

# Quincy

CONTINUED FROM | PAGE A-3

unfurling a stream of negatives past an intense light, physicist Max Planck discovered “ragged discontinuity” in the atomic world, a “minute jerkiness” that began to unravel linear ideas about cause and effect, making room for the non-linear, the illogical, the spontaneous, the random-proof of the unexpected.

Shlain: “Chaplin was the showman of the incongruous, genius of the jerky gesture...master of the bellylaugh. A clown who poked fun at the serious endeavors of the left brain, he did so without using a single word. With pantomime, facial expressions, and a signature waddle, Chaplin showcased the communicative power of the right hemisphere.”

For the past 11 years, Nashua native Jeff Rapsis has been bringing silent movies “back” into our lives by performing live musical accompaniment for these classic pioneering films. When he is not at his day job as a founding partner of an entertainment publication, Rapsis travels New England and throughout the country, improvising his musical scores to silent films. “No performance is the same,” said Rapsis as we sat last week in the Nashua Barnes and Noble. Two weeks ago, he gave his first performance in Nashua at the First Church.

A young film buff from an early age enamored of the Marx Brothers, particularly the way Chico Marx played piano, Rapsis began taking piano lessons in junior high school. His two loves merged in an epiphany on the first day of seventh grade at Spring Street Junior High School where Sebastian Salvo, celebrated Nashua public school music teacher and film collector, began showing silent movies during study hall.

“The first film we saw was Charlie Chaplin I Am. I will never forget it—Mr. Salvo said only one thing about the film—‘Charlie Chaplin is the only character in the film.’” In this 20-minute film, Chaplin, getting ready for bed, finds a thousand different ways to foil himself in the effort.

As Stephen Weissman points out in *In Chaplin, A Life*, the elements of early comedy—before stuntmen—are staggering. A first-rate comedian had to “execute back slides, nosedives, fanny flops, and alley oops on cue—in deadpan or in double take—deploying his body in space with the soaring ease and apparent weightlessness of a prima ballerina.” Add to that the precise science of humor—the specific rhythm needed to release two incongruous images colliding at just the right moment to catch the audience off-guard.

While attending Fordham University, Rapsis took a sabbati-

cal from his love affair with silent film and kept his distance from music—he loved it too much. Then in 2000 when he and his partners founded the entertainment publication, Rapsis began writing about classical music for it. In 2004 Ken Keisler, Symphony NH director, asked Rapsis to do a film score for “Dangerous Crosswinds,” a serious crime drama. With the release of the film, Rapsis sought out ways to get back in to film.

In 2007, he pitched the Palace Theater to run the silent film *Phantom of the Opera* on Halloween night. Despite plans to write a complete score, time got away from him, and Rapsis had to improvise. “I discovered it was so much better to be playing freely with the film in real time. As the musical line follows the emotional arc of the film, you become one with arc of the story.”

Rapsis soon discovered that the way a musician performed live music could make or break the experience for an audience. While attending a silent film festival, he noticed the accompanist played loud circus music throughout the film, drowning out the audience and the film.

Rapsis discovered the very same thing that Chaplin discovered—you needed to provide the space of a pause to allow the audience to share the laughter. Rapsis likens performing music to a silent film to that of a fly fisherman—“you have to cast the melody out, then reel it in slowly, and know where to go with the next tune.” Rapsis also feels the need to “curate” silent film, that is, to foster it in live theater settings, where it began because television—or even worse, phone technology—does not do it justice.

According to Rapsis, there were about 11,000 silent films made, with 80 percent of them irrevocably lost, leaving approximately 1,000 in existence. Rapsis has accompanied 304 different silent films—and is always looking to discover a new one he has not seen. “I collaborate with dead people,” said Rapsis. “When you make music all the time, you develop your own style. You store up your own bank account of musical gestures.” Not unlike the bankroll of gestures that became stock and trade for Chaplin.

Chaplin said: “Life is a tragedy when seen close-up but a comedy in long-shot.” In silent film, humor and pathos intertwine in an image, a movement, a gesture, a look—those intangible things beyond words. For Rapsis, silent films distill everything down to what is important—the big emotions, the big moments that remind us what matters in this world of distraction—those moments when we fall in love, family, friendship, loyalty, being alive.”

Quincy Whitney is a career journalist, author, historian, biographer and poet and a lifelong New Hampshire resident. Contact her at [quincysquill@nashuatelegraph.com](mailto:quincysquill@nashuatelegraph.com) or [quincy@quincywhitney.com](mailto:quincy@quincywhitney.com).