

MOVIE NIGHT



#4

The Silent comedy, slapstick and music hall magazine



CHARLEY BOWERS

ALICE HOWELL ERIC SYKES

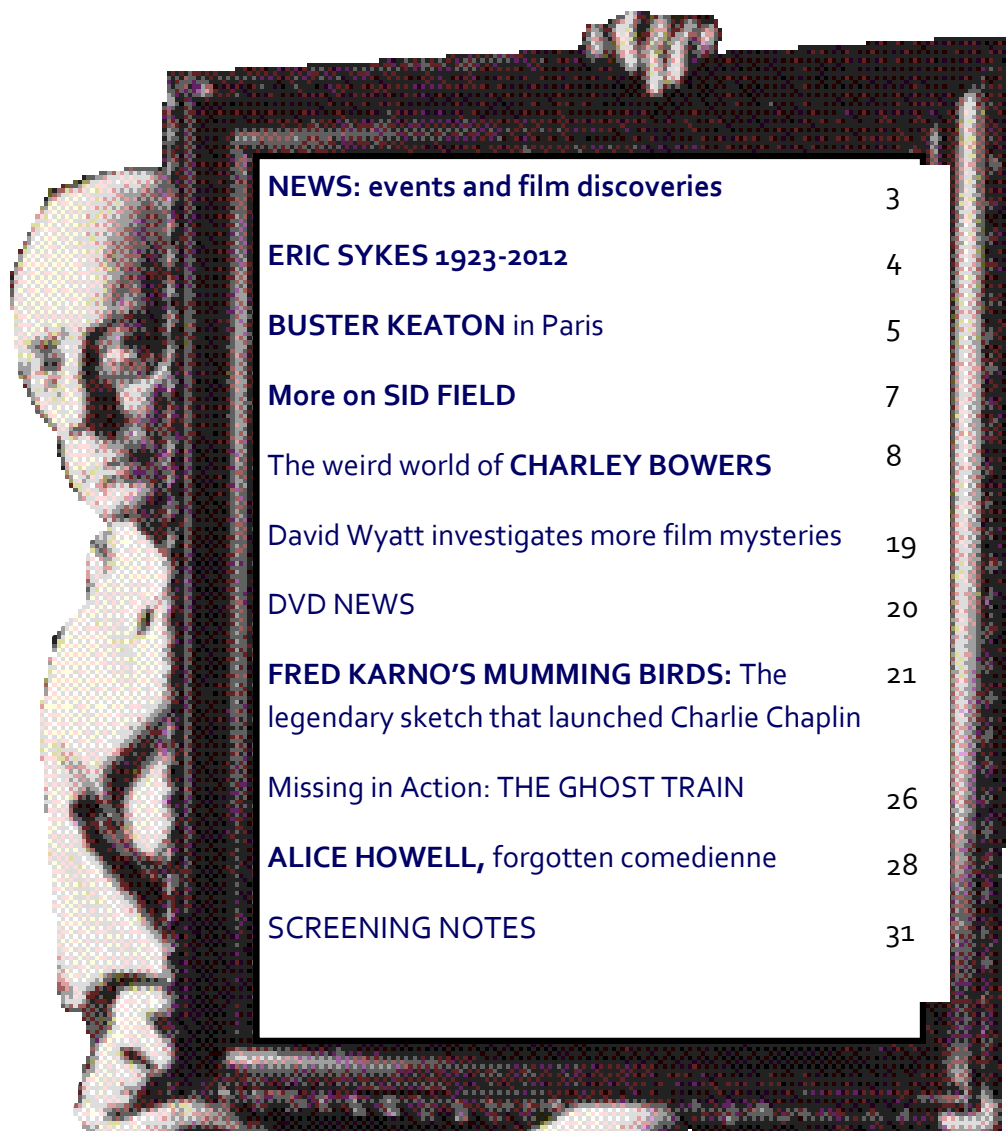
The sketch that launched Charlie Chaplin –

Fred Karno's 'MUMMING BIRDS'

Welcome to the fourth issue of 'MOVIE NIGHT'. This is the first anniversary issue, and is the longest to date! There have been a lot of exciting developments, discoveries and DVD releases going on recently , so you'll find plenty of news items inside. As well as that, there are the usual mixtures of features, biographies and in-depth focuses on particular films.

A special "thank you" to David Wyatt and Mark Newell for providing articles and information for this issue and to Gerry Dunne for proofreading. Finally, thanks to everyone else who has been in touch with snippets of information, comments, questions etc. Please keep all contributions coming in to matthewross22@googlemail.com

Now, over to Mr Keaton for the contents of this issue...



NEWS: events and film discoveries	3
ERIC SYKES 1923-2012	4
BUSTER KEATON in Paris	5
More on SID FIELD	7
The weird world of CHARLEY BOWERS	8
David Wyatt investigates more film mysteries	19
DVD NEWS	20
FRED KARNO'S MUMMING BIRDS: The legendary sketch that launched Charlie Chaplin	21
Missing in Action: THE GHOST TRAIN	26
ALICE HOWELL, forgotten comedienne	28
SCREENING NOTES	31

New Laurel & Hardy footage found!

An amazing discovery surfaced on the Internet during the Summer. Home movie footage by vaudevillian and amateur cameraman George Mann of his visit to the Hal Roach studios has been released from his family's archives and posted on YouTube. The footage is roughly nine minutes long and features extensive scenes of Laurel and Hardy at work, filming 'SHOULD MARRIED MEN GO HOME'. Mann filmed alongside the regular cameramen and captured duplicate shots of some scenes from the finished film, as well as some delightful scenes of Stan, Babe and their leading ladies Viola Richard and Dorothy Coburn clowning for the cameras. There is precious little film of Stan and Babe behind the scenes during their Hal Roach years, and as far as I'm aware, no other footage from their silent years, so this really is a bit of a revelation.

Amongst the other delights of the footage are glimpses of the Roach backlot familiar from so many classics, and of the S.S. Mirimar boat set glimpsed in 'SAILORS BEWARE' and Charley Chase's 'ROUGH SEAS', amongst others. Charley even makes a brief appearance himself, out of costume. It's even rarer to see behind-the-scenes footage of him, and it's especially good to see him at a period when many of his films have vanished.

All in all, this is a gem of a discovery that really adds colour to the history of L& H and the Roach studios. The warmth and camaraderie of the film-makers shines through, and this is essential viewing for anyone who has ever enjoyed any of their work.



Happy Birthday, Jean Darling!

Congratulations to Our Gang's Jean Darling, who recently celebrated her 90th Birthday.

Slapstick 2013

Bristol's Slapstick festival is gearing up again for the New Year. Dates are confirmed as January 24th-27th and the first confirmed event is a special screening of Harold Lloyd's classic 'THE KID BROTHER'. More announcements are to follow imminently and by the time you read this, the whole programme will probably be online; check www.slapstick.org.uk for updates.

Great Lives: Stan Laurel

Thanks to John Bogie for tipping me off about a recent BBC radio documentary on Stan Laurel. 'Great Lives' features a celebrity profiling someone who influenced them, and comedian Ken Dodd chose Stan. In conversation with Glenn Mitchell, Ken retold the story of his life. Ken spoke with genuine affection for the boys and it was a very pleasant way to spend half an hour. Hopefully, some casual listeners will be inspired to follow it up by watching the L & H films!



ERIC SYKES, 1923 – 2012

It was very sad to hear of the passing of Eric Sykes in July. Eric was a true giant of comedy, and really the last survivor of the band of comedians and writers who changed the face of post-war U.K. comedy.

Born in Oldham, Lancashire, Eric's breakthrough came as a scriptwriter for the radio series 'EDUCATING ARCHIE', a vehicle for ventriloquist Peter Bowles. Although ventriloquism is perhaps a questionable concept for a radio show, Eric turned the series into a success and thereafter was in demand as writer for Frankie Howerd and others. He soon became acquainted with The Goons and formed a close-knit partnership with Spike Milligan to write many of the series' funniest episodes. Eric was able to harness Spike's fragile comic genius, and was the only outside writer to ever pen Goon Shows without Milligan during the latter's bouts of illness. It speaks volumes of Eric's comic versatility that, although he rose to fame as scriptwriter for radio, he found his greatest successes in the very opposite medium of visual comedy. Having always nurtured a terrific fondness for sight gags and slapstick, he would incorporate this into his own TV shows and, most explicitly, the series of silent film pastiches he made. Starting with the hilarious, award-winning 'THE PLANK' (1967), through to 1993's 'THE BIG FREEZE', Eric paid homage to his heroes, from Buster Keaton to Jacques Tati via Stan Laurel. It's a sign of his popularity and status as a "comedian's comedian" that these short films boast impressive cast lists, with everyone from Tommy Cooper to Spike Milligan turning up in cameos.

The traditional mixture of slapstick and sight gag in these films was enhanced by Eric's slightly surreal Goon Show tendencies, and a dry sense of humour to match his deadpan, lugubrious expression.

Although he had fruitful associations with many comedians, it is Eric's partnership with Hattie Jacques that endures in the public memory. The pair were teamed in the long-running sitcom 'SYKES AND A...', later revived as simply 'SYKES'.

Cuddly, dizzy Hattie was a perfect contrast for Eric's dim-witted, slightly pompous character, in both character and appearance; the glorious joke of the series was that the pair were supposed to be identical twins! The warm and gentle humour of the series caught the public interest and was only ended by Hattie's death in 1980.

Eric kept busy to the end, despite the onset of deafness and failing sight (he was registered blind). In his latter years he made straight acting appearances in TV's 'THE BILL', a 'HARRY POTTER' film and 'THE OTHERS'.

Recognised as a national treasure, he remained warm and charming, always acknowledging the debt he owed to classic comedians. He described Laurel and Hardy as "two gentle souls who taught me how to laugh". Eric Sykes was a gentle, humorous soul himself, and the world is a little bit sadder and worse off for his passing. Rest in Peace, Eric.



CLASSIC SYKES

THE PLANK (1967)

Eric's first silent comedy is the one for which he will be best remembered. Teamed with Tommy Cooper as a pair of incompetent builders, this is 45 minutes of classic visual comedy mixing Laurel Hardy with Buster Keaton as Sykes milks every possible gag from the simple prop.

SYKES AND A HAUNTING (1962)

Sykes' much-excerpted take on the old handcuffed-together routine, executed pristinely with Hattie Jacques.

STRANGER (1972)

Very funny SYKES episode from the first colour series, featuring Peter Sellers as a psychotic old flame of Hattie's.

RHUBARB (1969)

Silent Comedy via The Goons; Sykes experiments with sound by having only one word – the title- spoken by all characters in the film.

SYKES AND A BATH (1962)

Sublime mixture of situation and slapstick as Eric gets his toe stuck in the bath tap. Builds to a great sequence in a doctor's waiting room full of people with similar misfortunes...

HEAVENS ABOVE (1963)

Eric's supporting role in this Peter Sellers film showed he could tackle grittier acting parts.

BUSTER KEATON'S

French Connections

In the last issue, I reported on Buster's overlooked French feature, 'LE ROI DES CHAMPS ÉLYSEES' and mentioned that one of the locations used in the film is still identifiable today. I've just been lucky enough to spend a holiday in Paris, so I took a trip there, and to a couple of other locations with Buster connections...

First of all, on the right is another look at the Café du Trocadero, one of the places where Buster accidentally hands out a fortune on his journey through the city... The spot is still very busy in the centre of the Place Trocadéro, and is one of the first sights you see as you emerge from the metro station. In fact, very little has changed since 1934 and the building's appearance is almost exactly the same as in the film. It's a great feeling to stand where Buster once stood, which isn't often possible on this side of the pond. The food is also great and there's a cracking view of the Eiffel Tower!

Buster's journey as millionaire also takes him past some more well-known locations, such as l'Opéra and the Arc de triomphe.

The Keaton connections with France don't end with 'LE ROI DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES'. The French would always be among the greatest admirers of Buster's pantomime and, just as they had come to his aid at his 1934 low



On the left, Buster stands outside the Cirque Médrano in 1947. On the right, the same spot today. It's somewhat less glamorous now, and you'd have to be very brave to stand in the middle of the busy traffic junction where Buster is stood!

ebb, would do so again at subsequent lean times. In 1947, an offer came in from the legendary Cirque Médrano, an indoor circus near to Paris's Place Pigalle, for Buster to perform live. At this point, Keaton hadn't been in an American film for over 2 years, so he was glad to make the trip. Buster performed classic bits from his films in the show, including 'the giant newspaper' gag from 'THE HIGH SIGN', the duel scene from 'THE PASSIONATE PLUMBER' and 'putting the drunken wife to bed' from 'SPITE MARRIAGE'. Eleanor Keaton was his foil in many of the sketches, and audiences were hugely appreciative.



