

You're listening to *Imaginary Worlds*, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

When I was studying film in college, I watched my first silent movies. And I was amazed that these films were so adventurous. The cinematography was so fluid. Because once sound came about, movies had to be made in these hermetically sealed studios with cumbersome sound recording equipment. But in the 1920s, cameras were really lightweight, you could bring them anywhere. And I don't think filmmaking became that agile again until the 1960s or '70s.

And one of the greatest films from the silent era was released 100 years ago this month: *Nosferatu*, the classic German vampire tale.

And the amazing thing about *Nosferatu* is that the movie almost disappeared completely, there was a campaign to destroy it. And the story of how it survived is inspiring to me because it's about the love of cinema and people using modern instruments – and I mean musical instruments -- to infuse new blood into an old vampire film.

But before we hear about that, let's look at the movie itself.

Stephen Brockmann is a professor at Carnegie-Mellon who teaches German language and culture. He says in the 1920s, the problem the filmmakers had with *Nosferatu* was that they were basically ripping off Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*.

STEPHEN: They definitely set out to film the book. They didn't get the rights <laugh> to the book. So they had to make the film without the rights to the book.

What happened when they tried to get the rights? Why weren't they not able to?

STEPHEN: Well, the widow of Bram Stoker, wasn't willing to give them the rights didn't want a film to be made. And she certainly didn't want this film to be made.

So, they thought, well, what if we changed the names? *Dracula* became Count Orlok, although most people just call him *Nosferatu*, which is another word for vampire. His minion from the novel, Renfield, the guy that eats spiders, is called Knock. The heroes from the novel, Jonathan and Mina are renamed as Hutter and Ellen. But some of the differences were more than cosmetic. Like, there is no Van Helsing-type character, there's no expert vampire killer.

STEPHEN: In the novel, you know, you've got all these, you know, determined individuals who are out there to, to kill the vampire and they ultimately succeed in killing

the vampire. And the way the vampire dies in Nosferatu is a totally different story. Right? All the kind of the guys, all the men who are there to be scientific and to make, you know, they don't wind up helping at all.

Okay, this is a spoiler from 100 years ago, but in the movie, the heroine, who is named Ellen, learns that a quote "sinless maiden" can defeat a vampire by offering herself to him. The vampire will be so enraptured as he feeds on her, he won't notice the sun rising until he starts to burn. And that's what she does to stop the vampire from killing more people.

STEPHEN: That's one of the key things, the sacrifice, her sacrifice is kind of what, one of the main things that differentiates the, the film from the novel. So she, she plays a much more active role in the film. The whole film is set up around her sacrifice. And there are all sorts of hints from the very beginning of the film that the film is going to end in her death. Around halfway through the movie, just as, uh, Nosferatu is about to descend upon her husband and, you know, bite his neck and potentially kill him.

At that moment, her husband is spending the night in Count Orlok's very creepy castle.

STEPHEN: That's when she wakes up in her town. So there's this cross cutting, cutting across a distance. So she wakes up and it's as if across this distance, there's this communication between her and the vampire. And so then he decides to go, the vampire decides to go for, for her rather than her husband. And I think there's ambiguity throughout the film about whether she's doing it in order to, to save him and the town or whether she's doing it because she's fallen under the spell of the vampire.

So many later interpretations of Dracula have that sexual tension to it, but Stephen says that wasn't in the original novel. This was added to the vampire lore by the director F.W. Murnau.

STEPHEN: So, the original novel is very Victorian. And you can say there's a horror of sexuality in the original novel, but in the film, although the Dracula figure Nosferatu is extremely, you know, ugly. He's not good to look at it. And you think, why would anyone, you know, be fascinated by him? He clearly is; he does exert this fascination and he exerts this pull and a kind of weird attraction on both the, the male in the film, the leading man and the leading woman at this, this exact moment, the early '20s was exactly when there was this, you know, sexual freedom, Weimar, Germany, especially in Berlin, that was unprecedented.

And the film's director, Murnau, was long rumored to have been gay. And he was also part of the avant-garde, artistic movement known as German Expressionism.

