



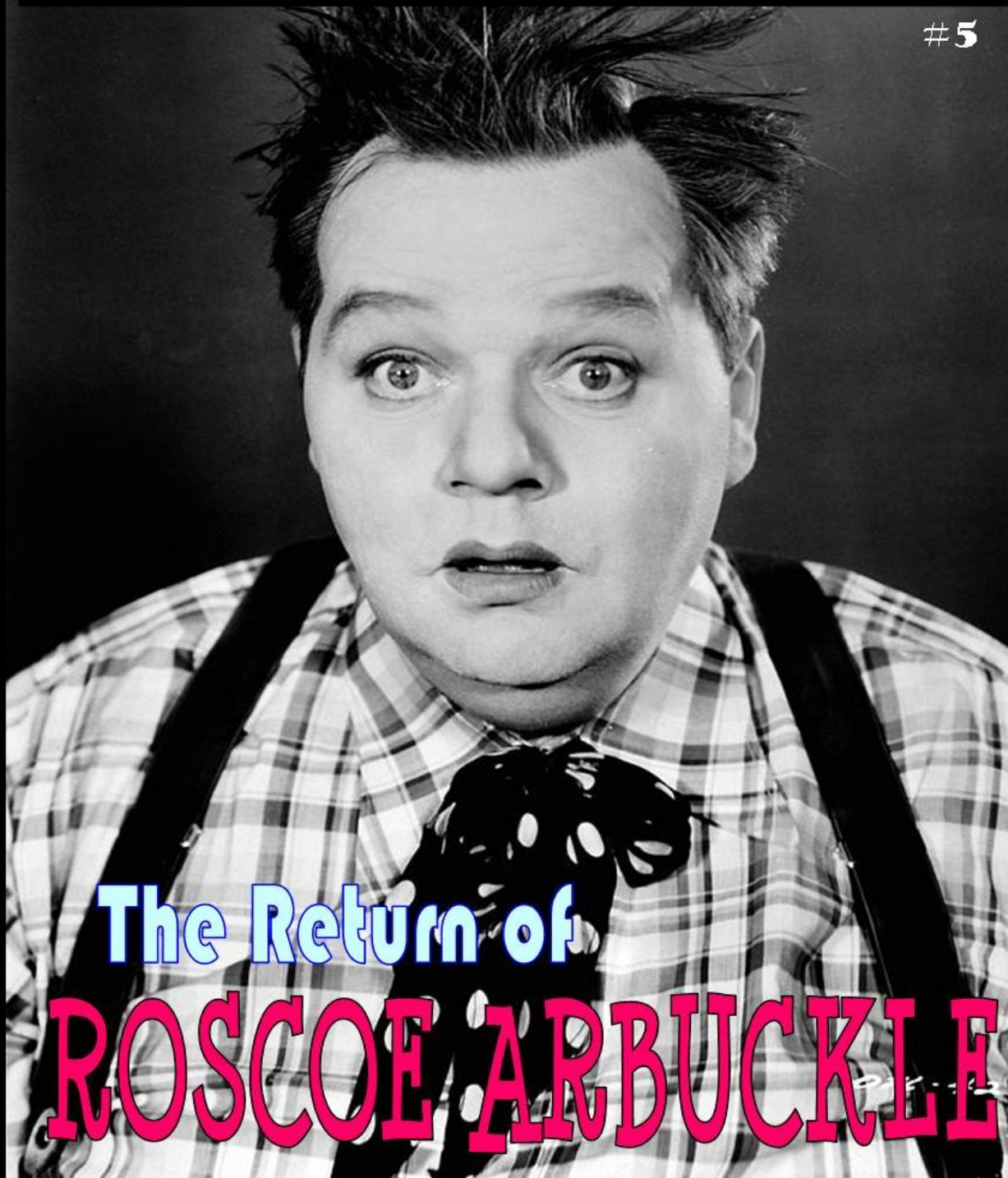
# MOVIE NIGHT



The Silent comedy, slapstick and music hall magazine

Also featuring...

#5



## The Return of **ROSCOE ARBUCKLE**

AND...

**MACK  
SENNETT**

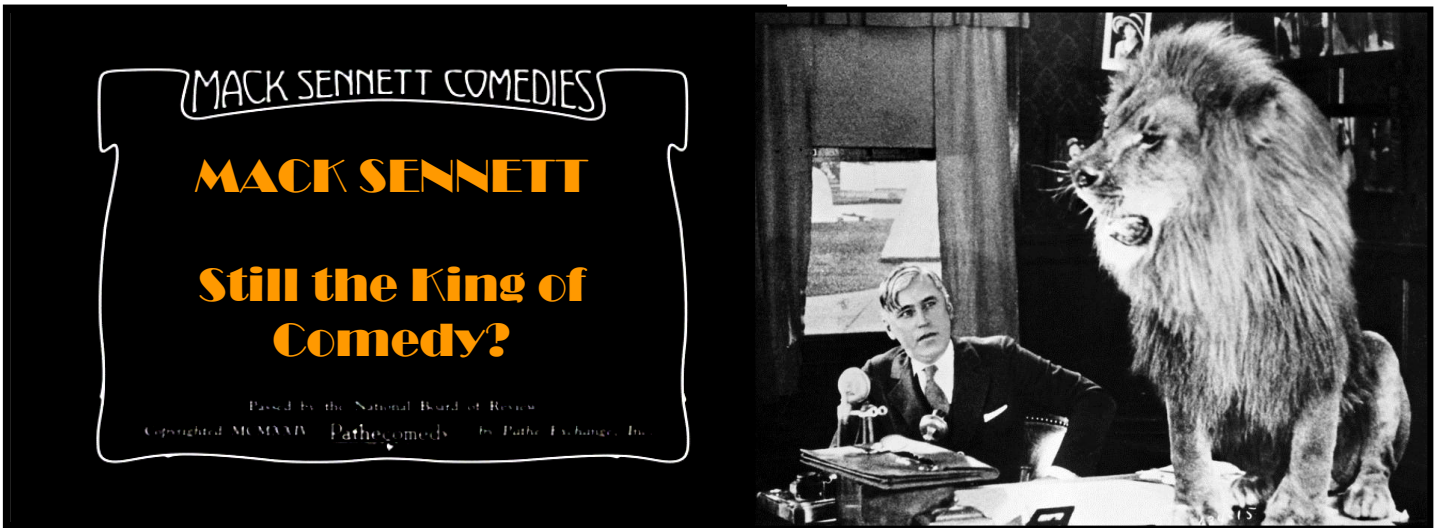
**HAL ROACH'S  
COMEDIENNES**

**LOST FILMS  
REDISCOVERED**

Welcome to issue 5 of 'MOVIE NIGHT'. Lots of exciting news about film discoveries and DVD releases this time around, plus the usual articles.

Many thanks to all those who have been in touch with suggestions and comments. A special shout-out this issue to all those who have contributed articles, information, tidbits, and to Gerry Dunne and David Wyatt for proofreading.





Last autumn saw the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of Mack Sennett's Keystone studios, and so it seems a fitting time to celebrate his achievements and reflect on their place within silent comedy. Sennett was a true trailblazer in the field, opening the first dedicated comedy studio, and for 20 years creating an anarchic vision of chaos to become the self-styled "King of Comedy" (the name of his memoirs). For many years no history of silent comedy would forego mention of Mack Sennett, but I'm not sure this is still the case. Is Sennett still the rightful owner of his royal title? The recent silent comedy revival has, in fact, tended to overlook his studio's efforts. Books and documentaries have focused on the iconic faces of big name comedians rather than producers, and if the subject does come up, Hal Roach is usually the first name mentioned.

The Roach and Sennett styles present an obvious contrast. Roach films focused on characterisation, pausing to reflect on humanity's foibles. Sennett's style was anarchic, freewheeling, joyously madcap; a whirlwind of cross-eyed and moustachioed men racing like flesh cartoons through explosions, log cabins and frenzied car chases in a dazzling display of inventive visual gags. Roach allowed the individual to flourish; Sennett star comics were subsumed into the fast-paced madness. True, more idiosyncratic personalities like Chaplin and Harry Langdon worked for Sennett; significantly though, they got the best opportunities to develop their characters elsewhere. Roach films organically developed a story that could happen; at Sennett, continuity and common sense were trifling matters to be swept aside as long as something funny was happening.

Of course, this is a sweeping generalisation that can't be totally accurate for hundreds of films; there was some overlap between the two styles but, on the whole, it is a fair comparison. I must admit that my personal preference has always been for the Roach style, but why should there be only one way to make a comedy? Modern preference for the subtler side certainly doesn't mean that Sennett should go unmentioned. People spend so much time comparing and choosing between Chaplin and Keaton, Beatles or Rolling Stones, sweet or savoury, and so forth. It isn't really productive and misses a key point; one of the joys of silent comedy is the infinite number of variations on a theme. Watch Laurel and Hardy wreck their car as a result of carefully built squabbling arising from their characters; then watch Billy Bevan do the same in a series of dazzling stunts in a Sennett film. Both scenes are fun and the fact that two different approaches could exist is what makes silent comedy such a buzzing pool of inspiration.

In recent years we have, I think, come to place more value on character and story when we evaluate silent comedy. Partly, this is a defensive reflex. No longer widely seen on television, silent films easily slip into annoying, lazy stereotypes in the human consciousness. As anyone who has seen 'THE GENERAL', 'LIBERTY' or 'THE KID' knows, those under cranked

pastiches accompanied by tinny piano are way off the mark. But how many people *have* seen the inspiration of these films? To try and stand up for slapstick, we focus on its most sophisticated elements - the satire, the production values, the carefully developed characters - when presenting it to an often indifferent and hostile world. Ergo, we play up Chaplin, Keaton, Laurel and Hardy and Charley Chase, and play down Ben Turpin, Keystone madness and Del Lord's car chases.

I don't think this emphasis is always so conscious though. Laurel and Hardy, Chaplin and Keaton have all been on TV in recent years. From a personal point of view, I was introduced to them all in this way, and then went on to buy videos and DVD as a result.

Until the recent centenary celebrations on TCM, when was the last time a Mack Sennett comedy was scheduled on TV? Or available in any extensive form on home video? Until now, Sennett films had dropped out of sight, denied the restoration that they deserved.

Significantly, Sennett's profile was much higher when Silent comedy last had a boom, in the 1960s. The difference is that, then, Sennett films were seen in the Robert Youngson compilations, in series like 'COMEDY CAPERS' and 'THE FUNNY MANN'S', and on their own account on TV. It must be said, that perhaps a change in our sampling methods has had something to do with it. We're fortunate now to be able to seek out complete versions of these films in nice DVD prints and at cinema showings. Compilation films sampling short clips and highlights from many films have dropped out of favour, yet they are probably the best way to see Sennett films. As Glenn Mitchell pointed out, they are often schizophrenic and look better as clips than in their entirety. Retrospective samplings enable all the strong points to be seen, rather than in more diluted form, exposing the weaknesses in plot. When you look at the whole film, one often comes away having laughed heartily for 20 minutes but still with a slight feeling of disappointment.

The more you analyse this modern way of thinking, the more illogical it becomes. Think about more recent comedy; Sketch shows move from one unrelated scene to another.

Spike Milligan, who grew up on visual comedy, essentially created a verbal version of the Sennett world in 'THE GOON SHOW', later recreating it on TV in his 'Q' series. The MONTY PYTHON films move abruptly from one unlikely dream to another. More recent comedies like 'THE MIGHTY BOOSH', 'FATHER TED' and 'FAMILY GUY' are all about surreal, randomly motivated plot points and are loved for it. Comedy has become edgy; well, Sennett is pretty edgy. Lest we forget, to portray policemen as Sennett did in the 1910s was little short of anarchy! Even by modern standards, there's much that is pretty edgy throughout his oeuvre. There's black humour (stuntman Ben Turpin left to drown by his indifferent coworkers when it's their lunch break, Billy Bevan accidentally blowing up a dog), surrealism, gags about futuristic technology (regular allusions to TV as early as the 20s) and gags that are risqué even now.

