

A story that's been almost 90 years in the making reaches its conclusion this weekend.

"**Eyes of the Totem**," the made-in-Tacoma silent film that was thought to be lost forever, returns Friday (Sept. 18) to the same theater where it first appeared.

Made in 1926 by an iconic Hollywood director, the film was uncovered in the vaults of a New York City museum by a dogged Tacoma preservation officer in 2014.

With the help of a dedicated team of cinema and history buffs, the film has been restored with a new original score.

Two screenings Friday and one Sunday at the Rialto Theater mark the completion of the project. Several other events are planned for the weekend, and more screenings are planned in October.

Among the many people in attendance at Friday's screening will be the daughter of one of the film's stars.

EYES OF THE TOTEM

In the mid-1920s, film executive Howard Weaver opened his version of Hollywood-by-the-sea at Tacoma's Titlow Beach. The studio made only three films before the talkies put an end to silent films and the Weaver Studios.

"**Eyes of the Totem**" was the second of Weaver's films. The melodrama about a woman whose Klondike Gold Rush husband is murdered as they arrive in Tacoma starred several big names of the day and was directed by Woodbridge Strong Van Dyke.

Van Dyke went on to direct "Tarzan the Ape Man," "The Thin Man" series, "San Francisco" and other Hollywood classics.

The 81-minute film is an archive of Tacoma in motion. Landmarks, some long gone and others still standing today, provide the backdrop.

In the story, the woman (played by Wanda Hawley) sends her daughter to a boarding school (filmed at Annie Wright School) so the woman can beg unencumbered in front of the totem pole that today stands in Fireman's Park at Ninth and A streets.

A major plot point has Hawley's character searching for the villain who killed her husband. She can remember only his eyes.

Exteriors were filmed at the Winthrop Hotel, Thornewood Castle, Old City Hall and other locales.

Interiors were shot at the Titlow Beach studios. The gigantic studio burned down a few years after film production ceased.

All three of Weaver's films, including "Totem," were thought to be lost, though a large collection of still images survived.

LOST AND FOUND

Shortly after being hired as Tacoma's historic preservation coordinator, Lauren Hoogkamer located the film in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

After interest was ignited among local history and film buffs - who soon were calling themselves Team Totem - the film was fast-tracked for restoration and screening.

"It's exactly what I hoped would come from it, that it would inspire art, and film and history, and create a relationship between them," Hoogkamer said. "It's really gotten people interested in Tacoma's history. You can see the history right there. It's not just a list of facts."

Chief among those historical points is that for a brief period Tacoma had a film industry that rivaled Hollywood's.

"I think it's inspired people to find a little bit of pride in that history," Hoogkamer said.

The film needed a score. Whatever Van Dyke had intended for music was nowhere to be found.

Tacoma composer John Christopher Bayman has been working on the project for the past two months.

"I really had to get in the story as best as I could and then help tell it with music," Bayman said.

Using a sample library equivalent to a 40- to 50-piece orchestra, along with several live musicians, Bayman recorded 225 tracks for the film.

"In a nod to the silent era, it's a piano-driven score, even though it has orchestra elements," Bayman said.

Bayman not only composed different motifs for each character, but also for their various moods.

BABY PEGGY

All of the actors in the film, including Peggy Ann Sessoms, the young child who played Hawley's daughter at the beginning of the film, are deceased. But Sessoms' daughter, Joanne Ribail, will attend Friday's screening.

Sessoms had never revealed to Ribail or other family members that she had been in the movie. But after her mother's death in 2002, Ribail discovered a newspaper clipping in her mother's papers that talked about the film.

"They called (my mother) the Baby Peggy of the Northwest. I was shocked," Ribail recalled. "She never said anything about it."

The other Baby Peggy the newspaper story referenced (Diana Serra Cary) was a child actor of the silent era and at age 96 is the medium's last superstar still living.

Late in 2014, Bonney Lake resident Ribail went online looking for photos from "Totem."