STEPHEN: So, Expressionism is very much, it draws on the traditions of German romanticism, but it takes it further. And it be, it makes it much more psychological and anguished and conflicted, but typically a, an expressionist film, and really typically for most German cinema of the Weimar Republic, it was all done in very careful studio work. Um, and it wasn't done on location and, and this film is, um, quite different from most of those Expressionist films, because rather than creating, um, an expressionist set Murnau is actually working with real locations for the most part in the film, he's taking this kind of Expressionist aesthetic, but he's, he's using it in real locations, that's kind of radically new. Then there's also kind of this innovative camera work that he uses in the film. And I'm thinking particularly of the scenes on the ocean, where, where, uh, Nosferatu is on this ship and they're coming to the town in Germany. And so, you've got these very fluid scenes of motion on the ocean, and then you've got the scenes of the rigging, but it's all kind of real. I mean, the rigging of the ship is real. Whereas an expressionist film, like a typical expression is film would have kind of weird drawings, you know, on the ceiling or on the floor.

The movie was groundbreaking in a lot of ways, but it still bore a striking resemblance to Dracula – not that Dracula would notice because vampires can't see their reflections. But Bram Stoker's widow, Florence Balcombe, hit them with a lawsuit, right after the movie opened.

They lost, which is still surprising to Stephen because he thinks they changed the story enough to make a plausible defense. Then again:

STEPHEN: Maybe they shouldn't have thanked Bram, you know, Stoker, maybe that's the problem if they explicitly thanked Bram Stoker, you know, in the credits. Um, and maybe if they hadn't done that, maybe, you know, there would've been no basis for a lawsuit, but they did. And so, there was a lawsuit which they lost, and I don't think they tried to appeal it.

The court ordered them to destroy every copy of the film, but one of the prints had already made it to the United States, where Dracula was in the public domain because Bram Stoker never fully registered the American copyright. But Nosferatu wasn't shown widely again until 1962, after Dracula entered the public domain in the UK.

Today Nosferatu is one of the few silent films that's become a pop culture reference -- which is remarkable. I mean, I can't help but push the vampire metaphor – they tried to stake this movie in the heart, but it would not die.

STEPHEN: It's too good. It's just too good. A film. And then just the, you know, also the way that that it's filmed, right? I mean, you got all these, you know, incredibly beautiful scenes throughout the whole movie, particularly as it reaches its climactic end, just extraordinary cinematography. It's, it's just incredibly beautiful and that, I think that has an impact on viewers.

I have another idea why the movie is thriving. In recent years, there's been a trend of live orchestras playing in front of movies. But with silent films, you can go much further and come up with an entirely new score for the film.

Now there was an original score for Nosferatu by Hans Erdmann. And this is it, or this is actually a modern recording of it. It sounds pretty classical, of its time. And you can play it with the movie if you want to. The soundtrack to Nosferatu is not baked into the film.

STEPHEN: I think you're right that, um, these early sound films, it's harder to keep them alive. Right. Because they've got, you know, they're stuck with the sound that they, that they have, whereas with a silent film, it gives you the freedom to dream and, and, and the music was part of that. And of course, the other thing is with dialogue, then it's in a particular language. Whereas with silent film, it can be in any language, there's no language barrier at all.

After the break, we'll hear from two composers with different ideas and different approaches to scoring Nosferatu.

BREAK

Philip Shorey is the creator of the Curse of the Vampire orchestra. He's based in Minneapolis, and his orchestra has performed his original score for Nosferatu in the U.S. and Europe. In fact, he's planning on performing at a screening of Nosferatu in Slovakia this summer, at the castle where they filmed Nosferatu – if world events and the pandemic allows them to. But the origin of how he got here was an epic journey in itself.

It started when he was in college studying to be a film composer. He was watching Nosferatu in class.

PHILIP: And it, it brought me to tears. You know, it was quite emotional, quite surprising. And something about the, the power of, of love demonstrated through Ellen.

Ellen is the character who sacrifices herself to the vampire so she can save her husband, and the whole town.

PHILIP: It just, it just really shook me and got me at that moment. And I felt I need to do something with the story. I don't know if other people are telling it this way and how I just saw it or not.

And in that moment, he thought about composing a score for the film, but it was daunting.