Sennett may have had to move over from his sole position as king of comedy. His standards may have not been consistently up to Hal Roach's, or have dated as well, but amidst the Sennett catalogue are classic films, and many brilliant, iconic gags that still entertain and surprise. His studio designed the template for silent comedy. Others may have taken it to greater heights, but the landscape would have been very different without its founding fathers. Let Chaplin be king of pantomime and Roach be the king of situation comedy, but don't overlook Sennett as king of the anarchic gag.



## **A SMATTERING OF SENNETT...**

I've chosen a handful of Sennett films that, I think, show Sennett's studios at their mad, king of comedy peak. These aren't necessarily the very best films to come out of the studio, but they are some of the ones that I think best exhibit elements of the Sennett house style. For that reason, there's no Chaplin, Arbuckle etc, and only a smattering of Langdon...

### **THE DAREDEVIL (1923)**

Ben Turpin is a physical embodiment of the Sennett style; zany, unbelievable and prone to extreme slapstick. The Sennett gag team used this to their advantage by casting him in melodramatic settings. To write a Ben Turpin scenario, all one really has to do is place him in a situation where he looks ridiculous (and of course, the beauty is that he looks ridiculous pretty much anywhere!). This reaches its apotheosis in 'THE DAREDEVIL' as he plays a stunt double in the movies... How could Ben Turpin double for anyone?! It's a glorious joke, and with this premise in place, the Sennett gagwriters have a field day. Ben is constantly forgotten about in the middle of stunts by his careless film crew; cruel, surreal Sennett humour at its finest.



### **SUPER HOOPER DYNE LIZZIES (1925)**

Another key ingredient in the Sennett cauldron of madness was the use of crazy car chases and gags. Director Del Lord made this his specialty, and here the subgenre reaches its zenith. This film contains the classic sequence where Billy Bevan pushes his broken down car up a hill, oblivious to the fact he has bumped into, and begun pushing, a whole line of parked cars. This film is let down by some standard scare comedy stuff (and a couple of extremely dubious racial gags) in the second reel, but the first reel is top notch stuff.

### **HIS MARRIAGE WOW (1925)**



Harry Langdon's work only really flourished when he managed to replace the Sennett style with his own brand of delicate pantomime. However, on occasion, the over the top madness actually formed an effective backdrop to Langdon's style, making his quiet talent even more apparent. This film, while not his funniest, shows the stylistic contrasts meshing nicely. In a runaway car with Vernon Dent, this could have easily become another Del Lord gagfest, but Langdon shifts the focus of the scene from the chase itself to his helpless reactions.

### **WHISPERING WHISKERS (1926)**

Some of the best and best-known Sennett films are the mid-20s series teaming his regulars Billy Bevan and Andy Clyde as a couple of hoboes. This one contains the classic gag where the pair are asleep on the railway tracks, but have set their alarm for the precise time where they need to roll over to avoid the oncoming express train.



Plotwise, it falls into the standard "one title card to explain a complete change of location and plot" Sennett cliché, but the individual gags are of such high quality there's not too much time to grouch.

### **FLIRTY FOURFLUSHERS (1927)** **THE BEST MAN (1928)**

Two films that show Sennett could adapt his style to the sophistication of the late 20s. The former features Billy Bevan and Madeline Hurlock as two everyday folk who pretend to be rich in order to hook themselves millionaires; of course, they end up wasting their time trying to chase each other! It's a snappy proto-screwball comedy that relies on situation to pull it through, and the commitment to the new era is shown by the drastic step of removing Bevan's prop moustache! Without it, his plump, partridge-like face is revealed, wearing a startled expression that befits a man who probably hadn't seen his top lip in years...

'THE BEST MAN' is perhaps the best of the late 20s Sennetts. It has Bevan as hapless, obnoxious best man to nervous bridegroom Vernon Dent. Dent is an unsung hero of the Sennett films, and his underplayed frustration is a beautiful contrast to Bevan's antics losing the ring, destroying Dent's suit and setting fire to the bridal suite. The chaos in these scenes builds naturally, and is all the more funny for it; as Simon Louvish said 'Stan Laurel couldn't have done a better job'. Incidentally, the similarity to the Hal Roach style is carried further by the use of Culver City locations.

### **SPEED IN THE GAY 90s (1932)**

Who says Sennett couldn't do talkies? This Andy Clyde short revisits the Sennett car chases of yore, adding an extra humorous dimension by shifting the setting to the early days of motoring. There's plenty of potential for gags based on the primitive cars, and there are some nice, bizarre extra touches, such as Andy designing a bird-man costume, and absentmindedly walking around still wearing it while going to meet the mayor. The period setting also helps to keep the film from seeming as dated as many other early talkies.

### **THE FATAL GLASS OF BEER (1933)**

W.C. Fields' four sound shorts are the best known of Sennett's talkie shorts, and this faux-melodrama is the most off-the-wall. Sennett himself actually hated this short and tried to veto it being made, so you might think it an odd choice to include here. However, when you look closely, it actually dovetails nicely with the absurdist Sennett style. The studio's comedies had a long, proud heritage of parodying melodrama that went right back to the Keystone era; this reached it's apotheosis in the ridiculous Ben Turpin parodies. 'THE FATAL GLASS OF BEER' is a clear stylistic cousin of these films, especially Turpin's frozen north parody 'YUKON JAKE'.



*Agree? Disagree? Outraged by my choices? Drop a line and let me know what you think are the most iconic Sennett moments at [matthewgross22@gmail.com](mailto:matthewgross22@gmail.com). Now, I'd best go milk the Elk...*

# LOST THREE STOOGES FILM REDISCOVERED!

As the years go on, it seems more and more unlikely that lost films will keep turning up. Yet, last issue we had new footage of Laurel and Hardy, and this time there is not only new Clara Bow footage but also yet another exciting rediscovery of a previously lost comedy.

'HELLO POP', made in 1933, was the only one of the Three Stooges' films to no longer exist in any form, having disappeared in a 1967 MGM fire. Now however, the Vitaphone project reports that they have turned up a complete copy of the film, which is currently under restoration.

'HELLO POP' came early in the team's career, when they still *were* stooges, rather than stars in their own right. It was one of their MGM shorts featuring them with Ted Healy, and was made in Technicolor. (This decision was partly based on a desire to recycle Technicolor musical numbers from earlier films in the short).

The story features Ted Healy as a harassed show producer trying to stage a musical, with the Stooges constantly interrupting proceedings. Apparently, they end up beneath leading lady Bonnie Borrell's massive hoop skirt during the climactic musical number.

Also in the cast are Italian comedy actor Henry Armetta and Tiny Sandford, playing a strong man.

Great that this missing link has turned up, and hopefully it will be shown to the public soon. The discovery also gives hope that other early Technicolor films might turn up. Can we have 'THE ROGUE SONG' now, please...?



**Ted Healy with the Stooges in 'HELLO POP'. Just visible on the left is Tiny Sandford.**

## FINAL MISSING ARBUCKLE-KEATON ALSO DISCOVERED?

Well, it seems to be an exciting time for rediscoveries; currently making the rounds on the internet is a report that the 1917 Arbuckle-Keaton short 'A COUNTRY HERO' has resurfaced in Eastern Europe. Over the last twenty years, the Arbuckle-Keaton films have steadily been reappearing, and this is the last one to remain unaccounted for. Indeed, it is really the final missing piece in Buster Keaton's film career.

'A COUNTRY HERO' is also significant for two other reasons. It contains the first (albeit reluctant) onscreen appearance of Keaton's father Joe, complete with his famed vaudeville hitchkick. Secondly, it is the first of the Arbuckle-Keatons to be filmed in Hollywood, and therefore Buster's introduction to the place that would become his home.

There's no indication yet of what condition the print survives in (if at all), but here's hoping we soon see the holy grail of Keaton appearances. More on this film in this issue's 'MISSING IN ACTION' on page 19.

# FRED KARNO: A NEW BIOGRAPHY

I'm sure readers will be interested to hear of an interesting Fred Karno development. Following on from the article on Karno in the last issue, Dave Crump has been in touch. He runs an excellent website, 'Khaotic: The Fred Karno Story' and is working on a new biography of Karno. This is sure to be an interesting read, as well as correcting errors in previous accounts. Dave says "I have travelled around the world to interview surviving Karno relatives, including his two grandsons in America and have had access to never before published or seen personal documents and testimony."

He adds, "I am always looking for anyone who has information or material on Karno," and wonders if any readers might be able to help.

If you think you have something that Dave might be interested in, his email address is [crumpy@supanet.com](mailto:crumpy@supanet.com).

Karno is a fascinating, important figure in the world of comedy who has frequently been forgotten or maligned, so it's great that there's a new biography on the way. I'll look forward to reading it when it's finished. In the meantime, do have a look at [www.fredkarno.co.uk](http://www.fredkarno.co.uk).

*ERRATUM: On the subject of Fred Karno, in my 'MUMMING BIRDS' article, I claimed that 'MY OLD DUCHESS', Lupino Lane's 1933 take on the Karno sketch, is a lost film. Happily, I've since found out that the BFI do hold a copy. Unhappily, it is a restricted access film locked in the vaults, so we won't be finding out much more about it in a hurry. Still, good to know it's out there somewhere.*

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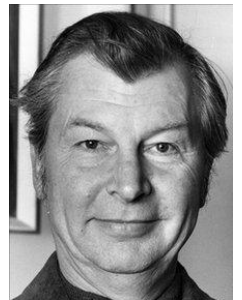
## CLIVE DUNN 1920 - 2012

Slightly outside the normal remit of 'MOVIE NIGHT', Clive Dunn nevertheless excelled in physical comedy, and so we sadly comment on his passing here.

In fact, Clive Dunn did have at least one direct link to the classic comedians; as a 15 year old schoolboy, he appeared as an extra in Will Hay's classic film 'BOYS WILL BE BOYS' (1935).

When older, he appeared in supporting comic roles with Tony Hancock and in sitcom 'BOOTSIE AND SNUDGE'. In this series, his portrayal of a character much older than real age brought him to the attention of Jimmie Perry and David Croft when they were casting 'DAD'S ARMY'. His youth enabled him to add physical comedy to the character of the clumsy, doddering Corporal Jones. Always one step behind the rest of the platoon Jones was nevertheless always the first to volunteer, with inevitably disastrous consequences! Dunn's mastery of physical mannerisms made both his portrayal of old age and handling of pratfalls very convincing. He was later to play a variation on the character in 'GRANDAD', a children's series.

Clive Dunn enjoyed a long, happy retirement in Portugal, concentrating on painting to pass his time. Having created one of the most loved, immortal characters of British comedy, he will long be remembered.





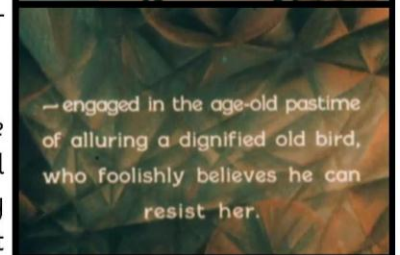
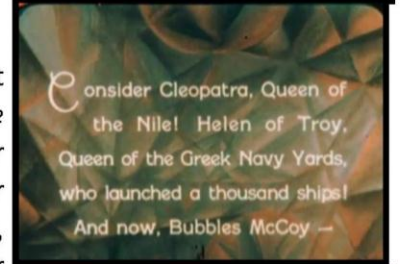
# The 'It Girl' returns

A very welcome addition to the UK Christmas TV schedule was 'Hollywood's Lost Screen Goddess', an hour long profile of Clara Bow. Part of a season looking at famous female stars, it was especially gratifying to see the oft-overlooked Miss Bow given such high-profile treatment, alongside other more frequently named stars like Marilyn Monroe and Ava Gardner.

