

Film

A Silent Classic Gets Some 80's Music

By ANNETTE INSDORF

At first glance, there would seem to be little in common between Fritz Lang's silent film classic "Metropolis" — the visually dazzling science-fiction epic made by the Viennese director in 1925-26 — and the quintessentially 1980's sound of Giorgio Moroder, the Oscar-winning composer of "Flashdance," as well as the scores of "Midnight Express," "American Gigolo" and "Scarface." And apart from the fact that both artists eventually moved to California, there is not much to suggest a shared sensibility or concerns.

Nevertheless, when "Metropolis" is rereleased Friday at the 57th Street Playhouse — following a gala premiere Thursday night for Astoria's American Museum of the Moving Image — it will not only be in a reconstructed form but accompanied by Mr. Moroder's new musical score. Purists will probably be appalled by the disco rhythms and often intrusive lyrics of the eight songs, but others may well feel that the renowned musician-composer (and producer of Donna Summer's albums) has given "Metropolis" a new life and enlarged its potential audience to include the youth market.

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Although Mr. Moroder has been busy lately composing songs for such recent films as "Electric Dreams" and "The Neverending Story," the past two and a half years have been mainly devoted to "Metropolis" — from securing the rights, to finding missing footage, retranslating the titles, placing them on the images rather than between them, color-tinting selected scenes and engaging such celebrated rock artists as Pat Benatar, Adam Ant and Bonnie Tyler to perform the songs.

"Metropolis" was conceived in 1924 when Fritz Lang first saw the Manhattan skyline, but it takes place in the year 2026 and tells a timeless story of exploitation and class struggle. Consequently, the sound of a time midway between the year of the film's making and the year of its events seems less jarring than if "Metropolis" were a period film.

When the new version premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May, Mr. Moroder seemed both relieved and elated. Admitting that the project was sparked by the success of Abel

Gance's reconstructed and newly-scored "Napoleon" — and by the suggestion of "someone at Paramount that I do something with a silent movie" — he recounted the genesis of the project. "I didn't plan to reconstruct 'Metropolis,'" he said, "but the problem was the lack of a definitive print. When I bought the rights, all I wanted to do was put the music on the movie."

He first saw "Metropolis" at the age of 17 "and then again quite often," he said. "I knew it didn't need a classical score — which I'm not too good at anyway. Then I watched 20 silent movies to make sure there was nothing better than 'Metropolis' for this project, and did a 15 minute tryout just to see how it would work. I was really excited, and started to inquire about the rights."

By coincidence, Mr. Moroder was in Switzerland recording with David Bowie, and when he told the singer that his next project was "Metropolis," "he was really surprised and disappointed: he told me he wanted to do the same thing," Mr. Moroder said. "I had to compete with him to get the rights. Had I known how much it would finally cost, I might not have done it."

The price was \$200,000, but it proved to be only the beginning. Six months later, Mr. Moroder met Enno Patalas of the Film Museum in Munich, an expert in German silent film. He told the composer that he found some footage of "Metropolis" at the Library of Canberra in Australia. "I

thought I had the official version," Mr. Moroder recalled, "but then I heard of this footage and started to read about 'Metropolis,' and finally realized that I had to reconstruct it."

After a long period of negotiation with the Australians, he received a videotape of their version, which contained approximately eight scenes that were new to Mr. Moroder.

Having learned that John Hampton, a collector in Los Angeles, had an original nitrate — and therefore chemically volatile — copy of "Metropolis," Mr. Moroder checked it out, but confessed how scared he was "because he had that footage in the trunk and it could have exploded at any second! But he had a few things which nobody else had." The next stop was the Censorship Ministry in Berlin, where he consulted the original cue cards, as well as the original score with hand notations of the conductor.

"I found that two major things were missing," he said excitedly. "One is the character of Hel, which an American editor took out in 1927 because he thought the name wasn't right for American audiences! I couldn't find any picture of Hel [the hero's dead mother]. By pure coincidence, someone from the Film Museum went to the Cinémathèque in Paris, and in this disorganized place, he found 400 pictures in an album. One showed the tombstone of Hel, but I couldn't use it because it was a production still and you could see the cameraman's head! So I recreated the monument and filmed it."