Just down the road from the Médrano is the Moulin Rouge; this shot of Buster with Zsa Zsa Gabor dates from around 1959

After so long in the shadows, it must have heartened Buster to hear the laughter of the live audiences and see the huge billboard outside the Médrano with his face on, proclaiming him as the "premier comedian du Cinema Americain". Indeed, he returned to the venue another three times between his first visit and 1953, always playing to great admiration. One of the Médrano clowns, Len Austin, recalled how the clowns would gather to watch Keaton at work – "amazed, that's all I can say". Certainly, existing live footage of Buster on TV shows that he could hold an audience in the palm of his hand, and a tantalisingly brief excerpt of him performing the duel sketch at the Médrano appears in Brownlow and Gill's masterful 'BUSTER KEATON: A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW'. In fact, this sketch was actually filmed in its own right as 'UN DUEL A MORT' in 1951, a short film that has now become almost impossibly obscure.

James Agee's 1949 article 'COMEDY'S GREATEST ERA' takes a lot of credit for rehabilitating Keaton's career; certainly this may have been the case in America, but actually his appearances at the Cirque Médrano were the first reawakening of interest in him, and the first time he had star billing in any-

thing much since his series of shorts at Columbia. The live shows proved to Buster that people were still interested and entertained by him in bleak times, and as such represent a huge turning point in his career. Sadly, there is no longer a circus here; the Cirque Médrano is now strictly a touring concern and in its place at 63 Boulevard de Rochechouart is a somewhat less glamorous Carrefour supermarket. Still, I was chuffed to find that it was only a few minutes walk from the apartment where I was staying and enjoyed paying a visit to the spot where Buster's post-war career really took off. Who knows, perhaps Buster's spirit is still pratfalling amongst the pastries and banana skins!

Before we move on from 'LE ROI DES CHAMPS ELYSEES', there is one more point of note... This amazing scrapbook recently turned up on Ebay. Presumably owned by someone connected with the production, it contains an amazing 139 stills from the film, including the gems below... Any stills from 'LE ROI..' are scarce so this is an amazing find. I would have placed a bid, but unfortunately I'm about £5,993.50 short of the £6000 asking price! Still, congratulations to whoever the lucky bidder was; it's a beautiful souvenir of an overlooked moment in Buster's career.





MORE ON SID FIELD

Way back in issue 2 I wrote about Sid Field and a recent BBC documentary about him. The documentary mentioned and showed a clip from Sid's first film, 'THAT'S THE TICKET'. Mark Newell has kindly supplied some more information on this obscure little film and corrects a few misconceptions. He writes:

"That's the Ticket" was a minor movie made in 1940 by Warner British starring Sid Field and Hal Walters. The plot involved wartime espionage. In 1943 Sid became a West End star and subsequently (1946) had a lavish musical feature ("London Town")

built around him. This was incorrectly publicised as his first film and the earlier effort was thus conveniently forgotten. Sid lived to make only one more film - "Cardboard Cavalier" in 1949.

The National Film Archive restored "London Town" in the 1980s and showed copies of all three Sid Field films in a brief season at the National Film Theatre in the 1990s. The recent Sid Field documentary on BBC4 however didn't mention "Cardboard Cavalier" at all and wrongly claimed that "That's the Ticket" was a recent rediscovery."

The film has recently been screened again at the National Film Theatre. David Wyatt saw it there and adds:

"THAT'S THE TICKET was good - probably his best film. Just when I thought it would be really good the plot disintegrated though, & we got Sid in drag, in a haunted house & some pie throwing at the end, as if someone thought "Oh heck we haven't had any drag, scary stuff or pie throwing yet...""

Sadly, that seems to be a common problem in British comedies! I couldn't get down for the NFT screening myself, but hopefully it will come around again sometime. Though sadly it seems like Sid never made a vehicle worthy of his talents, his spirit shines through in all the film I have seen of him, so I look forward to catching up with 'THAT'S THE TICKET' soon.



KEYSTONE CENTENARY

September marked the 100th anniversary of Keystone Studio's opening. Mack Sennett's seminal company of course had a profound influence on silent comedy's overall style, and on the American film industry in general. Without Keystone, we might never have had Chaplin films, not to mention all the other comedians who started out with Sennett. Fittingly, TCM has paid tribute to Sennett's oeuvre by screening all-night showings of his classic films. These are in new, restored versions by new company Cinemuseum. You may recall that I mentioned their forthcoming Sennett DVD collection in a previous issue. These screenings are a brilliant taster of what's to come, and hopefully a release date is now not too far away. Watch this space!

THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL WORLD OF

CHARLEY BOWERS



Pussy willow trees that sprout live cats, eggs that hatch tiny cars and dancing ostriches made of cushions and feather dusters... No, not images from Edward Lear, Salvador Dali or 'Sgt Pepper'-era Beatles lyrics, but from the surreal fantasy world created by Charley Bowers. Inventor, animator, writer-director and comedian, Bowers was a true original. In the late 1920s, he produced a series of pioneering short films combining live action comedy with stop motion animation. This is the story of those films, and the elusive genius behind them...

Telling the story of Charley Bowers really needs to begin with the tale of his rediscovery. Until relatively recently, he was completely forgotten, one of the most obscure of all silent comedy's "lost boys". Although he had considerable success in the 1920s, his work was not included in the first revivals of silent comedy in the 1950s principally because it was not even known about. After the early 30s Bowers had dropped totally off the radar, his films never revived or even recalled in mainstream circles. Yet, in a few forgotten corners they remained, waiting for reappraisal.

Flash-forward to late-60s France, and film historian Raymond Borde has taken to the habit of buying up unwanted films from circuses and travelling picture shows in case of finding something interesting. As anyone who has ever searched for any kind of treasure knows, it's a game of roulette, and nine times out of ten all you get is uninteresting, or duplicates of what you already have. However, once in a while, a glittering gewgaw turns up that makes it worth all the trouble. Borde's own discovery was a cache of films starring a comedian billed as "Bricolo". Just imagine his surprise when, without any warning, the following tale unspooled before his eyes:

A young inventor has created a substance able to graft any objects together and make them grow. With this, he is able to grow an eggplant that contains real eggs, some new laces for his boots and a straw hat from a single straw. He tries to sell the potion to farmers, but his demonstrations go awry, leaving one farmer stranded on top of a huge tree, and another with a wheelbarrow that grows into a fully decorated Christmas tree! Finally, he runs into a farm overcome with violent mice, who ambush the housecats with miniature guns. The inventor's solution is to graft catnip onto pussy willow, growing a tree that produces "battalions of cats" from its branches. The cats finally rid the farm of the mice, but the farmer complains that he cannot afford to feed them all and sends him packing. The inventor resorts to suicide by sticking his head in a cannon!

Not your average comedy short, then.. Borde was beguiled, not just by the offbeat story and gags, but by the incredible animation effects used in this completely unknown little film. There is a seamless integration of incredibly lifelike animations with real-life footage. There are no cheating cutaways in this film, later identified as 'NOW YOU TELL ONE' (1926); we see all of the bizarre events unfold before our eyes in a dazzling display of camera trickery that even outdoes Keaton's 'SHERLOCK JR'! At one point, a real straw hat grows on top of the inventor's head as he busies himself with his tasks, and the animation of cats sprouting from the tree is completely convincing.

Borde didn't realize it yet, but he had just had his first encounter with Charley Bowers. In fact, he had no idea who this slightly Keatonesque actor was, nor that in reality he was *actually* the inventor of the novel ef-



A typical Bowers animation effect; Charley nonchalantly grows a straw hat atop his head; 'NOW YOU TELL ONE', 1926.

fects seen in the film. Bowers was so forgotten that *nobody* seemed to know who he was. As with many silent film comedians, the French had endowed Bowers with his own nickname, Bricolo, from the verb 'bricoler', meaning 'to build'. The appellation was a good one; as more of Bricolo's films turned up over the following years they all featured the eccentric little inventor building some sort of incredible machine, or accidentally creating his own kinds of Frankenstein's monsters. The billing was used in all of the films that turned up, with no clue to Bowers' real identity. Only years later did Borde locate a promotional brochure listing this. With Bowers' name known, historians were able to work backwards and the jigsaw started to fall into place.

But after a while, the jigsaw refused to be completed; his identity may have been disclosed, but Bowers is still shrouded in mystery. Take his biography, for instance. One of the sole sources for information is this account in Photoplay from 1928:

"His life has been as goofy as his pictures. His mother was a French countess, his father was an Irish doctor and Charley was born in Iowa. After that, anything was possible. It happened. At five a tramp circus performer taught Charley to walk tightrope. At six the Circus kidnapped him. He didn't make it back for two years and then the shock killed his father. At nine, he supported his mother by walking rope, mowing lawns, ran elevators, printed menus, broke broncos, jockeyed horses, packed pork, sketched cartoons, toured vaudeville, directed plays, designed scenery, produced advertising, wrote history, animated one hundred reels of cartoons, worked out the Bowers process, invented a camera and - grew up."



Just who was this man? A rare portrait of Bowers in mufti.

Well, the bit about Iowa is reasonable enough, but after that, I think a substantial pinch of salt is required! Bowers (or his publicity department) seems to have been working overtime to create a fantastic life story to match his cinematic creations. On and off the screen, the line between fact and fantasy becomes blurred in Charley Bowers' story. This is borne out by some of the only surviving testimonial of the man himself. Isadore Klein, an animation colleague, paints him as an egotist and a pathological liar, always coming up with tall tales and false boasts. His favourite was when Bowers told completely seriously, of having walked a tightrope between two skyscrapers while carrying a lighted oil stove in each hand! Of course, one should always be wary of taking one witness's word as gospel (just think what Frank Capra did to Harry Langdon's reputation), but one cannot deny that Bowers seemed to be fascinated by lying. ! We've already seen that the plot of 'NOW YOU TELL ONE' is based around telling tall tales and this would be a recurring motif in several Bowers films. More broadly, the suspension of disbelief in the face of fantastic happenings is central to the world he created on celluloid; the ongoing uncertainty over his life story would surely have pleased him.



A frame from Bowers' 'MUTT AND JEFF' cartoon, 'GRILL ROOM EXPRESS'. The use of animals and a modernised, speedy kitchen, point the way to common themes in his later films

So, let's work back to build up a picture of what we definitely do know. It's possible that he did do a vaudeville wire-walking act, but as far as I'm aware there has yet to be solid evidence of this, and he certainly never incorporated it into his existing films. What *is* verifiable in the biography above is his work designing, illustrating and animating. He had a great talent for drawing and by the early 1910s had fallen into newspaper cartoonist work at the Chicago Tribune, and subsequently tried his hand at animation. He worked on a series called 'Pif and Paf', and ultimately worked up to being head animator at his own studio on a series of 'Mutt and Jeff' cartoons, which continued successfully until 1925.

By the mid-1920s Bowers was becoming interested in the possibilities of using his animation talents in conjunction with live



Original stills from Bowers films are rare, but this postcard from 'EGGED ON' popped up on Ebay not long ago.

action. Later cartoonists like Frank Tashlin recalled going to see silent comedy films with a notebook to jot down gag ideas that they could magpie, and Bowers was probably in the same practice. He must have sensed an affinity between his cartoons and the madcap world of silent comedy then blossoming, and seems to have been especially influenced by Buster Keaton's approach. In the mid-20s he patented a filming process for mixing his stop motion animations with live footage. Contemporary publicity describes the patenting of his special camera in 1926:

"Bowers claims that he can photograph anyone and then show him doing anything imaginable, such as walking a tightrope, sitting atop the Dome of the Capitol, or flying from a skyscraper in New York to the new bridge in Philadelphia [...] The inventor states that an appropriate setting, interior or exterior, may be photographed at one time and the actors and action transferred cinematographically [sic] into the set later. In this way it will not be necessary to take companies to foreign lands. Bowers says a few feet of film is sufficient"

Put like this, the idea is almost a precursor of modern green screen technology. Bowers' own special interest in the process was its ability to merge his animations with moving backgrounds and humans. To show off this and perhaps create a wider market for his process, he embarked upon a series of 12 'Whirlwind comedies', independently produced in Long Island and starring himself. Thus began the series of 'Bricolo' films which are today his most brilliant legacy.