PHILIP: I felt like I'm not at that point. I don't know if I'll ever be at that point. You can't just write 95 minutes' worth of music for nothing. Just expect it not to be played.
<laughs>

Then he went on Spring Break. He decided to work with a puppet theater troupe as a side project. And he fell in love with puppetry. He completely changed his direction in life. And for years after college, he toured the world with his puppet theater troupe.

Then one day, a friend invited him to a screening of Nosferatu. Somebody had composed their own original score for the film – which is something he had once thought about doing.

PHILIP: And I went, I saw it, it was cool, it was very nice music, but I could tell the composer had a different interpretation of the film than I did. The vampire was comically creepy. Ellen's love wasn't that strong, and I had just seen it vastly differently, and I felt something inside of me say okay, do something with it now.

But this isn't the moment he goes back into composing. He doubted himself, he was thinking, I haven't done this for years. Who do I even know in the music scene anymore?

But he still had this vision of how he wanted the film to be portrayed. So, he contacted a friend who is an artist, and they made a Nosferatu comic book together. And when they were out promoting the comic book, they were

promoting their comic book to friends in Poland who ran an arts festival in Poland.

PHILIP: I pitched them this idea, I was like, you should show Nosferatu at your festival, and you should translate this comic into Polish. And they loved the idea. And then they thought, well, it's a silent film. There should be music. Can you write music for this film? And that's where I was just like blown away. Like they had no idea that I went to school for that. That was my dream, my passion, but I, I quit it 15 years ago for something else. And I'm like, well, I guess I can. They gave me an orchestra. That's a volunteer orchestra, 35 players at the time. People got word of this project in the film, and it bumped up to about 50 or more plus a choir. And for the first time after not having written music for orchestra, never heard my music played live. I was given an opportunity.

MUSIC:

By the way, this is from a studio recording of Philip's orchestra.

Well, when you first started, I mean, you know, you've been waiting, you know, even if you didn't know it, you've been waiting all those years to do Nosferatu. What were some of the first things, creative decisions you wanted to make? You're like, all right, from the outset, I'm going to do this and I'm going to do this and I'm not going to do this. And I want this.

PHILIP: Well, I, the first, the big challenge was I'm working with a volunteer orchestra, and I needed to know who was playing, what instruments that I have, what was my palette. And then they would give me instruments. And I was like, well, I didn't expect that. How am I going to fit that in? And so, for example, one of those instruments was I got like four saxophones and that's not a typical orchestral instrument usually. Uh, and I thought, what am I going to do with the saxophone? Like, it doesn't fit. But I, I saw a Knock and I, I thought now this is a guy who who's just very earthy in his nature. Like he, he spiders he's, his personality reminds me of a snake, he's very earthy. And I thought I'm going to weave like this sort of saxophone led melody for him that's reedy and woody and like earthy and just feels like a snake. It's comically creepy. He was like my comically creepy, kind of character.

What he just described is a leitmotif. Leitmotifs are themes that come up every time you see a character. That idea goes back to 19th century operas, but one of the first film composers to make leitmotifs a regular part of their work was John Williams. I mean, we all know the themes that go with Yoda, Darth Vader or Luke

Skywalker. So, Philip decided that's what modern audiences would expect now when they watch Nosferatu.

PHILIP: I definitely made a conscious decision that this score is going to have themes. It's going to have leitmotifs. It's going to have character themes, emotional themes.

So could you describe to me the themes that you came up with the leitmotifs for different characters?

PHILIP: Yeah. I'd love to, um, I love this part. Well, there's a number of leitmotifs, you know, like there's the leitmotif for when the, the vampire is present. You know, it's like this four-chord, coral, dark sub median subdued chord progression. I mean, and I know that's very geeky of me to, to say, no, my nobody really knows what that means, but it's like, it's just this chord progression. That's very dark and it's led mostly through the choir and it's, it, it arises whenever the vampires like shows up in all power and strength. Now he's got a dominant theme for hunting, and I call it the vampire hunting theme. He's very singular minded. He does really just one thing he hunts, and he feeds that's pretty much it. So, I got a lot of inspiration for his vampire hunting theme from Jaws. Like you say, John Williams. What they did with Jaws really revolutionized film music. They did something by mistake or, or by default where they didn't have the robot shark working throughout some of the filmmaking process. So how are you going to provoke fear when the shark is supposed to be there, but you can't see it? Well, it's in the music. And that's something that I played off as well, like where you can feel the vampire is coming. You don't see it. And even when we perform it live with The Curse of The Vampire orchestra, I show flashes of the vampire shadows throughout the theater, with different lights. I have some multiple Nosferatu characters wandering throughout the theater, hiding, peeking out, wandering here and there over now, they're over there. You think it's the same person, but it's like, he's shape shifting and moving throughout the theater.

