

1981

Chaplin

Nancy Reynolds
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1981 Nancy Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Nancy, "Chaplin" (1981). *Graduate Research Papers*. 3237.
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/3237>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Chaplin

Abstract

This paper examines Charles Chaplin, an individual who influenced comedic style through the medium of silent film. By his unique characterization and performance skills he was not only able to popularize himself as a comic but he was further able to heighten the audience's acceptance of what was then a new medium--film. Chaplin was to become an acknowledged 'king' of film comedy and no imitation could compete with his comedic style. The focus of this study is on the influences which combined to produce Chaplin's unique comedic talents. Chaplin was European-born (in London, 1819). His parents were both performers of stage comedy. The styles and techniques employed by European performance traditions were therefore Chaplin's major source of influence. There were, however, many individuals and elements that went together to create the 'Little Fellow.'

CHAPLIN

A Research Paper

Submitted to

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Nancy Reynolds

November 1981

This Research Paper by: Nancy Reynolds

Entitled: CHAPLIN

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement
for the Degree of Master of Arts, Communications Media.

Roger A. Kueter

November 30, 1981
Date Approved

~~_____
Director of Research Paper~~

Robert R. Hardman

November 11, 1981
Date Approved

~~_____
Graduate Faculty Adviser~~

Robert R. Hardman

November 11, 1981
Date Approved

~~_____
Graduate Faculty Reader~~

Ernest K. Dishner

December 1, 1981
Date Approved

~~_____
Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction~~

Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
I	Introduction	1
II	Review of the Literature	2
	The Karno Influence/The Mime.	5
	Keystone/The "Tramp" Discovery.	7
	The Tramp	13
	"Chaplinesque".	16
III	Conclusion	20
	European Influence.	20
	The Silent Character.	22
	References.	24

Chapter I

Introduction

'I've often thought of my own popularity. I've never been impressed with the magnitude of it. I happen to have the good fortune to work in a medium that has a large circulation'- Charles Chaplin (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 121).

This paper examines Charles Chaplin, an individual who influenced comedic style through the medium of silent film. By his unique characterization and performance skills he was not only able to popularize himself as a comic but he was further able to heighten the audience's acceptance of what was then a new medium--film. Chaplin was to become an acknowledged 'king' of film comedy and no imitation could compete with his comedic style. The focus of this study is on the influences which combined to produce Chaplin's unique comedic talents. Chaplin was European-born (in London, 1819). His parents were both performers of stage comedy. The styles and techniques employed by European performance traditions were therefore Chaplin's major source of influence. There were, however, many individuals and elements that went together to create the 'Little Fellow.'

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Many diversely talented, clowning individuals helped to characterize the period of silent film comedy. The five most easily remembered are Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy (both of whom mark the end of silent film comedy and the beginning of film comedy with sound). With each a mental image may come to mind. What immediately comes to mind when I think of Laurel and Hardy are their contrasting forms - Stan with the broad grin that cuts across his long narrow face and Oliver, thoroughly charming and cherubically round. What comes to mind with Keaton is his profile, his carriage and the way in which he conveys the Keaton demeanor - without a smile. Round glasses, which were chosen by Lloyd to round out his all-American-boy character, is the feature which appears with first thoughts of Harold Lloyd. Before investigating Chaplin for this study I tried to recall what it was for me (beyond costuming) that distinguished him from other silent film comedians. What came to me were his eyes. No matter how badly out of focus the Chaplin films were to my memory I could sharply recall his eyes. Stan Laurel was also impressed with Chaplin's eyes. He is quoted from an interview with John McCabe:

What has to be remembered about Charlie is that he was essentially a pantomimist--and none better--still, with Charlie, things

really began with his face. That may seem strange but it's true. He had those eyes that absolutely forced you to look at them. He had the damndest way of looking at an audience. He had the damndest way of looking at 'you' on stage. I don't think anyone has ever written about those eyes of his. They're very dark, the deepest kind of blue, and intense, just like him. And they can dominate anyone they look at. That's a part of the secret of his success--eyes that make you believe him in whatever he does. (McCabe, 1978, p. 27)