The first of the 'whirlwind' shorts was 'EGGED ON', released in May 1926 and still extant. Charley plays the character that would become customary for him, an eccentric inventor (basically, one senses, a caricature of himself). He decides what the world needs is the unbreakable egg shell and locks himself away in his room until he has a design for a machine to fulfill this purpose. Attempting to create interest, he visits the offices of the National Egg Shippers Association. Unfortunately, his sales pitch begins with a demonstration of the fragility of eggs, ie. by smashing them all over the offices of the businessmen; he is forcibly ejected. Undaunted, Charley sets off to build his machine alone, scavenging parts from a wide variety of sources, including a postman's bicycle, a window cleaner's ladder and an old man's beard. Finally, his enormous, complex machine is finished and he collects eggs for a demonstration. However, transporting the eggs in the hood of a model T Ford seems to have an adverse effect on them; when he takes out the crate of eggs, they quiver and bulge, before each one begins to hatch. However, the small crumpled hatchlings gradually unfurl not into chicks, but into perfect tiny replicas of Model T Fords that drive away as Charley watches in astonishment!

'EGGED ON' is a template for the films that followed in several ways. First of all, Charley's character is fixed as the eccentric, slightly otherworldly inventor. With deadpan demeanour and something of a physical resemblance to Keaton, he also possesses a natural extension of his fondness for gadgetry. In fact, Charley's character is almost how Buster might have turned out if he'd stayed locked away from the world developing his inventions instead of trying to win the girl. He essentially plays a technocrat, brilliant in his own way but possessed of a one track mind oblivious to the chaos he causes in pursuit of his inventions. (he could be an ancestor of the character of Sheldon in current sitcom 'The Big Bang Theory').



The climatic animation in 'EGGED ON'; miniature T-fords hatch from a crate of eggs and drive away.

The second significant thing about 'EGGED ON' is its use of



An ad launching the Whirlwind Comedies. Bowers drew the cartoons and portrait himself.

eggs as a key feature. Bowers seemed to have a persistent fixation with eggs and the process of metamorphosis. The mysterious transformations that take place inside an egg proved a source of immense fascination for him and this was reflected in his animations, which often involved strange creatures hatching out of eggs or morphing into something else. In Bowers' world, forms and the state of being are transient and dreamlike at best, nightmarishly inconsistent at worst. He would find himself an innocent victim caught up amongst strange creatures, out-of-control machinery and impossible circumstances as he wandered in a daze through a bizarre poster paint dreamland. Here was a hostile place where painted figures in portraits leapt from their frames to attack you, eggs could turn back into chickens and household objects could fly about at will. Bowers' cartoon background was very clear in his films; anything could happen!

Collaborating with Bowers on direction and script of 'EGGED ON', and all subsequent films, was a gentleman by the name of H.L. Muller. Amongst the many mysteries of Bowers' career is the nature of his working relationship with Muller. I've given more space to this discussion at the end of this article, but suffice to say for now that his input, creatively and technically, was certainly crucial in helping Bowers' flights of cartoon fancy become a filmed reality.

It's also worth mentioning here two other notable names involved with the Bowers films. Ted Sears, later famous at Disney for his work on 'SNOW WHITE' and other films, acted as gagman and animation assistant. Eddie Dunn, later supporting actor and gagman at Hal Roach studios, also worked faithfully for Bowers as writer and supporting actor. Bowers has been criticized for taking all the credit for his films himself, but this is unfair. Although Dunn and Sears never received on-screen credit (how many gagmen did?), their contributions are consistently noted in press releases from the Bowers studio and in Hollywood trade papers. Bowers can't have been all *that* stingy with credit after all.

Whatever the ratio of credit, the team at the Bowers studio was producing incredible results in the Whirlwind comedies. The second film, 'HE DONE HIS BEST' continues the theme of incredible inventions. The story starts out conventionally enough, with Charley searching for a job so he will be able to marry his girlfriend. He eventually finds work as a waiter, but as he is non-union, the kitchen staff walk out on strike. From here, things start to become more unusual, as Charley invents a machine to do the work of the entire restaurant at the push of a button. A huge tube connects the kitchen to the seating area, hovering above and dispensing table cloths and cutlery. In the kitchen, buttons are labeled with different meals, which the machine prepares ingeniously. Take chicken dinner, for instance. A mechanical hand appears from a trapdoor, holding an ear of corn as bait for a live chicken. Seconds after it has been lured into the trapdoor, it reappears fully roasted on a plate. Next, potatoes are mashed using a mallet, and carrots dug up and chopped. Peas prove more of an effort; the mechanical hands plant a pea in a pot and instantly a plant grows before our eyes, bearing tins of peas as its harvest. These are retrieved and meal is dispatched to the table via the giant tube. Next is an order for hash, somewhat



Charley Bowers' film world was full of crazy machines, like this one from 'A WILD ROOMER' (1926).

simpler to make; meat, vegetables, a shoe and a mop are all ground down through a mincer and onto a plate. The restaurant owner is greatly impressed and instructs Charley to make a wedding cake for his daughter's wedding. Charley expects to be the bridegroom but discovers she is marrying another man. He collapses in tears on the machine's control panel, sending food flying all over the wedding party. (Interestingly, nearly all of Bowers' films end on a downbeat note, with his invention either failing or the girl he is trying to win already being married, or both.)

A **WILD ROOMER** again involves Charley making a huge machine. Here, Bowers' creation is designed to do, well, everything. Bowers' character is completely subsumed by the animations for a while, as a long sequence shows the machine's function of "entertaining baby": for the child's amusement, it creates a living a



doll with a beating heart, that then frolics away on the back of a squirrel. Bowers is off-screen for almost 5 minutes while all of this is going on. As a comedian he was capable, but often the real stars were his animations.

Perhaps aware of the slightly uneven ratio of action to animation, Bowers and Muller next focused on the process of invention rather than the invention itself. This gave a more sustained storyline, and enabled animation to be peppered throughout rather than as one isolated setpiece. 'MANY A SLIP' features Charley trying to develop the non-skid banana peel. (fortunately, the idea doesn't work out; just think how many silent comics would have been thrown out of work!). The result is one of his funniest films, with animation and live action comedy perfectly integrated. Throughout are little amusing touches; absolutely everything in Charley's lab is labeled "Patent Pending" and his unorthodox methods of testing his solution are very funny. He has built his own miniature staircase to test his banana skins on, and conducts further experiments on unsuspecting passers-by by planting peel on the pavement outside.

These eccentric gags and touches were a great asset when Bowers and Muller tried some more conventional storylines. 'FATAL FOOTSTEPS' is the simple story of Charley taking a correspondence dance class in the Charleston. Charley does create an invention, a pair of dancing shoes, but this is less of a focus than in the other shorts. In the place of extended bursts of animation, the surreal humour remains to make for a very entertaining comedy. Charley takes everything to extremes by a process of warped logic; for instance, to help him learn the dance steps, he paints numbered footprints on the floor. Gradually, he paints more and more until the entire farmhouse, floor, walls, ceilings and all, are covered!

In 'NOTHING DOING' he is disqualified from joining the police force for being too short. His solution is to build a great mound of putty on his head, which he then covers with "hair" he has obtained from shaving a small dog! Later, he is faced with a line of criminals who he must escort to the police station. How to tackle the problem? If he walks behind, they can run away; if he walks in front they can sneak up on him. His solution is bizarre but practical. In the manner of a circus trick shooter, he walks at the front of the line, aiming his gun backwards over his shoulder, keeping his aim by using a hand held mirror. Endowed with the mind of an inventor who considers all possibilities, no matter how ridiculous, he comes up with solutions that are impractical yet somehow make sense.



Some of Bowers' animal creations. From the top: a doll and squirrel from 'A WILD ROOMER' (1926); Charley's insect assistant from 'THERE IT IS' (1928); a DIY Ostrich from 'SAY AHH' (1928); A metal eating bird and a gangster worm in 'IT'S A BIRD' (1930)

Sadly, we can only guess at many of the flights of fancy that Bowers and Muller came up with for several of the other films, as the survival rate is not good. 'HE COULDN'T HELP IT' won praise for an animated puppy that accompanies Charley; 'THE VANISHING VILLAIN' involved him with an invisibility formula used by crooks, which no doubt gave him plenty of scope for some surreal and spooky animation effects. One of the most intriguing looking films is 'SHOOSH', made especially more so by its alternative title 'WHY SQUIRRELS LEAVE HOME'. Surviving stills show Charley working as a detective, a role he returned to later in one of 'THERE IT IS' (1928).



An intriguing still from a missing Bowers comedy, 'SHOOSH' (1927).

'NOTHING DOING' was the last of the 'Whirlwind' comedies. They had caused quite a stir and an offer came in for Bowers to continue his comedies at Educational Studios in California. Educational was at this time a very notable comedy studio, with Lupino Lane, Lloyd Hamilton, Larry Semon and Dorothy Devore on its roster, so the move was a step upward. In October 1927, Film Daily reported that Bowers was packing up all his equipment from his Long Island studio and preparing to bring his process to Hollywood. Accompanying him were Muller and his gag writers Dunn and Sears.

The Educational series would successfully continue the formula of surreal gags and animation, but there were a few subtle changes. For starters, the shorts benefited from higher budgets and a slicker appearance overall. They also tended to favour more happy endings than the early films, perhaps in an attempt to broaden the shorts' appeal to more conservative viewers. Another interesting development was Charley's adoption of a thicker white makeup and slightly more passive, innocent character. Instead of being a ruthless inventor he started to become wound up in chaos that his animated creatures were already causing. Probably this was the influence of Harry Langdon, who was being absorbed a little bit by everyone at this time.

The first of the Educational series was 'THERE IT IS'. Perhaps his wildest and most-off the wall film, it's also one of his funniest. The story starts in the Frisbee household, where strange disturbances have been occurring. Eggs turn back into chickens in the kitchen, items disappear randomly and a "fuzz-faced phantom" runs around the house causing havoc. The distraught family send to Scotland Yard for help, setting up a fantastic visual pun: the detective HQ is literally a yard full of men in kilts! Amongst them is Charley, who is despatched to the scene, along with his insect assistant, McGregor. There he finds all sorts of strange goings-on, as the phantom appears and disappears through walls. Retiring to bed, a painting of a seascape above Charley's head suddenly turns stormy and produces a massive tidal wave to soak him; Charley puts up his umbrella and falls asleep, but awakes to find that the phantom has somehow suspended him from the ceiling in his sleep! After many more frenetic and brilliantly mad-cap scenes, the mystery is finally solved: the phantom turns out to be the grandfather of the previous tenants, who return to claim him and all ends happily. No description could fully capture the lunacy of this film, but it is a maelstrom of surrealism and comic invention that has to be seen to be believed. Almost as good was the second Educational short, 'SAY AHH' which returns to Bowers' favourite theme of eggs. Only the second reel remains today, and as we join the footage an incurable grouch has been prescribed a diet of ostrich eggs to help return him to a good humour (!). Charley is the ostrich farmer, trying his best to keep up a supply from his ostrich, Cleo. He accidentally spills cement into the ostrich's



The brilliantly literal vision of Scotland yard in 'THERE IT IS' (1928)



In the Educational films, Charley becomes noticeably more Langdon-esque in appearance and action.

feed bag, resulting in an unbreakable concrete egg. With the feed ruined, Charley improvises by grinding down anything he can get his hands on: cushions, feather dusters, a broom, etc. After dining on this concoction, Cleo lays an egg that hatches out two miniature replica ostriches made from cushions, collars and feather dusters. The sight of such bizarre creatures finally causes the grouch to break into uproarious laughter, and the two ostriches dance a synchronised foxtrot as the film fades. It's one of Bowers' most charming animation sequence and a wonderfully uplifting end to the film. However, in the final few seconds of the film, the picture becomes almost completely consumed by the flashes and blotches of nitrate decomposition. 'SAY AHH' was rescued just in time, but the decaying image is a portent of the rest of the series' fate. Of the four remaining Bowers' Educationals, not a single frame remains.

A great shame, as reviews indicate that they maintained the high standard that the series started with. 'WHOOZIT' had Charley entering an Opium den, causing him to have surreal hallucinations that no doubt gave full reign to his surreal gags and animations. 'YOU'LL BE SORRY' had Charley starting his own one-man police force. Possibly a remake of 'NOTHING DOING', it won particular praise for a scene in which Charley finds himself locked in a cellar full of strange gadgets and mechanical animals; Film Daily singled out "an incredibly lifelike mechanical puppy" as a main laugh-getter.