Clara's story has been subjected to much hyperbole, sensationalism and downright malicious fabrication over the years, so I did go into the programme with some trepidation. My fears were not helped by the 'Radio Times' blurb, which placed far more emphasis on "the psychiatric troubles which led to the breakdown of her personal relationships" than it did on her stardom. Would this be another lazy, sensationalist retelling of myths that focused more on Bow's troubles than her achievements?

Well, I'm really pleased to report that the documentary turned out to be nothing of the sort. In fact, it was little short of a triumph. Lavishly filled out with archive footage from across her career (and not just from Public Domain films), it carefully put Clara's achievements into context and presented an honest but sympathetic presentation of the darker side of her life. 'Talking heads' were well-chosen, and included Kevin Brownlow, Leonard Maltin, Diana Serry Carey and Bow biographer David Stenn.

From a comedy point of view, her work in light dramas and comedies like 'MANTRAP', 'IT' and 'TRUE TO THE NAVY' was well-represented. Best of all though, was an enticing clip of the long lost colour footage from the 1928 comedy 'RED HAIR'. Previously known only from some rare out-takes (*below*), the first reel recently turned up and we were privileged to see the opening gag (*at right*). Clara Bow always possessed an effervescence and vitality that influenced the entire atmosphere of jazz-era Hollywood. These qualities made her seem to pop right out of the screen, and nowhere was this more apparent than in the colour footage from 'RED HAIR', which made her seem more fresh, vital and alive than ever. Congratulations to everyone involved with this documentary; it helped Clara's spirit come alive, and hopefully won her some new fans.



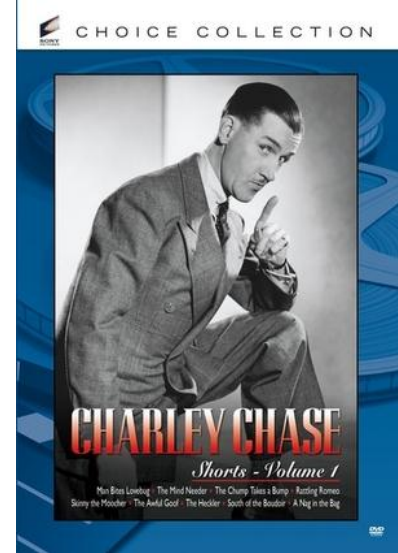
# DVD News & Reviews

## The return of the Charley Chase Columbia shorts!

On-demand DVD service is proving to be a new dawn for many hitherto neglected shorts. After petitions and long campaigns, Sony are releasing an 8 film volume sampling Charley Chase's elusive final series for Columbia. Amongst the shorts are a couple of classics, 'THE HECKLER' and 'RATTLING ROMEO'. There are also three very, very rare films that were never issued to the home movie market and have scarcely been seen since their first release: 'SOUTH OF THE BOUDOIR', 'THE CHUMP TAKES A BUMP' and 'THE AWFUL GOOF'. The last named is particularly interesting as a partial remake of Chase's silent classic 'LIMOUSINE LOVE'. Also included are 'THE MIND NEEDER', 'MAN BITES LOVEBUG', 'SKINNY THE MOOCHER' and a bonus Smith and Dale short directed by

Chase, 'A NAG IN A BAG'. The Columbia films have sometimes taken a bad rap, but they've been out of view for so long that they are due for reassessment. Hopefully, if this set generates enough interest, the remaining shorts might see the light of day.

*Update – my copy of this set has just arrived. It's packaged un-elaborately, but the films themselves look absolutely pristine and beautiful. As to the content of the films themselves, I'm planning a more detailed look at the Chase Columbias in a future issue but almost all these films are at least very good, and 'THE HECKLER' and 'RATTLING ROMEO' merit repeat viewings.*

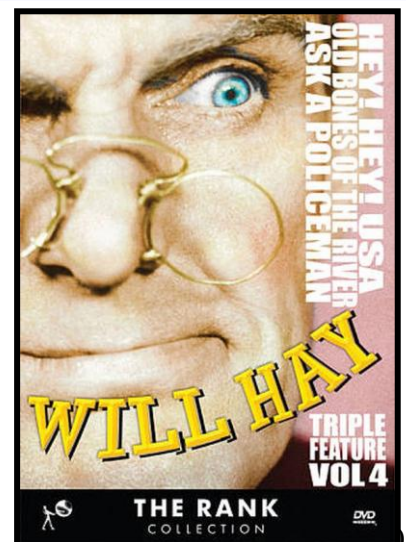


## 'COLLEGE' ON DVD & BLU-RAY

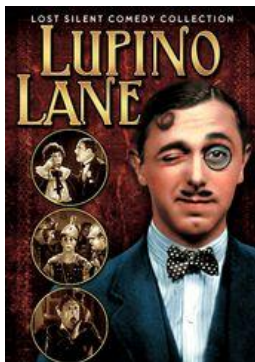
The final disc in Kino's 'Ultimate Edition' Buster Keaton series is 'COLLEGE'. Supplementing the previous release, this version contains an audio commentary by silent comedy expert Rob Farr which is sure to throw new light on a well-known film. Best of all, though, is the presence of Buster's last film, 'THE SCRIBE' on the disc. This colour industrial safety film, made in Canada in late 1965, has long been extremely difficult to see. If, like me, you want to see every scrap of Keaton around, this is a must.

## HAY! HAY! U.S.A.!

The great (and underappreciated) Will Hay is virtually unknown in the U.S., where his films were seldom shown. However, now a handful are being released on Region 1 DVD. If you're unfamiliar with Hay, he played a constantly shifty, blundering figure of seedy authority (the closest comparison is a British W.C. Fields). Although his films are often very British in humour, their appeal is by no means exclusive, and they contain many classics amongst them. Hopefully, this is his chance to get a bit more exposure beyond our small island!



# LUPINO LANE COMES TO DVD!



*Well, the folks at Alpha Video keep on turning out interesting and obscure silent comedy releases: at long last, here is a DVD dedicated to Mr Lupino Lane! This newly released disc (region-free) features 6 of Lane's shorts, including some of his best efforts and some lesser-known ones.*

*The contents are: FANDANGO (1928), MAID IN MOROCCO (1925), ROAMING ROMEO (1928), NAUGHTY BOY (1927), 'WHO'S AFRAID' (1926) and PURELY CIRCUMSTANTIAL (1929). The first three of these films are amongst his best two-reelers, while 'NAUGHTY BOY' and 'WHO'S AFRAID' both have worthy moments. PURELY CIRCUMSTANTIAL is the rarest film on this set, one of his very few talkie shorts. Thanks to Terry Baxter for tipping me off about this release. My review follows below...*

## **FANDANGO**

Overall a very good Lane short, just a notch below his best. This print is actually rather good, and has the original opening titles. Music on this, and all the other silents. is fairly nondescript jazz, but it suits the quick-paced mood of the film.

## **MAID IN MOROCCO**

Lane's first short for Educational is one of his best. I detailed the content more thoroughly in the LL article in issue 2, but the key gag here amongst many great acrobatic moments is his 360 degree run around the inside of a Moorish arch. Sadly, this print of the film is something of a disappointment; the image is really quite dark and grainy. It's not unwatchable, but a shame that perhaps the best film on this set is in the worst shape.

## **NAUGHTY BOY**

Not quite up to the standard of the first two films, 'Naughty Boy' nevertheless contains the usual smattering of fine acrobatics, and contains a particularly well developed opening sequence involving Lane's attempts to load a huge pile of parcels into a lift. His gags tended to be more instant than this, but the more sustained routines of this kind suited him well. In fact, this film as a whole has more of a slow-burn, situational quality that seems more Hal Roach than Educational. Intertitles are original, and the print on the whole is rather good to look at (although the opening 30 seconds seem a little jumpy).

## **WHO'S AFRAID**

Almost a forerunner of recent comedy 'A NIGHT IN THE MUSEUM', this short contains a 50-50 split between brilliant gags and more disappointing scare comedy stuff, making it one of the weaker entries. The good bits are *really* good, however, especially the startling illusion gag that opens the film, and a chase sequence reworked by Lane in his sound feature 'NO LADY'. The print is rather soft, but again quite watchable.

## **ROAMING ROMEO**

One of the quintessential Lane films, his parody of Ben Hur is here presented in a really clear print with all titles original (bearing its original moniker rather than the punning rebrand 'BENDING HUR'). Although I think 'HECTIC DAYS' and 'SWORD POINTS' pip it to the post as the best Lane parodies, there is nevertheless lots to recommend this, including a beautifully timed routine with Lane and Wallace Lupino masquerading as statues. Look out for Anita Garvin!

## **PURELY CIRCUMSTANTIAL**

One of only 4 LL talkie shorts, this film suffers from the common flaws of early talkies, and some rather creaky stage dialogue, but has some very nice moments, including an altercation with ever-reliable Amazonian Blanche Payson.. Also, it's glaringly obvious after the previous, lavish films, how much the budget was cut for talkies. Interestingly, Lane's voice seems to have recorded deeper and less consciously English here than in subsequent sound films; an attempt to modify it for the insecurities of the talkie market perhaps? The print is from a 1950s TV syndication with remade titles, but the end title is original. Image is soft and sound poor, but this is probably due as much to the primitive early sound technology as anything else.

All in all, this is a great disc. Although it's a budget release, the prints are watchable, the music is well chosen and the films are rare. And did I mention it's only \$5.99?? Until the day we see a complete restored Lupino Lane DVD set with bespoke scores (the words "hell freezes over" spring to my lips), this is a most acceptable placeholder.



# ROSCOE'S RETURN

*In 1932, Roscoe Arbuckle returned to cinema screens after 11 long years in the wilderness. During his enforced absence, a lot had changed. Talkies had arrived. The independent comedy studios had, for the most part, gone under or been absorbed into bigger concerns. Slapstick was passé. And yet, audiences greeted with open arms one of the pioneers of slapstick, an old friend who they had shared mud puddles and food fights with many years ago. This is the story of the comeback that no-one, least of all he, thought could ever happen...*

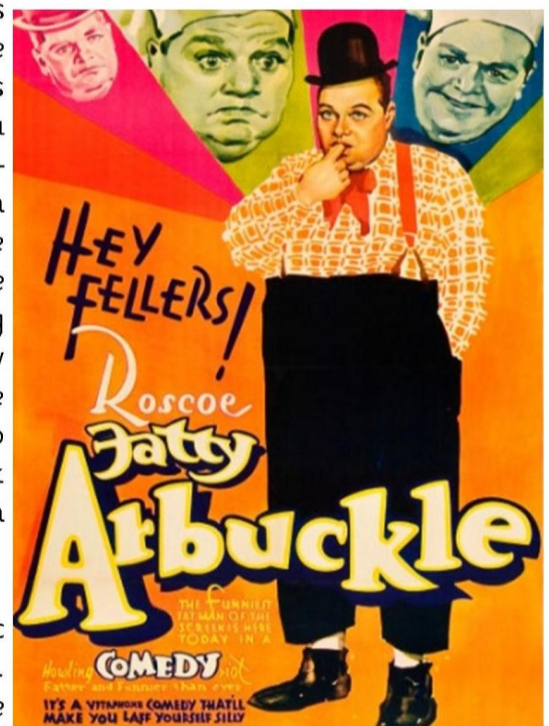
Let's get the mention of the scandal over with right at the start and have done with it. There's no need to recap the ins and outs of the trial, although it is always worth shouting from the rooftops "He was INNOCENT!" one more time. Of the whole sorry saga, the one redeeming feature is that Roscoe Arbuckle was, eventually, allowed to be rescued from his exile and return to doing what he loved best.