Oh, wait a second. So, you have, you have actors dressed up as Nosferatu and some of the other characters popping up in the, in the, like, like in the audience basically?

PHILIP: Yes. Just Nosferatu and people don't expect it. And then all of a sudden, he's, here's a flash of him over there and now he is in the movie.

That's cool.

PHILIP: I've got a theme for Ellen first. It is just this gentle piano end. I'm not trying to be like cliché. It's a little more like sophisticated on the piano. The classical, it's very light. It's very gentle. It's very, uh, soft spoken. She's not a very dominant character at first. And, and then it kind of develops, it's an anguish at times. And then at the end, which is our favorite part. I mean, she kicks butt, like, I mean, love, love rules. Like it is the most powerful force in the whole show. And we use a grinder during that scene. And it's like, you can smell the rotting flesh of the vampire as he's burnt by the sun.

But so, a grinder, uh, like what does it, I mean, I know what a coffee grinder is, but what does a grinder mean exactly.

PHILIP: A grinder like for sheet metal, you know, like a...

Oh right. Okay. Got it

PHILIP: Yeah. With the grinding blade. So, it's very loud.

Oh cool.

PHILIP: And it it's, I try to place it in the orchestra where the brass is because it'll just destroy any woodwinds near it. And I have a, I have a really tough orchestra. Like one time we didn't have a plexiglass shell where performing in Germany and later I saw video of the grinder and it's just like sending sparks, like right into the trumpet player. <laugh>.

Philip is one of many people who have written original scores for Nosferatu.

Josh Robins runs a musical group in Austin, Texas called The Invincible Czars. And when he first got into the scene, he says, there were so many live orchestras and bands creating scores for silent movies like Nosferatu, Metropolis or Buster Keaton's The General, he wasn't sure how he could stand out. So, they hit the road and played all these towns where people wouldn't compare them to all the other groups in Austin.

JOSH: Somewhere in there I think we, uh, I think it was when we were doing a movie called The Wind, which is a great movie with Lillian Gish, everywhere that we went on that tour. I think we did 20 dates or something everywhere that we went. Somebody asked us, when are you going to do Nosferatu? And so, it, it got asked enough that I considered it and I thought, well, it not only has it been done in Austin. I mean, virtually every town with an art house cinema has had the idea, let's get a local band to, uh, score Nosferatu or just play in front of Nosferatu. And that's what most of these are, as far as I can tell, they're either orchestras, which are great, or, you know, maybe it's a heavy metal band or a DJ. I watched tons of them on YouTube just to see, like, who's done this, what have they done? What's it like, what could we possibly add that hasn't already been done?

Josh sent me a video of a live performance. It was recorded from the audience, so it was not mixed for sound. But this will give you an idea of what he's talking about.

And in coming up with his own score, he didn't want to be too modern or too classical. He tried to aim for something in between.

JOSH: We try to be, what do I say, tastefully modern with it, not overdo that kind of thing. So like, like the guitar that goes *shun-shun-shun*, people don't even know that's a guitar. That's just, that's just my heavy metal setting with a tremolo effect. But that effect being so extreme, it just makes this instrument sound unrecognizable. I do think though that what the modern sounds do, regardless of how much you use them, they do draw in a modern-day audience.

And even though modern audiences have come to expect leitmotifs, he didn't want to use them.

JOSH: We're spoiled by a hundred years of cinema -- video games, TV, we're used to being told through music through visuals what's happening. They didn't do that in the silent era. They were developing that.

What they were doing back then was reacting to what's on screen with music. So that's what he set out to do, with a modern twist.