'HOP OFF' had animated fleas, with Charley the proprietor of their circus. A key gag featured his charges roller skating on a bald man's head! 'GOOFY BIRDS' was the final short of the Educational series and featured Charley on an expedition to capture a rare umbrella bird, complete with disguises to catch the bird unawares, a variety of strange traps, and a "tough guy" worm that subdues the bird.

The films had been uniformly praised in the press, with words like "astounding", "novel" and "hilarious" popping up again and again in reviews. However, Bowers and Muller did not make another series of films for Educational, nor anywhere else. Probably, the shorts were too expensive to produce, especially when sound was coming in.

However, they did try once more, in a one-off sound short released by independent producer J.H. Hoffberg. There has been debate over when 'IT'S A BIRD' was made exactly, but the general date settled on is 1930. The short revisits the lost 'GOOFY BIRDS'; presented as a Lowell Thomas tall story, it takes the form of flashbacks as junkyard owner Charley tells the tale of his quest to capture a rare metal-eating bird to help him dispose of his junk. His flashbacks begin with his junkyard overflowing; Charley has to resort to more and more novel ways to get rid of it. He takes to "gifting" people with old fenders and stoves, swapping one family's grand piano for an old boiler! When he hears of the metal-eating bird at a lecture, he sets off to find one, making a torturous journey to Africa by bicycle, towing behind him a huge line of wagons including a crate, a tent, an outhouse and a 10-piece Oompah band! Finally confronted with the animated bird, Charley lures it into his crate using a worm dipped in aluminium paint. Back home, he watches in amazement as the bird chews its way through wheels and fenders, before finally settling down to lay an egg. The egg slowly hatches a full sized T-ford, in an extension of the central effect from 'EGGED ON'. Charley proposes that they go into partnership running a flivver factory, but the bird tells him that she can only lay one egg every 100 years.



Charley and Katherine McGuire in 'THERE IT IS'. Taken from a promotional poster for Educational Pictures..

'IT'S A BIRD' shows that the Bowers comedies could have easily continued in the sound era. The addition of voices to the animated



Screenshots from Bowers' final onscreen appearance, 'IT'S A BIRD'.

characters is an asset, and although Bowers isn't *great* with dialogue, he gets by and would probably have become better over time (this was his first talkie, after all).

However, after this short, the Bowers trail goes cold. There seem to have been no more attempts to repeat it; perhaps he was beginning to run out of original ideas for animations—the effects seen in the film, whilst brilliant, all have their roots in previous films. Bowers looks pretty old and tired in the short, so perhaps health was another factor in his disappearance for the next few years. Or maybe he and Muller had a falling out. Whatever the truth, there is no evidence of any more Bowers films for some years. However, one film from the 30s era that bears a clear lineage in technique and humour to the Bowers Comedies is a curious little short called 'FRESH LOBSTER'. Starring Billy Bletcher, shows the hallucinations of a man who eats lobster before bed; a giant anthropomorphic lobster appears, chasing his bed through the busy city streets! Although the models and animation are not as accomplished as Bowers' work and I'm not suggesting he worked on the film, I'm sure he was an inspiration, as the ideas of strange creatures and the surreal gags seen are very similar.

The next definite Bowers project that has been uncovered is an odd little cartoon called 'BELIEVE IT OR DON'T' (1934), a series of odd little vignettes culminating in a lobster playing a xylophone, then being blown up! Then there's another gap of a few years until 1938. In this year, Bowers made 'PETE ROLEUM AND HIS COUSINS' an animation telling the story of oil and how it is useful to our lives, as an exhibit for that year's world's fair. Joseph Losey, the film's producer, recalled Bowers as a wizened little man whose work totally consumed and exhausted him; again, this leads to speculation that health played a part in his limited 30s output. In the following years, there were a few more independent cartoons bearing Bowers' distinct animation style, the last being 1940's 'WILD OYSTERS'.

After this, there are no more Bowers films or animations. Illness was encroaching on his career and soon all he could get by on were illustration commissions. Eventually, he became too ill to fulfill even these commitments and had to teach his wife, Winifred Leyton (leading lady in some of his silent shorts), to draw them for him.

Death came to Charley Bowers relatively early, in 1946, but although he had slunk back into obscurity, he has been rediscovered and hailed as a true maverick and genius of animation and silent comedy. With showings of his films at Pordenone and Bristol's Slapstick festival in recent years, his profile is perhaps higher than ever before. Even in this age of CGI and special effects, audiences are *still* awed by his special effects and off-beat gags. Perhaps he was just too far ahead of his time in the 1920s to really succeed in the mainstream. Surrealists like Andre Breton claimed him as an influence, and his eccentric gadgets are an acknowledged influence on the Aardman animations team and their "WALLACE & GROMIT" films. Mysteries and falsehoods may cloud Bowers' biography, but one thing that is certain is his talent as trailblazing animator and creator of comedy. With his co-conspirators, he trod a unique path and created some unforgettable short films that are unlike anything else in the silent comedy canon.



The all-singing, all-dancing oil drops climax to 'PETE ROLEUM AND HIS COUSINS'!

THE FILMS OF CHARLEY BOWERS

This list includes only the live action short comedies that Bowers made between 1926 and 1930. He also worked on hundreds of animated cartoons, which space precludes mentioning. Films in **green** exist complete. Films in **orange** are only partially extant. Films in **red** are completely lost.

WHIRLWIND COMEDIES

(independently produced for Joseph P Kennedy and released through FBO). Bowers and H.L. Muller shared writing and direction, with assistance from Eddie James. Also on the gagwriting team were Ted Sears and Eddie Dunn. Titles written by Neal O'Hara

1. **EGGED ON**

With Winifred Leyton.

Charley invents a machine to make eggshells unbreakable.

2. **HE DONE HIS BEST**

Charley mechanises a restaurant when all the staff go out on strike

3. **A WILD ROOMER**

Charley must demonstrate his new machine in order to claim an inheritance

4. **FATAL FOOTSTEPS**

With Eddie Dunn, Babe London?

Farmhand Charley takes a correspondence course in learning the Charleston; soon, the whole farm is caught up in it.

5. **MANY A SLIP**

With Eddie Dunn

Charley's next project: the non-slip banana skin. Only the second reel survived for years, but the first has now been recovered and the complete film restored.

6. **NOW YOU TELL ONE**

Charley is brought before the liars club to tell of a new substance that grafts objects together.

7. **SHOOSH (aka WHY SQUIRRELS LEAVE HOME)**

Charley runs a detective school

8. **HE COULDN'T HELP IT**

Ex-Vaudevillian Charley takes his dog act onto the streets

9. **GONE AGAIN**

Charley mechanises a village general store



The Bowers comedies received a fantastic reception. Sadly, this film no longer exists.



Back to the drawing board for the non-skid banana skin in 'MANY A SLIP'...



A lobby card for one of the numerous missing Bowers films.



Charley and FEATHERED friend in the missing short 'GONE AGAIN'.



Charley and Kewpie Morgan in 'SAY AHH'.



10. THE VANISHING VILLAIN

Charley gets mixed up with a crook and an invisibility formula

11. STEAMED UP (aka A PICKLED ROMANCE)

Charley is trying to save up cigarette coupons to buy an engagement ring

12.. NOTHING DOING

Charley joins the police force to impress his girl's father.

EDUCATIONAL PICTURES SHORTS

1928. All directed by H.L. Muller and written by Bowers & Muller with contributions from Ted Sears and Eddie Dunn.

1. THERE IT IS

With Buster Brodie, Katherine McGuire.

Charley is a detective from Scotland Yard sent to solve the mystery of the fuzz-faced phantom!

2. SAY AHH

With Kewpie Morgan, Eddie Dunn and Buster Brodie.

Charley has to supply ostrich eggs as a cure for a rich man who can't laugh.

3. YOU'LL BE SORRY

Charley starts his own one man-police force. Seems to be a partial remake of 'NOTHING DOING'.

4. WHOOZIT

Janitor Charley has strange opium visions!

5. HOP OFF

Charley gets involved with a flea circus

6. GOOFY BIRDS

With Buster Brodie and Yvonne Howell.

Charley and his partner go on an expedition to catch the rare umbrella bird.

SOUND SHORTS (J.H. Hoffberg)

A Lowell Thomas tall story. Directed by H.L. Muller.

1. IT'S A BIRD (c1930)

With Lowell Thomas.

Charley sets off on an exploration to capture a metal-eating bird.

WHO WAS H.L.MULLER?



Amongst the many mysteries of Bowers' career is the nature of his working relationship with Muller. Opinion has been divided on this matter; some believe that Muller was merely a pseudonym for Bowers himself, while at the other end of the spectrum are those who claim that Muller was the actual creative talent behind the films, with Bowers merely contributing the animations. I would say that the truth lies somewhere in between. Muller definitely existed, with reports from *Film Daily* and *Motion Picture Weekly* commenting on his appointment to the Bowers series, including a brief resume of his career up to that

point. He seems to have been born in England, and most of his other work seems to have been not in comedy or animation, but in documentary films. It's therefore unlikely that his contribution to However, he had worked with sound film experiments and colour film, so was obviously a bit of a technical whiz himself. With this background, he almost certainly requires a good deal of the credit for the on-screen wizardry. Indeed, many of the films are credited as "directed and photographed by H.L. Muller". Bowers' previous efforts had been pure animation, so integrating this with live footage must have required Muller's assistance.

Furthermore, if Bowers was as stingy at sharing recognition as Isadore Klein reported, he must have recognised that Muller's contributions were invaluable to the success of the films. The most likely scenario is that Bowers probably provided some of the more wacky cartoonist's ideas and animations, while Muller could help harness these into the film format that Bowers was unfamiliar with. Their teaming seems to be another one of those instances where talents come together to create magic, then fade away when they go their separate ways; neither man had a particularly distinguished career after the Bowers Comedies ceased production.



Muller, Bowers and Buster Brodie on the set of the lost short 'GOOFY BIRDS'

Muller the actor?



Looking at the still opposite of Muller directing, I spotted the similarity to the actor above in Bowers' 'HE DONE HIS BEST.'

Looking at the ears and low brow, I'm pretty sure of the match,, and it does seem probable that, in a small unit like the Bowers Comedies, anyone on hand would be roped in to play parts. I wonder if he appears anywhere else, or if this was a one-off appearance...

But what became of H.L. Muller when there were no Bowers comedies in production? Whatever the reason that Bowers and Muller made no more shorts after 'IT'S A BIRD', Muller returned to his work as cameraman. In 1931, *Film Daily* places him as cameraman on Clark & McCullough's second RKO short, 'FALSE ROOMERS'. Interestingly, former Bowers colleague Eddie Dunn is in the cast of this short, so could possibly have helped to get Muller the job. It's not always easy tracing the credits of film technicians, and Muller doesn't seem to have contributed to any more of the series, but **such things are not always easy to trace.**

Soon though, he is reported as working on his own camera process (more evidence that he played an important role in realizing Bowers' process). Evidently, this never came to fruition, or at least didn't find a backer, as Muller plugged away in obscurity, being reunited with Charley Bowers for his last few animated cartoons. Here he again takes credit for 'photographing' suggesting his talent to be instrumental to the success.

Muller and Bowers' mutual need for each other's talents seems again to be shown by Muller's drift back to obscurity after Bowers' death. What became of him is not definitely known, but historian Steve Massa has dug out a variety obituary for a New York projectionist named Harold Muller, from 1963.

Whatever his fate, Muller deserves recognition for his crucial role in making the Bowers comedies. While Bowers was the creative genius, without Muller, it's very unlikely that his flights of

fancy would ever have reached the screen in the form that still amazes us.



As late as 1940, Muller was still credited on Bowers' work



INSPECTOR WYATT INVESTIGATES...

David Wyatt presents more solved and unsolved silent film conundrums...

First, we've got an answer to one of our previous questions. (Just for once! Please can we have some more?) Last issue PanayotisCarayanis asked about a 1920's Syd Saylor comedy in the 'Let George Do It' series. The Dutch title on his copy translates as 'Finding Nelly', and he wondered if the right title was GEORGE IN LOVE. The plot has George arriving in a big city with only a photo of the girl he wants to find. The answer comes from the Kodascope 16mm library catalogue, thanks to Tony Saffrey in London. GEORGE LEAVES HOME is described as "adventures of a country boy in the city and his searching for a long -lost playmate." So that seems to be the right one.

The Kodascope catalogue had a great selection of silent comedies. Many of these prints have been the source for later copies on film and DVD. Eg.no complete 2 reel prints have surfaced of Mack Sennett's LIZZIES OF THE FIELD (1924, with Billy Bevan and Andy Clyde.) All copies from Lobster Films, Alpha Video, etc derive from the Kodak one reel version. Clips of the car race climax were in Robert Youngson's 1960's compilation 30 YEARS OF FUN, which makes me wonder if Robert Youngson had more footage on 35mm - though I guess this would have come to light by now if so.