After being blacklisted, Arbuckle had made a living directing Lupino Lane, Al St John, Lloyd Hamilton, Johnny Arthur, Marion Davies and many others under the pseudonym 'William Goodrich'. However, while this gave him some outlet for comedy creativity, he yearned to perform again. Gradually, as the social climate of the 1920s turned toward the more liberated jazz era, public opinion rebelled against the kind of draconian censorship that had unfairly banned him from the screen. Roscoe started to become less a symbol of scandalous debauchery and more of an emblem of the unfair suppression of fun.

Slowly, but surely, there were promising signs: he embarked on well-attended vaudeville tours, and opened his own nightclub, 'Roscoe Arbuckle's Plantation'. He even snuck in a cameo appearance in a film, 'CHARACTER STUDIES'. This gag reel presents Carter De Haven as a quick change artist impersonating celebrities, the joke being that through trick photography, he changes into the actual stars. Made in 1925 as a private joke for the stars, the film saw release in 1928 by Educational Pictures, and happily Arbuckle's brief appearance was not edited out.

The advent of talkies provided a new dawn, and producers showed an interest in showcasing Roscoe once again. There were abortive plans to make films in Germany, where there was no ban on his films, and Hal Roach even considered making a series of Spanish-language Arbuckle talkies for export. However, for one reason or another, all these projects fizzled out. In the USA, Arbuckle was just too much of a risk, even though the initial ban on his employment was subsequently lifted. Roscoe remained hopeful of making a comeback, but was becoming resigned to the fact that he probably wouldn't. In an interview with Tom Ellis of 'PHOTOPLAY' in 1931, he said "The people who hate me have a right to their opinion and I have a right to mine, which is that I've suffered enough and I want to get back to work. If I do get back, then it will be grand. If not, then o.k.."

The 'Picture Show' article is, on the whole, very sympathetic towards his case and is indicative of the changing attitudes. Arbuckle was now recognised for the innocent scapegoat he





**Roscoe and Bill Hayes in 'HEY POP'.**



**Roscoe confers with director Alf Goulding and young co-star Bill Hayes on the set of 'HEY POP'.**

had been made. The next issue of PHOTOPLAY saw a damning editorial stating that "Arbuckle's treatment is unfair! The Mothers of America should exercise a little of the values they preach so glibly on a Sabbath morn"; many letters poured in, all in favour of Roscoe. More articles began to appear, complaining of his plight, and there was even a song publicly dedicated to him. In 1931, the Hollywood community signed a petition requesting that Arbuckle be returned to the screen. A year later, one cinema owner in Kansas defied the Mothers of America by screening an Arbuckle Keystone, with the star in attendance.

Finally, in late 1932, the go-ahead was given for our maligned star to make his comeback. Sam Sax of Warner Brothers signed him to make a pilot film for a potential series of two-reelers, "just like the old days". In October of that year, Arbuckle once again dressed up in a plaid shirt, derby and ballooning pants, and walked before the cameras to begin filming 'HEY POP'.

Despite all the changes of the last decade, 'HEY POP' retains an old-time atmosphere. We open with Roscoe in his frequent role of short-order cook. His very first appearance is a gag from the Arbuckle-Keaton short 'THE BELL BOY' revisits gags from 'THE WAITERS BALL' (1916) AND 'THE BUTCHER BOY', including the famous moment where he dons a fur coat to enter the walk-in freezer. Meanwhile, in the restaurant, a mother abandons her child, leaving a note to look after him.

The restaurant owner will have none of it and threatens to send the boy to the orphanage. Arbuckle finds the distraught child and agrees to help him, hiding the boy in the freezer disguised as a sack of meat! Fired from his job, Roscoe struggles to make ends meet; when the authorities close in, he dons a female disguise and hides the boy in a pram. The two are caught up in a baby show and almost take the prize, until Roscoe's wig slips and the chase is on again. The pair take refuge behind a locked gate, but it turns out to be the gate of the orphanage.

Although the ending is very abrupt, and it's a shame that nobody thought to properly round out the story (a similar dilemma to that befalling Laurel & Hardy's 'THEIR FIRST MISTAKE'), there is much fun to be had in this short. There is a fun, freewheeling quality in the gags reminiscent of his silent work; Roscoe gets to try his hand at some dextrous food preparation gags a la 'THE WAITERS' BALL' and revisit his knife-throwing speciality. He also gets to essay one of his famous 'Miss Fatty' drag roles, as well as some effective new gags. One fun sequence has the starving heroes goading a greengrocer into pelting them with food they can make into a stew.

'HEY POP' leads us on a merry chase, forever trying to sidestep the shadows of Arbuckle's ordeal and, for the most part, it succeeds. Inevitably, though, there are a few overtones of what had happened. Most glaringly obvious is the lack of a real romantic interest for Roscoe, a pattern continued in all the subsequent films. Similarly calculated is the orphan subplot, as though the scriptwriters have said "how can we prove that this man is safe for family entertainment? Let's have him rescuing an orphaned child.." Along the same theme, is the old-time atmosphere purely to fit in with Roscoe's nostalgic appeal, or is it a conscious attempt to hark back to the more innocent, pre-scandal era?

With hindsight, it is easy to let such thoughts cloud our judgement when looking at Arbuckle's work, but we must try to divorce the entertainment from the mundane real life and judge the films as comedies on their



**Together again: Roscoe and Al St John in 'BUZZIN' AROUND' (1933)**

own term. Happily, 'HEY POP' wins out as a very entertaining comedy and the considerations above do not hurt it. Arbuckle tackles dialogue confidently, his voice a warm, bouncing burr like pumpkin pie. His work as a director during the early sound era, and his vaudeville tours, enabled him to sidestep the hesitancy of many talkie debuts. Best of all, despite the years of depression, dashed hopes and alcoholism, he has retained his boyish charm, and puts plenty of verve into his performance. His delight to be back in front of the cameras is palpable in both the film itself and the stills taken on set, in which he is always beaming. With his comeback underway, and a new marriage to Addie MacPhail (who appears briefly in 'HEY POP') he was once again a happy man.

Although some of the reviews criticised the old-time slapstick style of the film, audiences greeted it with open arms, and

Film Daily commented "mebbe you think Sam Sax is feeling chipper after the response awarded to the first of the shorts starring Roscoe Arbuckle last night. Mr Arbuckle is definitely back!"

With his popularity re-confirmed, more films went into production. The next film, 'BUZZIN' AROUND', is perhaps the best, retaining a fun, freewheeling quality and again harking back to his silent years. After the initial eggshell-treading in engineering his return, now the fun could really begin, and this is reflected in the short. Country boy Roscoe goes to the city to demonstrate his formula for making china unbreakable. Unfortunately, his cousin Al St John has mixed up the jug with his potent home brew, with disastrous consequences for New York's china merchants!

The slapstick is broad and predictable, but Arbuckle has lost none of his verve for pulling off such material with finesse. His misplaced confidence while breaking plate after plate is uproarious, as he doggedly tries to create a successful test. There is also a very funny sequence showing the aftermath of him swallowing a bee; every time he opens his mouth, stranger and stranger buzzing sounds emanate from deep within the Arbuckle anatomy! The humour is heightened by his panicked facial expressions. Arbuckle is confident in his new medium; this routine is visual humour played almost without dialogue, but *with* sound, providing a great update of his silent style. Speaking of the silent years, one of the joys of 'BUZZIN' AROUND' is Roscoe's reunion with nephew Al St John, frequent foil. Here Al is more benevolent, but has some funny moments. Sadly, it was to be the final time that the pair appeared together.

Another former collaborator seems to have been on Roscoe's mind when he turned to making his third short, 'HOW'VE YOU BEAN'. In the film, Roscoe is opening a grocery store with his partner, a little man with a flat hat and a stoic demeanour... yes, you've guessed it, its... Fritz Hubert. I know, disappointing, isn't it? At the time 'HOW'VE YOU BEAN' was being filmed, Buster Keaton was in a sanatorium on the opposite coast of America, being treated for alcoholism and a nervous breakdown. Who knows, if the location or timing had been different, perhaps Keaton might have popped up in a cameo or supporting role, as he had all those years ago. I'd like to think that the ersatz Buster is Roscoe's tribute to his ailing friend. Whatever the truth, the Keaton similarity extends to a reworking of the famous Arbuckle-Keaton 'can of molasses' sequence from their first collaboration, 'THE BUTCHER BOY'.



**'HOW'VE YOU BEAN' features Roscoe re-enacting the famous molasses skit from 'THE BUTCHER BOY', and even gives him an ersatz-Keaton partner.**



**Scenes from 'TOMALIO', the weakest of the Vitaphone shorts. The donkey is a much better co-star than overbearing Charles Judels (right)...**

It's a fine reworking, if inevitably not up to the standard of the original. In fact, the entire first reel of 'HOW'VE YOU BEAN' is good, vigorous slapstick, played for all its worth. The second half meanders somewhat, but still has some entertaining moments, as Roscoe and Fritz attend a wedding dinner dominated by some Mexican Jumping Beans. Hubert is no Keaton, for sure, but he provided a decent foil for Roscoe, and the two would be teamed again in Roscoe's next short.

Sadly, the success of the first three films was not repeated in the short that resulted; 'TOMALIO' is an almost total misfire. Arbuckle and Hubert end up stranded in a strange Latin American republic, dominated by a tyrannical general (the scenery-chewing Charles Judels), who Roscoe ends up competing with in a cross-country race. The main problem is that Judels totally dominates the short with his overacting, which is often excruciatingly unfunny. There is actually precious little for Roscoe to do but stand around most of the time and wince at the histrionics. The climactic race is robbed of its humour by some bad undercranking, and, in hindsight, the physical strain that Arbuckle seems to be going through.

Warners evidently knew they had a dog on their hands; 'TOMALIO' would be swept under the carpet, only limping out into release after all the other Arbuckle shorts in the series had been distributed. What a shame that, to moviegoers at least, Arbuckle's career would seem to end with such a damp squib.

'CLOSE RELATIONS' was a distinct improvement, and also showed something of a switch from slapstick to (admittedly broad) situation comedy. Roscoe is off to meet a distant uncle to discuss an inheritance but spends his journey there annoying a man who turns out to be his cousin. After an uncomfortable journey, the cousins arrive to find the Uncle, his nurse and their other cousin (future Third Stooge Shemp Howard) are all somewhat mad. Although this sort of depiction of mental illness is far from our more sensitive age, it's all done without malice and contains some funny moments. Shemp Howard, in particular, gives a scene-stealing performance, wandering in and out of scenes while performing some surreal deed or another.

Shemp reappears in 'IN THE DOUGH', playing a comic sidekick to gangster Lionel Stander. The villains are targeting a bakery as part of their protection racket. Enter Roscoe in his frequent role of cook, to become the new head baker. There are some new gags in the great Arbuckle tradition of eccentric food preparation, my personal favourite being his method of icing a cake. After Roscoe randomly squirts vast quantities of icing at an off-camera cake, we cut to the result: a beautiful design, tastefully iced with roses and calligraphed writing. There is also some nicely timed slapstick with the kitchen doors, although some of the material is rather more basic slapstick (a dough fight with the gangsters seems rather forced.) On the whole, 'IN THE DOUGH' is a fun film, not quite up to the series' best, but



**Roscoe has an unfortunate encounter with one of his 'CLOSE RELATIONS'...**



**Cake a la Arbuckle in 'IN THE DOUGH', Roscoe's last filmed appearance.**

The Warners executives were certainly pleased with how their gamble on the series had panned out, and, the day after 'IN THE DOUGH' wrapped, Roscoe was promoted to a contract for feature films. Even now though, fate ominously crept up to deal his career the final blow. After a night celebrating with friends, he returned home in good spirits. Two minutes after returning to his hotel room, he relaxed in his chair and peacefully suffered a fatal heart attack. As David Yallop pointed out, it is a bitter irony that Arbuckle's life ended in a hotel room, just as his career had done 11 years earlier.

