

THE SILENT TREATMENT

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THE LITTLE TRAMP AT 100 A Charlie Chaplin Centennial Celebration



Kid Auto Races at Venice, Cal.

By Jeffrey Vance (adapted from his book *Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema*)

No human being is more responsible for the development and popularization of cinema as the dominant form of art and entertainment in the twentieth century than Charles Chaplin. Yet, Chaplin's importance as a historic figure is eclipsed only by the universality of his screen character, the Little Tramp, which transcended cinema almost from its inception and became an iconic figure in world cinema and culture. Building on traditions forged in the commedia dell'arte which he learned in the British music halls, Chaplin brought traditional theatrical forms into an emerging medium and changed both cinema and culture in the process. The birth of modern screen comedy occurred the moment Chaplin donned his derby hat, affixed his toothbrush moustache, and stepped into his impossibly large shoes for the first time.

Chaplin arrived at the Keystone Film Company in early December 1913

and took a room at the Great Northern Hotel in downtown Los Angeles (he would later relocate to the Los Angeles Athletic Club). The pioneer film comedy producer Mack Sennett was startled to find Chaplin to be young because he had played older men on the stage.

Chaplin's first film was aptly titled *Making a Living* (1914) in which Chaplin plays a "sharper;" he is an impoverished gentleman dressed in a top hat, frock coat, and monocle, with a drooping moustache of a typical stage villain. Chaplin was accustomed to months of rehearsing and refining a comedy sketch on stage with the Fred Karno Company. He quickly discovered that at Keystone, subtlety

always gave way to speed. Chaplin wanted a character-driven film with a slower pace, while Henry Lehrman, the film's director, insisted on fast knockabout. He was further confused by why scenes were shot out of narrative order. He had no previous film experience and had always rehearsed and performed his theatrical work in the proper sequence. Chaplin was devastated when he saw the final product and discovered what Lehrman had edited, recalling: "Although the picture was completed in three days, I thought we contrived some very funny gags. But when I saw the finished film it broke my heart, for the cutter had butchered it beyond recognition, cutting into the middle of all my funny business."

Mabel's Strange Predicament (1914) was the first film in which Chaplin donned the costume and char-

acter of the Tramp. Sennett evidently brought Chaplin into the cast of *Mabel's Strange Predicament* as an afterthought, wanting him simply to enter a hotel lobby set and provide some comic business. He told Chaplin, "Put on a comedy makeup. Anything will do." Chaplin recalled in his autobiography: *I had*



no idea what makeup to put on. I did not like my get-up as the press reporter [in Making a Living.] However, on the

way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane, and a derby hat. I wanted everything to be a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large. I was undecided whether to look old or young, but remembering Sennett had expected me to be a much older man, I added a small moustache, which, I reasoned, would add age without hiding my expression.

Encouraged by the laughs his Tramp was receiving, Chaplin explained the character to Sennett, "You know this fellow is many-sided, a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow, always hopeful of romance and adventure. He would have you believe he is a scientist, a musician, a duke, and a polo-player. However, he is not above picking up cigarette-butts or robbing a baby of its candy. And, of course, if the occasion warrants it, he will kick a lady in the rear—but only in extreme anger!" And thus was born the most celebrated character in the history of motion-picture comedy.



Mabel's Strange Predicament

Motion picture audiences first saw the Tramp on the screen in *Kid Auto Races at Venice, Cal.* (1914) which was filmed on the Sunday afternoon of the following week in which *Mabel's Strange Predicament* was filmed; but *Kid Auto Races at Venice, Cal.* was edited and delivered to exhibitors first. *Kid Auto Races at Venice, Cal.*, a Keystone "event" comedy, was a split reel film reportedly photographed in forty-five minutes to take advantage of

a children's car race at the ocean side resort of Venice, California. The plot, such as it is, is quite simple: the Tramp makes a nuisance of himself while a camera crew attempts to film the event. Although quite primitive, the film is historic not only because it represents the first appearance of the Tramp on screen, but also because it manages to record the first audience's reaction to the character. The audience, of course, is the throng of spectators at the race who begin to notice this peculiar fellow causing trouble with a "camera crew." At first the audience does not know what to make of the Tramp, then they begin to smile, then titter, and then laugh at his antics. In those brief moments of discovery, recorded for posterity, a comedic revolution was born.

