

FILM PRESERVATION

In age of DVD, industry, archives team to save culture's most endangered species



DAMAGED: Horrendous damage on 1969's "Easy Rider," with Jack Nicholson, required extensive digital repair.

NO HARM, NO FOUL

Original vision top priority

By ROBERT KOEHLER

In these heady days of film preservation, the first commandment is "Do no harm."

If that makes film archivists and restorers sound like physicians, that's exactly the idea. It's no accident, for example, that technicians in facilities repairing damaged films and wearing white coats resemble the family doctor.

"These people are surgeons," says Sean Coughlin, founder and president of leading preservation lab Cinetech. "They're healing the film so it's back in the shape it was when the public first viewed it."

In perhaps the most fascinating marriage of aesthetic ethics and state-of-the-art technology that exists anywhere

in the entertainment business, commercial restoration labs like Cinetech, film preservation departments at most of the major studios, nonprofit film foundations and archives at institutions ranging from UCLA and the American Film Institute to the George Eastman House, the Library of Congress and Gotham's Museum of Modern Art are operating in

a well-coordinated effort to rescue and restore what remains of the American film heritage by applying equal measures of ever-developing tools and software with an avowed adherence to that first commandment.

The latter is a mostly unspoken rule, however, and Fox film preservationist Sean Belston observes that despite all the coordination going on: "I don't think a strict written code of ethics will ever happen, because we — meaning the studios and the institutional archives — have different interests. My needs and short-term goals are different from those of an archive, which can spend, if they have the funding, an unlimited, painstaking amount of time on select works."

"I'm helping preserve Fox's library as an asset of Fox's for their worldwide business. At the same time, we all must collaborate and operate with the same values."

The key players in the field agree that another way of thinking of the first commandment is understanding, in

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UCLA fest clarion call for lost art

BY MARK PFEIFFER

It's still safe to say that Los Angeles is the film capital of the world. Each year the city gives birth to myriad productions, ranging from budget-heavy blockbusters to the more esoteric indie fare. However, one of L.A.'s most respected institutions is not one of production, but preservation. Beginning on Friday, UCLA's 10th Festival of Preservation will give the public a chance to experience its most recent triumphs and discoveries.

Kicking off with a screening of the restored version of Academy Award-winning documentary "The Times of Harvey Milk," the festival will run through the end of August, presenting more than 40 entries from a library of over 250,000 film and television titles, and 27 million feet of newsreel footage.

Previous incarnations of the biennial festival have begun with such studio classics as "Gilda" and "Joan of Arc," this year it will be spearheaded by an independent film for the first time. "Harvey Milk" (1980), which chronicles the life and assassination of San Francisco's first openly gay city supervisor, is one of several films benefiting from a generous grant donated by the Almannson Foundation. In this case, the foundation requested that the archive use the funds exclusively on independent films, a request to which UCLA was only too happy to comply.

"We want to alert the archival world and the public in general that these films are in need of preservation," says Andrea Alsberg, the archive's head of programming.

"Not only are we preserving films

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UCLA archive on display

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from the teens, but films from the '70s and the '80s."

In the recent past, the preservation field, once fairly competitive, has grown more collaborative. Working against time, the relationship between the major preservation archives such as UCLA, New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Library of Congress and the George Eastman House, as well as studios, private collectors and the smaller preservation houses, has become more of a global community. For example, the restoration of John Ford's Oscar-winning "How Green Was My Valley" (1941), was a joint venture between the Academy of Motion Picture Arts &

Sciences, UCLA and 20th Century Fox. Slated to run Sunday, a previously "lost" American silent, "Molly O" (1921), is a project shared with the growing Russian archive, Gosfilmfond.

"By the very necessity of the urgency of preserving films and the fact that these are not commercial enterprises, the major archives — especially the members of the Intl. Federation of Film Archives — all really band together," says Tim Kittleton, director of UCLA's archive. "The large goal here is to preserve film, not to say, 'Hey I got to do this before you did.'"

Among the event's highlights include fest closer "Cyrano de Bergerac" (1950), which earned an Oscar for Jose Ferrer in the title role and will be presented by producer Stanley Kramer on Aug. 26. Also of the men-in-tights genre is Alan Crosland's "When a Man Loves" (1927), starring John Barrymore in his second Vitaphone picture (after 1926's



RAISING 'KANE': Spencer Tracy stars in "The Power and the Glory" (1933), which has drawn comparisons to Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane."