What happened to Arbuckle is almost too sad and unfair to bear contemplation by those of us who love and admire him. Tattered by persecution and disappointment, there's an unavoidable tendency to view his life in terms of "What-if?". What if he hadn't died just on the verge of making a comeback? What if he'd been able to reunite with Buster Keaton? What if the scandal had never happened? What if he'd been able to equal Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd in the 20s?

Of course there is this sense of indignant loss for Arbuckle, but, difficult as it is, we must try not to view his career purely by the terms of this loss. Arbuckle may have died young and before he could fully re-establish himself, but he died knowing that he was on the way up, that he could be funny again, and that audiences loved him. His final 6 films are hardly the painful, last motions of a bitter has-been either. Although they are sometimes tentative, awkward and only sporadically equal to his silent peaks, they are fun and, more importantly, *they were allowed to happen*. The fact that they gave Arbuckle fulfilment is really the only justification needed for their existence. That they are frequently genuinely funny is a bonus. Watch them and forget your pity for Roscoe. Smile with him as he smiles, and enjoy his final works. There's no need to laugh out of pity, he's still charming and hilarious even after all his ordeal. Now there's a positive story after all...

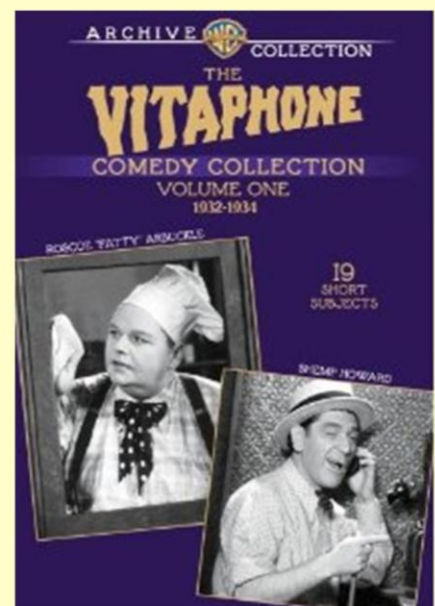
### **AND NOW... MR A ON DVD!**

What a happy coincidence that, as I wrote this article, the 6 Arbuckle comeback shorts, long available only in poor-quality bootlegs, are finally seeing release. Part of the increasingly interesting Warner Archive 'on-demand' series, 'The Vitaphone Comedy Collection' pairs Roscoe's shorts with a further 13 films featuring Shemp Howard, in both starring roles and in support of Ben Blue, Jack Haley, Charles Judels, Harry Gribbon et al. Shemp was a mainstay of the Vitaphone shorts, and the connection lies in his appearances in two of Roscoe's films. The billing of the set as Volume 1 hopefully hints at some other interesting releases in the future; there are many interesting films in the Vitaphone archive.

Available now, the full contents of this set are as follows...

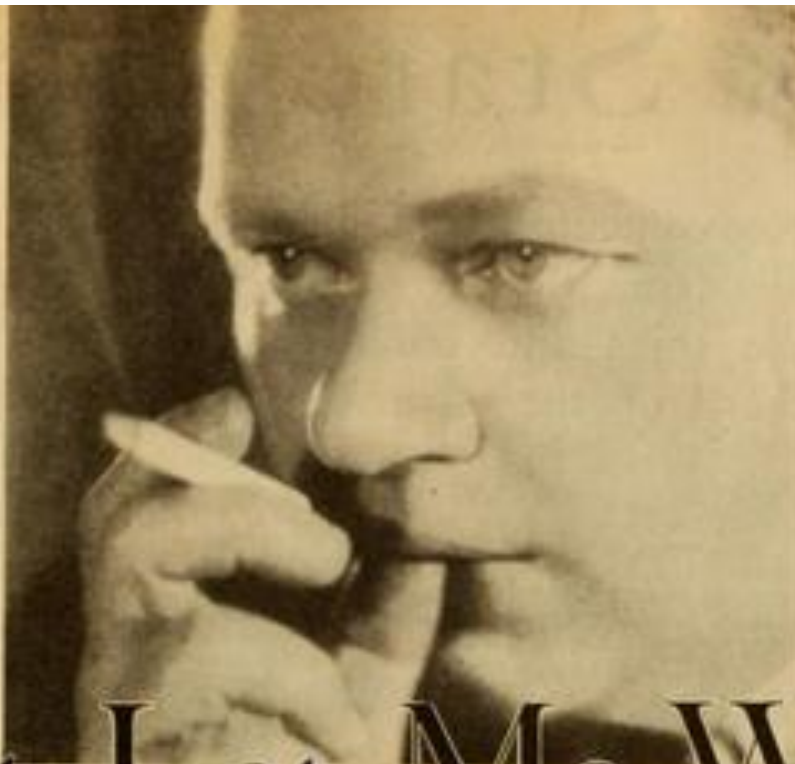
**ARBUCKLE:** HEY POP/BUZZIN' AROUND/HOW'VE YOU BEAN?/TOMALIO/CLOSE RELATIONS/IN THE DOUGH

**SHEMP HOWARD:** PAUL REVERE JR/MUSHROOMS/SALTWATER DAFFY/ART TROUBLE/HERE COMES FLOSSIE/I SCREAM/CORN ON THE COP/VERY CLOSE VEINS/RAMBLIN' ROUND RADIO ROW/PURE FEUD/THE WRONG, WRONG TRAIL/PUGS AND KISSES/HOW D'YA LIKE THAT?





It isn't the jolly "Fatty" Arbuckle of his great Paramount starring days of a decade ago. There's somberness in that big moon face that made millions laugh in the good old days



Under another name, Roscoe Arbuckle directs short comedies for a Hollywood producer. And still he cherishes a faint hope that some day he can stagecome-back better his own camera

# "Just Let Me Work"

**T**HIS is a story about "Fatty" Arbuckle. And it's not a "sob story." It's not a sob story for the simple reason that Arbuckle isn't sobbing. There's nothing to sob about!

But neither is it the "head-high-facing-life-courageously" sort of thing. For Roscoe Arbuckle wouldn't fit into that classification any more than the whiner category. "Fatty's" not fighting very hard any more. A decade of battle has knocked most of the fight out of him. Not he isn't hawling, either.

This story, in short, is merely a presentation of the case of "Fatty" as he stands today.

It was nearly ten years ago, now, that headline ink was smeared thick and ugly across the gay-hued Arbuckle shield. The jovial clown that had rolled 'em in the aisles with his elephantine antics became overnight a sinister figure whose name might not even be mentioned in polite company.

Journalistic sensationalism had its customary Roman holiday—and the fact that a jury acquitted Roscoe Arbuckle of the charges against him made no difference in the fact that he was a ruined man.

Well, all that's an old story by this time. You've read it time and again, and you've read interminable arguments for and against Arbuckle. You know, too, that with his friends in movieland solidly behind him, "Fatty" tried to fight back to the place he had lost.

He fought strenuously. He made speeches. He toured the country, in personal appearances and in vaudeville. He sought backers to put him again on the screen. He fought, courageously, against the organized campaign to keep him off the screen—the campaign that has ever been waged by the extremists to prevent him from coming back.

For years, his name and the news of his fight were good copy. But then, inevitably, came the indifference that is worse, in "Fatty's" profession, than the most rabid condemnation. "Fatty" was left to be forgotten.

Illusions lost and hope fading, Roscoe Arbuckle just jogs along directing other people's comedies

And that was the break that did for him! "Fatty" stopped fighting, then—and whatever he has done since, to tell the truth, has been half-hearted at best.

And that brings us to today—when "Fatty" Arbuckle isn't even a name any more! Literally, that is. Because Arbuckle, smashed at last by the futility of ever trying to live down the shadow of that name in headline ink, has

changed it. Today he works in Hollywood, but not under the name of Roscoe Arbuckle. He has adopted an entirely different name.

That new name has been printed, here and there. We won't print it, because to do so would mean merely another hardship for the man. Under that new name, he has achieved a certain measure of success—certainly not great, but enough to earn a living—at directing talking comedies. To divulge the name of the company that is making his pictures would mean only the probability of unfair prejudice against his work. And that would be tragic—for some of the two-reelers Arbuckle is turning out are superior to many feature pictures! He knows his stuff!

**T**ODAY then, "Fatty" Arbuckle, the hilarious comedian, is gone. Instead, there is a big fat fellow behind a director's desk in a Hollywood office, the door of which bears a name that doesn't even remotely resemble Roscoe Arbuckle.

There's no grin on his face. It's almost always serious. There are lines there that weren't on that cherubically smiling countenance that beamed from the screen in the old "Fatty" comedies.

He works hard. When he's casting his comedies, he makes a point of picking the names of old-timers he used to know. He's particularly happy when he can give a few days' work to some fellow who's had the breaks against him.

He doesn't court publicity. Now and then, a writer or an editor will say: "What can we do for you to help you, Roscoe?" [PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 127]

By Tom Ellis

Arbuckle will half-smile and say, usually: "Aw, never mind me; I'm doing all right. But you might give a story to So-and-So"—naming either an old-timer who's heading for the rocks, or a newcomer who needs a boost.

He has learned that his field is motion pictures, and it is in that field alone that he must seek whatever the future holds for him. He tried, disastrously, restauranting. His friends backed him—first with the Plantation Club, a night resort near Hollywood. It went well enough, in a way, but "Fatty" got nothing out of it to speak of. His name was blazoned there in electric lights, and it was called "his" place.

But all he really was was entertainer there. And it didn't last.

**T**HEN some friends promoted another place for him, in Hollywood. But it was off the beaten track.

Friends are few—real friends, that is. Not many people came to Arbuckle's café. And that flopped, too.

"It's pictures for me," he realized. He had been brought up in pictures, and pictures was all he knew.

He hasn't many resources. So he turned back to pictures.

Producers were afraid of his name. They knew that to mark their product with the name of Arbuckle was to invite disaster.

It was Mack Sennett who took the first chance. He gave "Fatty" a job directing and gagging. But even Sennett had Arbuckle use another name. Four months, "Fatty" stayed there.

Then he went to Radio Pictures. Radio kept it very, very dark. If "Fatty" happened to get into a photograph taken on the set he was working on, while acting as gag-man, the negative was destroyed. The studio adopted a rigid hush-hush policy on Arbuckle's presence while he worked there as comedy adviser on two pictures.

From there, "Fatty" went to another producing organization that specializes in two-reel comedies.

For the past several months, he has been successfully directing there under his new name. He is reasonably happy.

When we say that, we mean that "Fatty" is resigned. He has lost his fight; he has lost his illusions. And of hope, he retains only a vestige.

That hope is the one thing he has never given up. It is the hope that some day, some given up. It is the hope that some day, somehow, he may once again return to the screen—on the screen! And it's not because he thinks he can make more money—because he's making a good living now. It's because he can never forget the place he once held in the hearts and affections of movie-goers. He wants that place back.

**"A**LL I want to do is to be allowed to work in my field," is the way he puts it. There's no longer any enthusiasm behind his saying it, though.

"It isn't for money. I'm not broke. I never have been broke. I don't want anybody sobbing or whining over me.

"I've no resentment against anybody for what has happened. My conscience is clear, my heart is clean. I refuse to worry. I feel that I have atoned for everything.

"You know, people can be wrong. I don't say I'm all right. I don't believe the other side is all right. And anyway, so much worse has happened in history to people vastly more important than I am that my little worries don't matter, in comparison. So why should I kick?

