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YESTERDAY-TODAY-TOMORROW

Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

CHARLIE IN HIS PRIME

THE CHARLIE CHAPLIN FESTIVAL

(Mutual-Lone Star Studio)



IT may seem almost blasphemous, and certainly preposterous, to mention a revival of four old Charlie Chaplin films in the same issue, let alone the same breath, as the radio presentation of *The Trojan Women*. Nevertheless I intend to do so. Any comparison of the contents and artistic function of these two works is, of course, so ridiculous as to be quite beside the point. Yet they do at least have this in common: both take us back to the very roots of their respective media. This on the one hand, is what the theatre has grown from: from this, on the other, the modern cinema has developed. I therefore suggest that it was the same sort of interest, though operating perhaps on very different levels of taste, which impelled some of us to tune in to the Euripidean drama, and others to see the Chaplin films—and some of us to do both. And in each case there would be basically the same sense of discovery, if we were coming to these experiences for the first time.

Many absurd claims have been made about Chaplin—and the company in which I have just placed him may seem to some readers as ludicrous as any—but it can surely be said of him that no other human being in history has made so many other human beings laugh, not merely in his own country, but throughout the world. For when Chaplin created his funniest and most popular films the screen, being silent, was truly international—and Charlie, with his genius for clowning, had found a universal language.

The four items—all two-reel comedies—which are brought together in this so-called "Festival" are all taken from the period of 1916-17, when Chaplin worked for the Mutual Company at the Lone Star Studio in Hollywood at a salary of 10,000 dollars a week and a bonus of 150,000—or 670,000 dollars a year. These films were, in fact, originally released in close succession—*Easy Street* on January 22, 1917, *The Cure* on April 16, 1917, *The Immigrant* on June 17, 1917, and *The Adventurer* on October 23, 1917. For some reason, however, they are not included in the present collection in this order, *The Immigrant* now coming first, followed by *The Adventurer*, then *The Cure*, and finally *Easy Street*.

ACCORDING to Theodore Huff, who is Assistant Professor in the Department of Motion Pictures at New York University (they take the cinema seriously in the States!), the time which Chaplin spent with Mutual was "his most fertile and sustained creative period." His art was "in full bloom" and he made 12 "almost-perfect comedies" for this company, incidentally earning ten times his previous year's salary in the process.

The four comedies now being revived in New Zealand are certainly excellent samples of the art which made Chaplin world-famous—they have terrific speed, furious slapstick, clever pantomime, healthy vulgarity, and a clear

hint of that pathos and social satire which were later to become pronounced features of all his films. Already the character with the turned-out feet, the baggy trousers, the little moustache, the battered bowler, and the cane is fully developed.

In all four comedies the "heavy" (a most appropriate term in this case) is played by the hulking Eric Campbell, and the heroine by Edna Purviance, whom Chaplin is said eventually to have rewarded for her nine years as his leading lady by starring her in his dramatic eight-reeler *The Woman of Paris*, in 1923.

SEEING these films, one cannot help wondering whether Chaplin, whose genius was pure pantomime and who held out for so long against the talkies, was wise in eventually breaking his silence. Speech here would certainly be not merely superfluous, but also a deterrent, though it has to be admitted that one's enjoyment is enhanced by the background of music and by the sound effects. The role of the humble piano in the old-time movie-houses has probably been under-estimated: a completely silent film is a very lifeless thing.

One of the obvious interests in such a revival as this is to observe the reaction of the different sections of the audience: those who are renewing acquaintance with an old friend, and those who are meeting him for the first time. Everyone without exception seems to enjoy the experience, but as a generalisation I think it can be said that, among children, Chaplin's knockabout comedy appeals more to boys than to girls, and that the age group between about ten and 15 appreciate him rather less than the groups before and after; for the reason that this middle group is perhaps more likely to be seeking some logical explanation of impossible situations, whereas younger children and adults are content to accept the fun at its face value.

The pre-1916 Chaplin was still so much a primitive in the development of screen art that his films of that era are of limited interest only; and those he made after 1917 have either been withdrawn entirely from circulation by Chaplin himself (for example, *Shoulder Arms* and *The Kid*) or else, like *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*, are of recent enough vintage to be fairly fresh in our memory. Therefore—especially with Chaplin's new *Monsieur Verdoux* looming up as a centre of controversy—these two-reelers of his pantomimic heyday have a special interest and significance. For here, despite technical imperfections, is the essence of Chaplin: this is the Chaplin of legend, the man who, probably more than any other, brought universality to the screen. It would be sheer affectation to suggest that the modern filmgoer should want to see such classics frequently, any more than the modern theatregoer and radio-listener would appreciate constant revivals of *The Trojan Women*; yet he should certainly welcome the rare chance now offered. For these crude old films demonstrate, as nothing else could, that the appeal of Charlie Chaplin is ageless as well as international.



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