

'Kidnappers Foil' exhibit revisits a pre- 'American Idol' phenomenon

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February 12, 2020

Where to look first within Gareth Long's immersive film installation "Kidnappers Foil"?

Five screens hanging in an upstairs gallery at the Blaffer Art Museum face different directions, and seven more cover the walls. The films playing, all grainy and black and white, are similar but different: Each is a unique production of the same amateur film, a bit of recovered Americana called "The Kidnappers Foil," the life project of one Melton Barker.

Well, project is a polite way to put it. A prolific itinerant filmmaker based in Texas, Barker had quite the racket going with his company, Melton Barker Juvenile Productions.

"The Kidnappers Foil" was a crib of the wildly popular children's short series "Our Gang" that Barker produced several hundred times from a single script as he bounced around small towns across America from the late 1930s to the early 1970s. He cast a "Local Gang" of kids in each location, charging their parents \$4-\$10 per child for the opportunity.

He drummed up interest by presenting local newspapers with a photograph of himself holding child star Spanky McFarland, whom he claimed to have discovered. Spending about a week in each town, he partnered with local cinemas to screen the films. Barker worked Texas, the Midwest and the South heavily but produced versions of his film from coast to coast.

The film's plot is almost blissfully hokey: A girl named Betty Davis is kidnapped. Her parents offer a reward for her return, and a boisterous band of kids - the Local Gang - rescues her when the criminals are napping. To celebrate, Betty's parents throw a party with a talent show.

That final hook was a touch of genius, accommodating all manner of starry-eyed young performers - from a guitar-playing, pony-riding duo in Western outfits to sequin-clad hoofers and serious-minded accordion players, pianists and singers. Tapping into Americans' insatiable appetite for fame, "The Kidnappers Foil" was a phenomenon decades before reality shows like "American Idol" and "America's Got Talent."

The digitized prints of Long's installation date from the 1930s to the 1950s, and the kids are uniformly white and pretty uniformly bad actors. You'll either find them hilarious or disarmingly nostalgic. While the films are synced to start together, they unfold at different paces and aren't the same lengths. As that timing goes haywire, the experience turns abstract. Ambient audio seems to emanate from a few of the screens, adding another layer of distortion, although visitors can focus on a single film by donning headphones.

Barker, a hard-drinker who was married three times, was born on Valentine's Day 1903 and died in 1977. He probably would never have conceived such a mash-up and apparently didn't consider his films precious, leaving the prints in the hands of the local cinemas. A few ended up with local historical societies and eventually caught the eye of Caroline Frick, the director of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image at the Univ. of Texas-Austin.

During more 15 years of research, Frick has mapped Barker's travels and recovered more than 20 prints of "The Kidnapper's Foil" along with a dozen or so other films he produced for small cities. "He made more movies than Scorsese or Spielberg combined, and, despite less than perfect results, his hundreds of children's shorts continue to perplex technical experts who wonder 'how did he pull this off?'" she wrote several years ago.

Long's installation is about a different aspect of cultural significance. As a conceptual artist, he explores ideas about authorship, the value of a copy versus an original, seriality, amateurism, stupidity, translation and collaboration. Barker's production hits all those buttons.

Art dealer Jonathan Hopson, a fan of Long's, invited the artist and Rice University's Lisa Lapinski to create a companion show at his house gallery in Montrose. Their enigmatic "Tove & Melton & Lisa & Gareth & Charles & &c" riffs on a similar theme: They invited more than 30 fellow artists and students to create a response to an anecdote about the great silent film comic Charlie Chaplin entering a Charlie Chaplin look-alike contest and losing. The show contains a rotating mix of 38 mostly small-scale "Chaplins," ranging from a found knitting pattern of Chaplin's face to handmade tiles and a living outdoor sculpture made of crabapples and twigs.

"We lean towards minimal installs and try not to overload the viewer," Hopson says, "So every time you come, I'll have switched something out." Perhaps most interesting of all are the varied, graphically-rich black and white wallpapers Long has created with images from Barker's films, which have nothing to do with Chaplin but also appear at the Blaffer.