

Musicians join forces for a not-so-silent-night

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The members of Yid Vicious are not afraid of playing in the dark, or of making things up as they go along.

So the well-known Madison Klezmer band is an apt musical pairing with the silent film classics “The Golem,” based on a Jewish folk tale, and the German Expressionist horror film “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,” both groundbreaking movies from 1920.

The spine-tinglers will be featured in “James Madison Movie Nights,” a free movie-in-the-park event this month with a twist: Live original music performed by master area musicians on instruments ranging from the clarinet to the theramin.

Madison composer and percussionist Geoff Brady wrote the score for “The Golem,” showing outdoors tonight accompanied by the musicians of Yid Vicious. Next Sunday, Brady and fellow instrumentalists Arthur Durkee, Kia Karlen and JoAnne Powers will create an improvised score for “Dr. Caligari” on the spot.

The project is funded by a \$1,500 City of Madison BLINK! grant, money for experimental and temporary works of art meant to appear unexpectedly and then vanish. It’s a good fit for Yid Vicious, which has improvised soundtracks to silent movies at UW-Madison’s Cinematheque, played along bike paths and popped below Monona Terrace to perform “Tunes in the Tunnel” during the city’s Ride the Drive event.

“I’m always looking for ways to present contemporary and experimental music in nontraditional performance settings,” said Karlen, who plays French horn and accordion for Yid Vicious. “I think people are really open to the music if they’re able to come upon it in an unusual fashion like this, and don’t have to get past the idea of, ‘Should I spend the money to go to a two- or three-hour concert where I’m not sure I’ll know or like or understand the music?’ It’s more fun to bring it to people in different settings.”

Brady decided to write his “Golem” score at a friend’s suggestion because of the band’s Yiddish folk music tradition, he said. “It’s sort of a Frankenstein story. It’s about a rabbi in medieval Prague who built a clay man and brings it to life” to defend the Jews of Prague from persecution.

The challenge in writing for film, said Brady, is timing things to the on-screen action and carefully creating a sound that will enhance the movie, not distract from it. For that reason, the focus will be on the movie and not the live musicians.

“We’ll have lights on our music stands” but otherwise be playing in the dark, Karlen said. “It’s a little like being the orchestra pit for an opera.”

