

# THE SILENT TREATMENT

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## Oscar Micheaux: AN AMERICAN INDEPENDENT



*Within Our Gates* (1920)

TORONTO, ON. The TIFF Bell Lightbox is hosting a month-long retrospective on the career of pioneering artist and craftsman Oscar Micheaux beginning February 1st, 2014 and running through February 23rd in recognition of Black History month.

From the 1920s to the 1940s, Oscar Micheaux was the most prolific, successful—and indeed only—African American writer-director-producer in American cinema. A Pullman porter and farmer before he established himself as a successful author with his self-published novel *The Conquest: The Story of a Black Pioneer*, Micheaux made his move into filmmaking in 1918 when he was approached by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company—the country’s largest producer of “race” movies (films targeted at African American audiences in the segregated theatres that specifically catered to them)—for the film rights to his novel *The Homesteader*. When Micheaux

demanded creative control over the film adaptation, negotiations quickly broke down; undeterred, Micheaux set up his own production company and made the film himself, launching a remarkable three-decade career of proudly independent filmmaking.



Oscar Micheaux

Although Micheaux’s films typically pattern themselves after Hollywood genres—musicals, crime thrillers, melodramas, etc.—they question, criticize or invert the ideological bases

of those genres. Micheaux’s most famous film, *Within Our Gates*—often viewed as his response to D.W. Griffith’s landmark racist epic *The Birth of a Nation*—exemplifies his particular progressive approach in its depiction of the horrors of lynching and the racist culture of the American South, and its distinctly middle-class vision of African American self-improvement. (Micheaux was a dedicated disciple of African American self-help guru Booker T. Washington, to whom he dedicated the novel of *The Homesteader*). Educated, socially conscious, and determined to make a place for themselves in mainstream (middle-class) society, Micheaux’s heroes stand in stark contrast to the antiquated and denigrating portrayals of African Americans that dominate much of Hollywood history.

Highlights from the retrospective include a centerpiece presentation of *Within Our Gates* (1920) on February 1st, *Body and Soul* (1925) on February 2nd, and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) on February 8th along with career highlights during his sound era filmmaking. (Complete schedule at <http://tiff.net>)

### THE DREAM OF VALENTINO

MINNESOTA. *Fame is a dangerous dance*. A sultry young dancer is transformed from an unknown immigrant into a silent film sensation. Rudolph Valentino’s stardom blazes across the silver screen but is quickly

consumed by the same forces that ignited it. Seduction and scandal swirl in Dominick Argento's tango-tinged opera about an artist discovered and destroyed by Hollywood.



*Rudolph Valentino*

In March, the sixth production of Minnesota Opera's New Works Initiative is a major revival of Argento's **The Dream of Valentino**, starring internationally acclaimed tenor James Valenti as the 1920s film icon and sex symbol, Rudolph Valentino. Brenda Harris stars as June Mathis, the catalyst of his meteoric rise to fame. Eric Simonson will direct, with Maestro Christoph Campestrini set to conduct.

Dominick Argento examines fame and the immigrant experience in his opera, set in the early days of Hollywood. The Washington Opera gave the work its premiere under the baton of Christopher Keene in January 1994, followed by its co-commissioning company, Dallas Opera, in 1995. The production featured special multi-media sets by John Conklin and costumes by the couturier Valentino. Writing of the premiere, Peter G. Davis of New York magazine stated, "What a pleasure to encounter a real opera composer, one who has studied and learned from his predecessors, loves the form, understands its conventions, has mastered

them and then lets his imagination take wing." **The Dream of Valentino** received its European premiere in February 1999 in Kassel, Germany.

**The Dream of Valentino** is part of Minnesota Opera's New Works Initiative, a landmark program designed to invigorate the operatic repertoire with an infusion of contemporary works. ([www.mnopera.org](http://www.mnopera.org))

## SILENT SCREENINGS

### *A Night of Silents at Nethercutt Museum*

Located in Sylmar, California is the treasured location of The Nethercutt Museum; an endowed, not-for-profit education institution and resource for automotive enthusiasts, historians, and students. Opened to the public in 1971, the facilities represent a lifetime of collecting by founder J.B. Nethercutt, including many of the greatest automobiles ever made from four eras: antique, vintage, classic and post-war.