Numerous elements contributed to Charlie Chaplin's success. Deep within the 'little fellow' seen on screen is a past which reaches back to the turn of the century, lower class, Victorian London--to the music halls which are said to have sprung from the poor's need to escape their condition (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 30). Chaplin's childhood was not the thoroughly sad, Dickens-like tale he described in his autobiography (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 64) but he knew poverty. Thomas Burke described Chaplin's early life in City of Encounters (1932):

...if Charlie today is hard and cold, it is because his first decade was hard and cold - orphanage, back streets, back rooms, broken boots, fish and chips: the craven ugliness of poverty and the mordant strain of it. (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 27)

As was earlier mentioned, Chaplin also knew the music halls. His parents were both music hall artistes. Charlie's music hall debut took place when he was only five (1894) and he began regular performance when he was fourteen (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 66). The music halls must have stood in

contrast to the surrounding poverty. In Genesis of a Clown, Sobel and Francis describe the music halls:

...from its earliest days music hall purveyed a kind of twilight culture, investing in picture galleries, waxworks, museums and nude statuary ...Charles Morton, 'The Father of the Halls,' staged a condensed version of 'The Tempest' at the Canterbury Music Hall in Westminster Bridge Road, put on opera and ballet, and was credited with introducing to London the music for Gounod's 'Faust.' Comic songs, employing skillful rhymes and rhythms, must have stimulated a more imaginative use of language. (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 55)

The comedy employed by the music halls involved poking fun at authority and authority figures. These figures included the pompous, rich and conventionally moral--which indicates the strict separation between the classes.

Chaplin's early life was inescapably tied to both the socio-economic conditions and comedy traditions of that time and place. Two years after Chaplin began his career in film he expressed his attitude toward these early influences. While rejecting his early music hall training and at the same time acknowledging the influence of his early background Chaplin commented:

The Elizabethan style of humour, this crude form of farce and slapstick comedy that I employed in my work, was due entirely to my early environment and I am now trying to steer clear from this sort of humour and adapt myself to a more subtle and finer shade of acting. (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 80)

Chaplin may have succeeded in altering his style to his own satisfaction. He in no way, however, was able to dispense

completely with those elements which helped to shape his style in the beginning.

The Karno Influence/The Mime

Stan Laurel had much to say about Charlie Chaplin. Early in their careers the two worked with "Karno Company," an English mime troupe which had a number of groups that traveled around the world. Laurel and Chaplin studied under its creator, Fred Karno. "Fred Karno didn't teach Charlie and me all we know about comedy. He just taught us most of it..." Speaking to John McCabe, Stan Laurel goes on to describe Karno's style and influence:

If I had to pick an adjective to fit Karno, it would be supple. That's what Karno was mentally and physically, even when he was an old man. He was flexible in just about everything, and above all he taught us to be supple. Just as important he taught us to be precise. Out of all that endless rehearsal and performance came Charlie the most supple and precise comedian of our time. (McCabe, 1978, p. 28)

Karno also taught Chaplin about combining pathos with comedy. Stan Laurel speaks of Karno's instructions, "Keep it wistful gentlemen... we want sympathy with the laughter" (McCabe, 1978, p. 27).

Karno's troupes mimed his stories. The qualities of suppleness and precision which Laurel speaks of come to play silently--in acrobatics and burlesque put to music. As a mime act these comedians were concerned with the visual. The success of pantomime depends on its capacity for capturing

both mood and meaning with human movement. Stan Laurel and Charlie Chaplin both agree that Karno's skill and sensitivity to these elements was ample. Chaplin comments:

At the time I joined Karno he had between eighteen and twenty companies touring all over England and in many parts of the world, America, South America, and Africa. No language was necessary because the acting of the troupe was vivid and expressive enough to bring laughter from every race. All of the pieces we did as I remember them were cruel and boisterous filled with acrobatic humor, and low knockabout comedy. Each man working for Karno had to have perfect timing and had to know the peculiarities of everyone else in the cast so that we could collectively, achieve a fast tempo. (McCabe, 1978, p. 28)

