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Cinema treasures at UCLA festival

UCLA Film & Television Archive's month-long Festival of Preservation, which starts Thursday, includes Laurel & Hardy shorts in Spanish, two Bette Davis pictures, tasty film noir and even an appearance by silent film star Baby Peggy.

By Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times Film Critic

I've been writing about the incomparable UCLA Festival of Preservation for nearly 20 years, and every time a new edition appears, I fear I'll run out of fresh adjectives to describe the UCLA Film & Television Archive's gift for restoring the widest possible spectrum of fascinating and hard-to-see cinema.

I'm clearly getting low on superlatives, but UCLA has not run out of films for its festival, which opens Thursday at the Hammer Museum's Billy Wilder Theater with Robert Altman's "Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean." This year's treats range from silent films such as 1925's "The Goose Woman" (complete with color tints done the old-fashioned way) to Barbara Loden's ahead-of-its-time 1970 independent drama "Wanda."

There is even space for an old-fashioned Hollywood crowd-pleaser, 1935's "The Crusades," directed by Cecil B. DeMille in his trademark combination of raciness and religion. The New York Times called it "two hours of tempestuous extravaganza" that brings "the panoplied splendor of the past into torrential life upon the screen." They don't make quotes like that anymore.

If that isn't unexpected enough, the festival, which spans 23 programs over an entire month, includes a glimpse of Laurel and Hardy acting in Spanish, an in-person appearance by a major silent film star and an adaptation of a Samuel Beckett play that caused star Zero Mostel to puckishly say he "wished to be re-blacklisted."

The two Laurel & Hardy featurettes, "La Vida Nocturna" (Blotto) and "Politiquerias" (Chickens Come Home) date from the early 1930s, a time when studios released multilanguage versions of shorts and features without resorting to dubbing. Hearing the comedy duo blithely work through phonetically learned Spanish while still being funny is a treat.

The silent film star would be the redoubtable Baby Peggy, dubbed "Hollywood's Tiny Titan" by UCLA because she was a major child star in the early 1920s. Now the well-known author Diana Serra Carey, the 92-year-old luminary will appear with her films March 19 at 2 p.m.

One of the festival's perennial strengths is its double-headers, and one of the best ones is a Saturday twin bill showcasing early work by celebrated directors Douglas Sirk and Anthony Mann.

Sirk's 1948 "Sleep, My Love" is an atmospheric drama of the wife-in-jeopardy variety, with a completely charming Robert Cummings helping to save Claudette Colbert from a sinister Don Ameche. And Mann's vivid and energetic 1944 B-picture potboiler "Strangers in the Night" shows what a great training ground a 56-minute Republic programmer could be.

For film noir fans, the night of nights is March 18 and a double bill of "Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye," featuring James Cagney as a gangster even more deranged than the one he played in "White Heat," and, better still, "Cry Danger," a dark morsel so tasty its preservation was funded by the Film Noir Foundation.

"Danger" stars Dick Powell at his most laconic as a tough guy let out of prison and determined to punish the crooks who sent him up the river. It's got great gritty visuals of Bunker Hill as well as lots of hard-bitten dialogue such as this exchange between a weary cop and our hero: "I'll be seeing you." "I'll count the hours."

Less straight ahead is the Monday pairing of two unusual crime dramas, "Satan Met a Lady" and "The Big Shakedown." The first is a loose, breezy and played for laughs pre-Humphrey Bogart version of "The Maltese Falcon," which substitutes the jewel-filled Horn of Roland for the black bird and wastes Bette Davis in a role she so disliked that it brought on a suspension from Warner Brothers.

Davis is also present in a supporting role in "The Big Shakedown," which combines two things you never thought you'd see in the same film: gangsters and toothpaste. A scene in which guys named Lefty, Gyp, Spike, Shorty and Trigger head to the men's room to try out some counterfeit paste is one for the books.

Music is, as always, a major component of the UCLA event. There are two programs of early sound Vitaphone shorts that showcase unjustly forgotten vaudeville troupers. There's also a program of "soundies," 1940s shorts intended for video jukeboxes, that precedes a showing of "Pot o' Gold," which stars Jimmy Stewart as a music clerk in a picture that was allegedly the least favorite of his entire career.

The festival's television element is especially strong this year. The Mostel-Burgess Meredith "Waiting for Godot" that drove Mostel to distraction is paired with "Film," another Beckett effort that did the same for star Buster Keaton. And for pure emotional punch there is nothing stronger than watching Hanna Bloch Kohner, wife of Hollywood agent Walter Kohner, become the first Nazi concentration camp survivor to appear on national TV in a 1953 episode of "This Is Your Life."

"Oh no, I don't believe it," she says as the program starts, and by the time it ends, neither will you.