"I found one picture of Wanda Hawley holding this baby. I looked at it and thought it did look like my mom. But it said 'unknown child.' "

After Ribail saw a recent newspaper story about the movie, she contacted Team Totem to let them know the child had a name.

Team Totem member Michael Sullivan said they have confirmed that Ribail's mother, who was 2 at the time of filming, and the toddler in the film are the same person.

Ribail has seen some clips of the film.

"It was very emotional to watch it. Why didn't she tell us about it? But she was never one to talk about what she did," Ribail said. "My mom passed away 13 years ago. I wish she were still alive to be able to see this. She would have loved it."

STRANGER THEN FICTION

In 2012, author Jamie Ford made "Eyes of the Totem" a plot point in his novel, "Songs of Willow Frost."

At the time, he, like just about everyone else, thought the film would never be seen again. In the novel, the main character travels from Seattle to Tacoma to be an extra in the film.

"I didn't want to write a film set in LA. I can always make it up, but I prefer to anchor it in local history," Ford said.

He had to imagine what the sets and plot line were like.

"I had a vague sense from the stills what the film might be about," he said.

He was thrilled when he found out the film had been rediscovered.

"In a way it makes my book, which is fiction, more real. It's better than a time capsule." When Ford tells others of the film's rediscovery, "they look at me like I'm a little crazy."

Ford will see the film Friday for the first time.

"I'm really looking forward to it. We don't see the Northwest on film very often," Ford said.

"Totem" will most likely travel to silent film festivals in Rome, San Francisco and Seattle, Hoogkamer said.

Bayman will be selling the soundtrack, and DVDs of the film itself will eventually be available for purchase.

SPEAKEASY

A good chunk of the action in "Totem" takes place in a speakeasy hidden inside the Winthrop Hotel. It's run by the film's villain. Entry is gained by speaking a password to monitors who can be seen only through slot peep holes.

That atmosphere - minus the villain - will be recreated Friday at one of Tacoma's most ornate historical treasures: the Pythian Temple.

After speaking the passwords ("Weaver sent me"), visitors will be allowed through an alley entrance. Yes, the door has a slotted peep hole.

"If they don't know the password, we'll still let them in," said Knights of Pythias member Adam Boyd.

Inside, a no-host bar catered by Pacific Grill will serve drinks. Lodge members will be conducting tours of the space during the evening.

On the building's top floor, the Washington State History Museum will have selections from their exhibit on the Gold Rush set up.

The building is only rarely opened to the public, Boyd said, noting it is a semi-secret group.

"We're the only operating fraternal organization left in downtown Tacoma. The place used to be littered with them," Boyd said.

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'TOTEM' EVENTS

Information: eyesofthetotem.com.

FRIDAY (Sept. 18)

'Totem' screening

When: 7 p.m. (sold out) and 10 p.m.

Where: Rialto Theater, 310 S. Ninth St., Tacoma.

Tickets: \$15 at Broadway Center Box Office or call 253-591-5894 or 800-291-7593.

No-host speakeasy and Klondike Gold Rush exhibit

When: 6 p.m.-midnight.

Where: Pythian Temple, use alley entrance on Court C. Password: "Weaver sent me."

Suggested donation: \$10 (\$9 if in costume).

SUNDAY

Book signing: "Tacoma's Theater District" by author Kim Davenport. Books will be for sale. 1 p.m., Rialto Theater.

"Totem" screening

When: 2 p.m.

Where: Rialto Theater.

Followed by: "Suffering Heroines and Leering Villains: **Eyes of the Totem** and Silent Movie Melodrama" presentation by UWT film professor Claudia Gorbman.

MORE: Two more "Totem" screenings are scheduled Oct. 4 and 18 at the Blue Mouse Theatre.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Craig Sailor, Staff writer, 'Silent no more All eyes are on Tacoma's 'Totem' as it re-premieres this weekend', *News Tribune, The* (online), 18 Sep 2015 20 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/157F33CDDA7D3830>>

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