Prior to returning from an American tour, Karno's troupe did a six week stint in New York at a vaudeville roof garden called the American Music Hall. It was here that the eventual originator of the Keystone comedy series, Mack Sennett, first saw Chaplin perform. Chaplin, under Karno's direction, had developed uniquely expressive movements. Sennett was captivated:

I was impressed, more than impressed, stunned might be a good word. I think I was struck by him because he was everything I wasn't: a little fellow who could move like a ballet dancer. The next week I couldn't remember his name but I sure as hell never forgot that wonderful easy grace of movement. I had seen nothing like it. I've seen nothing like it since except in Chaplin films. (McCabe, 1978, p. 43)

At the time he saw Chaplin, Sennett was an actor for D.W. Griffith at Biograph Studios. Later Sennett remembered

Chaplin well enough to find him and ask him to take Ford Sterling's place at Keystone.

Music provided a framework for mime. The rhythmic quality that was later associated with Chaplin films came from Chaplin's mime training. Karno comedian Fred Kitchen is said to have been the expert who taught Chaplin his "medley of kicks and falls" (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 134). Kitchen has been described as,

...a master of pacing, accumulating laughs by a slow gathering of momentum around a central gag, putting into practice Karno's dictum that the best comedy resulted from a fusion of two opposites--a comic who is ignorant to what is about to happen to him, and an audience which has guessed it in advance. (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 135)

Kitchen also utilized what Karno had taught him concerning pathos. When Kitchen died The Stage commented:

...his gift as a player of sketches, his power to bring tears to the eyes of his audiences, and his robust, clean humour were celebrated throughout the world of music hall... He had a remarkable gift for touching his audiences with his depth of pathos, and was said to be one of the few actors able to cry real tears on the stage. (April 5, 1951) (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 136)

During its second tour of the states Chaplin left Karno company to join the Keystone Company. He took however, all that he had learned from Karno and Company to the world of silent film.

Keystone/The "Tramp" Discovery

In his autobiography Chaplin describes his first impressions of the Keystone Studios located at Edendale, a suburb of Los Angeles,

It was a dilapidated affair with a green fence around it one hundred and fifty feet square. The entrance to it was up a garden path through an old bungalow--the whole place looked just as anomalous as Edendale. I stood gazing at it from the opposite side of the road, debating whether to go in or not. (Chaplin, 1964, p. 140)

Upon entering the studio he continues,

I was enthralled. A soft light pervaded the whole stage. It came from broad streams of white lines that diffused the sun and gave an ethereal quality to everything. This diffusion was for photographing in daylight. (Chaplin, 1964, p. 141)

The Keystone studios contained essential ingredients for film production. McCabe describes in greater detail what Charlie first saw at Keystone:

Sets were continually being built or torn down (there was room for five good-sized sets on the lot) and the roof and sides of the building were translucent diffusing the strong California sun needed for natural lighting. On cloudy days the roof could be rolled back and/or the sides of the building raised for additional light. (McCabe, 1978, p. 50)

Chaplin began working for Keystone at \$150 a week.

Charlie Chaplin stayed with Keystone just a year but turned out approximately thirty-five one and two-reelers in that year (Everson, 1978, p. 264). But there was more to Chaplin than Sennett's company could contain. As Gerald Mast described Keystone in his book The Comic Mind, "Keystone clowns were bodies not brains" (Mast, 1973, p. 51).

Discussing the relationships to be found within the Keystone world Mast adds, "Where Sennett used objects that were consistently frenetic, destructive, and violent, Chaplin started to develop objects (the cane, the bowler hat, anything else he touched) that led a more subtle and supple life" (Mast, 1973, p. 51) (Notice Mast's use of the word, "supple").