JOSH: For example, in *Nosferatu*, there are several scenes where characters are feeling this unseen force and, and visually the way it's portrayed is they kind of like look up in the air, move their eyes around and kind of, oh, like I'm feeling something and maybe audiences a hundred years off that, but audiences today do not get that. They're just what's what is he doing? Is he looking at the ceiling?

He tried out a lot of different sounds for that moment in the film.

JOSH: And one night we were rehearsin' and, um, that sounded very Texan. We were rehearsin'. Uh <laugh> when we were rehearsing and, um, had all of our stuff set up and we were trying to figure out what to do for those moments where there there's a part where Ellen does it, you know, she looks up in the air like, oh, she's feeling something. And she even bends over the chair like, oh, something's affecting me. And I knew we needed a sound. I was like, we, we need a sound to really convey what's happening throughout the movie. Whenever this happens, we took a break. You know, we were trying various different sounds on guitar. We tried looping some things tried. Some violin sounds some sampled, backward symbols, blah, blah, none, none of this was working. So we took a break and all of our stuff was set up and the PA was still turned on. We had this micro chord synthesizer. I pressed it and it need this sound. That sounds like screaming. It sounds like *yayayayayaya!* I just about peed my pants with our sound system was turned all the way up. And I looked and I went, I found the sound and everybody went, yeah, that's the sound <laugh>.

Another sound cue he was really excited about happens every time one of the characters looks at a book that's about vampires.

JOSH: So anytime that, that book is, anytime it cuts to a page from that book, I run this sample. That's just me reading one of the pages. I can't remember which page whispering it like this. And then I flipped that sound to be backwards. So it sounds (*makes backwards whispering sound*), and then I doubled that. So it sounds like two different voices (*makes backwards whispering sound*) and it's quiet, but unnerving it's, it's unsettling anyway. So I'll fade in the whisper, when it fades in it, if you've never seen us do it and you see it for the first time, like, is somebody next to me whispering? What is that? <laugh>, I mean, it's pretty unnerving. And so people will ask every time, like, what was that whispering? How are you doing? You know, um, we did another movie before, uh, we did, when we did Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, we did the whispering, and we had the audience. We had the audience do it. So anytime that Mr. Hyde was on screen, just, just whisper. Just, we did it here in Austin at the old Ritz theater, it's an Alamo draft house. It's not anymore, but this server came into the Alamo Draft House with food. And, and she, I heard later that she was so freaked out that she asked to just work a different screen, you know, like I'm not going back in that auditorium. But I feel like the best compliment that we can get, and we do get it often is you guys were so perfect with this. I forgot you were even there. That tells me we did it.

And musical groups are not just reinventing silent films for new audiences. They can also play a role in just bringing people back to movie theaters – or at least bringing them back for something other than superheroes.

JOSH: The silent film with live music is really a live experience or best experienced live. And for that reason, the novelty of just having a band with a movie is, is enough to be cool, to get people to come out.

Philip agrees.

PHILIP: You know, with the advent of the, the home theater and how cinema has just, you know, entered into the home in not many different ways than what you can get it in the cinema, I think silent film with live orchestra has a unique role to play where this is a experience you will never get in your living room.

What kind of audience reactions have you ever had either during or even, or, or at when people come up to you afterwards?

PHILIP: Man. Um, some really powerful ones. To be honest, like this story of this Ellen and this love theme and her love destroying the darkness that is within us and the resurrection and, and it is, I think it is spiritual. I've seen some people after seeing our

show, come up and just needing, needing to talk. So, I think that a lot of people are going through a lot of dark stuff and to show that the, the power of, of love and, and self, not just any love, but like self-sacrificial love and this power resonates with people, I think that's why I do it. It's, it's not for just the art and the orchestra. It's actually for, for people who really need message.

During the pandemic, streaming has been controversial in terms of which movies are deemed big enough to get theatrical debuts versus which movies go straight to streaming. And I have to admit, it is really convenient when a new movie pops up on one of my devices the moment that it's released.

But as I've started going back to movie theaters, it's also been incredibly refreshing to experience the joy of being in a dark room full of people, all having the same emotional reactions at the same time. It can make you feel less lonely, less isolated – and less like a vampire.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Stephen Brockmann, Philip Shorey and Josh Robins. I have links to their music in the show notes.

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