

CKET



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The Beth Custer Ensemble's sounds of silents

BY JIM CATALANO

Journal Staff

Cornell Cinema continues its tradition of bringing in cutting-edge projects when it welcomes San Francisco's Beth Custer Ensemble to perform the original score to the 1929 silent film "My Grandmother." The event will take place 7:15 p.m. Saturday in the Willard Straight Theatre.

Directed by Kote Mikaberidze, the film exemplifies the Soviet Eccentric Cinema movement of the 1920. A Georgian paper pusher loses his job, then spends a great deal of effort trying to find a "grandmother" who will help him land another position. The film, which was banned by Soviet authorities for 40 years, utilizes a bunch of anarchic techniques: stop motion, puppetry, animation, and more.

Custer, who plays clarinet and piano, was introduced to the film in 2000 by a friend who works at the Pacific Film Archive. "He had seen me with play with Club Foot Orchestra (another leading band that scores silent movies), and said I have the perfect film for you, and gave me a VHS tape of 'My Grandmother,'" she says in a call from her studio in San Francisco's Hunters Point Naval Shipyard neighborhood.

She landed a commission that was enough to hire a trio. "We did an overture and a constructed improv score," she says. "Then I

fell in love with the film and I approached the Castro Theatre, where Club Foot used to play, and they said they loved to do it. That gave me the impetus to score it out for eight people, including a narrator who speaks the English translations of the Russian intertitles in English."

Custer then was selected to receive the Aaron Copland Recording Fund, which gave her enough money (\$15,000) to record for five days. Then she had to get permission rights to the film, which took almost two years, until just a couple of months ago.

"I turned around and married the score to the film, which is a really complicated process, with 21 cues," she says. "We had to speed up my music to match the film speed. I had to design the DVD cover, and the menu. I learned a lot and last week, I finally got copies in my hand."

"For me, it's an amazing film that I think everyone would enjoy if they saw it. But it's hard to explain what we're doing, because people don't always see live music played to films."

Custer's score incorporates a variety of influences, including jazz, blues and bluegrass. "Kote Mikaberidze was following the Soviet Eccentric movement of the 1920, and they were really into American culture, especially jazz," she says. "I found it interesting that I naturally wrote a jazzy score, because that's what they were into

If you go

The Beth Custer Ensemble accompanying the 1929 silent film 'My Grandmother'

● When: 7:15 p.m. Saturday

● Where: Willard Straight Theatre, Cornell

● Tickets: \$12 (\$8 students & seniors), available at Ithaca Guitar Works and Willard Straight Hall Ticket Desk

anyway.

"There's one scene where the wife comes home from a shopping spree and the husband is dangling overhead pretending to hang himself. She starts dancing the Charleston, so I wrote a Charleston to go along with it, just trying to follow the tempo of the footsteps of the guy who is the grandmother."

Scoring a feature film is a big endeavor, of course. "Sixty-five minutes of constant music is a lot of music," she says. "And how do you make it interesting for the performers to keep them engaged? So there is some improvisation, and I've assigned different characters and different moods to certain people in the ensemble. There are breaks in the movie where we're all improvising to the screen."

The Beth Custer Ensemble includes drummer Jan Jackson, guitarist David James, bassist Craig Broussard with special guests Chris Grady (trumpet), Dina Maccabee (violin), Jessica Ivy (cello) and Nyls Frykdal (narrator). For more information, or to hear samples from the score to "My Grandmother" and other projects, visit www.bethcuster.com.

She's hoping that she'll continue to get more film work. "It's my chosen passion, what I want to focus on more than playing in clubs," she says. "I'm kind of tired of the club scene, now that I'm 47. I'd like to steer myself toward scoring more films."

Though Custer has been based in San Francisco for a long time, she was born in Indiana and grew up near Fredonia, N.Y. She's looking forward to returning to her native state, as is her family; at least 15 relatives will be coming to the performance at Cornell.

Tickets for the event are \$12, 48 for students and seniors, and available at the Willard Straight Hall Ticket Desk and at Ithaca Guitar Works. For more information, call 255-3522 or visit www.cinema.cornell.edu.



Provided

A scene from "My Grandmother," the 1929 silent movie from the Soviet Eccentric Cinema era that will screen at Cornell Cinema Saturday, with live music from the Beth Custer Ensemble.



Anne Hamersky/Provided

The Beth Custer Ensemble will accompany "My Grandmother" Saturday night at Cornell.

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Faculty Chamber Music:

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Thursday, November 10

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