Mast goes on to contrast Sennett's style of comedy with that of Chaplin's:

The difference between Chaplin's cops--who represent awesome propriety, the social Establishment, and the laws of those who can afford to make them --and Sennett's goofy klutzes is the difference between a man with a social conscience and a man without one.

Sennett's film's are blissfully devoid of conscience as well as intellectual self-consciousness. The Keystones make fun of things without turning the fun into something that can actually bite. Compared with even the early Chaplin Essanays, the Sennett romps are toothless. (Mast, 1973, p. 53)

Sennett's style of film-making left little room for aspiring stars--those who might be interested in cultivating their talents via the close-up shot. Keystone films contained mostly long and extreme-long shots. Chaplin was, though, allowed more freedom in his last few months at Keystone. Starting with the film "Laughing Gas" Chaplin was allowed the opportunity to write and direct his own film. He was then free to bring the camera in to a more intimate position with its subject and experiment with eye contact

(Kerr, 1975, p. 77) (possibly to cultivate that look which Stan Laurel observed was so effective).

The Keystone films were, however, what Mack Sennett intended them to be. Sennett reflects upon the days at Keystone:

Anything went, and every fool thing you might think of under the influence of hashish or a hangover went big. We were awash with pretty women, clowns, and story tellers who can't write. We made a million dollars so fast my fingers ached from trying to count... (MacCann, 1966, p. 163)

Summing it all up "... We made funny pictures as fast as we could for money" (MacCann, 1966, p. 163). There were no lofty artistic designs behind the Keystone product. Walter Kerr offers a plausible explanation for the Keystone style in his book The Silent Clowns:

The films are, I think, victims of what may be a curious law. Whenever an entirely new form is let loose on the world, it must begin at the very beginning. Silent film comedy began as though comedy had never existed, as though Aristophanes had never existed, as though sophistication of the same materials had never been achieved. (Kerr, 1975, p. 62)

Kerr then proceeds to aptly liken the Keystone players and their performing behavior to that of chimpanzees.

That Sennett began at the beginning does not however, thoroughly explain his chosen style of comedy. Sennett had been impressed with early European comic performers of stage and film. Many gags and stunts used by Keystone performers originated in Europe. The chase scenes employed by French

film-makers were duplicated at Keystone (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 95). Keystone cops, as Sobel and Francis state "were a surrealist extension of what Sennett had seen in burlesque" (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 104). Concerning Sennett's work they state "it was the spirit of the Com-media dell'Arte, of vaudeville and burlesque, which informed all his work and gave it its dynamism" (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 95). In American Silent Film William Everson discusses the influence of French comedy on the Chaplin film "Tillie's Punctured Romance" and other Sennett films from 1909 on. This influence is worthy of further investigation. From France, Max Linder stood to be the first film comedian of world wide status and would have been the most influential. Linder's early films for Pathe received recognition and acclaim. (He failed to succeed in America when he attempted a spoof on the Fairbanks film "The Three Musketeers" which was called "The Three Must Get Theirs") (Kerr, 1975, p. 57-58).

Chaplin too was influenced by Max Linder. Both characters carried a cane, wore a fancy waistcoat, and black moustache. Both were excellent mimics, small and nimble. In an inscription on a photograph he once sent to Linder, Chaplin acknowledged his debt "To the one and only Max, 'the Professor,' from his disciple, Charles Chaplin" (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 130).

Charlie the "Tramp" has conflicting origins. Chaplin himself tells a story which John McCabe suggests involves Chaplin finding a costume for "Kid Auto Races at Venice" (McCabe, 1978, p. 52). In his autobiography Chaplin recalls:

I had no idea what make-up to put on. I did not like my getup as the press reporter. 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 in 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 mustache, which, I reasoned, would add age without hiding my expression.

I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up made me feel the person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked onto the stage he was fully born. (Chaplin, 1964, p. 144)

The tramp as a comic figure was not original. The tramp-clown had been a vaudeville favorite and film favorite as well since 1901 (Jacobs, 1939, p. 18).

