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Enter The Shadow

The Caligari Project is the multi-media fest we didn't know we needed



Cover | *by Gregory Beatty*

The Caligari Project

Multiple venues

As originally conceived (a single screening of a classic silent film with a live score by Regina composer Jason Cullimore), *The Caligari Project* was an impressive enough undertaking. But it subsequently grew to include numerous partners who've organized a smorgasbord of lectures, art exhibitions, performances, concerts and screenings that started in January and run to late December.

Recently, I spoke with two of the organizers, Chrystene Ells and Berny Hi, who — along with Gerald Saul and Rowan Pantel, and co-ordinator Michelle Brownridge — have shepherded the project from its initial conception five years ago.

"We were at a screening of the Buster Keaton comedy *The General* that the Regina Symphony Orchestra did in 2011," recalls Hi. "It was great, but we're also film buffs, and that got us thinking how we could organize a better event which to us would mean a bigger screen and more of a film presence."

The project takes its name from the film they finally settled on: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Produced in Germany in 1920, it's directed by Robert Wiene and stars Werner Krauss as a deranged hypnotist who uses a sleepwalker in a sideshow attraction (Conrad Veidt) as an agent to commit murder.

Both in its themes, and the aesthetics of its cinematography, the film is an early example of an art movement that arose in Germany in the period between World War I and II called German Expressionism. Film and visual art were heavily impacted by the movement, but its influence also extended to literature, dance, theatre, music and even architecture.

"Originally, our scope was pretty small," says Ells. "But Jason wrote a grant and got funding to write the score. Then he's connected to the RSO, so he was talking to them, and they said 'Yeah, we could probably get Victor Sawa to conduct, and we'll create this sub-group of the main symphony called The Caligari Orchestra."

"Once Victor Sawa was on board, we thought 'Maybe we should do [something] bigger.' As things started to snowball, and more artists found out about it, we decided 'Okay, let's take it to the next level.'

Keen to incorporate visual art into the project, Ells met with MacKenzie Gallery head curator Timothy Long. "He said, 'Oh, I love German Expressionism!' And then, 'You know,

the Winnipeg Art Gallery just got a massive endowment of German Expressionist art. Maybe we could find the funding to bring it here.”

EXPRESS YOURSELF

German Expressionism was part of a broader Expressionist movement that arose at the end of the 19th century, and was tied to the decline and decay of Europe’s existing aristocratic power structure and the ongoing shift of artists away from literal depictions of reality that began with Impressionism in the 1870s. But it had some factors unique to Germany too.

“We’re not scholars of GE, but three things stand out for me,” says Ells. “First, is the incredible despair that was rampant between the wars, especially in Germany, which ended the war with its tail between its legs. Germans were ashamed, and had to go through the indignity of publicly surrendering, so all of Germany was in this state of angst.

“Secondly, industrialization was growing and there was a whole aspect of GE that involved our increasing insignificance in relationship with the machine and our disconnect from nature. The film *Metropolis* (1927) is a really great example of the mechanization of life, and the insignificance of the individual.

“A third major aspect of German Expressionism was that psychoanalysis was arriving on the scene with Freud and others, and we were becoming aware that we have an unconscious mind and artists really delved into that,” says Ells. “Often in GE, what you’re seeing is what’s going on in the mind of the artist or character.”

LIGHT & SHADOW

To develop themes such as angst, insignificance and the inner emotional landscape more fully, artists in different genres developed specific aesthetic strategies.

Film is a case in point, says Hi. “It was very theatrical, with dramatic acting, lighting, camera angles and make-up. People were coming straight from theatre, and trying this new medium. Because of the economic situation, a lot of the sets and costumes were taken from theatre, so it gives the films an uncanny, otherworldly look.

“Black-and-white was the aesthetic, and what’s called low-key lighting. The main reason for that was technical. The sensitivity of the celluloid was so low compared to today. So you had these giant banks of lights that were actually arcs of flame, and would just pound

light at actors. There was a lot of play with shadows too, which had to do with the psyche.”

Film noir and the horror genre in general are two obvious artistic successors to GE, and its influence extends to present day, says Ells. “It’s a pretty valuable artistic movement, I think, and for contemporary artists to recognize the power and history is important.

“It’s important for kids too. I worked on Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), and you see kids walking around with Jack Skellington hats and stuff and they think they’re Goth or Emo, and it’s like they don’t have any idea what the history of that is.”

NAZISM & NOW

As students of history know, the Weimar Republic that existed in Germany in the interwar period ultimately gave way to the Nazi Party led by Adolph Hitler in 1932-33. Seeking to promote the myth of Aryan-Germanic supremacy, the Nazis had no time for the angst-ridden and, to their eyes, perverse depiction of life by GE artists.

“Incompetents, cheats and madmen” is how Hitler described them, and the Nazis actually organized a 600-piece exhibition of GE art in Munich 1937 to highlight its deficiencies. They pulled out all the stops to portray the art as degenerate, citing its Jewish and Bolshevik tendencies, and heaping scorn on its portrayal of Germans as weak, immoral and prone to mental illness.

But the exhibition included work by such masters as Klee, Chagall, Kandinsky, Grosz, Dix, Beckmann, Schwitters and more — and proved wildly popular, with over two million people seeing it during its four-month run.

“People went and said ‘Oh, this is so terrible. But so compelling!’, says Ells. “That’s the other thing about GE, it’s like an iconic language of political dissent.”

As noted elsewhere, *The Caligari Project* has been five years in the making. And during the incubation period, a number of developments have occurred, such as the rise of Donald Trump in the U.S., Britain pivoting away from Europe with the Brexit vote, and a surge of right-wing nationalism in many corners of Europe, that raise alarming parallels with the era that spawned GE in the first place.

“That’s especially true with the upcoming vote in the U.S., and all the dissatisfaction that’s arising out of the choices there,” says Ells. “But we’ve also realized recently a [link] between the industrialization of that time and our relationship now as individuals with the corporate globalization that’s occurring. In *Metropolis* it’s called ‘the Moloch’, the gaping maw that devours the soul.”

CALENDAR CHECK

The best way to get up to speed on *The Caligari Project* is to visit caligari.ca. But here’s two upcoming events to keep in mind.

On Sunday, Oct. 16, there will a screening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* at Conexus Arts Centre at 7 p.m. A special orchestra has been assembled under the direction of Victor Sawa, and they will premiere a live score composed by Jason Cullimore.

On Thursday, Oct. 20, the MacKenzie Gallery is hosting *Caligari Salon: An Evening of Angst, Art, Cinema*. It will feature a screening of local and international shorts in the style of GE, along with a Prairie Puppet Underground performance called “Somnambulist Puppet Sideshow”.

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