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A salute to our cinematic history, and its saviors

UCLA archive that helps rescue old films makes Siskel stop

Michael Phillips | Movie critic

In this drastically evolving time, when digital cinema replaces actual, tangible strips of film before we can even assess the revolution's ramifications and potential losses, the UCLA Film and Television Archive performs a crucial service for our shared American history.

The latest annual UCLA Festival of Preservation is now touring the country. The Siskel Film Center is one of its whistle-stops. And the new lineup, through Oct. 5, spans a mind-altering range of material, from ripe, rare silent dramas to a Duke Ellington "soundie" to Buster Keaton doing Samuel Beckett.

Silents first. A double bill of rare features screens Monday. A bizarre 1926 mix of romantic comedy and Yellow Peril melodrama, director Paul Sloane's "Eve's Leaves" (3 p.m. Monday) stars easygoing Leatrice Joy as a sea captain's daughter brought up, more or less and mostly at sea, as a short-haired, trousers-sporting boy. Looking for love (or "vibrations," as they're called in a romance guide lent to her by the ship's cook) the young woman begins vibrating in the vicinity of an American tourist (William Boyd, a right simp). But a Fu Manchu-school Chinese pirate (Walter Long) wants the newly fragrant and gussied-up delicacy for himself.

"Eve's Leaves" is not the film to consult for enlightened racial attitudes. The first half is the juicy half, even though the second half features torture sequences and more action. References in this China-set concoction to "real chop suey, Chicago style" may hold a special interest to local cinephiles, though anyone, anywhere can appreciate (or reject) puns referencing "Freud eggs" or wisecracks along the lines of "So's your old Mandarin!" More historical curio than remarkable cinema, "Eve's Leaves" is nonetheless pretty stimulating.

So is "The Goose Woman" (4:30 p.m. Monday). Louise Dresser milks it as the alcoholic former opera star eking out a poverty-line living raising geese and pigs while nursing her resentments. Her son gets embroiled in a murder rap, and as the frankly absurd narrative unfolds, director Clarence Brown (who did, among others in the sound era, "National Velvet" and "The Yearling") draws particularly naturalistic portrayals from Dresser and from the charming Constance Bennett (later of "What Price Hollywood?" and "Topper") as the theatrical sensation who sets the men in the hick town abuzz.

Film preservation doesn't seem like a political issue — who, really, wants to see *more* of our cultural heritage disintegrate into nothingness? But it takes money and public awareness and, therefore, political will. "These Amazing Shadows" (ironically shot on high-def digital video) is a way-to-go! salute to the National Film Registry, a federal program overseen by the Library of Congress, whose consultants select 25 "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant" American films each year to its list, financing their preservation. The survey documentary will screen at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, as well as 5 p.m. Sept. 11; 3 p.m. Sept. 18; 6:45 p.m. Sept. 24 and 7:45 p.m. Oct. 5.

The remainder of the Festival of Preservation includes films never made available on DVD, such as

Robert Altman's eccentric, fluidly adapted film version of the cockamamie stage play "Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean" (3 p.m. Saturday and 6 p.m. Wednesday) and much more from much further back in the 20th century. Check the website for details. And see these 35 mm prints under near-optimal conditions while we still have the cinema lovers around who believe in such things.

"The 2011 UCLA Festival of Preservation," through Oct. 5 at the Siskel Film Center, 164 N. State St.; 312-846-2800 or siskelfilmcenter.org.