Complementing the Museum is a separate and adjacent facility called the Nethercutt Collection, which features rare collectibles that range from antique furniture, mechanical musical instruments, and a Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre Pipe Organ. The Music Room is opened during select times of the year for concerts and popular silent film programs featuring the use of a hand cranked 1909

Power's Model 6 Cameragraph projector owned and operated by Joe Rinaudo.



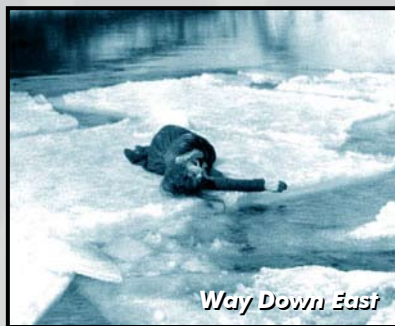
The first silent program weekend of the 2014 season is scheduled on Saturday February 7th and Sunday February 8th, when organist Dean Mora joins Joe in a specially crafted evening of comedy and animated short subjects, all presented on 35mm film. Titles include *Giddap!*, a Mack Sennett comedy from 1925 with Billy Bevan; *Modeling*, a Max Fleischer cartoon from 1921; *The Dome Doctor*, a Larry Semon comedy from 1925; and *Fluttering Hearts*, a Charley Chase comedy with Oliver Hardy from 1927.

The intent of these shows is to give the audience the experience of an itinerant motion picture show, dedicated to those men and women projectionists who trooped film, music, and equipment across the country to bring entertainment to small towns that didn't have a motion picture theater. Visit the Nethercutt Collection's website for details at [www.nethercutt-collection.org](http://www.nethercutt-collection.org)

## *ArthouseFW: Silent Sundays*

FORT WORTH, TX. Presented by the Lone Star Film Society, in partnership with the Modern Art Museum and Kimbell Art Museum of Fort Worth, ArthouseFW presents a full year of carefully curated film

programming that includes everything from the avant-garde to the most popular and celebrated cinema gems. The ArthouseFW Silent Sunday series present the visionaries of early cinema who pioneered film and narrative techniques that shifted movies from a simple means of entertainment to a serious artistic medium. Each picture will be presented alongside unique live musical accompaniment in the Kimbell Art Museum's Renzo Piano pavilion.



The Spring 2014 Sunday schedule includes a February 16th screening of *Sunrise* (1927), one of the most essential surviving films from the silent era detailing the moral dilemmas that arise when a lascivious woman from the city dishevels the life of a farmer and his family; *Way Down East* (1920) on March 16th—D.W. Griffith's grandiose early American melodrama was a career defining picture, costing the most in production and leaving the cast and crew with lasting physical damage. *Strike* (1925) plays on April 20th, and chronicles the violent suppression of a mutiny and marks the celebrated Russian director Sergei Eisenstein's first full-length film; and finally *Wings* (1927) on May 18th, tells the story of two World War I airmen who seek the love of the same woman. Filmed in Texas, this action-packed film features some of the most daring air battles in filmmaking history and exhibits the absolute talent of the

early cinematic master William A. Wellman. (<http://lonestarfilmssociety.com/arthousefw/>)

## TST SPOTLIGHT

### FRED NIBLO FAMED DIRECTOR & A.M.P.A.S. FOUNDING MEMBER

By Jim Mckee (excerpted article)

The story of Fred Niblo begins with F.W. Liedtke, who served as a captain in the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment and was wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg. In 1871, he came to Nebraska with three Union veterans to settle on military land grants that comprised a full section northeast of the village of York. To claim the land, each of the four was required to build a home, so four sod dwellings were built at the center of the square mile, with one well serving all dug at the intersection of their claims.

After teaching for a term, Liedtke sent for his wife, Anna, and their son, Otto. In 1873 he was elected as York County Clerk, and the family moved to the county seat at York. On January 1, 1874, a second son, Frederick, was born, and later that year the senior Liedtke was elected county judge.

The population of York was about 200 that year, and much of Nebraska was suffering under the second year of a grasshopper invasion and widespread drought. As young Fred grew, his father's career continued to prosper as he became state auditor in 1878.

With the beginning of the 20th century, Fred's parents divorced and Fred began traveling the world, "sometimes an actor, sometimes a writer, sometimes an explorer." It was also during that decade that Fred began working in vaudeville in New York City.