"People have the right to their opinions. The people who oppose me have the right to

theirs. I have the right to mine—which is that I've suffered enough, and been humiliated enough.

"I want to go back to the screen. I think I can entertain and gladden the people that see me. All I want is that. If I do get back, it will be grand.

"If I don't—well, okay."

## APPENDIX II -The Roscoe Arbuckle 'comeback' shorts: Production details. All films 2 reels.

### 1. Hey, Pop! (12/11/1932)

Directed by Alf Goulding. Story by Jack Henley and Glen Lambert.

Starring Roscoe Arbuckle, with Billy Hayes, Florence Auer, Jack Shutta, Dan Wolheim, Milton Wallace, Leo Hoyt, Hershall Mayan.

### 2. Buzzin' Around (4/2/1933)

Produced by The Vitaphone Corporation, distributed by Warner Brothers. Directed by Alf Goulding. Screenplay by Jack Henley and Glen Lambert. Photographed by E.B. DuPar.

Starring Roscoe Arbuckle, with Al St. John, Dan Coleman, Alice May Tuck, Tom Smith, Al Ochs, Harry Ward, Gertrude Mudge, Fritz Hubert, Donald MacBride, Pete the Pup (dog).

### 3. How've You Bean? (24/6/1933)

Produced by The Vitaphone Corporation, distributed by Warner Brothers. Directed by Alf Goulding. Screenplay by Jack Henley and Glen Lambert

Starring Roscoe Arbuckle, with Mildred Van Dorn, Fritz Hubert.

### 4. Close Relations (30/9/1933)

Produced by The Vitaphone Corporation, distributed by Warner Brothers. Directed by Ray McCarey. Screenplay by Jack Henley. Camera by E.P. DuPar.

Starring Roscoe Arbuckle, with Charles Judels, Mildred Van Dorn, Harry Shannon, Shemp Howard, Hugh O'Connell.

### 5. In the Dough (25/11/1933)

Produced by The Vitaphone Corporation, distributed by Warner Brothers. Directed by Ray McCarey. Screenplay by Jack Henley. Camera by E.P. DuPar.

Starring Roscoe Arbuckle, with Lionel Stander, Shemp Howard, Marc Marion, Fred Harper, Dan Coleman.

### 6. Tomalio (30/12/1933)

Directed by Ray McCarey (dir). Screenplay by Jack Henley, Glen Lambert

With Charles Judels, Phyllis Holden, Fritz Hubert.

**MISSING  
IN ACTION**

# 'A COUNTRY HERO' (1917)

*With the rumours of 'A COUNTRY HERO' turning up, it seems a good time to review what we know about this film already and speculate on what it might contain....*



**PRODUCED BY JOSEPH M. SCHENCK. DIRECTED BY ROSCOE ARBUCKLE. STARRING ROSCOE ARBUCKLE, WITH BUSTER KEATON, AL ST JOHN, ALICE LAKE AND JOE KEATON. RELEASED BY PARAMOUNT.**



**Behind the scenes of 'A COUNTRY HERO'. Top: Roscoe with Otis Hoyt, manager of the Long Beach Liberty Theatre.. Above: the cast and crew: Joe Keaton second from left, then Lou Anger, BK, Alice Lake and Roscoe. Al St John crouching by camera.**

'A COUNTRY HERO' was the sixth of the Arbuckle-Keaton collaborations to be made, and has an important status in the series for several reasons. Firstly, the previous 5 films had been made in New York. After filming on 'CONEY ISLAND' wrapped, the whole company moved west to the Horkheimer Brothers studios in Long Island, California. 'A COUNTRY HERO' was therefore the film that brought Buster Keaton to Hollywood.

Before production began on the film, a reception was given to Arbuckle, Keaton and Al St John by local theatre owner Otis Hoyt.

The trio (and canine co-star Luke the Dog) were in attendance for a screening of their short 'OH! DOCTOR!', and Arbuckle was presented with his own box in the theatre. There was also some impromptu clowning for the benefit of the audience as the presentation was made, with Arbuckle telling Keaton and St John, "You kids better be good from now on!".

Back at work, filming started on a rural set, designated 'Jazzville'. This was another of Roscoe's 'village comedies', in the vein of 'HIS WEDDING NIGHT' and the later 'THE HAYSEED'. *Motion Picture Weekly* reported on the storyline during production:

*This comedy, which will be released in the near future, tells of the rivalry between "Fatty" and Cy Klone, the garage owner, over the affections of a pretty school-teacher. A stranger, however, comes to town—a city chap—and unites the two rivals in a common cause against him when he tries to steal the school teacher from beneath their eyes. The stranger takes the heroine to the city and there he is followed by "Fatty" and Cy who finally rescue her from the unscrupulous villain. Alice Lake supports Mr Arbuckle as the leading woman.*

Also supporting Mr Arbuckle was Al St John in the role of the city slicker; Cy Klone was played by a vaudeville actor making his first film appearance, one Joe Keaton, father of Buster. Buster's role does not seem to have been determined, but it's most likely that he played an assistant to either his father or Arbuckle.

Of key scenes within the film, we know details of at least a few. *Motion Picture Weekly* records an impressive scene where a train wrecks a car, "recorded by four cameramen and a graflex machine". The aftermath of this scene is shown in the scene on the right. *Wid's Daily*, in its review of the short, commented that "a water trough at the door of the blacksmith shop figures largely as a source for a dip at various critical points in the comedy."

This was in no small measure due to Joe Keaton and his famous vaudeville hitch-kick, described colourfully by Rudi Blesh in *Keaton*:

*"Now," said Arbuckle, "Buster and Alice will be sitting on the edge of the watering trough. They're spooning, but you don't like it. So you grab him and kick him into the trough. Use your camera foot."  
"My what foot?"*





"He means your downstage foot," said Buster.  
 "Then why the hell don't he say so?" growled Joe.  
 They took their places. The camera began rolling. Joe made a practiced grab at his son, and his practiced toe found its traditional mark. With this power behind him, Buster made a beautiful Original Aboriginal straight into the water.  
 "N.G. Kill it," said Arbuckle. "Wrong foot. Shoot again."  
 Joe turned on him. "I've been kicking that boy's ass for years," he said, "ever since he was born, and now you tell me how. But I'm going to tell you how. Unless we reverse positions so I can use my right foot you'll never get this scene."



Buster was doubled up laughing, and Alice was giggling. Roscoe joined in.. Joe glared, then joined in too. They switched places and got a perfect take. Buster was firmly in the drink. But the Keaton kick, once unleashed, roared on. Two seconds later, Arbuckle was in the trough too. [...] The heroine herself felt the jarring impact of a leather sole on the rear placket of her gingham dress. She took off, wailing, to land in the water ahead of the two comedians."

Former cine-phobe Joe Keaton was now sold on the film industry, and would become a mainstay of the Arbuckle and Keaton films.

Another key scene in 'A COUNTRY HERO' involved some kind of village talent show, providing an excuse for burlesque-style dancing from the principles. Roscoe appeared as 'Fatima', "wriggling through a series of snake-like movements and mysteriously opens a cigar box, pulling forth a piece of hosiery which is expected to impersonate a serpent". This scene was revisited the following year in 'THE COOK', as was Buster's embryonic Egyptian dance, which lived on in his WW1 army camp shows and through to 'THE HOLLYWOOD REVUE OF 1929'.

**"A water trough features largely in the comedy" said *Wid's Daily*. I've no idea what they're talking about...**

The climax of the short sounds like a typical Arbuckle battle royale, as Arbuckle, according to the *Wid's Daily* review, "demolishes all manner of furniture, wielding a piano the way a giant might use a club!"

Inevitably, much of the interest in the Arbuckle-Keaton shorts is based on the input Keaton had. This two-reeler, fairly early in their collaboration, is more likely to be closer to the early efforts than the more sophisticated Keatonesque shorts subsequently produced. However, the presence of Joe Keaton is at least one significant Keatonian aspect, as is the burlesque dance routine. Regardless of this, the short is doubtlessly highly entertaining slapstick by masters of the genre. Hopefully, the rumours of rediscovery will turn out to be true and we'll get to see for ourselves soon.



Joseph M. Schenck presents  
**"FATTY" ARBUCKLE**  
 in  
**"A Country Hero"**

**Buckle Up to Arbuckle**

and watch your box office expand. Get in on "The Country Hero," the best "admission" tonic and grouch cure ever put over by "The Prince of Mirth."

Each laugh is worth many admissions.

Get in now. Get in big and get in long.

FAMOUS PLAYERS - LASKY CORPORATION

Paramount Pictures

# HAL ROACH'S FUNNY LADIES

The silent years

*In the last issue, we looked at Alice Howell, one of the relatively few comediennees to sustain a silent comedy career. Alice's story got me thinking about other comediennees, and the difficulties many of them faced in achieving fame in their own right. As the 1920s progressed,, more funny ladies did manage to break through from the ranks of leading ladies; this was concurrent with a move towards more sophisticated, human comedy spearheaded by the Hal Roach and Al Christie studios. In this article, I'm going to take a look at Roach's attempts to promote female comedy stars.. Sometimes successful, often not, nevertheless the experiments produced an interesting bunch of films...*

In the 1920s, the Hal Roach studios was developing a line in more natural, human comedy. Led by Harold Lloyd and developed through the Charley Chase and 'Our Gang' series, there was a trend toward natural situations and humour. As the Roach house style veered away from faceless slapstick, there was more of a place for women to thrive...

### THE EARLY YEARS

There had been early attempts before the mid-1920s to allow women a greater role. Lloyd's partnership with Bebe Daniels had allowed her to shine, but only within the constrictive parameters of leading lady; you can only be so funny on an idealised pedestal. It would take other studios to make a star of her in comedy vehicles like 'SENORITA'.

The earliest Roach films to give star billing to a woman were a handful starring Beatrice La Plante, from 1920. Bebe Daniels' departure had perhaps awoken Roach to the fact that he could nurture female stars as well as low comedians, and shortly after he signed the relatively unknown Beatrice La Plante to make a series of shorts, starting with 'A REGULAR PAL' in 1920. Of the five films made, one of the few to circulate widely is 'MERELY A MAID', which might as well have been titled, 'merely an average one-reeler'. Similarly uninspiring is 'START THE SHOW'; the model for the La Plante films is clearly an attempt to rework the success of Mabel Normand. Not only is Miss La Plante's plucky farm girl a clear homage to 'Keystone Mabel', but Roach went the whole hog and imported all the concomitant barnyard settings and broad slapstick. 'START THE SHOW' has Beatrice as a farm girl who ends up hosting a show by a bunch of travelling actors in her barn. There's much in the way of mud-puddles, haystacks and top-hatted villains, but little in the way of genuine, individual humour. Although she has a couple of charming moments, for the most part the nominal star is subordinate to much general slapstick.

Miss La Plante didn't seem to inspire any creative sparks and one gets the impression that, at this time, the Roach style wasn't geared to making the right type of comedy for ladies like her. Aside from Lloyd, the early Roach comedies were made up of Snub Pollard moustaches and Noah Young heavies, Rube Goldberg gadgets and Paul Parrott gag frenzies. All great stuff in their own right, but for our girls, there were slim pickings indeed. Of course, we shouldn't forget that, at this early stage, the social climate was hardly very conducive to realms of successful female comedy stars. In 1922, most women in Hollywood were still stuck up on that



**Beatrice La Plante in 'MERELY A MAID' (1920). Sophistication was yet to be added to the slapstick.**

ethereal pedestal, being worshipped by the comedians below them. Indeed, as her own series faltered, Beatrice La Plante ended up in the inauspicious position of leading lady to Gaylord Lloyd in films like 'TROLLEY TROUBLES', before disappearing into obscurity. (Understandably, really; playing second fiddle to a the second most important Lloyd brother is hardly a glowing addition to a C.V.). The time was not quite right for a Roach comedienne yet. Only as the flappers' hemlines raised could the leading ladies begin to climb down from the pedestal and really get the chance to do more than look lovely.

