

Composer brings silent film to life

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Photo courtesy Marilu Lopez, Fretts/Four Directions Media

Mohican composer Brent Michael Davids wrote a full score for the 73-minute silent movie, "The Last of the Mohicans." Davids joined the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra to perform his original soundtrack live at the 4th annual Syracuse International Film Festival in Syracuse, N.Y., April 18. (Middle photo) Dale Rood, director of studio operations for Four Directions Productions, stood in front of the Syracuse Landmark Theater in Syracuse, N.Y., where, on April 18, the studio premiered its first 3-D animation. (Bottom Photo) Photo courtesy Four Directions Productions -- The Oneida Indian Nation's Four Directions Productions premiered the completion of its first 3-D animated short film at the Syracuse International Film Festival on April 18 in Syracuse, N.Y. The animation is a telling of an ancient Oneida legend.

ONEIDA, N.Y. - American Indian composer Brent Michael Davids took his fascination for the story "The Last of the Mohicans" to the next level by creating a score for the 1920 silent version of the film.

"I've been interested in things about 'The Last of the Mohicans' forever it seems like, mostly because I was astonished to learn that we don't exist anymore and I found that fascinating," said Davids, an enrolled citizen of the Mohican Nation whose Mohican name means Blue Butterfly.

Davids, whose composing career spans 30 years, premiered his full score for the 1920 film "The Last of the Mohicans" at the opening event of the 4th annual Syracuse International Film Festival in Syracuse, N.Y., April 18. Davids, who plays the Native flute, joined the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra to perform his original soundtrack live at the event.

"I've had this fascination with all things Mohican for as long as I can remember," Davids said. "And the 1920 silent movie is one of about 12 or 13 different versions of that film. It's the second version; the first version was made in 1911."

Davids said the 1920 version came into public domain, which means it came out of copyright and was available for anyone to show it or use it. Davids said he decided to write an entire new soundtrack for this film. Over the years he's collected almost every version of the film, which is based on the book by author James Fenimore Cooper.

"There are so many Hollywood film composers out there," said Davids, who is among only a few American Indian composers. "We see these movies like 'Titanic' and 'Lord of the Rings' with big scores and I say, 'I can do that.'"

When Davids was writing the score for the 73-minute silent movie, he wanted to include American Indian instruments and sounds.

"I wrote a huge orchestra score and I put Native flutes in there along with percussion and the electric guitar with

the orchestra," he said. "And then I thought that it would never be played because orchestra music is very seldom played anywhere."

But the film did get played for the opening night of the film festival, which was overall a big night for Davids, who had two other world premieres that evening. He wrote a thank you song to the Oneida Nation for its historic friendship with the Mohican Nation.

"I'm thankful for the Oneidas for actually giving us [his Mohican ancestors] a place to stay when we needed it," Davids said. So he wrote a song about it.

"The Mohicans lived in your home for 100 years before we moved to Wisconsin," Davids said to a group of Oneida Nation members on April 13. "We're really thankful for that. We don't know where the tribe would be now without that help. The song I wrote is going to be sung at the opening night of the film festival. It's called 'Born to Say Thank You.'"

The third premiere of the night was the Oneida Nation's Four Directions Productions 3-D animated short film, a telling of the ancient Oneida legend of Raccoon and Crawfish. Davids wrote the score for the eight-minute animation.

Davids, who holds bachelor's and master's degrees in music composition from Northern Illinois University and Arizona State University respectively, has worked on a variety of American Indian films and works to promote the success of American Indians in the film industry.

"One of the things that I've noticed in the Native films that are being made is that they are using non-Native people to do the soundtracks," Davids said. "The music score is like another script that is running along with the film. And this type of music is very difficult to make because it has to shift so fast and it also requires a high skill level and versatility on the part of the composer."

Davids said a lot of American Indian directors either don't use film scoring for their movies or they hire non-Native composers because they don't realize that there are American Indian composers out there.

Davids, who also works with youth in music, said he recommends that musicians learn to read music.

"Music is a language that everyone can read no matter what language they speak," he said. "I've had my music played all around the world in places that I've never even been."

Davids' world premiere event was recorded for a DVD that will be marketed by the Syracuse International Film Festival and is scheduled to be televised nationally on PBS.

New animated short film brings Oneida legend to the big screen

The Oneida Indian Nation' of New York's Four Directions Productions held the world premiere of its first 3-D ani-

mated short film at the Syracuse International Film Festival in Syracuse, N.Y.

"Long ago, American Indians delivered important messages by sending runners; going from one village to another and nation to nation," said Dale Rood, director of studio operations for Four Directions Productions and a Turtle Clan representative to the OIN's Men's Council.

"Our ancestors also entertained and educated their young through storytelling," he said. "Today, communications are done much differently. We still need to inform and educate, but in a way that captures the attention of a public that is used to video games, cell phones and flat screened televisions. We must also correct stereotypes of Indian people painted by Hollywood. That's been embedded into the fabric of modern society."

Rood said this is why the OIN started Four Directions Media, the parent company of Indian Country Today and Four Directions Productions. Four Directions Productions produces 3-D video animation, high-definition video, Web design and interactive projects for a variety of internal and outside clients.

The world premiere, a telling of the ancient Oneida legend of Raccoon & Crawfish, took place April 18.

"The animation is wonderful and incredible, and it's scored for an orchestra with American Indian flutes," said Brent Michael Davids, Mohican composer who wrote the score for the eight-minute film.

"There is also a place in the animation where a whole community of crawfish is singing and dancing, so I had to make up a little crawfish song for them to sing. It's very cute."

The animation took the Four Directions Productions' graphics team about a year to complete.

"If you take a look at some of your larger animation studios, they have a whole host of people that are working on a project like this and we were smaller than that. But if you take a look at the quality, it's nothing short of amazing." Rood said to see the story come to life was very special to him.

"This story was told to me and my grandmother as it was told for hundreds of years to countless other Oneidas, by word of mouth," Rood said. "Now young people, children and adults around the country can learn about Oneida culture from this first, of hopefully many, legends brought to life. This particular legend is about the moral of lying."

"What was especially exciting for me was creating characters through animation that were once only part of the Oneida children's imagination."

For more information on the film, visit www.4dpgroup.com.