Historic cinema has new festival...but they won't be making a big noise about it

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The Hippodrome cinema in Bo'ness, on the Firth of Forth in West Lothian, will be the centre of a new annual festival in March which will show the silent masterpieces of stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy and Clara Bow.

It opened in 1912 as the first purpose-built cinema in Scotland, but the A-listed building fell into disrepair before re-opening in 2009 following a £2 million renovation project.

Now it will be at the centre of a festival solely dedicated to the great silent film classics of the black and white era of Hollywood – the first festival of its kind in Scotland.

Around 20 films from the silent era, largely in the 1920s, will be shown at the Hippodrome Festival of Silent Cinema, which is hoped to be the first of an annual festival at the cinema.

The programme for the festival, which will be unveiled in the coming weeks, will include one of the classics of the era, The Kid, starring Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan.

Music to accompany the films will be provided live by the noted silent film musician and expert Neil Brand, who will accompany the movies with his own improvised tunes on a piano.

Brand is acknowledged as the leading expert in silent film accompaniment and recently toured with the silent film fan and comedian Paul Merton.

Shona Thomson, producer of the festival, which will run from March 18 to March 20, said that she wants each film showing to be an event in itself. "There is something very special about this. It seems to make perfect sense that this first festival is silent cinema," she said.

"It's such a special space, and silent film is really all about the experience, as is a visit to the Hippodrome.

"It's a gorgeous building with a beautiful theatre, and so seems the right place to have every movie as an event, with live music, and even some explanation to the background of the film.

"There are some classics in the programme, but there are also some films which have rarely been seen, as well as some films from the Scottish Screen Archives.

"We want it to be as appealing to the general audience as it is to cineastes: and there are some great and hilarious films in the silent era."

She added: "We sometimes forget, but these actors were the first movie stars and they were massively popular: Clara Bow was receiving 45,000 fan letters a week at one point."

The festival is also going to include a Slapstick workshop and many other events yet to be confirmed.

Cinema bosses are now urging those who are interested to register on the website of Falkirk Council, which runs the cinema, to find out more about the festival.

Councillor Adrian Mahoney, Falkirk Council's Convener of Leisure, Tourism and Community, said: "The Hippodrome Festival of Silent Cinema is Scotland's first silent film festival in Scotland's first purpose-built cinema. It's great to bring the festival to Bo'ness and, in particular, the Hioppodrome, where once again the silent movie is king."

The building was designed by the local architect Matthew Steele after being commissioned by the film-maker Louis Dickson in the early years of the 20th century.

It opened on 11 March 1912 and is a rare example of pre-art deco cinema architecture as well as being Scotland's oldest purpose-built picture house.

It was restored as part of the Bo'ness Townscape Heritage Initiative, which saw its decorative scheme reinstated, new seating installed and original seating restored, and digital and 35mm projectors fitted to offer a modern movie experience.

After many years of use, it showed its last movie in 1975 before becoming a Bingo hall.

It then closed before its refurbishment, funded by a combination of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Falkirk Council and Historic Scotland.

Silent movies will run from March 18 to 20 at The Hippodrome in Bo'ness.

Notes to editors

The Kid, from 1921, starring Charlie Chaplin, was the legendary comic's first full-length feature, and also starred Jackie Coogan.

The festival will feature a film starring Clara Bow, the original "It Girl", who was one of the leading stars of the 1920s.

Silent films were popular until the late 1920s, before "talkies" became more prevalent.

They often featured live music in the cinema itself, including pianists and organists.

The top grossing silent films included The Birth of a Nation, The Big Parade and Ben-Hur.

Original article can be found by following this link to the Herald Scotland website.

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