The genius of the Little Tramp character is that he is so human and familiar—he is one of us. It is remarkable that when directed simply by Mack Sennett to find something funny to wear, Chaplin invented spontaneously that day in 1914 a symbol of downtrodden yet resilient humanity. (*The Little Tramp Centennial is a yearlong celebration with special programming taking place in multiple locations such as the Silent Winter Event in San Francisco on January 11th, The Bristol Slapstick Festival in the UK from January 24th – 26th, and the annual Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, Italy in July 2014. Keep posted with other upcoming events through Chaplin's official website, www.charliechaplin.com*)

THE DEAD SILENTS AT BARTS PATHOLOGY MUSEUM

London, UK. Barts Pathology Museum is hosting a month long silent film series opening on January 8, 2014 with movies that bear some relation to the research and study that goes on at Barts. Barts Pathology Museum is one of London's

best-kept secrets—a stunning Grade II listed 19th-century hall where quirky medical specimens are displayed. The hall features a glass roof because medical students once dissected cadavers there.



The first movie in the series, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), will be supplemented with an especially composed harp score by Elizabeth Jane-Baldry. The remaining pictures in The Dead Silents series include *The Hands of Orlac* (1924) on January 15th, *The Lost World* (1925) on January 22nd, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920) on January 29th. Additional details about the museum and this unique series can be found on the museum's blog at <http://potts-pots.blogspot.co.uk/>.

Silent Movie Calendar: Fabulous Hats!

The 2014 Silent Movies Calendar is a calendar with a cause: all proceeds (after printing expenses) benefit silent film preservation work or study, with previous beneficiaries ranging from the **Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum** in California to **Lobster Films** in France. The art selection, calendar design, and production is handled by Rodney Sauer of the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra. The theme for the 2014 release is **fabulous hats**, ranging from the everyday straw hat to the most exotic and flamboyant head gear



dawned by recognizable figures from the era such as Theda Bara, William S. Hart, Lillian Gish, Carmel Myers, and the Our Gang troop. The 2014 calendar is available for purchase on the Mont Alto Orchestra website at www.mont-alto.com/Calendar.html.

THE WOMEN FILM PIONEERS PROJECT

A NEW ONLINE DATABASE

October 2013 saw the public launch of **The Women Film Pioneers Project**, a free online database published by Columbia University's Center for Digital Research and Scholarship in collaboration with Columbia's School of the Arts and Columbia Libraries & Information Services. The database currently includes more than 150 career profiles of women who worked during the silent film era as directors, producers, writers, camera operators, editors, costume designers, and exhibitors.

In addition to the career profiles,



the database also features longer overview essays, still images and streaming clips, and bibliographic resources.

The first phase of WFPP focuses on women who worked in the United States, Latin America, Australia, and European countries. Phase II will include more European coverage, as well as Asia and the Middle East. The WFPP website is accessible at <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/>.

TST BOOKCORNER

LAME BRAINS & LUNATICS

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE FORGOTTEN OF SILENT COMEDY

By *Steve Massa*

Silent film comedy was a fortuitous combination of art and technology, where the physical comedy skills and artistry passed down from the Commedia dell'Arte, English music hall, and American vaudeville were captured for posterity by the newly created motion picture camera.



While the Chaplins, Keatons, and Laurel & Hardys are still remembered and celebrated, this book profiles unsung practitioners such as Billie Ritchie, Marcel Perez, Lige Conley, and George Rowe, with special focus on the neglected comediennes Alice Howell, Gale Henry, Fay Tincher, and Josie Sadler. Popular icons on the order of Mack Sennett, Marie Dressler, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, and W.C.

Fields are re-examined, plus detailed histories of silent comedy teams and kid's comedies are offered. The book also includes selected filmographies and is lavishly illustrated with more than 225 rarely-seen photographs and advertising images. (www.bearmanormedia.com)

HOME ENTERTAINMENT

CITY LIGHTS

This dual format BLU-RAY and DVD edition of *City Lights*, the most cherished film by Charlie Chaplin, is his ultimate Little Tramp chronicle. The writer-director-star achieved new levels of grace, in both physical comedy and dramatic poignancy, with this silent tale of a lovable vagrant falling for a young blind woman who sells flowers on the street (a magical Virginia Cherrill) and mistakes him for a millionaire. Though this Depression-era smash was made after the advent of sound, Chaplin remained steadfast in his love for the expressive beauty of the pre-talkie form. The result was the epitome of his art and the crowning achievement of silent comedy.

Features include a new digital restoration from a 4K film transfer, with uncompressed monaural soundtrack on the Blu-ray; new audio commentary by Charlie Chaplin biographer Jeffrey Vance; a 2003 documentary on the film; archival footage from the production; a booklet featuring an essay by critic Gary Giddins; and a 1966 interview with Chaplin (www.criterion.com)

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