Other Mack Sennett 2 reelers cut to one reel included two more with Billy Bevan - A SEA DOG'S TALE and GIDDAP. GIDDAP has just been released by Alpha Video on DVD ("Forgotten Funnymen - Billy Bevan volume 2") but mistakenly identified as THE IRON NAG. Both Bevan comedies, THE IRON NAG involves him as a convict winning a steeplechase while GIDDAP features a wild polo match which takes off into surrounding streets and houses. GIDDAP was released on 8mm years ago (by Mountain Films) as POLO PINHEADS. Presumably Alpha used a retitled copy for their source material and made a wrong guess at the original title.

Which brings us to another Mack Sennett query. An extract in one of those French Film Office catalogues (mentioned in past issues) was called LES CHAUFFEURS RIVAUX, and was listed (hopefully correctly) as being "taken from an old Mack Sennett comedy". (I say this because the name 'Mack Sennett' was often applied to any unknown silent comedy with gay abandon, just as any Sennett was labelled a 'Keystone comedy.') Annoyingly I could have bought a copy of this one some years ago when visiting 'LesCingles du Cinema' - the huge film fair at Argenteuil near Paris. But as French film prices seem to be more than double ours, I didn't buy it, so again we have only the catalogue description to go on: "Rival fleets of taxis wait at the station but only one client emerges, whom they fight to the death over. " Is this from Mack Sennett's 'Taxi Driver' series? I've only seen two of them - A TAXI SCANDAL and TAXI DOLLS, and it's neither of those. According to Brent Walker's highly recommended book 'Mack Sennett's Fun Factory' (highly recommended, but you do need to take out a second mortgage!) , there is a scene at a train depot in TAXI FOR TWO, so is it from this? Harry Langdon is a taxi driver in HIS NEW MAMA and collects his only client, Jack Cooper from a station, but there are no rival fleets of taxis. Billy Bevan is up against rival taxis in FROM RAGS TO BRITCHES; Film Office sold other extracts from this film and as I haven't seen the whole two reeler, could this be another extract that I haven't seen? Once again, over to you.

P.S. I'm introducing Walter Forde's first comedy feature WAIT AND SEE at Bristol's 'Slapstick' festival in January. It's a good one - but the BFI copy is missing some footage, unfortunately. If anyone should know if the film exists elsewhere, or they have a copy (except for the 9.5mm version which I know about, thanks) please let us know - quickly!



Walter Forde was alarmed to hear who was introducing his film....

DVD NEWS

Lots of good news on the DVD front this time around. First of all, several people have been in touch to ask where Lupino Lane films are available on DVD. Well, it's slim pickings I'm afraid, but there are a few shorts to be had:

The Forgotten Films of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle set contains 'FOOLS' LUCK', directed by Arbuckle, alongside many of Roscoe's own classics. Currently selling at www.oldies.com for just \$8.99, grab one while you can!

Releasing via the same website, Alpha Video continue to put out some forgotten silent comedies on affordable volumes. The newly released 'WORLD WAR ONE COMEDIES' features Lane's 'HIS PRIVATE LIFE' (also directed by Arbuckle) alongside Snub Pollard's 'THE DOUGHBOY' and Billy Bevan's 'THE FLYING ACE'. One of his more slapstick-y shorts, it nevertheless contains some lovely bits of business.

The fantastic SLAPSTICK ENCYCLOPEDIA box set previously released by Kino, but long out of print, has been newly licensed by Madacy Entertainment in the US. Priced At just \$14.99 on Amazon, it's a treasure trove sampling silent shorts by everyone from Charley Bowers to Larry Semon, including Lupino's tour de force short 'ONLY ME' (1929).

These are about the only officially available of Mr Lane's shorts, but there are a few other sources on the internet selling 16mm transfers of various quality. Ebay and Ioffer sometimes have home-made sets and films. More legitimately, www.A-1video.com sells 5 volumes of Lane's shorts, and Bill Sprague's fantastic service allows you to pick and choose your own compilation of shorts from his huge collection.

Check out his site at www.moviehistory.webs.com. Although you're not getting restored films, there are many rare and otherwise unavailable films, including several of Lupino's. I've ordered from Bill before; he's very helpful and offers the service at a very reasonable price.



MAX LINDER ON DVD & BLU-RAY

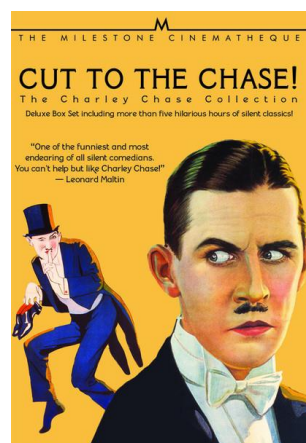
Available on DVD and Blu-Ray is a new French DVD set dedicated to silent comedy pioneer Max Linder. The set contains restorations of a number of his early Pathé shorts as well as his daughter Maud Linder's compilation 'En Compagnie de Max Linder' (containing edited versions of his three American features 'BE MY WIFE', 'SEVEN YEARS' BAD LUCK' and 'THE THREE MUST-GET-THERES'. It's about time Linder got his due, and this new release looks as though it will be definitive.

CUT TO THE CHASE – AT LAST!

A surprise announcement came lately; many moons ago Milestone Films announced a comprehensive restored collection of Charley Chase silent classics. Several of their restorations aired on TCM, but the set was shelved indefinitely. Well, *9 years later*, it has finally been taken off the shelf and is being released in November! Several of the films have since been duplicated on other releases, but two of the shorts 'THE UNEASY THREE' and 'CHARLEY MY BOY' are exclusive to this set.

THE NAVIGATOR on Blu-Ray

Kino continue their series of 'ultimate' Keaton DVDs and Blu-rays with his 1924 classic 'THE NAVIGATOR'. Extra features include audio commentary and a documentary on the making of the film by historian Bruce Lawton. The final 'ultimate edition', of 'COLLEGE', is due to follow in the New Year.



FRED KARNO'S 'MUMMING BIRDS'

The long life of a music hall act on stage and screen...



'The Guv'nor': Fred Karno.

Fred Karno's name is still legendary. After all, what can you say about a man whose "army" included both Chaplin brothers, Stan Laurel and Will Hay, not to mention scores of other talented but less well known comedians? He not only mentored and influenced these comedians early in their careers but also authored dozens of music hall sketches acknowledged as classics and later very influential. He certainly left a huge impact on his employees; consistently they displayed a reverence for the man's knowledge of comedy. Chaplin, always reticent in praising others, said "He *knew* comedy". "Most of what I know, I owe to Fred Karno" gushed Hay. "Fred Karno didn't teach me and Charlie everything we know, he just taught us most of it" said Laurel.

Karno's most legendary sketch 'MUMMING BIRDS', better known as 'A NIGHT IN THE ENGLISH MUSIC HALL', is where much of his reputation stems, and left long shadows on both the comedians who featured in it, and upon silent comedy in general. It pretty much launched the career of Charlie Chaplin, as well as giving a big leg up to fellow comedians

Stan Laurel and Jimmy Aubrey. Karno's comedians borrowed many of its gags and style, and many others were influenced as well. Here is the history of a classic music hall act and the cinematic variations on a theme that resulted...

'Mumming Birds' was probably the first act to present a "show within a show". As Frank Scheide has noted in an essay on Karno, theatre shows were traditionally a closed tableau taking place in a separate world to the audience, and 'MUMMING BIRDS' was the first self-reflective stage sketch show to blow away the hallowed boundaries of the proscenium. Yes, music hall comics bantered with audiences, but there had never been an attempt to satirise an entire theatre bill. Karno had been inspired to write such a sketch after watching a dismal evening's entertainment; first performed for a charity show in 1904, both the content and title of his sketch would go through several evolutionary phases. For some time, the sketch laboured under the arduous title "Twice Nightly, or A Stage Upon A Stage". Mercifully, in 1906 the title was changed to the much less cumbersome 'MUMMING BIRDS'. Karno exhibited a penchant for ornithological titles as his trademark; his first success had been 'JAIL BIRDS', and he followed this with 'EARLY BIRDS'. By 1907 the act had stabilised into something along the following lines...

As the tabs parted at the opening of the sketch, a replica stage flanked by boxes was revealed, with the show just about to start. Into one box, an inebriated gentleman stumbles, pausing to attempt to light his cigarette from an electric light. On the other side of the stage are a fat boy and his grey-haired grandfather, the fat boy armed with a mountain of buns and a pea-shooter. The acts that follow in the course of the evening's entertainment are burlesques, of popular act 'types', amongst them a dreadful comic singer, a tramp juggler and "The terrible Turkey", a scrawny wrestler. Each act meets with the scorn and constant interference of the drunk, and a steady pelting of buns by the fat boy. (as one account beautifully put it "the acts suffer criticism of a particularly severe nature, for what blow could pen or typewriter deliver compared with the impact of such very large buns?") The Terrible Turkey is so undernourished that he gobbles all the buns thrown at him;



Pandemonium reigns in this rare shot of the climax of 'MUMMING BIRDS'...

once he is finished stuffing himself, it is announced that he will take challengers to fight him. The drunk sees this as his cue to undress and takes to the stage, causing chaos. Pandemonium reigns amongst a still-steady hail of confectionery from the boy, and the curtain comes down.

The star part that developed in the act was the drunkard, who had the potential for many funny bits of business, pratfalls and hostile reactions to the acts on the 'stage'. Early on, this role went to Karno comic Billie Reeves, but it would be a young Londoner by the name of Charles Spencer Chaplin who took it to its most famous levels. It was through half-brother Syd that Charlie got his chance to join Karno's troupe, and David Robinson reports that by 1909 he was playing lead as "The Inebriate" during a run of the sketch at the Folies Bergeres in Paris.

The Karno troupe took the sketch on tour to the USA and Canada in 1912, where it was rechristened 'A NIGHT IN AN ENGLISH MUSIC HALL'. Also along for the tour were future silent comedians Jimmy Aubrey, Albert Austin and Stan Jefferson (soon to be Stan Laurel). Aubrey took the part of the "Terrible Turkey" and Jefferson was the terrible comic singer, in addition to understudying Chaplin. The pair shared lodgings, and Laurel later recalled their days together fondly. The sketch toured to great acclaim, with praise reserved especially for Chaplin, as a review from 'The Butte Inter Mountain' of April 1912,

preserved in Chaplin's own scrapbook, attests:

"he scarcely says three words, yet so funny are his actions that he proves himself one of the best pantomime artistes ever seen here. [...] There are many others in the cast who provide all manner of fun and the act from start to finish is one of the greatest novelties as well as thoroughly entertaining."



The reviewer also noted that the high level of balletic knockabout in the sketch required the participants to be "high class athletes and acrobats as well as pantomimists".

It was reviews like this that led Mack Sennett to come talent-scouting for Chaplin, and he left to make films for Keystone, leaving the troupe to continue without him. However, while Chaplin may have left Karno, Karno did not leave him, at least in comic spirit. The Inebriate would become a regular feature in Chaplin films, and more broadly, his anarchistic qualities informed the earliest visions of the Tramp. At Keystone, Chaplin used the drunk character in 'THE ROUNDERS'. A year later, he goes one better and roughly reproduces 'MUMMING BIRDS' for us in his Essanay short 'A NIGHT IN THE SHOW'. He made alterations and extra material to make it more suitable for his film style, but here essentially, is 'MUMMING BIRDS' with The Inebriate, the boy and his grandfather and the selection of awful acts which meet Chaplin's wrath.



The Inebriate from 'Mumming Birds' informed many of Chaplin's later drunken escapades on screen, amongst them 'THE ROUNDERS' (top) and especially 'A NIGHT IN THE SHOW' (above).

'A NIGHT IN THE SHOW' takes this template, however, and transforms it from an ensemble piece to a Chaplin star comedy. Some of the changes were necessary due to limitations of silent film - the mediocrity of the acts on stage must be conveyed entirely visually, for instance - but other aspects are clearly the result of Chaplin's fertile imagination chewing over the sketch in the intervening years, and embellishing it with new bits of business to fit his developing style. He's taken flak over the years for being a stagey director, but, far from presenting the broad stage sketch as a whole, he uses the intimate nature of the camera to focus in on small bits of business that would have been lost in the vastness of the music halls and vaudeville theatres where the sketch was performed.

