

Supplementary learning packet for Middle School Silent Movie Assembly Program (Grades 6-8)

Students will learn about early animation devices and inventions that resulted in the development of the motion picture. Then, a connection will be made to Thomas Edison - America's greatest inventor – and his invention of the motion picture camera. After explaining how to watch silent movies, a variety of important film clips that were made during the "Golden Age of Silent Movies" between 1894 and 1929 will be shown.

The next part of the program goes beyond the film's mechanical basics by explaining some of the "invisible" aspects of good movie making such as: camera work, composition, editing and lighting. Then, more film sequences show the above mentioned aspects for good movie making.

"Mood" music will be explained by playing examples of this very specific music on the piano. Now armed with the ability to analyze silent films and an appreciation of the film's musical accompaniment, students will see some outstanding film footage where all of these elements have great impact on the telling of the story.

Significant vocabulary to share before the assembly program:

Silent Movie: Film before 1929 had no sound track so it was necessary to have a piano player, organist or orchestra provide live music at movie theatres.

Pantomime acting: The actor uses accentuated body language and facial expressions (in place of speaking) to communicate emotions and thought.

Persistence of vision: A motion picture is made up of many photographs or frames that are flashed onto a movie screen one frame at a time. Each new frame looks very close to the previous frame. Your brain now turns all of these pictures into a moving picture because it remembers the previous picture as you continue to watch the remaining frames on the film.

Mood music: According to one silent movie conductor, there are 52 different moods starting with Aeroplane and ending with western. Mood music is called upon to support three types of situations: one third of the film footage is for action; another third is for psychological situations while the last third of the film depicts atmosphere or scenery.

Pathos: the quality or power in literature, art or music, of evoking a feeling of pity or compassion.

Melodrama: a way of acting in a play or movie that intensifies sentiment and exaggerates emotion.

Intertitles: Title cards that explain in words what is currently taking place in silent movies. They are used to smooth over areas in the film that are difficult to express by way of camera work or pantomime acting alone.

Slap stick: broad comedy characterized by violently boisterous action as in pie throwing, mugging, and obvious farcical situations and jokes; farce combined with horseplay in a comic form.

Storyboard: the process of telling a story by sequencing events and actions in a movie.

Farce: a light, humorous play or movie in which the plot depends upon a skillfully exploited situation rather than the development of character; ridiculous.

Mores: sociological folkways of central importance accepted without question and embodying the fundamental moral views of the group.

Classroom writing exercise:

Compare and contrast the similarities and differences in the time period depicted in the movie clips with our existence today. Have comedy and tragedy changed that much from the silent movie days or has modern technology (made available to directors) allowed them to depict scenes differently? Finally, how do you need to interact with a silent movie versus a recently made movie? In other words, what are the signs you need to “read” to make sense of the movie?

Acting out a silent movie skit and writing a movie review:

Assignment: Understand what elements make up a “silent movie by making a silent film skit about something that has happened in your life. Act it out so the audience understands with no words.

The class can be divided into two groups. Each group will create and perform a different pantomime skit that is based on movie clips they just watched. They will use the vocabulary list for direction on how to construct the skit. After the two groups perform their skit, both groups write a movie review.

Think of the skit as if you are watching a movie trailer. Can pantomime acting (with a little help from title cards) portray a story?