### **FROM LEADING LADIES TO 'ALL-STARS'**

By the mid-20s, there were more encouraging signs. The sophistication and often domestic humour of the Charley Chase films enabled his leading ladies to take a bigger part in the action, and the comedy. From the Chase series came Martha Sleeper. Starting with Charley at just 16, Martha had a tremendous sense of comic timing and added so much more than beauty to films like 'MUM'S THE WORD', 'LONG FLIV THE KING' and 'TOO MANY MAMMAS'. However, when Chase's comedies took a more domestic turn, Martha was just a little young to play wives, especially the suspicious harridans called for in films like 'INNOCENT HUSBANDS' and 'MIGHTY LIKE A MOOSE'. Two other ladies with significant comic talent joined him on such occasions. Katherine Grant had come to attention opposite Stan Laurel in his Roach starring series; although only a few years older than Martha, she was superb at playing icy, suspicious women. Playing opposite Charley, films like 'THE CARETAKER'S DAUGHTER', 'WHAT PRICE GOOFY' and 'INNOCENT HUSBANDS' offer her some fine moments of comic interplay with Chase, where she was especially great at showing cynical disbelief at his increasingly desperate attempts to extricate himself from sticky situations.

Following Katherine Grant was Vivien Oakland, who had her most shining moment opposite Charley in the proto-screwball 'MIGHTY LIKE A MOOSE'. The bizarre tale of a husband and wife who secretly have plastic surgery and then unknowingly embark on an affair with each other in their new identities presented Chase and Oakland as almost a fully-fledged team.

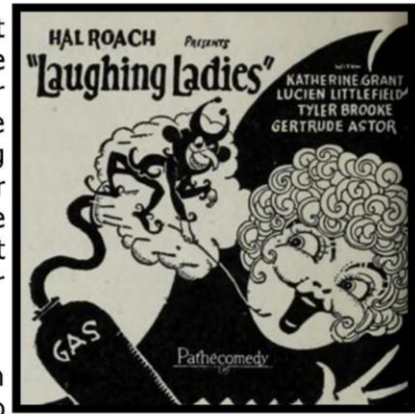
Sleeper, Grant and Oakland earned their stripes opposite Charley, and proved that women could be an integral part of the Hal Roach comedy style, rather than merely adornments to it. In many ways, it was the vision of Chase and collaborator Leo McCarey with their proto-screwball comedies that gave them the opportunity to shine, but of course the main credit must go to these very able comediennes themselves.

Accordingly, Roach began to sit up and realise the potential of using female stars in lead roles. In 1925 he had begun billing 'all star' films, featuring varying combinations of his stock company. As William K Everson succinctly pointed out "all-stars meant the same then as now: no stars". In fact, the series offered the chance to experiment with ideas and try out those with star potential in leading roles, in the hope that one of them would stick. Amongst those tried out for starring roles were the leading ladies who had proved so adept at comedy. First of all, Martha Sleeper was given the chance to star in 'SURE MIKE', a one-reel test short. This film presents her as a shop assistant working in a department store clearly inspired by Harold Lloyd's 'SAFETY LAST'. Martha has romantic designs on the store manager, William Gillespie, but is constantly at odds with tetchy floorwalker James Finlayson. The short is almost a forerunner of Clara Bow's famous vehicle 'IT', if it were condensed into 9 minutes and rammed full of slapstick. 'IT' is not full of slapstick and succeeds very well as a light romantic comedy for a female star. 'SURE MIKE' crams as many gags in as possible to the point of over-frenetic numbness. Building up characters is of course always difficult in such a short space of running time, but this rather takes the biscuit: within the first two minutes alone, Martha has had a madcap rollerskate race down a busy street, been for a ride on a runaway motorcycle and made a disastrous airborne entrance to the store! There are good ideas in the film, and Martha's engaging personality keeps it afloat, but in the end she is smothered in overegged chases and pratfalls. Accordingly, 'SURE MIKE' failed to set the world on fire. Back to the drawing board, and Martha was next billed to appear with Lucien Littlefield in another all-star film. However, she ended up leaving to make a trip to New York instead; she would subsequently return to Roach and appeared in some meaty supporting roles, but was never again the main star to this extent. In Chase's 'MUM'S THE WORD', she plays a flirtatious maid, and has a very funny sequence where she accidentally ends up walking around in Charley's huge shoes. 'LONG FLIV THE KING' has her



**Martha Sleeper and William Gillespie in 'SURE MIKE' (1925)**

as more of a straight leading lady, as a queen who marries Charley, but her engaging personality still shines through. Her most celebrated role actually came a couple of years later, when she was no longer under regular contract at Roach. In Max Davidson's 'PASS THE GRAVY', she plays his daughter, who has ended up in the awkward situation of having to tell him that he has just served his neighbour's prizewinning rooster as a roast dinner. Unable to speak to him, she must convey the message in increasingly ridiculous pantomime, and completely steals the short from under Davidson's nose. It's a priceless scene that has awarded her at least passing immortality as a comedienne.



Back to 1925, and Sleeper's absence left a gap to fill opposite Lucien Littlefield. Summoned for a chance at stardom was Katherine Grant, who gained star billing in the short, 'LAUGHING LADIES'. Littlefield played a forgetful dentist, but the plum comic role belonged to Katherine as wife of the chief of police, who accidentally receives more than her intended dose of laughing gas. Sadly the film does not seem to exist, but we can garner some of its fun-filled spirit from this FILM DAILY review:

"Boys, here's a laugh-getter if ever there was one. The cast [...] all do excellent work. However, Katherine Grant comes out way ahead of them all. Suffering from a toothache she goes to an inexperienced dentist and is given an overdose of laughing gas. It knocks her cookoo and she giggles and smirks as she walks nonchalantly down the street."

Katherine's frivolous state extends to losing her inhibitions, as she "rudely hits any passerby she passes. As the wife of the chief of police, all the cops assist her in any difficulty. Aboard a bus she takes a liking to a dapper young man (Tyler Brooke) and has his wife taken away by a cop. All this time, the dentist is following close on her trail, trying to spray her with a restorative." This leads to a climax at Katherine's home, with Brooke trying to distract her so Littlefield can sneak up and spray her, but "just then, in dash the chief and Brooke's wife, and, well—judge for yourself."

'LAUGHING LADIES' sounds like a very fun, boisterous comedy short, with a great opportunity for Katherine to show her talent. The transformation from her usual icy spouse type to the fun-loving good-time girl of the second reel was surely worth many laughs. If the story of the short sounds familiar, it is because it was adapted 2 and a half years later into Laurel and Hardy's 'LEAVE 'EM LAUGHING'. (Incidentally, the earlier film featured Babe Hardy in a small role).

Based on the success of this film, Katherine Grant seemed destined for bigger things. Following the production of the film, she reunited with Chase for 'CHARLEY MY BOY' and 'HIS WOODEN WEDDING', and also played an important part in Glenn Tryon's 'THE HUG BUG'. More starring films in the vein of 'LAUGHING LADIES' would surely have followed, but then, this able comedienne seemed to step from stardom into obscurity. In fact, she had the misfortune to be struck by a hit and run driver. Although she was not seriously injured, she needed rest before she could fulfil any more starring roles. Tragically, though, she was never to fully recover. Historian Bill Capello has unearthed her biography, and it seems that the accident triggered a nervous collapse in Katherine. This, coupled with an existing eating disorder, led to a complete breakdown to the point where Katherine needed continuous care. A 1929 PHOTOPLAY article cites her as an example of the desperate diets used by leading ladies, claiming she had been "reduced to an invalid by starvation". Sadly, her condition did not improve, and she remained in a sanatorium until her death in 1937, aged just 32. During her illness, Hal Roach paid tribute to Katherine Grant, saying "she was one of the most capable comediennesses we have ever seen. We expected big things of her". Her tragic end was a great loss.



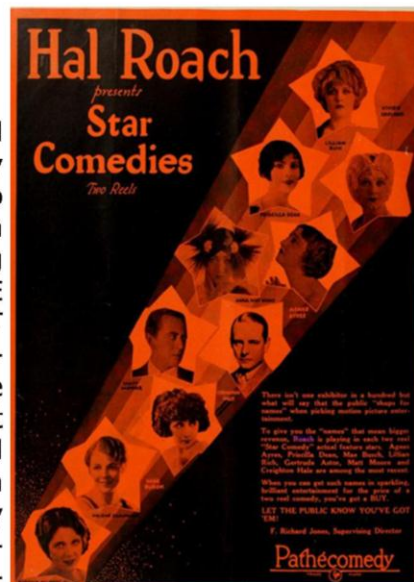
Kathryn Grant had a beautiful figure, but she was just a little too plump for the eye of the camera. Kathryn tried to reduce in a hurry. Trying to undo the mischief of a foolish diet, she spent months in a sanitarium. Today she is an invalid and studio work is out of the question

Vivien Oakland took over Grant's roles in the series, and also popped up in many of the all-star films. Her meatiest role was probably in 'ALONG CAME AUNTIE', officially a Glenn Tryon vehicle, but dominated by Vivian as a woman keen to cover up her divorce and second marriage in order to obtain an inheritance. The short has seen wide release due to the identity of her former husband, a certain Oliver Hardy! Although an excellent comic actress, Vivian wasn't quite starring material. She would remain on-hand to offer excellent support to Laurel and Hardy in the future, most notably in 'WE FAW DOWN', 'SCRAM!' and 'WAY OUT WEST'.

**Katherine's fate, as cited in *Photoplay*, 1928.**

## ALL-STARS AND FADING STARS.

By 1926, the all-star series had thrown up some interesting comedies and plenty of opportunities for funny women, but none of the players had really gelled as star personalities in their own right. Hal Roach's next move was to hire in established stars whose lustre had faded somewhat and present them in comedies. So, over the next year we get a glut of shorts giving star billing to females — Agnes Ayres in 'EVE'S LOVE LETTERS', Theda Bara in 'MADAME MYSTERY', Priscilla Dean in 'SLIPPING WIVES', Lilian Rich in 'ON THE FRONT PAGE'. With recognised female stars in place, would the studio become a haven for funny ladies? Well, not quite. Although the stars were allowed to be the central point of the films, more often than not they actually provided next to none of the comedy. They were dramatic stars and as such merely provided novelty value whilst acting as ciphers for thin stories enabling the usual Roach comedians to do their stuff. The real funny business was provided not by Ayres, Dean et al, but by such folk as Tyler Brooke, Stan Laurel, James Finlayson and Oliver Hardy. The 'fading stars' films only proved the dichotomy between women *in* comedy and women *creating* comedy.



**This still pretty much sums up the approach of the 'fading stars series'. Roach stock company creating comedy; fading star looking on, bemused...**

Appropriately, the only real success of the 'fading stars' was a female star who had achieved her fame in comedy, rather than drama. Mabel Normand had her comic style fully formed years before her entrance to the Roach studios. Scandals, illness and whispers of drug addiction had broken her, and her career was assumed over. But, to his eternal credit, Roach believed she was still a saleable comedienne. His head director, F Richard Jones, was close to Mabel from their days together with Mack Sennett, and believed he could get the best from her. Mabel arrived at Roach in early 1926, was given a three year contract and embarked upon the first successful Roach series to star a comedienne.

## THE RETURN OF MADCAP MABEL

Mabel's return was with quite some fanfare. Her journey back to Hollywood was reported extensively, with Pathé affording great publicity to her return in the trade journals. There was even a song written to accompany her first Roach film, 'RAGGEDY ROSE'. Considerable effort was also awarded to the film itself, her first in three years. 'RAGGEDY ROSE' was planned as a 5 reel featurette (although eventually released as a two-reeler), with direction shared between F Richard Jones and Stan Laurel. (Rob Stone has noted that although Laurel is credited somewhat vaguely as "in collaboration with Jones", internal memos reveal him to have been very much in control, rather than merely a glorified assistant director).

