

## LIVE ACTORS WITH SILENT FILMS

During the early decades of motion pictures, film exhibitors experimented with having entertainers sit next to the screen to provide commentary and dialog. These narrators would travel around with the film and usually give a lecture about the film and describe the incidents contained there in. In the West, these narrators were eventually replaced by title cards (and lack of interest), but in Japan (and Korea, Taiwan and Thailand to a lesser extent) the narrators became an integral part of the film-viewing experience. Many of the films first shown in Japan were from Europe and America, so a narrator was necessary to translate the title cards and make sense of the stories which were culturally opaque. These narrators were called benshi. A number of the most famous were heavy drinkers, woman chasers and notorious libertines. They often wore colorful clothes, commanded attention and were frequently billed in larger type than the film itself. Sometimes these benshi ventriloquized the characters in the movie, sometimes they just narrated the action, sometimes they recited poetry based upon the scenery. Often musical accompaniment would be present as well. The benshi became such an integral part of the film-watching process in Japan, that it was a good ten years or more after the rise of talkies in the West, that sound pictures rose in popularity in Japan. As late as 1942, 14% of the films exhibited in Japan were still silents.

Probably the greatest reason for the benshi's success in Japan is that the silver screen was viewed as an offshoot of the dramatic stage. Traditional Japanese theater is rarely without a mediating voice, from the chorus in a noh play, to the joruri narrator in a puppet doll drama, to the gidayu narrator in kabuki.

It is said, a great benshi performer never takes away from whatever the big screen offers, they enhance the viewing of the film and fill it with textures and layers of interpretation. Walking Boxes Productions hopes to hold this same kind of integrity with their presentation of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

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## FOLEY ART

The art of adding sound effects to film began back in the late 1920s when "the talkies" were born. Microphones at that time were only strong enough to pick up the dialog of the actors. Filmmakers felt the final soundtrack was too sterile, so sound effects were added. It was Jack Foley who pioneered the art of sound effects for film. It was his idea to project the finished scenes of a film in a studio while simultaneously recording the corresponding sound effects. Jack felt that every actor had his or her own way of walking. He tried to capture the nuances of each actor's individual manner of walking as his own foot-steps were recorded in the studio. Some actors, hearing and seeing the difference between Jack's steps done for them and another sound man's efforts, began to demand that only Jack do their walk. Jack was the first to bring in produce and other oddities to create certain effects. For example, a blow to the head being reproduced by smacking a watermelon; or a set of keys and their rattle becoming the chain mail of marching Romans. Jack Foley was never once listed in a film's credits, but the art form which he helped to pioneer now bears his name.

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