In Everson's book (listed) The Parade's Gone By Chester Conklin tells a similar story but for the film "Mable's Strange Predicament" (p. 148). In Charlie Chaplin McCabe tells Charlie Chaplin Jr.'s story of the tramp costume (p. 53). Chaplin, though, had begun the development of a tramp-clown like none other.

Within a few months with Keystone Charlie Chaplin be-

came enormously popular. With Marie Dressler, Chaplin starred in American film comedy's first full length feature "Tillie's Punctured Romance." But Charlie the "tramp" did not completely develop at Keystone. According to Chaplin himself, his style of comedy was more subtle than the directors at Keystone wanted to encourage (Chaplin, 1964, p. 147) and the success of "Tillie's Punctured Romance" brought numerous job offers--one from Essanay he couldn't refuse.

The Tramp

In 1915 Chaplin began work at Essanay for \$1250 a week plus a \$10,000 bonus (McCabe, 1978, p. 67). It was here that the Chaplin character fully appears in what has sometimes been referred to as Chaplin's first masterpiece "The Tramp" (McCabe, 1978, p. 72). Starring opposite Chaplin in this film was Edna Purviance (who eventually was to appear in thirty-five of Chaplin's films). Charlie the "tramp" saves Edna from crooks and is rewarded by Edna's father with a job as hired hand. Clumsy in his job as hired hand, he again confronts the crooks who attack the farm house by ladder, is wounded, pursues the crooks and becomes "town hero." Though admired by the "girl" he eventually loses out to her fiance and establishes the Chaplin exit--"His few possessions are in a bandanna, his shoulders droop in despair --when suddenly he whips his cane elegantly, gives a joyous

little hop as he walks down the street to what he- and we- feel must be a better tomorrow." (McCabe, 1978, p. 73)

Throughout the production of "The Tramp" Chaplin maintained the desire for precision which he had developed under Fred Karno. Stan Laurel comments:

Leo White, a friend of mine, worked on 'The Tramp.' He said they repeated some gags until the actors felt that if they did it one more time they'd blow their corks. He said the business of the crooks going up the ladder was done so many times and in so many variations that they just couldn't tell what the hell all the fuss was about. But they were wrong. That's just what made Charlie a great creator of comedy. He knew that sometimes you have to do a thing fifty times in slightly different ways until you get the very best. The difference between Charlie and all the rest of us who made comedy--with one exception, Buster Keaton --was that he refused to do anything but the best. To get the best he worked harder than anyone I know (McCabe, 1978, p. 73).

Though a success in terms of Chaplin's career, "The Tramp" was not his best comic effort. Walter Kerr describes "The Tramp" as "a failure" in terms of solving its own problems and answering any questions it raised. Kerr views this film as an experiment--that Chaplin was attempting to evoke a new feeling from his audience--pathos.

The 'tramp' character was abandoned temporarily to truly materialize in "A Dogs Life" twenty films later (Kerr, 1975, p. 81). Kerr analyzes the Chaplin character. He suggests that there is a fault or "problem" with the early Chaplin characterization;

The secret of Chaplin, as a character, is that he can be anyone. That is his problem. The

secret is a devastating one. For the man who can at the flick of a finger or the blink of an eyelash, instantly transform himself into absolutely anyone is a man who must, in his heart, remain no one. To be able to play a role, to know a role as a role, is to see through it. To be able to play them all is to see through them all... With every posture exposed as an artiface that can be adopted on the instant and just as instantly dropped, the door to the world in which less perceptive, less malleable people do accept postures and pursue them to blind profit is effectively sealed off. Who would wish to be part of a world that can so easily be faked? And how would you go about it? You can't believe in what you know better than, in what you do without believing. Infinitely adaptable but universally a fraud, Chaplin now has no one identity to embrace, to enter whole--heartedly, to feel secure about, to find rest in. He can only come out of nowhere, open his bag of tricks on demand, pretend to be what is asked of him for a moment or so and then go away again... The tramp is a philosophical, not a social, statement. And it was a conclusion to which Chaplin came, not a choice he imposed from the outset. The tramp is the residue of all the bricklayers and householders and bon vivants and women and fiddlers and floor-walkers and drunks and ministers Chaplin had played so well too well. The tramp was all that was left. Sometimes the dark pain filling Chaplin's eyes is in excess of the situation at hand. It comes from the hopeless limitation of having no limitations (Kerr, 1975, p. 85).

