

## Robert Shields

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**From:** Jeff Rapsis <silentfilmmusic@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Monday, September 13, 2021 6:43 AM  
**To:** silentfilmmusic  
**Subject:** Series honoring film director Tod Browning opens Sunday, Sept. 19 at Town Hall Theatre, Wilton, N.H.  
**Attachments:** browning\_A.jpg; browning\_B.jpg; drifting\_A.jpg; drifting\_B.jpg

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### Early work of macabre film director Tod Browning showcased in Town Hall Theatre series

Two-month retrospective runs through Halloween; opens with exotic crime melodrama 'Drifting' (1923) with live music on Sunday, Sept. 19

WILTON, N.H.—He's best known as the director of the original 'Dracula' (1931) starring Bela Lugosi and the early cult classic 'Freaks' (1932), a horror film featuring handicapped circus performers.

But long before those macabre masterpieces, director Tod Browning pushed the boundaries of cinema while developing his craft during the silent era.

Often collaborating with legendary actor Lon Chaney, Browning specialized in twisted melodramas, gritty crime thrillers, and bizarre stories that drew on his own background as a carnival sideshow entertainer.

Browning's early work will be highlighted in a two-month series of rarely screened silent feature films at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H.

The screenings are free and open to the public; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming.

All screenings will feature live music by silent film accompanist Jeff Rapsis.

"These early pictures from Tod Browning will change your mind about silent cinema," Rapsis said. "When shown in a theater with live music and an audience, the early Browning pictures really leap to life. They're a terrific example of why people first fell in love with the movies."

The series opens on Sunday, Sept. 19 at 2 p.m. with '**Drifting**' (1923), an exotic crime drama directed by Browning. The film, a story of opium smugglers and set in a remote Chinese village, stars Priscilla Dean, Wallace Beery, and Anna May Wong.

Additional screenings include:

- Sunday, Oct. 10 at 2 p.m.: '**The White Tiger**' (1923). Crime drama about a gang that uses a chess-playing device to swindle unsuspecting wealthy victims. Starring Priscilla Dean, Raymond Griffith, and Wallace Beery.
- Friday, Oct. 29 at 7:30 p.m.: Lon Chaney in '**The Blackbird**' (1926). Bizarre melodrama in which Chaney leads a double life as a criminal mastermind of the London slums and also the Bishop, his pious but deformed brother. Will the entrance of a new woman expose his secret?

- Saturday, Oct. 30 at 2 p.m.: Twisted Halloween Weekend Double Feature. Lon Chaney stars in a pair of Browning-directed crime melodramas. '**Outside the Law**' (1920) features Chaney as a gangster who frames a former rival and turns his young daughter to a life of crime. In '**The Unholy Three**' (1925) Chaney is a criminal ventriloquist who runs a pet store that fronts a masterful scheme for fleecing wealthy customers.

- Sunday, Oct. 31 at 2 p.m.: Lon Chaney in '**Where East is East**' (1929). Chaney, as "Tiger Haynes," a jaded animal trapper in the jungles of Laos, cares only for his young daughter, Toyo, who plans to marry a circus owner's son. But the couple's happiness is threatened by the appearance of a mysterious woman.

Browning was born in 1880 in Louisville, Kentucky as Charles Albert Browning, Jr. Browning's uncle, baseball star Pete "Louisville Slugger" Browning, gave his nickname to the iconic baseball bat.

As a child, Browning was fascinated by circus and carnival life. Before finishing high school, at age 16 he ran away from his well-to-do family to join a traveling circus, from which he never returned.

By 1901, at the age of 21, Browning was performing song and dance routines on riverboats plying the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, as well as acting as a contortionist for the Manhattan Fair and Carnival Company.

Browning developed a live burial act in which he was billed as "The Living Hypnotic Corpse," and performed as a clown with the Ringling Brothers circus. He would later draw on these early experiences in his filmmaking.

During this time he showed his fascination with the macabre by adopting the professional name 'Tod,' after the German word for 'Death.'

Browning began acting in films in 1909, first as a slapstick comedian, eventually working under legendary early director D.W. Griffith. While continuing to perform on camera, he also began directing short films.

In 1915, Browning was severely injured when a car he was driving collided with a railroad locomotive. According to biographers David J. Skal and Elias Savada, the tragic event transformed Browning's creative outlook:

"A distinct pattern had appeared in his post-accident body of work, distinguishing it from the comedy that had been his specialty before 1915. Now his focus was moralistic melodrama, with recurrent themes of crime, culpability and retribution."

Hired to direct by Universal Pictures in 1919, Browning focused on exotic thrillers often starring popular star Priscilla Dean. Later, at MGM, Browning often worked with legendary actor Lon Chaney in melodramas known for their bizarre stories and emotional intensity.

Although Browning continued to work into the 1930s, alcoholism contributed to his career gradually halting. He retired from motion pictures in 1942, and died a recluse in 1962.

Over time, critics have come to recognize Browning's distinctive contributions to cinema, especially in his silent-era collaborations with Chaney at MGM from 1925 to 1929. Today his films are regarded as a unique body of work that reflect Browning's singular vision and outlook on life.

Accompanist Jeff Rapsis, who will provide music for all films in the series, improvises live scores for silent films using a digital synthesizer to recreate the texture of the full orchestra.

"It's kind of a high wire act," Rapsis said. "But for me, the energy of live performance is an essential part of the silent film experience."

The two-month retrospective of Tod Browning's early work will open with 'Drifting' (1923), an exotic crime drama starring Priscilla Dean, to be shown with live music on Sunday, Sept. 19 at 2 p.m. at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H.

The screening is free and open to the public; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming.

For more information, visit [www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com](http://www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com) or call (603) 654-3456. For more about the music, visit [www.jeffrapsis.com](http://www.jeffrapsis.com).

## CAPTIONS FOR IMAGES

### BROWNING A:

Director Tod Browning in the early 1930s, at the peak of his career at MGM studios. A two-month series spotlighting Browning's early work will open on Sunday, Sept. 19 at 2 p.m. with a screening of 'Drifting' (1923), an exotic crime thriller, with live music at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit [www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com](http://www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com) or call (603) 654-3456.

### BROWNING B:

Director Tod Browning in the early 1930s, at the peak of his career at MGM studios. A two-month series spotlighting Browning's early work will open on Sunday, Sept. 19 at 2 p.m. with a screening of 'Drifting' (1923), an exotic crime thriller, with live music at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit [www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com](http://www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com) or call (603) 654-3456.

### DRIFTING A:

A vintage magazine cover promoting 'Drifting' (1923), an exotic crime thriller directed by Tod Browning. A two-month series spotlighting Browning's early work will open on Sunday, Sept. 19 at 2 p.m. with a screening of 'Drifting' (1923) with live music at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit [www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com](http://www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com) or call (603) 654-3456.

### DRIFTING B:

Original promotional material for 'Drifting' (1923), an exotic crime thriller directed by Tod Browning. A two-month series spotlighting Browning's early work will open on Sunday, Sept. 19 at 2 p.m. with a screening of 'Drifting' (1923) with live music at the Town Hall Theatre, 40 Main St., Wilton, N.H. The screening is free; a donation of \$10 per person is suggested to support the Town Hall Theatre's silent film programming. For more information, visit [www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com](http://www.wiltontownhalltheatre.com) or call (603) 654-3456.

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Images attached. More high-resolution digital images available upon request.