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We Watched A Movie With Live Music at Gables Cinema

By Brian Hunker · On April 24, 2019

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Entering the cinema my eyes were immediately drawn to the two identical Steinway grand pianos. Their black and gold edges gleamed as though they could somehow reflect more light than was naturally available in the half-darkened theater. The amalgamation of the two massive soundboards outstretched the length of the theater's screen. Several antique horns and an old shipyard bell were stationed near the left piano, while a full set of brass concert chimes loomed above the piano on the right.



As more audience members began flowing in from the lobby, Paola and I quickly snagged two of the last remaining seats near the middle of the auditorium. The sizable crowd in the lobby suggested the Coral Gables Art Cinema may have sold-out the theater this Thursday evening. Tonight was a special event and so the movie/performance was preceded by some opening remarks from local artistic luminaries including Steven Krams, Carlene Sawyer, and Nat Chediak.

Gables Cinema President and Founder Steven Krams spoke first and succeeded in his task of warmly welcoming the audience, and recognizing the cinema staff for their hard work. Additionally, Mr Krams announced some news which I am excited to pass along: The Gables Cinema is moving forward with plans to expand from one to three auditoriums in the next year. They manage to do so many great things with just the one theater. Imagine how much more cool stuff they'll be able to do with 3 theaters!

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Mr Krams then introduced the Executive Director of the Dranoff 2 Piano Foundation: Carlene Sawyer. Ms Sawyer spoke a bit about the Dranoff 2 Piano Foundation and the 2 renown pianists we were about to hear: [Bobby Mitchell](#) and [Ashley Hribar](#). If you are reading this, you'll probably be interested to know that there is one more performance left in the Dranoff 2019 concert Season. On May 3rd Dranoff is bringing together 2 incredible pianists and one vocalist for an evening of classic Cuban and Argentinian songs. That sounds like another dynamite show and you can get more info and tickets at the [Dranoff website](#).



Ms Sawyer then gave the floor over to the founder of the Miami Film Festival (now Program Director for Gables Cinema) Nat Chediak. Mr Chediak was on hand this evening to introduce the film and provide the audience with some much appreciated context before we set our eyes on a film originally released all the way back in 1927. While this film presents a very grounded and human story, it is also a marvel of technical craftsmanship. It's actually quite staggering when you consider the kinds of

close-ups, dissolves, panning and overlays the filmmakers employ. Not only were they inventing these new visual forms of narrative storytelling, they somehow managed to create all these special effects without so much as a single transistor's worth of assistance.



Mr Chediak concluded his remarks by bringing out the evening's performers and kicking off the show. The 2 pianists emerged from the wings of the auditorium. The audience politely applauded and the lights dimmed even further. As the opening title card faded up on the screen, pianist Bobby Mitchell ascended the keys of the piano nearest the chimes with a smooth flourish of soft notes. Just as Mitchell neared the upper reaches of his keyboard, Ashley Hribar (stationed over at the left piano) began issuing an equally charming answer phrase which seemed to sail down the left hand side of the auditorium. This symmetrical interplay between the two brilliant musicians at either side of the room was immediately delightful and continued throughout the performance.

Just like that, with a few seconds of gorgeous music and a few picturesque establishing shots, 141 moviegoers in Coral Gables were transported to a rural seaside town in the year 1927. You want to talk about movie magic, well it really doesn't get more magical than that. The film "Sunrise" is captivating from start to finish. It's no wonder that it won Best Picture at the very first Academy Awards Ceremony and is still rated the #5 best film of all time by the British Film Institute. The film's lead actress: Janet Gaynor also won the Academy's first-ever best actress award for her work in this film.



What surprised me most about “Sunrise” is the film’s humor. While “Sunrise” is mostly a serious drama, it’s got a lot of light hearted humor and some solid comedic performances that made us laugh out loud. I was also surprised by how modern the cinematic world of 1927 apparently was. I tend to think of the 1920’s as ‘olden days’ but in reality the interwar period was the spring of modernity. The characters in the film portray complex motivations and the film makes a brave attempt to unpack some of the difficulties of love, marriage, infidelity and forgiveness.

I’ve said that the film was captivating, but I did manage to escape it’s spell for a few moments to pay particular attention to the stunning musical performance of the two pianists. Hribar and Mitchell’s interwoven harmonies created a doubly intricate texture studded with grand flourishes and small, almost breathless, nuances. Illuminated only indirectly by the dim silvery light of the film’s projection, I could only catch glimpses of the four hands effortlessly moving, flawlessly rolling on from the late romantic to the modern, veering in and out of the Jazz age toward the sounds of contemporary exploration. At times Ashley Hribar would reach a hand over the keyboard action and manipulate the strings directly. At other times Bobby Mitchell would play notes on the large set of chimes or add other accents that were both musical and timed to coincide with the on-screen action. There are probably many other significant things they did which I can’t relate now because the seamlessness of their playing made it too easy to abandon critical awareness in favor of getting lost in the overall experience of sight and sound. Hribar and Mitchell are players who usually perform on big stages, on television, and in large concert halls. It was a rare opportunity and a real treat to hear these two performers up-close in such an intimate room.



The performers: [Bobby Mitchell](#) (left) & [Ashley Hribar](#) (right)

Of course, not every frame of "Sunrise" achieves timelessness. There are two scenes depicting a large man violently throttling a much smaller woman which regrettably pulled me out of the film and reminded me of the realities of violence toward women—realities which we seem more ready to grapple with honestly in 2019 (one hopes). At least we can offer up as evidence of some progress that such subjects would not be treated in any way as blithely in any film produced today. These two moments aside, the film actually focuses nearly every other moment on love and love's most transformative power: forgiveness. This theme of forgiveness and transformation is something I think we can all celebrate for another hundred years.

As the film's ending title card faded up onto the screen, the audience rose to their feet to enthusiastically applaud the evening's performers. The two pianists took bows. We all collectively reacclimated to the year 2019 and shuffled out into the lobby.

The performers hung around for a brief time after the show to greet the audience. I was able to have a few words with Bobby Mitchell and Ashley Hribar. They told me a little of how they worked to score the film themselves. They each took one of the main characters (Mitchell the man and Hribar the woman) and composed themes or selected works that could help describe each character. Some of the music they

chose wasn't written until the 1930's making the performance even more interesting and unique for its subtle anachronisms. During the show I recognized some of the strains of Ellington, Gershwin, and Chopin, all of which they masterfully wove into 90 minutes of cohesive and engrossing music. Part of me still wants to go back and watch the performance over and over again and analyze what each piece of music is and what it represents. If it were a modern movie I could probably do that. But tonight was a rare experience. Now over and gone.

While this special screening of "Sunrise" was a one-time-only event, it marks the 3rd or 4th time the Gables Cinema has brought live musicians in to perform music alongside classic films of the silent era. If that sounds like something that interests you, I'd encourage you not to miss the next one. You can stay tuned-in to Coral Gables Love and we will certainly let you know, or better yet, head over to [GablesCinema.com](https://www.gablescinema.com) and get on their mailing list to make sure you find out about all of their cinematic cultural events.

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