Charlie's experience at Essanay gave him more freedom to grow as both a performer and director. At Keystone he had produced only slapstick while at Essanay greater dimension was added to his characterizations. This could partially be attributed to the fact that Chaplin was now involved with more aspects of his work. Chaplin had directed all of his own films since the July 9, 1914 Keystone release of

"Laughing Gas (McCabe, 1978, p. 265). As director at Essanay, Chaplin was able to experiment with pathos resulting in a new, mellowed portrayal of the "tramp."

"Chaplinesque"

Sidney Chaplin, Charlie's brother (who had also been an actor for Sennett), in taking over all of his brother's financial affairs, negotiates Charlie's next move. In February, 1916, Chaplin begins work at Mutual for \$670,000 (at \$10,000 a week) and a \$150,000 bonus (McCabe, 1978, p. 82). Along with his first film for Mutual, "The Floor-walker," Chaplin takes the position of producer-director.

The films Chaplin produced for Mutual have been reputed to be his best. These include "The Immigrant," "Easy Street," and "The Rink." William Everson In American Silent Film suggests that these may be superior to many of Chaplin's later films (Everson, 1978, p. 264). Walter Kerr describes the Mutual films as Chaplin's "gayest." He now also discounts the "problem" he observed with the earlier Chaplin characterizations (Kerr, 1975, p. 96). Chaplin regards his time with Mutual in his autobiography:

Fulfilling the Mutual contract, I suppose, was the happiest period of my career. I was light and unencumbered, twenty-seven years old, with fabulous prospects, and a friendly, glamorous world before me. Within a short time I would be a millionaire--it all seemed slightly mad. (Chaplin, 1964, p. 188)

This was, in fact, a mad time for the film industry--

which was rapidly expanding. By 1914 the "star" system was well underway. Salaries for the stars had begun to soar. There was possibly no better example to feed the "star madness" than Charlie Chaplin. By the end of 1915,

Children were wearing Charlie buttons and mimicking his walk at play. Popular songs-- 'The Chaplin Waddle,' 'The Chaplin Strut,' 'The Chaplin Wiggle' were being churned out by Tin Pan Alley... The Ziegfeld Follies featured girls in Charlie make-up doing a number 'Those Charlie Chaplin Feet,' Theatre owners instead of billing Chaplin's name on marquees placed a life-size photograph of Charlie in the lobby with the legend 'I'm here today.' (McCabe, 1978, p. 79)

The Chaplin craze was thorough. As Walter Kerr describes:

Aping Chaplin was common practice among comedians: Chaplin had become so popular and, by this time, so utterly in command of his character that he seemed not so much 'a' funny man as 'the' funny man, the comic font in itself, an absolute from which all other work in the vein must necessarily be derived. Comedy was, in effect defined as what Chaplin did, and Chaplinesque traits, bits of business, flourished everywhere. (Kerr, 1975, p. 102)

Chaplin had developed an ominous character with which his comic peers had to compete. Between 1915 and 1917 Harold Lloyd made sixty films mostly with the tramp-clown character he called "Lonesome Luke", for Pathé. Pathé was satisfied with the success of the "Lonesome Luke" character and therefore reluctant to allow Lloyd to try something else. Lloyd was not content with the character as he recalls to Kevin Brownlow,

I didn't like Luke. Luke was a semi-imitation character. I tried my best to stay away from

anything Chaplin did and my clothes were really the reverse of Charlie's being too small instead of too big. All the same, Charlie had the corner on comedy clothes. Lonesome Luke was a broad comedy character and Charlie had the corner on that too. He was king in that department. (Brownlow, 1969, p. 459)

Eventually Lloyd refused to play Lonesome Luke and successfully replaced him with his own kind of character. By accident or design the imitation 'Charlies', however, came in abundance.