Nevertheless, the film is hugely valuable as a recreation of how Chaplin played the part of the drunkard. Furthermore, the part that made him famous clearly left a large imprint on him; his drunk act is an integral part of later films 'THE CURE', 'THE IDLE



'MUMMING BIRDS' was adapted into 'A NIGHT IN A LONDON CLUB' on the American tours. This bill shows Chaplin on the left, 3rd from the top. Also shown at bottom right is Stan Laurel, who revisited the sketch for his 1925 short 'PIE EYED'.

CLASS' and most of all 'ONE A.M.', which he built entirely around it.

It wasn't just the Karno comedians that were influenced by the sketch and Chaplin's screen adaptation wasn't the first. As early as 1907, the Pathe Freres in Paris had produced a version starring Max Linder under the title 'AU MUSIC HALL' ('AT THE MUSIC HALL') Karno was so touched by the homage that he responded with a law suit. The legal claim was unsuccessful, and this probably made him take a more resigned approach to the other screen versions that followed. Chaplin's rise likely made screen comics take even more notice of the Karno sketches, and one sees essences of it peppered throughout the silent comedy genre. Jumping forward to 1921, Buster Keaton's iconic short 'THE PLAYHOUSE' should perhaps have been subtitled as 'A NIGHT IN AN AMERICAN VAUDEVILLE HOUSE'; the famous dream sequence, with Keaton playing all the stars and audience in the theatre, bears some stamp of the Karno sketch. The audience members in their boxes react to the proceedings on the stage and among them are a fat boy and his grandmother very much resembling some of the 'MUMMING BIRDS' stock characters.

The following year, Larry Semon offers us his version of the Inebriate in 'THE SHOW', although his version has more in common with Chaplin's second character in 'A NIGHT IN THE SHOW' than the well-dressed Inebriate. Meanwhile, Stan Laurel would use his skills understudying the inebriate when portraying a drunk on

a night out in a 1925 short, PIE EYED. The night Club setting perhaps suggests that more of the business was inspired by 'A NIGHT IN A LONDON CLUB' than the original, but is a good indication of how Stan might have played the part if given the chance (the debate continues as to whether he did ever get the chance to).

Lupino Lane, not a Karno comic but, as we have seen, very much a dedicated follower of all things music hall, produced a version, 'ONLY ME' in 1929. This film is an organic mixture of 'MUMMING BIRDS' with 'THE PLAYHOUSE'; lane records a fairly faithful version of the sketch, but adds Keaton's twist of playing all the characters himself and takes it to the nth degree by doing so for the entire two-reeler!

In the 1920s, Karno himself had not been idle. He had attempted to make some film versions of his sketches, including 'MUMMING BIRDS' in the U.K, starring a forgotten music hall comedian, Harry Wright. Time has not been kind to Wright or the films themselves, which made little impact and seem to have vanished without trace. Truthfully, Karno's star was slipping by this time. His comedy, developed and styled in the Edwardian era, was starting to seem old-fashioned in the more modern 1920s, and it speaks volumes that he was returning to the old successes rather than inventing new ones. In 1929 he made plans with Syd Chaplin to make a feature length version of 'MUMMING BIRDS' starring Syd as the drunk. The film was to be the first talking comedy film made in Britain. Syd was in need of a career boost as well, and the two talked animatedly of their plans for the film. Plans progressed at Elstree studios, but all of a sudden, planning of the film stopped dead, it was dropped from the schedules and Syd hightailed it out of the country. What had happened? Well, it seems as though Syd was involved in a sex scandal involving a young starlet at the studio. It's hard to know exactly what went on, and to be honest, I don't want to speculate. What is known is that he was alleged to have "injured her breast", and settled out of court. It's worth pointing out that, according to biographer Lisa K Stein, Syd himself felt that he had been set up by B.I.P., who wanted to pull out of making the film and needed an excuse for the filming to fall



Interpretations of 'MUMMING BIRDS' extended beyond ex-Karno comedians; Keaton's 'THE PLAYHOUSE' (top) features some familiar stock characters, while Larry Semon (middle) and Lupino Lane both provided their own versions of 'The Inebriate'.

through. Whatever the truth, the film never was made, and Syd Chaplin's career was over. He fled back to America, and for a while the rumours were that he would continue his ambitions to film the project, but this time in a version starring Charlie. By now though, Charlie was totally absorbed in the production of 'CITY LIGHTS' and so the rumours remained just that. While these ideas were floating around, Karno made the trip to the states. Perhaps given hope by all the speculation of Chaplin's plans, he attempted to find work at the Chaplin studios. However, he found a warmer reception from the artist formerly known as Stan Jefferson. Stan Laurel, now one half of the movies' greatest comedy team, headhunted Karno for a gag writer's position at the Hal Roach studios. His arrival was with great fanfare and he was photographed with Roach, L & H, Harry Langdon and Thelma Todd, although in the end he worked on only a few shorts. Roach later recalled that all he really did while into the studio was get into a legal row over some tyres.



Hal Roach, Fred Karno, Stan Laurel, circa 1929.

One film that he did have an impact on was Laurel and Hardy's 'NIGHT OWLS' (1930). More than any of their others, this has a distinct music hall sketch feel to it, even down to the use of music hall song 'THE OLD BULL AND BUSH' as accompaniment to one sequence. It's surely significant that, when Stan returned to his music hall roots for Laurel and Hardy's 1947 British tour, the sketch he wrote was based on this film. While Laurel absorbed 'The Guvnor's' ideas with relish, it seems that Karno wasn't really capable of adapting his style to the more cinematic American comedians. After a few short months he was let go and returned to Britain.

There he was involved with a few more short films in the early 1930s (including one, 'THE BAILIFFS', where he makes a blink-and-miss-it cameo appearance alongside Flanagan and Allen), but never really seems to have conquered the film format.



The idea of a talking version of 'MUMMING BIRDS' did re-surface one last time, however. Lupino Lane, now working in Britain, directed an adaptation called 'MY OLD DUCHESS' in 1933. This is one of the many missing British films from the 1930s, so how faithful it was to the original is hard to determine. Karno does get a story credit, however.

That seems to be the last filmed instance of Karno's most famous sketch. He would continue to revive Mummie Birds with small companies through the 1940s, but after a failed venture to create his own theatre complex, The Karsino, ended up bankrupt, running a corner shop. A sad end, and lurid tales of his private life have since sullied Karno's reputation further, but the man referred to as the Guv'nor by his employees had influenced many comedians, and with 'MUMMING BIRDS', provided inspiration for almost an entire subgenre of comedies.



The spirit of 'MUMMING BIRDS' was alive and well at the end of the 20th Century, in Robert Downey Jr's recreation in 'CHAPLIN' (1993)

As a footnote to this tale of 'MUMMING BIRDS', there is one last filmed version from many years later. Richard Attenborough's 1992 biopic 'CHAPLIN' contains a wonderful re-enactment of the sketch that made Chaplin famous by Robert Downey Jr. Here is his Inebriate beautifully recreated almost 100 years later. There are many reasons to watch 'CHAPLIN', but this is perhaps the strongest one. The roots of so much silent comedy, the attitudes, style and nuance of our favourite clowns, began here with an influential sketch that enabled Fred Karno's army to go forth and conquer Hollywood.

A 'MUMMING BIRDS' mystery...

Was 'A NIGHT IN THE SHOW' really Chaplin's first attempt to put 'MUMMING BIRDS' on film, or was there an earlier attempt now lost in the mists of time?

In 'THE CHAPLIN ENCYCLOPEDIA', Glenn Mitchell cites a 1921 Chaplin interview from *The New York Times*, which references Chaplin being filmed while touring with Karno in Jersey during 1912, and adds "there is a parallel story of a newsreel cameraman who later claimed to have filmed Chaplin on stage, which may or may not tie into this account". Inspired by this, Chaplin and Alf Reeves thought about making their own films starring the Karno company, but nothing came of the idea. Or did it?

Many years later, a gentleman by the name of Patrick Wyand recalled that his friend Stanley Mumford had worked on a film for the Warwickshire Trading Company, titled 'THE MUMMING BIRDS' and that this was the first film starring Charlie Chaplin. These are quite precise details, so could it be true? Or have the details become muddled? The nascent British film industry wasn't that well documented, and even if the film was made, this doesn't necessarily mean it ever saw release.

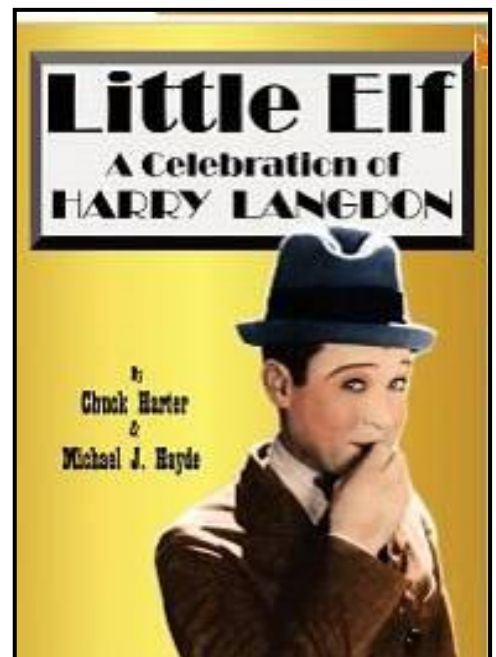
It seems likely that such a film would have been unearthed by now by the many ardent Chaplin scholars, but as the recent discovery of an unknown Chaplin film, 'A THIEF CATCHER' proved, you never can tell. Maybe somewhere, lost in the mists of time, is our very first glimpse of Chaplin's Inebriate.

New Harry Langdon book

Books on Harry Langdon have been thin on the ground over the years. Now, finally, what looks like the definitive work is here. Weighing in at a whopping 692 pages, 'HARRY LANGDON: THE LITTLE ELF' is the first comprehensive biography AND film-by-film study of Langdon's career. With rare stills and insight into his missing films, excerpts from his vaudeville sketches and many, many unseen photographs, this promises to be a treasure trove for us Langdon-ites.

A preview of the first chapter is available on the book's Amazon page and, if this is anything to go by,, 'THE LITTLE ELF' promises to be a classic. Both encyclopaedic and readable is hard to achieve but the authors certainly seem to have pulled it off. Priced at £34.00, it's not cheap, but for the content you get this is actually a very reasonable price.

The lack of books focused on Langdon has no doubt aided the spread of rumours and false images of his talent. With a definitive work like this out there, hopefully the popular conceptions of Harry will start to change. This one is on my Christmas list already!



[ANOTHER HARRY BOOK...](#)

Also released, though smaller in scope, is James L. Neibaur's book, 'The Silent Films of Harry Langdon'. Published by MacFarland, this is a pricey book for its slim size, especially compared to 'THE LITTLE ELF'. Still, it's great to see another book on Harry out there and another perspective on his films.

**MISSING
IN ACTION**

THE GHOST TRAIN (1931)



A GAINSBOROUGH PICTURE, produced by Michael Balcon.

STARRING JACK HULBERT & CICELY COURTNEIDGE

With Donald Calthrop, Angela Baddeley, Cyril Raymond, Ann Todd, Walter Forde.

DIRECTED BY WALTER FORDE

Written by Angus MacPhail, Lajos Biro and Sidney Gilliat, based on the play by Arnold Ridley.

7 reels (72 minutes)

A change of pace for this issue's missing film; instead of an American silent, a British talkie. 'THE GHOST TRAIN' is an interesting crossroads in British comedy. Based on a hugely successful stage play by Arnold Ridley (much later to become DAD'S ARMY'S Private Godfrey), it was directed by pioneer British silent comedian Walter Forde and launched the film career of comedy couple Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge. An adroit blend of comedy and drama, it concerned a group of passengers stranded overnight at an apparently haunted railway station. Amongst them is a silly-ass type (Hulbert) who manages to annoy everyone but turns out to be a detective; it's just as well as soon murder is afoot, and the "haunting" turns out to be a cover for a band of smugglers. Perhaps the first completely successful British sound comedy, the film got rave reviews in its day and was a milestone in '30s British films.

So, how has it managed to disappear rather than being shown and celebrated? It ought to have been revived frequently, but has been nowhere to be seen for the last 80 years. How could such a popular film go missing? I always find it a little surprising to realise how many sound films are missing. Well-known is the neglect of silents at this time, a problem that reaches its apotheosis with the infamous story of Carl Laemmle ordering all the "worthless" silent films burned in a huge bonfire.

