

## **THE SOUNDS OF SILENTS – Der Stummfilmpianist**

### **Short Synopsis:**

Willy Sommerfeld is the last remaining original silent film pianist who dates back to the very beginnings of cinema. A fossil of a by-gone era, his musical memory evokes the 19th century to an audience sitting in the 21st century.

We join the charismatic 102 year-old on an unusual trip back in time. Carefully selected sequences from silent films that Willy Sommerfeld accompanies live on piano become a mirror on his own long life. This artistic device sets the stage for Willy Sommerfeld's unique art. His music becomes the protagonist of the film and testimony to his great talent, and is thus preserved for posterity. This film is not meant as a mere biographical portrait, but rather as the sensitive portrayal of a man who has remained true to himself. A film that is cheery, melancholic and contemplative at the same time, but which always reflects the crafty twinkle in Sommerfeld's eye.

### **Director's Notes:**

What distinguishes a silent film pianist who accompanied cinema while it was still in its infancy from his present-day colleagues? That was the question I asked myself as I contemplated the form of my film about the then nearly 100 year-old Willy Sommerfeld, the last original silent film pianist of the silent film era. What is it that makes him so special?

If the film he is accompanying requires it, he can come up with the Czarist anthem, because he still has it in his head (watch his live accompaniment of Sternberg's "Last Command"). He also has at his fingertips the old tunes of historical Berlin that Lubitsch's films call for. More fundamentally, with his music, Willy Sommerfeld connects to a time when cinema was born.

I wanted to capture this fascinating gift of his in my film. But how to document a period that spans 100 years in a mere 80 minutes? How to turn his eccentric piano playing into the protagonist of the film? Of course! Through the silent films themselves, which bear witness to the era and also reflect fabulously on Sommerfeld's own life, even as he accompanies them in his unmistakable style.

The idea for the film was born!

Ilona Ziok, April 2006