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Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*

Dir. Fritz Lang. 1927/2002. N/R.

120mins. Gustav Frölich, Brigitte Helm, Alfred Abel, Rudolf Klein-Rogge.

When George Lucas's *Star Wars* was rereleased on its 20th anniversary in 1997, even the most nostalgic Jedi faithful at the multiplex noticed something disturbing: The special effects, costumes and set design looked a little shopworn. Conversely, Fritz Lang's Expressionistic science-fiction classic, *Metropolis*—recently returned to its pristine, two-hour version by a team of German film-restoration experts (hence the new title)—looks just as stunning today as it surely must have when it debuted in Berlin in 1927.

The outlandish story—part sci-fi melodrama, part agitprop philippic—isn't much more subtle than your average B-grade scheme. The privileged son (Frölich) of an omnipotent city ruler (Abel) expels himself from his Edenic existence after he glimpses the harsh lives of the workers who toil endlessly in the subterranean Lower City to realize his father's vision. He joins forces with the laborers' comely agitator (Helm), but his father and a mad scientist (Klein-Rogge) create a robotic version of the lovely labor leader, hoping to instill chaos and quell their budding rebellion.

The acting, largely as

exaggerated as the plotting, is nowhere near as powerful as Peter Lorre's restrained, unnerving turn in Lang's best film, the chilling 1931 crime thriller *M*. But, oh, the imagery: Dronelike workers walk slouched and synchronized in a sort of subhuman ballet; laborers manipulate the hands of clocklike machinery until they become as much a part of the apparatus as the nuts and bolts; Gothic skyscrapers, inspired by Lang's first glimpse of the Manhattan skyline, soar to the heavens.

These scenes, supported by 25,000 extras and elaborate sets, influenced everything from Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* to Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* to Ridley Scott's famous Apple computer commercial, "1984." In fact, Lang's lavishness in creating this enduring vision nearly bankrupted German film studio UFA. One diamond anniversary later, it's clear that the director didn't spend the money foolishly. (Opens Fri; Film Forum.)—*Darren D'Addario*



LABOR PAINS Frölich aids an exhausted worker.