

Silent films take us on a different journey



Courtesy photo

Nashua native Jeff Rapsis has been bringing silent movies 'back' into our lives by performing live musical accompaniment for these classic pioneering films.

"It is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say."

—Michel Foucault

Language often misfires—it requires translation across cultures and across the breakfast table. One sentence can be said in 10 different ways and mean 10 different things. There is a reason that humor—with its complex matrix of metaphor, subtlety and sophisticated references—is the most difficult thing to translate into words across the international cultural divide.

Conversely, there is an immediate, universal honesty and intimacy in non-verbal communication. Like a fine melody, an image, a gesture, a look, a movement can give a world of meaning. There are few art forms that demonstrate the power of imagery better than silent film.

While some may dismiss silent movies as irrelevant relics of the



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past, they are surprisingly relevant—perhaps especially today in these times of constant distraction and way too much information coming at lightning speed. True, silent movies represent a frozen time—captured in the foreign-looking costumes, settings and props of the 1920s, the heydays of silent film. But there is also a surprisingly real timelessness about the distilled abstraction of imagery without words. And nobody did it better than Charlie Chaplin.

In *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*, brain surgeon Leonard Shlain gives a brilliant explanation for the century-old iconic power of Chaplin. Shlain argues that for centuries, western culture literally worshipped words—was, in fact, held hostage by the left hemisphere of the brain. Left-brain dominance began with the monks copying medieval manuscripts—the single cultural act that spawned a culture ruled by a literal, linear, "either/or," warlike cultural mentality.

According to Shlain, Chaplin was nothing less than the linchpin for a massive cultural shift in western culture—away from the literal translation of words to the liberating power of image. In 1900, just as the "electric motion picture projector" began