At the end of two years with Mutual, Sidney Chaplin negotiated a new contract for Charlie. In 1918, Chaplin begins work for First National and a \$1,200,000 contract (Chaplin, 1964, p. 189). Prior to his five years at First National Chaplin had produced primarily one and two-reelers (Everson, 1978, p. 264). The three-reeler "A Dog's Life" is the first of nine films Chaplin produces for First National. Here the "tramp" is teamed with Scraps, a dog companion. The tramp's relationship with the dog creates new dimension in an otherwise "lone" character. Kerr refers to this Chaplin film as his first masterpiece though other sources may dispute. (Different sources have different preferences with Chaplin films. "Masterpiece" is a relative term. In relation to Chaplin's career "A Dog's Life" was a turning point and perhaps more deserving of the term "masterpiece" than his earlier "The Tramp.") Kerr deftly describes "A Dogs Life" as

...delightful a romp as any the comedian had capered through...composed of six balletically conceived and executed "turns" incredibly in-

ventive, one following so quickly upon the other's barely disappeared heels that we are left breathless with the spontaneity and precision of it all. (Kerr, 1975, p. 163)

In 1923 Chaplin moves to United Artists and produces for them nine full-length features in a period of thirty-four years. In 1936 Chaplin punctuated an end to silent film comedy with his last silent effort "Modern Times." It is Kerr's opinion that "Modern Times" is Chaplin's farewell to silent film (Kerr, 1975, p. 353). [Notable Chaplin films prior to "Modern Times" are "The Gold Rush" (1925), "The Circus" (1928), and "City Lights" (1931)] (Chaplin, 1964, p. 501). In his autobiography Chaplin makes the comment concerning the advent of talkies. "If I talked I would become like any other comedian" (Chaplin, 1964, p. 501).

Chapter III

Conclusion

European Influence

'Masterpieces are not single and solitary births, they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice-' Virginia Woolf. (Sobel, Francis, 1977, p. 159)

The same could be said for the master. Chaplin held an exhaustive knack for reaching audiences through the medium of film. His early influence on the development of film comedy is therefore significant. Often, individuals who are able to recall early silent film store their recollections right next to images of Chaplin. Uniquely talented, Chaplin might be viewed as the key spokesman for this new medium. Those however, who are interested in a broader picture must also look at those factors which influence Chaplin the comedian.

David Madden in his comparative study of *commedia dell'arte* and silent slapstick comedy, entitled Harlequin's Stick/Charlie's Cane, discusses influences of *commedia dell'arte* on silent film comedy. Madden expands on the thoughts (such as those of Kerr) concerning Chaplin's character stating,

The tramp's success as an everyman figure depends upon there being no man behind the mask, for he is, in a profound sense, a creature of the folk imagination. He underwent a slow realization and articulation, and giving him his cues, international audiences collaborated in the process. Chaplin

did not premeditate the Tramp; he discovered him in the same way the comedies were once made; on the fly, almost by accident. The shape of the figure and his acts were one, perceived profoundly, responded to thoroughly in an instant. (Madden, 1975, p. 154)

When viewed as a "creature of the folk imagination" Chaplin's characterization is placed in a broader light than has so far been discussed. Discussing the influence of commedia dell'arte on silent film comedy, Madden also expands on comparisons of movement,

The commedia actors spoke a language of gestures. They sculpted life in motion on the air. The art of the gesture extended from expressive poses and postures to the most exacting gymnastics. Looking at silent slapstick stunts we get some sense of the commedia actor's acrobatic skill in feats of running, leaping, falling, and tumbling. (Madden, 1975, p. 120)

