

San Diego Jewish World

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Silent Movie Mondays ends with Harold Lloyd comedy: 'Safety Last'



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By Sherrie Rose in San Diego



The final film of Silent Movie Mondays – Season II at the historic Balboa Theatre was a fitting classic: Harold Lloyd’s 1923 masterpiece *Safety Last!*. Presented as it was meant to be experienced—on the big screen with live accompaniment on the historic Wonder Morton Theatre Organ—the evening transported audiences back to the golden age of silent cinema.

The event also included pre-show entertainment and a post-film discussion with featured organist Russ Peck and local film experts.

Nearly a century after its release, *Safety Last!* remains one of the most beloved comedies of the silent era. Lloyd stars as an ambitious young man who leaves his hometown seeking success so he can marry his sweetheart. Working as a department store clerk while pretending to be a successful executive, he finds his carefully crafted image threatened when his girlfriend unexpectedly arrives in the city.

Lloyd goes to buy a necklace for his sweetheart in a brief scene that features a Jewish jewelry store owner, reflecting the ethnic caricatures seen in 1920s films. While largely accepted by audiences at the time, the portrayal is often viewed today as an unfortunate stereotype and insensitive.

To further impress her and earn a reward so he'll have funds to get married, he arranges a publicity stunt involving a daredevil climbing the building. Through a series of mishaps, Harold ends up making the climb himself, facing pigeons, ropes, construction hazards, a mouse, and countless near-disasters along the way.

The hanging from a clock scene is one of the most famous sequences in film history: Harold Lloyd dangling from the hands of a giant clock high above the city streets of Los Angeles. The scene remains thrilling today, made even more remarkable by the fact that Lloyd performed much of the stunt work himself despite having previously lost a thumb and forefinger in a film accident.

The title *Safety Last!* playfully reverses the familiar slogan "Safety First," reflecting the film's celebration of optimism, determination, and risk-taking in pursuit of dreams.

The Silent Film Experience

Watching a silent film with live accompaniment is dramatically different from viewing it at home. Silent films were originally presented with live musicians who supplied emotion, rhythm, suspense, and comic timing.

For this screening, Russ Peck's expressive score enhanced every scene, from the film's romantic moments to the escalating tension of the skyscraper climb. The music was the emotional unseen actor in the film. Following the screening, attendees enjoyed a Backchat discussion with Peck, who shared insights into the art of silent-film accompaniment and the challenges of performing in real time.

The Balboa Theatre

The setting added another layer of authenticity. Opened in 1924, just one year after *Safety Last!* premiered, the Balboa Theatre remains one of San Diego's architectural treasures. Its beautifully restored interior and commitment to classic cinema make it an ideal venue for silent-film presentations, creating a connection to film history that few modern theaters can match.

About Russ Peck

For many Southern California film enthusiasts, Russ Peck has become synonymous with silent-film screenings. A respected theater organist and historian, he specializes in the demanding art of accompanying silent films, where every chase, laugh, and dramatic moment depends on the musician's ability to interpret and enhance the action on screen.

His performance during *Safety Last!* demonstrated why live accompaniment remains such an essential part of the silent-film experience, transforming a century-old movie into a vibrant communal event.

As the curtain fell on Season II of Silent Movie Mondays, *Safety Last!* proved to be the perfect finale—a film filled with heart, humor, daring, and one of cinema’s most iconic images. More than a century after audiences first gasped at Harold Lloyd hanging from that clock, the laughter and excitement remain as fresh as ever.

Season III has already been **announced**, bringing another lineup of unforgettable silent-film classics to the Balboa Theatre starting September 21.

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