seeing this masterpiece of light for the first time.

"This ambitious film, the last Murnau was to make in Germany before coming to the United States to shoot 'Sunrise,' was a big-budget superproduction featuring dazzling special effects and a name cast. It was headed by Germany's Emil Jannings (as an unsettlingly mischievous Mephistopheles) and Sweden's Gosta Ekman as Faust, alongside beautiful newcomer Camilla Horn, a luminous Marguerite (a role for which Lillian Gish was originally envisioned). Also featured were the French chanteuse Yvette Guilbert, whom Toulouse-Lautrec had painted many years before, and director-to-be William Dieterle," the program says.

Eric Rohmer, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Murnau's virtuoso use of space in this dazzling film, described it as "a sort of visual opera, with the mise-en-scene taking the place of the score."

Andrew Sarris has called it "one of Murnau's most eerie works in its strange mixture of tones. Jannings' very playful Mephistopheles dominates the film until the spiritually intoxicating ending, which represents one of cinema's most sublime sequences of redemption."