But surely, when sound film came in, the industry was more protective of their precious, all-talking product? Well, not quite. There are still instances of the industry's corporate vandalism rearing its ugly head. Take 'THE GHOST TRAIN' for instance. After the success of the original, an Anglo-Hungarian remake was planned with a native cast. To save money, action scenes without dialogue or close-ups were re-used from the English original. The jumbling

around of the original to obtain these scenes seems to be the cause of its current, sorry state, and thus 'THE GHOST TRAIN' became a ghost film.

Not all is lost, however. Of the original 8 reel film, about 5 reels remain. HOWEVER... Only two of those reels have any soundtrack. Doh!

So what are we missing, and what has survived the ravages of Hungary's film pirates? The first couple of reels setting up the story are completely gone, particularly a shame as Walter Forde himself made a rare cameo as one of the passengers. The existing, albeit mute, footage picks up after the band of travellers have been stranded whilst changing trains. It's nice that there is some footage left, but without the dialogue we can hardly judge the film fairly as entertainment. Finally, after several reels of infuriating silence, sound returns 2 reels from the end of the film. Ironically, most of this footage doesn't really rely on sound—the final dramatic fight scenes with Hulbert and the smugglers seem to have been filmed silent and have that slightly odd speeded-up, floating quality that results. This also has the effect of lessening the tension and making it look just a bit silly. However, the sequence preceding this is the jewel amongst the wreckage of 'THE GHOST TRAIN'.

Following the discovery of the body, Cicely Courtneidge's matronly spinster character faints. Jack Hulbert's solution is to ply her with brandy; initially she refuses, but develops a taste for it and is soon soused. From here on in the sequence becomes a showcase for Cicely's drunk act, a very funny piece of acting where she gradually gets to release all her inhibitions and regress from starchy dignity to girlish giggles, flirting with the resigned Hulbert.

Hulbert and Courtneidge play off each other beautifully in the sequence, showcasing the skills they had honed in almost 20 years of teamwork. If the rest of the film allowed them as many funny moments as this, it's no wonder that it launched them as major film stars of the 30s. They would go on to make a series of delightful musical comedies, both as a team and solo.

Jack and Walter Forde would later rework the essence of 'THE GHOST TRAIN' into their 1934 collaboration 'BULLDOG JACK', which featured a wild train chase through an abandoned London Underground line.

Aside from this, film would be remade ten years after the original, in a version starring Arthur Askey. That film, however, had the distinct disadvantage of having Arthur Askey in it... A more positive legacy was in the assumption of the plot to provide the basis of the all-time classic Will Hay vehicle 'OH MR PORTER', as well as (less directly) his 'ASK A POLICEMAN'.

If for no other reason, this would have assured 'THE GHOST TRAIN's place as a worthy curio of British cinema. However, it was interesting for many other reasons, not to mention as entertainment in its own right. Until it turns up complete however, it will remain as ghostly as its central theme.



Overtly Art Deco Spanish poster for 'THE GHOST TRAIN'. Could a copy be lurking somewhere in Europe?

"EVERY ONE A HOWELL!"

meet **ALICE HOWELL**, silent comedy's forgotten comedienne...

Generally, the women of silent comedy are overlooked. Sure, Mabel Normand gets a mention, but other than that you could be forgiven for thinking that this was exclusively a man's world save for the thankless role of leading lady. These sort of roles usually required little flair, the key specifications being a) ability to stand around looking pretty and b) willingness to embrace men with implausible facial hair.



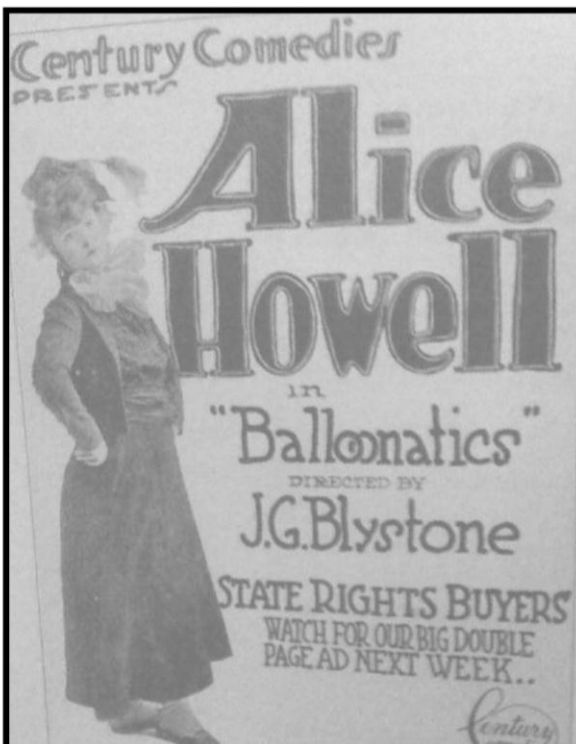
That said, although opportunities for women were definitely limited (and particularly so before the mid-'20s), if you dig a little deeper there were actually quite a lot of funny ladies who succeeded as comedy stars in their own right. Formidable types like Louise Carver, blimp-sized Kate Price and poor Dot Farley (billed as "the ugliest woman in pictures!") achieved successful comic images, but were defined by a *lack* of femininity. More demure types like Dorothy Devore and Frances Lee were able to remain feminine, but were usually caught in funny situations rather than creating the comedy themselves. Between these two extremes, fewer in number, were the genuine funny girls, who retained their femininity while still plunging headlong into the madcap world of slapstick and sight gag. Of these, Mabel Normand is the most well-known, but there were others. Louise Fazenda radiated a charming gawkinsness as a clueless country girl; Gale Henry, with her great dangling limbs and Olive Oyl droop, was successful in her own films, and when supporting Charley Chase. One of my personal favourites of the true comediennes is an unjustly obscure eccentric by the name of Alice Howell.

Of Irish stock, Alice was red-haired and feisty. Her comic image resembled a sort of manic doll; a round, porcelain face was enhanced with giant eyes that expressed a joyously vacant dizziness. Underneath, a pair of painted lips enclosed an empty-headed smile, while topping off the image was a great, tottering cloud of her frizzy red hair. Piled up carelessly, probably the result of running late again, it was the perfect symbol for her scatty but carefree character. Shuffling obliviously around in her own world, she was the original quirky girl, an ancestor to Lucile Ball, Lisa Kudrow and Zoey Deschanel. Alice's image and comic manner were both pleasingly original, and she was able to achieve great popularity, both with audiences and other comedians. When asked years later to name his top ten comediennes of all time, Stan Laurel fondly recalled Alice and the tagline for her comedies: "Every one a Howell!".

Our girl had started her career in a vaudeville double act with her husband Dick Smith. When he became ill with pneumonia and was unable to continue on the stage, Alice became the breadwinner. They moved to the sunny Californian climes for Smith's health and, like so many others at this time, Alice found work at Keystone. Whilst there, she mainly played in support of other comedians, typecast as cleaners and charwomen (although 1914's 'THE GREAT TOE MYSTERY' casts her unusually as a straight leading



A portrait of Alice from an ad for her Reelcraft comedies, 1920



lady). Most easily seen today are her roles supporting Charlie Chaplin, with whom she can be seen most prominently in 'LAUGHING GAS' (1914). Like Chaplin and many other Keystone personnel, she found greater prospects at other studios; there was only really room for one comedienne at Keystone, and Mabel Normand's place was secure. When Keystone director Henry 'Pathé' Lehrman left the studio to start his own production of 'Lehrman Knock-out Comedies', (subsequently abbreviated to LKO) he needed a Mabel type to match comedian Billy Ritchie's ersatz-Chaplin, and Alice joined him in 1916. Initially playing leading lady to Ritchie, Alice graduated to her own starring shorts under Lehrman's direction. Lehrman's style was fast, furious and often vicious slapstick but luckily, Alice seemed to be game for anything and threw herself into the slapstick of her films with wild abandon. Unfortunately, very few LKO films exist today so we have little to judge Alice's developing style on. One recent discovery, 'NEPTUNE'S NAUGHTY DAUGHTER' (1917) is available to watch on the Danish Film Institute's website, and a fragmented copy is also held at the BFI.

Top: advert for Alice's Century Comedies.

Above: Alice disguised as a man in the unidentified film 'FAT MAN IN KNOCKABOUT'.

In 1917, Alice jumped ship to Jack Blystone's Century comedies, and 2 years later formed her own corporation, releasing through Reelcraft. Sadly, she seemed to have a knack of working for the studios with the worst survival rates and we can see very few of her starring films today. Worse still, some of the survivors are in pretty rough shape. In 'LAUREL OR HARDY', Rob Stone describes the sorry state of 'DISTILLED LOVE', a Howell film in which Oliver Hardy appears. The existing print was such a fragmented jumble that Mr Stone wasn't even sure that all the scenes originally belonged in the same film! Other films are similarly fragmented and identified in archives; the BFI holds one that remains anonymous under the enigmatic title 'FAT MAN IN KNOCKABOUT'. Seemingly from 1918, the film presents Alice as an enthusiastic member of the

home front who practices defence with a bayonet and dresses as a man to join the army, while simultaneously trying to stop her husband (the eponymous fat man!) from running off to a poker game with another woman. Again, the surviving footage is so fragmented that the film becomes incoherent, but there are some great glimpses of Alice in action.

With such fragments inaccessible and hardly easy viewing, the crux of Alice's comic reputation rests today on three gems that do survive complete, coherent and available to collectors. The first, 'CINDERELLA CINDERS', dates from her time at Reelcraft. Released in 1920, the film begins with Alice as eccentric short order cook in a diner where the customers slurp soup noisily. In a very Chaplinesque manner, she conducts their slurping as though she is in front of the Royal Philharmonic, and then flips pancakes in time to the racket. Her clumsiness eventually results in her being dismissed, but another job opportunity presents itself as maid for a rich couple. Racing to beat the other applicants by means of a runaway bike and on roller-skates, Alice shows her ability and willingness to do dangerous physical comedy of the Lehrman school. Hired by the couple, Alice proves inept at domestic tasks but when a visiting Count and countess fail to arrive for a dinner party, Alice and the butler are made to masquerade as them to save the couple's social status. During the course of the evening, the punch bowl becomes

spiked with bathtub gin, setting up a comic tour de force by Alice as she gradually becomes more and more intoxicated. Men are queuing up to dance with the "countess", but she keeps making excuses to get away, enabling her to visit the punchbowl with a succession of larger and larger glasses. Alice's look grows increasingly manic (shades of Harpo Marx!), and each time she returns to the dancefloor her moves become wilder and less co-ordinated. The sequence is far from subtle, but made hilarious by Alice's wonderfully lively performance. In the end, the real Count and Countess turn up but turn out to be crooks. Alice and the Butler capture them and all ends happily.

'CINDERELLA CINDERS' seems to be the only one of the Reelcraft films to survive in any decent shape, but does seem to be a representative example of her style. A common formula seems to have been to place Alice in a dignified, serious situation that she could cause chaos in. In particular, 'LUNATICS IN POLITICS' won special praise for its satirical view of the suffragette movement. Alice's husband Dick Smith was the director of this and the other films and also took supporting roles (he is the butler in 'CINDERELLA CINDERS'). Smith evidently knew Alice's strengths and his support must have been crucial in helping her become a leading comedienne at a time when it was no easy to do so.

The series ended in 1922 and Alice was headhunted by Irving Thalberg, the "boy wonder" producer soon to become the power behind MGM. At this time, Thalberg was at Universal, and was trying to start up a programme of shorts for the studio. Alice joined comedians Neely Edwards and Bert Roach in a triple threat combination for what proved to be her highest-profile series. The set up was a domestic one, with Edwards as husband, Howell his scatterbrained wife and Roach their inept butler. This situation remained roughly constant for the series' many entries (one film every week for almost 2 years!), an unusual feature in silent comedies. Even in 'Our Gang', the kids changed homes, families and backgrounds in every film! As such, audiences could get to know the characters and their setting well and identify with them. Really these films were the first forerunners of the modern sit-com.

Again, the survival rate is dismal; only two of the films seem to circulate today. 'ONE WET NIGHT' is the story of Neely and Alice entertaining Tiny Sandford and his wife on the eponymous evening. The roof begins to leak just as a huge storm blows in, causing the family and guests on a mad dash to find items to contain the water. Alice is given less to do in this film and takes more of a back seat, but her presence is nevertheless pleasing. She has a wonderful opening gag in which she uses the family dog's paws to help her with her knitting, and her willingness to do anything for a laugh is seen in the scenes of her being soaked by the deluge. Although not a pure Alice Howell comedy, 'ONE WET NIGHT' is a very enjoyable blend of situation and slapstick. Incidentally, existing prints seem to be missing a final gag where the participants resign themselves to playing a game of bridge in their bathing suits.