Chaplin's inclusion of these skills as well as his 'exacting' and 'precise' performance of them have partly come from Fred Karno and Chaplin's experiences with the pantomime troupe. Mack Sennett had also applied what he knew of European burlesque and stage comics to his Keystone productions as was earlier mentioned. Sennett was impressed by the early French chase scenes which is obvious in his own frequent use of the 'chase.' Both Chaplin and Sennett admired and studied the styles of foreign movies and individuals such as Max Linder (who, by the way, had appeared in 1905 in the farce "La Vie de Polchinelle"--in the 'commedia' tradition) (Madden, 1975, p. 140). In a large sense the early Chaplin audiences were experiencing a part of European folk art via the silent

film medium.

The Silent Character

When Sennett first saw Chaplin he was impressed with Chaplin's grace of movement "like a ballet dancer." Chaplin continued to incorporate and refine the movements and gestures which fascinated early silent film-makers and their audiences. He combined these physical skills with his art of characterization successfully using pathos to reach his audience.

Walter Kerr, in suggesting an early problem with Chaplin's characterization (as mentioned), states "You can't believe in what you know better than, in what you do without believing..." and continues to suggest that though the early Chaplin character is adaptable he is "universally a fraud." By doing so Kerr is acknowledging the separation which exists in varying degrees between the person and the 'part.' In Chaplin's case the 'part' stems from a very unreal characterization. Chaplin's 'tramp-clown' is more clown than tramp, taking roots in burlesque and the harlequin. To "believe in" or not "know better than" a character molded in farce and fantasy is not feasible. More than Lloyd, more than Keaton and Laurel and Hardy, more than fact--Chaplin played 'fantasy.'

When all was forgotten with burlesque and travelling mimes, when Chaplin found it necessary to speak, he was

adding a dimension which didn't fit. ("If I talked I'd become like any other comedian.") Charlie's 'bag' contained a tramp full of gags, acrobatic skill, refined gesture and dance, slapstick, pathos and laughter. It was a style executed with Karno precision and Keystone fury/but Chaplinesque and inherently silent.

This research began with a vague recollection--Chaplin's eyes. Initially they were the sole image I had to remember him by. It ended with a realization of how an artfully designed character, Charlie the 'tramp,' fit into the development of comedy.

The reader should make a similar transformation. Having read this paper, the reader should be able to view a Chaplin film with added awareness of the influencing factors which go beyond the character they are watching on screen. It is also hoped that they would look at humor--both in its current form and where it has been.

References

- Brownlow, Kevin. Hollywood The Pioneers. New York: Knopf, 1979.
- Brownlow, Kevin. The Parade's Gone By. New York: Knopf, 1969.
- Chaplin, Charlie. Charles Chaplin My Autobiography. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964.
- Everson, William K. American Silent Film. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Franklin, Joe. Classics of the Silent Screen. New York: Citadel Press, 1959.
- Huff, Theodore. Charlie Chaplin. New York: Henry Schuman, 1951.
- Jacobs, Lewis. Rise of the American Film. New York, Harsourt, Brace and Co., 1939.
- Jordan, Thomas H. The Anatomy of Cinematic Humor. New York: Revisionist Press, 1975.
- Keaton, Buster, and Charles Samuels. My Wonderful World of Slapstick. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960.
- Kerr, Walter. The Silent Clowns. New York: Knopf, 1975.
- Knight, Arthur. The Liveliest Art. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1978.
- Lahue, Kalton C. World of Laughter. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1966.
- Lloyd, Harold, and Wesley W. Stout. An American Comedy. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928.
- McCabe, John. Charlie Chaplin. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978.
- MacCann, Richard Dyer. Film: A Montage of Theories. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1966.
- Madden, David. Harlequin's Stick/Charlie's Cane. US: Popular Press, 1975.

Mast, Gerald. The Comic Mind. Indianapolis/New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1973.

Sobel, Raoul, Francis, David. Chaplin Genesis of a Clown. London: Quartet Books, 1977.