The second missing element concerned a worker with whom the hero — son of the man who dominates Metropolis — changes clothes. In the files of Forest Ackerman, Fritz Lang's former agent, the musician-cum-sleuth discovered a few stills which explained where the worker had gone: Yoshivara, the Temple of Sin, about which Mr. Moroder added approximately 45 seconds with the stills.

He remembers this period as one of "making phone calls all over the world, trying to find new footage. I got a clue that a guy had a 9.5 millimeter copy of 'Metropolis' in San Diego. I went there, and found that the copy was made with subtitles. Somehow the movie flowed much better. So, although this was after the music was done, I took out all the cue cards which had dialogue and made them subtitles."

Given that Fritz Lang did indeed tell his story through cinematic means plus titles, lyrics might strike some viewers as a redundancy. Mr. Moroder defended his decision by insisting that "songs help make the movie more accessible. Moviegoers these days are very young people. If you give them a silent movie with a 'noncommercial' soundtrack, they won't go to see it."

The composer first showed "Metropolis" with only musical accompaniment to a group: "They had a hard time understanding it," he said. Then he presented a version with four songs to roughly 400 people and asked them whether there should be more songs or less: "Eighty percent said more." Consequently, he and his lyricist, Pete Bellotte, wrote another four songs.

Naturally, one of Mr. Moroder's considerations was, "What if you hear the song without the movie — on the radio, for example? I wanted the song to stand on its own," he maintained. The soundtrack album has indeed just been released. And a rock video is in the works, with Bonnie Tyler singing "Here She Comes" — which refers in "Metropolis" to a lascivious female robot.

Some will argue that such popularization is trivialization, and that Fritz Lang's work should not be tampered with. Mr. Moroder's response is in the form of a question: "For a movie like 'Metropolis,' what's better — to have at least 10 different versions locked in museums and be seen by a limited

Continued on Page 20



Above, a scene from the 1925-26 epic, "Metropolis," directed by Fritz Lang, at top. Set in the year 2026, the science-fiction film, reconstructed and with a new score by Giorgio Moroder, will be rereleased Friday at the 57th Street Playhouse.

A New 'Metropolis'

Continued from Page 15

amount of people? Or is it better to have this masterpiece — first of all, closer to Lang's original version — shown to possibly a few hundred thousand people who don't know who Fritz Lang is and probably never saw a silent movie?

"I didn't touch the original because there is no original," he continued. "And the 'original' is still out there. It's not like painting over the painting of an old master. Whoever wants to see the silent version can see it." (Coincidentally enough, the Thalia is showing the silent version today.)

Mr. Moroder also defended his translation, explaining that he watched four different versions with completely different subtitles. Since he and Mr. Bellotte speak German, they retranslated "Metropolis" into what he termed "a modern but very correct translation." Mr. Moroder was also criticized for some of the color tinting (which contrasts the vibrant upper world of the masters with the gray underworld in which the workers toil) and therefore removed 30 percent of the color. "However," he argued, "people thought I added

effects. This was not the case."

The process of reconstructing "Metropolis" has given the composer new concerns. "I'm making a documentary about 'Metropolis' with a friend of mine, and it's really about the restoration of movies," he said. "It deals with how a lot of movies were destroyed by the Nazis; how movies are losing color; and what we can do to preserve them." He does not plan to score another silent film, "unless I find an extraordinary movie, and even then, it wouldn't be a rock score," he said.

For the time being, he is overseeing the opening of "Metropolis" — in Paris Tuesday, New York Friday, and Los Angeles Aug. 16 — especially to check the sound. In Los Angeles, it will be played back digitally, which prompts Mr. Moroder to declare, "For the first time in history, with six tracks, it will be direct digital. This will sound so good that it will make people think about improving the sound of films. The irony is that it took a silent movie to have the first digitally reproduced score." But then again, silent films were never seen (or meant to be seen) without accompaniment; as the composer Kurt Weill put it, silent films need music as dry cereal needs cream. ■