"Don Juan"). Lacking a full set of titles for this piece, head preservation officer Bob Gitt had a complete set created based on the original typography in order to preserve the integrity of the film's aesthetic.

Occasionally, the archivist's role goes beyond simple preservation and conservation. Such is the case with UCLA's work on director William K. Howard's rags-to-riches epic of a railroad tycoon, "The Power and the Glory" (1933). Written by Preston Sturges and starring Spencer Tracy, the film's nonlinear structure, visual style and biographical motif have often drawn comparisons to Welles' "Citizen Kane." Working from a severely fragmented print, the

university was eventually forced to turn to a pair of French fine prints to capture scenes that were damaged beyond recovery or missing entirely.

Despite the emphasis on cinema, the archive continues to pride itself on diversity. "Minnie to Duke: Animation from the Golden Age" will showcase theatrical releases, promotional shorts and pencil test selections from Ub Iwerks, George Pal, Harman-Ising and Walt Disney on Aug. 6. On Aug. 9, UCLA will wheel out Newsreel Stories from the California History Project, selected from the Hearst Metrotone News Collection.

On Wednesday, the work of live television pioneer Fred Coe will be accompanied by an open panel discussion.

Also scattered throughout the festival will be an eclectic assemblage of rare trailers, shorts and screen tests with stars such as Katharine Hepburn and Lee J. Cobb.

The first official Festival of Preservation ran in 1988. Now, the university is developing the first film archivist graduate program in North America. If all goes as planned, the christening class will receive its first lecture in the fall of 2001. Along with nearly 100 new preservation projects, the archive looks forward to the construction of a vault to protect its more than 55 million feet of nitrate film and a 300-seat theater within the Hammer Museum in Westwood. The latter is particularly important because, according to many at UCLA, preservation ultimately serves the entertainment and education of the public.

As the second-largest film archive in the world, and the largest university archive, UCLA's size is superceded by the enormity of its task.

"Within the next couple of years I've got over 60 projects to finish," says preservationist Jere Guldin, revealing no trace of fatigue at the prospect.

In fact, the staff's biggest challenge is not the never-ending enormity of its task but getting it right. As Kittleton states: "The true archivist strives not to make the colors brighter, but to reproduce them as they first appeared when the picture was made."



PASSION PLAY: Michael Curtiz's "Noah's Ark" (1929) will screen Aug. 11 in UCLA's festival.

PRESERVATION FESTIVAL

The films will screen at the UCLA James Bridges Theater in Melnitz Hall, except where noted. For double-bill and shorts information, call (310) 206-8013 or consult www.cinema.ucla.edu.

Friday

7:30 p.m. "The Times of Harvey Milk," screens at the Directors Guild of America.

Saturday

7:30 p.m. "The Power and the Glory"

Sunday

2 p.m. "The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu" and "Daughter of the Dragon."

7 p.m. "Feet First"

Wednesday

7:30 p.m. "Remembering Fred Coe: The Live Television Years"

Aug. 3

7:30 p.m. "The Naked Kiss"

Aug. 4

7:30 p.m. "When a Man Loves"

Aug. 5

7:30 p.m. "The Prisoner of Zenda"

Aug. 6

2 p.m. Family Matinee: "The Great Rupert"

7 p.m. "Cheers for Miss Bishop"

Aug. 9

7:30 p.m. "Hearst Metrotone News Collection: Newsreel Stories From The California History Project"

Aug. 10

7:30 p.m. "How Green Was My Valley"

Aug. 11

7:30 p.m. "Noah's Ark"

Aug. 12

7:30 p.m. "Body and Soul" and "Force of Evil"

Aug. 13

2 p.m. Family Matinee: "Hot Water"

7 p.m. "Sherlock Holmes Faces Death" and "The House of Fear"

Aug. 16

7:30 p.m. "Chicano Love Is Forever" (Amor Chicano Es Para Siempre)

Aug. 17

7:30 p.m. "Butterfly"

Aug. 18

7:30 p.m. "One Hour With You"

Aug. 19

7:30 p.m. "God's Little Acre"

Aug. 20

7 p.m. "Four Frightened People"

Aug. 23

7:30 p.m. "Killer of Sheep"

Aug. 24

7:30 p.m. "The Home Maker" and "The Sensation Seekers"

Aug. 25

7:30 p.m. "Seven Men From Now"

Aug. 26

7:30 p.m. "Cyrano de Bergerac"

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