Generally the series stayed with domestic situations; 'TENTING OUT' dealt with what became a sitcom staple, the disastrous camping holiday.



Alice in 'CINDERELLA CINDERS' (1920)



Alice in 'UNDER A SPELL' (1925)

Slightly more off the wall was Alice's final surviving film, 'UNDER A SPELL'. This time, a hypnotist convinces first the husband, and then the butler, that they are monkeys, leaving poor Alice in the middle of it all!

Remembering the hard years when her husband's illness had left them penniless, Alice invested her earnings from film stardom wisely, and became quite a property baron. By the mid-20s she was doing well enough to retire from the screen. The Universal series ended in 1925, and after one final role in a Fox comedy, 'MADAME X', she bade farewell to movie stardom.

In interviews, Alice was philosophical about the lean times she had experienced and the hard work that had been necessary to earn a living, but doubtless she was glad to retire comfortably after the years of worry and toil. She would only make one more appearance, a mute role in a talkie, 'BLACK ACES' (1933). (Incidentally, Alice's daughter Yvonne became an actress herself, appearing notably as Charley Bowers' leading lady in 'GOOFY BIRDS' (1928). She married cameraman and future director George Stevens.

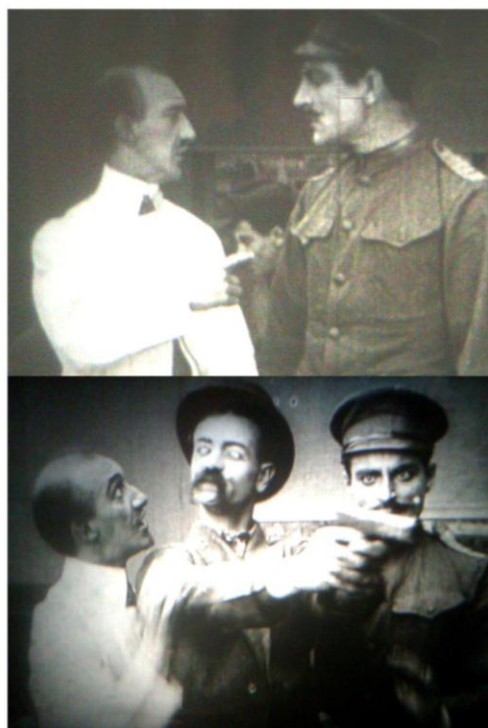
Alice Howell would enjoy a long, well-deserved retirement until her passing at the age of 76 in 1960. Her work may be mainly lost or mutilated, but Alice was an original who trod her own path and left us with at least a few glimpses of a genuine funny girl at work.

IDENTIFYING 'FAT MAN IN KNOCKABOUT'

The enigmatic Alice Howell fragment mentioned above offers up some points of interest.

Going purely by title, I'm guessing that the film, with its army enlistment theme, could be 'BEHIND THE FRONT' a 1918 Century comedy. The date also seems correct given the wartime theme. Alternatively, one familiar face suggests it could have been an LKO film...

The screenshots on the right show someone very recognisable to Laurel & Hardy fans. Yes, it's a very young and slim Jimmy Finlayson! (Even at this point, still without most of his hair...). Fin is known to have been in some LKO films, but I'm not sure about the Century Comedies. With the war theme however, I reckon it's unlikely for the film to be any earlier than 1917. Until someone can throw more light on this, however, 'FAT MAN IN KNOCK-ABOUT' will remain under its mysterious appellation!



Auction Watch



Following on from last issue's article on Charley Chase's lost silent films, here is another interesting artefact that recently popped up on Ebay. You're looking at a glass advert slide for Chase's 1928 short 'ALL FOR NOTHING'. Also depicted in the slide are Edna Marion and Tiny Sandford, dressed as a circus strong man. It's incredible that a fragile little piece of glass like this can survive 85 years, but there's not a trace of the film itself!

SCREENING NOTES

IN WALKED CHARLEY (1932)

Starring Charley Chase. With Del Henderson, Jacqueline Wells, Billy Gilbert, Eddie Dunn.

Directed by Warren Doane. Produced by Hal Roach for M.G.M.

'IN WALKED CHARLEY' is one of the more overlooked sound shorts that Charley Chase made for Hal Roach. It overlaps with several of his better known films in plot, but has some funny gags and situations that he never re-used.

The central situation of a main character appearing crazy was a favourite plot of Chase's; it gave good mileage for his eternally embarrassed character to show bewilderment and exasperation, not to mention get into awkward situations. With Charley himself posing as the crazy party, he made his silent classic 'CRAZY LIKE A FOX' and its later remake 'THE WRONG MISS WRIGHT'. In other films, he would be called upon to humour an apparent lunatic ('FAST WORK', 'MANY SAPPY RETURNS', 'PUBLIC GHOST #1'). Although occasionally such stories seem slightly insensitive in this era of greater enlightenment towards mental illness, it should be remembered that most of the time, the characters are only pretending to be affected, rather than a genuine affliction being mocked.

Interestingly, Charley nearly always chose foil Del Henderson to play opposite him in such instances. Henderson's quiet dignity was as much of a mismatch for the outrageous situations as Charley's own polite embarrassment was, and the combination made for some very funny scenes. In my opinion, this is the best and funniest of their collaborations of this nature.

'IN WALKED CHARLEY' begins with Henderson feigning a manic episode to stop his wife and daughter from going away on holiday. Charley, as travel agent delivering the tickets, gradually gets sucked in to the situation. It's an interesting touch that he is on the very fringes of the action; his initial appearance almost seems like a cameo in someone else's film. He walks out the door before being called back, and all the way through the film keeps trying to make his exit. Each time, however, Henderson's pretty daughter (Jacqueline Wells, aka Julie Bishop, best remembered from L and H's 'ANY OLD PORT') begs him to stay and help humour him. Charley's desire to leave as he gets pulled deeper and deeper into implausible situations enables him to show his full spectrum of comic reactions, from polite confusion, to disbelief, to furious exasperation as he is dragged further and further into the chaos.

This structure basically acts as a framework for some silly, but funny sequences. Highlights include Charley trying to give Henderson a bath, but ending up dunked himself (above), and Del attempting to teach him a game called "The King's Pond", which is an excuse to give him a soaking. Best of all is his insistence that they sing and dance a duet together, with Charley as the girl, dressed in a lampshade for a skirt!

The two men would mine a similar vein of camp humour to a much greater extent in the same year's 'MR BRIDE', but 'IN WALKED CHARLEY' is briefer and wilder. Not one of Charley's masterpieces maybe, but a funny and undeservedly forgotten film from a rich period in his career.

(A footnote: Chase biographer Brian Anthony states that, at this time, Charley was anxious to leave Roach for the chance to make features elsewhere, and 'In WALKED CHARLEY' was one of his contractual obligations before he could leave. Is it too much to speculate that the theme of him being unable to leave was based in real life?)



A SOLDIER'S PLAYTHING (1930)

Directed by Michael Curtiz. Starring Ben Lyon, with Harry Langdon and Lee Moran.

Long one of the most obscure of Harry Langdon's feature appearances, 'A SOLDIER'S PLAYTHING' has scarcely been mentioned, except in passing as another coffin nail in his floundering career. Well, I mentioned in the last issue that it is finally available through the on-demand Warner Archive DVD-R service and I've managed to pick up a copy.

The good news is, 'A SOLDIER'S PLAYTHING', is much better than I expected; Langdon's part may be a supporting role, but it's a juicy one.

Ben Lyon stars as Georgie, a wise guy who gets into a brawl with some gamblers and ends up believing he has killed one of them. Fleeing the scene, he joins up with the WW1 recruit drive, where he meets up with old friend Harry. After quite a story-based beginning, the film now descends (like most army comedies) into a series of loosely connected 'awkward squad' comedy scenes, featuring Lyon and Langdon constantly at odds with the sergeant while trying to maintain romances with the native French girls. These scenes are linked together by their many return engagements cleaning out the horses!

Although fairly standard in plot, the film is pretty well-directed and has many entertaining gags and sequences. Langdon must have had plenty of input, because so many of his scenes are quintessentially minimalist Langdon and couldn't possibly have been scripted by anyone else. He has a particularly lovely scene trying to sneak out of the barracks quietly, and another of his trademark confrontations with a dummy he believes to be a person. He also contributes the film's closing gag – back in America after the war's end, Harry visits the fairground, but the sight of the Horse carousel brings back too many bad memories and he makes a swift exit!

As a talkie, 'A SOLDIER'S PLAYTHING' moves pretty smoothly. Langdon's experimentations with dialogue in the Hal Roach shorts have stabilised and he handles it very well. In fact, he has some very funny dialogue moments, such as when he speaks a sort of gibberish curse at Ben Lyon, or his own gobbledegook version of French. He even sings a risqué song!

The cheeky nature of the song hints at a slight evolution of Langdon's character. Similar to his recent Roach short 'THE KING', he plays a slightly more adolescent version of the little elf. While still the same child at heart, here Harry trying to keep up with the big boys by flirting with women and making wise-cracks at the sergeant. If it sounds out of a character, it actually works pretty well, and fits the bawdy army burlesque style of the film.

On the whole, this is a very enjoyable comedy that, despite occasional dull spots (mainly Ben Lyon's romantic stuff) has many funny scenes and opportunities for Langdon to do his stuff. It makes it doubly a



'A SOLDIER'S PLAYTHING' features:

(top) Harry partnered with Ben Lyon, (middle) another of his encounters with a dummy and (above) even singing a song
All the above pictures are screenshots from the Warner Archive release of this film.

shame that the film flopped and he disappeared off the screen for two years. If he had kept up this style at Roach or elsewhere, some very funny films could have resulted.

DVD-wise, the Warner Archive release is no frills, but provides as nice a print as you'll find of this rare film. The surviving material varies in quality (some scenes are a little bleached out and others a bit speckled, but others are beautiful to look at). This is definitely a must-see for Langdon fans, and ample proof that he wasn't washed up in the sound era.

HECTIC DAYS (1927)

Directed by Charles Lamont. Starring Lupino Lane, with Wallace Lupino, Thelma Salter and Tom Whiteley. An Educational Pictures Release.

In my Lupino Lane filmography in issue 2, I put this film down as lost. Well, it turns out that I was pleasantly mistaken and the film does exist, albeit in Dutch sourced prints lacking titles.

The more I see of Lane's Educational shorts, the more it turns out that the rarer ones are some of the best, whilst widely circulated titles like 'BE MY KING' and 'GOODNIGHT NURSE' are far from being his best work. Typical!

In some of these later shorts, one senses a bit of laziness creeping in, and a tendency to throw in any tried and tested routines in randomly. On the whole, the earlier films are more consistent, and make more of an effort to integrate plot and gags, along with many rewarding little bits of business. 'HECTIC DAYS' is no exception and a very entertaining comedy. Another one of his forays into juxtaposing his nervous little 'Nip' character against epic backgrounds, this film finds him in the old West.

Lane plays a timid young sales clerk in a Western town, who dreams of being a gun-blazing sheriff. Getting carried away with his fantasy, he has a very funny scene with a manikin, acting out a whole gun battle for the to save the 'girl', and constantly switching hats to act out the different characters' parts. Finally bowing to the manikin, the dramatic effect is spoiled when its skirt falls down...

Next, he is ordered to deliver a huge pile of boxes of dynamite that completely block his view of the path ahead; predictable comedy, you might think, but he plays with our expectations by narrowly avoiding disaster. Tottering around in the middle of the road, a pack of cowboys and horseback run left, right and centre, missing him by inches. All the time, he remains completely unaware of the danger.

Eventually, bandits roll into town, led by tough guy Wallace Lupino. Nip manages to subdue Wallace by tickling him, in a scene pinched from the Arbuckle-Keaton 'OUT WEST' (1918). Although this isn't one of the Lane shorts directed by Arbuckle, he and Lane were on good terms and he was very much active at Educational around this time so could well have contributed the sequence as gag writer.

Nip eventually subdues the baddies whilst disguised in a ridiculous fake beard. However, in walks the sheriff and steals all the credit. A resigned Nip sticks to reading his wild west adventure stories.

A slickly made comedy, 'HECTIC DAYS' plays to Lane's strengths,, interating his acrobatic ability with pantomime, and carefully built gag sequences, the result is a very funny comedy western that deserves a wider audience.



In the next issue...



**THE RETURN OF
ROSCOE ARBUCKLE**

HAL ROACH'S COMEDIENNES

MACK SENNETT

BUSTER KEATON

and much more!