Fred's primary performing venue in the city was Niblo's Garden. William Niblo, who had been the owner of a coffee house and a caterer, bought a theater of sorts at Broadway and Pine streets, which had been a circus grounds, landscaped garden and ultimately developed as a saloon/hotel/restaurant/theater. The theater was best known as the site where P.T. Barnum staged his first appearance in 1835, but the theater turned more to drama performances and eventually vaudeville. It was here that Fred Liedtke changed his name to Fred Niblo.

In New York City, during his vaudeville days, he met Josephine Cohan, sister of George M. Cohan, and the two were married in July 1901. In 1907, the couple's travels took them around the world including Africa, where Niblo took what may have been the first motion pictures of that country. On their return, these and other movies were scripted and used in travel lectures and monologues. Niblo later joined his brother-in-law and Broadway producer Sam Harris as manager for a theatrical company.



Josephine died in 1916, and Niblo joined the Ince Studios as a producer/director of silent films the following year. While in Australia, directing one of his first films, *A Desert Woo-*

ing (sometimes titled *The Marriage Ring*), he became acquainted with the film's star, Enid Bennett, who became his wife a few months later.

Niblo's first notable film was *The Mark Of Zorro* starring Douglas Fairbanks, which was released in 1920. Later in the decade, he and four other movie producers and directors founded of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, and Fred became the first vice president.



With his directing of *The Three Musketeers* and *Ben-Hur*, his career was at its peak but did not carry over well into the transition to sound pictures. Around 1930, Niblo returned briefly to acting, eventually retiring in 1933. In total, he directed 44 films, acted in 10, produced three and wrote an additional two.

Niblo died of pneumonia on January 11th, 1949, in New Orleans. His amazing semicircular home on Angelo Drive in Beverly Hills is now the estate of media mogul Rupert Murdoch, and his "walk of fame" star can be found on the south side of the 7000 block of Hollywood Boulevard.

Thus the fame and name of Fred Niblo, who directed well-known stars Lillian Gish, Ronald Coleman, Greta Garbo, Norma Talmadge, Buster Keaton, Joan Crawford and Cary Grant, lives on in Hollywood but is almost unknown in his native Nebraska. *Full article:* [http://journalstar.com/news/local/article\\_b93ea677-2-edc-51b3-9826-348a547adcbf.html](http://journalstar.com/news/local/article_b93ea677-2-edc-51b3-9826-348a547adcbf.html)

## TST BOOKCORNER

### Exporting Perilous Pauline Pearl White & the Serial Film Craze

Exceptionally popular during their time, the spectacular American action film serials of the 1910s featured exciting stunts, film tricks, and effects set against the background of modern technology, often starring resourceful female heroines who displayed traditionally male qualities such as endurance, strength, and authority.

The most renowned of these "serial queens" was Pearl White, whose career as the adventurous character Pauline developed during a transitional phase in the medium's evolution. In this volume, an international group of scholars explores how American serials starring Pearl White and other female stars affected the emerging cinemas in the United States and abroad.



Contributors investigate the serial genre and its narrative patterns, marketing, cultural reception, and historiographic importance, with essays on Pearl White's life on and off the screen as well as the "serial queen" genre in Western and Eastern Europe, India, and China. ([www.press.uillinois.edu](http://www.press.uillinois.edu))



## HOME ENTERTAINMENT

### SUNRISE: A SONG OF TWO HUMANS

The love and loyalty of a farmer and his wife are put to the ultimate test in this classic silent film. *Sunrise* (1927), directed by F.W. Murnau, earned four statuettes at the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929; including the top prize for the most "Unique And Artistic Picture," Best Actress (Janet Gaynor) and Best Cinematography. This new release will come in a "combo pack" with a Blu-Ray and DVD of the film.

Bonus materials include the Olympia Chamber Orchestra score composed and conducted by Timothy Brock in Dolby Digital 2.0 audio mix; the original Fox Movietone Version and European Silent Version; commentary by ASC Cinematographer John Bailey; and original scenario by Carl Mayer with annotations by F.W. Murnau. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

#### TST EDITED & PUBLISHED BY:

**Brandee B. Cox:**

*Content Manager*

**Steven K. Hill:**

*Layout & Graphic Design*

Contact us at: [tstnews@yahoo.com](mailto:tstnews@yahoo.com)

[www.tstnews.net](http://www.tstnews.net)