The strong talent behind the camera was matched by Mabel's onscreen cohorts, Max Davidson, Jimmy Finlayson and, making her first appearance at Roach, Anita Garvin. As in the other 'fading star' films, Roach was clearly seeking to minimise the pressure on Mabel by surrounding her with talented people. This effort paid off, but happily, Mabel was still very capable of being funny. Although she looks frail compared to the Mabel of Keystone (this did not go unnoticed, with one reviewer commenting that "she is completely removed from the 'Pretty Mickey' of old"), she is still expressive and amusing.

'RAGGEDY ROSE' is a Cinderella story, featuring Mabel as assistant to junk dealer Max Davidson. An amusing first scene shows the intrepid duo's method of obtaining scrap metal. They are aided by some mechanical cats, which produce a horrendous racket at night, enticing local residents to hurl their junk into the alleyway below.





To protect herself, Mabel wears a WW1 tin helmet. Back at Davidson's place of business, another good scene has Mabel sorting through a giant pile of rags. When she finds a dollar, she secretes it in her stocking, unaware that she has a hole and that the money has escaped.

Mabel's second effort, 'THE NICKELHOPPER', is more confident all round. The direction is smoother, Mabel's performance more assured and the supporting actors wonderful. We begin with Mabel as an overworked 'dime a dance' girl. In a quick-cutting scene, we see the trials she goes through during a typical evening as she puts up with an array of mismatched dancing partners. Mabel's weary, exasperated expressions as she is whirled around by grotesquely tall men, has her feet trodden on, and is leered at by a young Boris Karloff, are very funny indeed. At the end of the night, Mabel is walked home, but her suitor is scared off by her awful father.

The next morning, we see the full extent of Mabel's home life; she and her mother labour through mountains of washing while father lazes around in his nightshirt. If it sounds maudlin, the verve of the players actually makes the scenes very amusing, especially Michael Visaroff, superb as the layabout father. The contrasts of Mabel's home and working life provide a real rhythm to 'THE NICKELHOPPER', and while we sympathise with her, the emphasis is always on comedy. Eventually, Mabel meets young playboy Teddy Von Eltz, but is embarrassed to tell him where she really lives, and so ends up going into James Finlayson's somewhat grander house to save face. Some slapstick chasing results, with Dad turning up just in time to be hauled away as a burglar while Mabel and Teddy escape to get married. We end with a bizarre gag, as the pair fall down a cliff, but are saved by using Mabel's voluminous wedding dress as a parachute!

This was the best female comedy produced to date at Roach; for once, a man could not have played this part and the story and comedy are rooted firmly in the dilemmas of the working girl. Pathos arose naturally from the comedy, giving Mabel's setbacks and ultimate triumph a much greater punch. Suddenly, we've come a long way from Martha Sleeper on roller skates!



**'RAGGEDY ROSE' was given extensive publicity. Above is a scene from the film with Mabel and Anita Garvin.**



**Max Factor makes a promotional visit to Mabel's make-up table during production of 'ANYTHING ONCE'.**

Not quite up to this high standard was 'ANYTHING ONCE', which nevertheless remained great fun. Again, Mabel was a Cinderella type, this time toiling to James Finlayson in a dress shop. Detailed to deliver a gown to a fancy dress ball, she can't resist trying it on herself, and is mistaken for a guest at the party. Although Mabel looks a little frail, she proves she was still game for slapstick in her attempts to board a crowded streetcar.

After three similarly themed films, the next film presented a somewhat different dynamic. 'ONE HOUR MARRIED' had Mabel wedding her man (Creighton Hale) at the outset of the film. The only slight inconvenience is a little matter called the First World War, and the draft board nabs poor Creighton just as they are leaving the church! The rest of the film follows Mabel's attempts to stow away after her husband, disguising herself as a general with the help of a uniform stolen from James Finlayson. *FILM DAILY* commented that "Mabel Normand is in her element, clowning around at a great rate while dodging shot and shell in No-Man's Land". Sadly, we can only imagine these scenes now as the film is the sole Roach-Normand collaboration to be lost. It does

sound like there was much potential in the film, and I'm sure Mabel's altercations with Fin were worth a chuckle. Perhaps most interesting about the film is the change in dynamic from Mabel as poor wallflower into a confident woman who will face death (and Fin in his underwear) to rescue her man. The success of the series obviously gave the studio confidence to dispense with the careful image protection of the earlier poor working girl roles and ladled on pathos, and to introduce more empowered characters for Mabel.

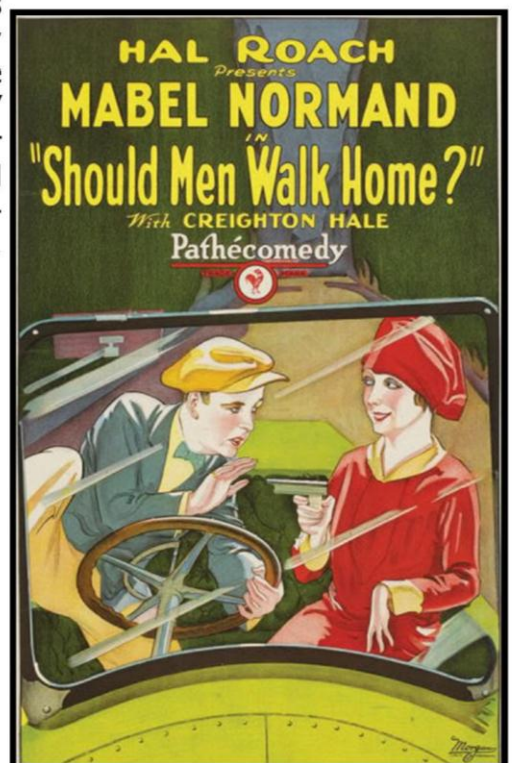


**Sgt Noah Young has plans for Creighton Hale in 'ONE HOUR MARRIED'.**

The next film carried this even further, representing a complete departure for Mabel (not seen since 'TILLIE'S PUNCTURED ROMANCE'). In 'SHOULD MEN WALK HOME?' she portrays a clearly defined 'bad girl' role. Here she is confident, brash and scheming. More than that, her first act is to hold up Creighton Hale at gunpoint! Clearly, the success of Normand's comeback was such that there was no longer a need to tread on eggshells and present her as a Cinderella type.

Mabel is a cat burglar, but unfortunately for her, intended victim Hale is also in the trade. Having met her match, she decides to team with him, and the majority of the film features their attempts to steal a priceless jewel from a society party. Normand and Hale work very well together, effectively acting as a comedy team. The fun is further enhanced by suspicious, yet dunderheaded detective Eugene Palette. His suspicions give Mabel the opportunity for many of her awkward and exasperated facial expressions, especially when trying to hold clandestine communications with Hale. The funniest scene occurs when the jewel finds its way into a bowl of punch being served; Mabel attempts to stop Oliver Hardy from obtaining the punch. At first she "accidentally" spills his drink; a similar accident then occurs with the rug under his feet. Oliver starts to get suspicious, and Mabel's rebuffs become more sinister. Soon, she is able to dissuade him by merely shaking her head slowly and menacingly. Poor Hardy eventually walks off defeated, his thirst unquenched. The scene relies totally on the facial expressions of the players, and as they are two of the most talented actors in this regard, it succeeds beautifully.

As a whole, 'SHOULD MEN WALK HOME' bubbles over with gags, situation and winning performances, and is by far the best of Mabel's Roach films. The rival crooks plot is fresh and anticipates the screwball comedies of the next decade. The strong cast of comedians is also an asset, which does a good job of covering for the fact that Mabel was actually pretty ill during production. Anita Garvin later recalled that, even during her comeback film 'RAGGEDY ROSE', "Mabel was adorable, but her mind was pretty well shot. [...] She had difficulty finding her spot in front of the camera". Adding to the stress were physical problems, and shortly after 'SHOULD MEN WALK HOME?' was completed, it was announced that she was taking a break for an infection.. In the event, it was evident that she was too ill and tired to cope with the demands of visual comedy, and sadly her contract was ended. Mabel Normand, the first female screen comedian, had made her last film.



**Pathé 'cornerblocks' were available free to exhibitors for inclusion in local newspapers. Believe it or not, that's meant to be Oliver Hardy in the 'Should Men Walk Home?' ad!**

## **MISS LAUREL AND MISS HARDY?**

By the time Mabel left Roach in early '27, the studio had built up a winning house style, with a stock company to match. Funny women were now an integral part of almost every film. Added to the casts around this time were petite Viola Richard and Edna Marion, with Anita Garvin gaining a permanent contract at the studio. Meanwhile, the old favourites Martha Sleeper, Vivian Oakland and Kay Deslys continued to do sterling work.

Think of the classic moments in Roach films from this time, and many of them owe immeasurably to the presence of these ladies. Best of all was Anita Garvin, who went from strength to strength. Her icy, Gloria Swanson demeanour made her not only an ideal villain, but a fantastic comic foil. Such dignity was just *asking* to be punctured in Hal Roach comedies, and Anita's sense of humour and ability to take pratfalls enabled her to set herself up magnificently.

She stole the show in virtually every appearance, the most extreme example being her famous gag appearance in L & H's 'THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY'. In a little over 10 seconds, Anita steals the entire film with a look of crestfallen dignity and the shake of a leg. No mean feat for a film filled with one of the largest pie fights in movie history! Similarly great were her appearances opposite L & H in 'SAILORS BEWARE!' and with Charley Chase in 'NEVER THE DAMES SHALL MEET'. All this did not go unnoticed, and she was tipped for starring roles.



**Say hello to the girls... Marion Byron and Anita Garvin, "the only female comedy team in pictures!"**

With the astronomical success of Laurel and Hardy at this time, Roach was keen to explore ideas for other comedy teams. Why not try and apply the previous attempts to star female comics with the new format? To do this, the tall, dignified Anita required someone of opposite dimensions. Rather than use any of the studios' existing stars, Roach opted to hire the short, pert Marion Byron. Marion's most recent role had been opposite Buster Keaton in 'STEAMBOAT BILL, JR', in which she proved herself very capable at handling visual comedy and a good deal of manhandling in the climatic scenes. A popular actress, her small stature earned her the nickname 'Peanuts'.

The first film to star the pair together was 'FEED 'EM & WEEP', which also gave a good deal of footage to Max Davidson. The girls' characters are set as trouble-prone flappers, their personalities beautifully described by a title in the film: "They are on their way to Hollywood to replace Gloria Swanson and Mary Pickford". Anita is the Swanson type, attempting at all times to remain dignified and glamorous even in the most unfortunate circumstances. Marion is a comic vision of Pickford's innocence, filtered through Stan Laurel, and most explicitly, Harry Langdon. Her costume, complete with whiteface and tentative kiss curl, almost look like Harry in drag, although that's somehow more of a comment on Langdon's femininity than any shortcomings on Marion's part. It does seem a bit of a shame to make Marion's role quite so explicitly clownish, as she could have easily played the part just as well in her normal look, and made it more realistic. But from the outset, the film makes it clear that this partnership is permeated with a Laurel and Hardy dynamic, and the film-makers were determined that we wouldn't miss it!



**Harry Langdon was so in vogue in the late '20s that even the women were copying him!**

'FEED 'EM & WEEP' shows more than stylistic parallels to the Laurel and Hardy series; much of the content is familiar from our adventures with The Boys. As two waitresses working their way to Hollywood, the girls are provided with an apologetic covering letter from their agency, identical to the one carried by L & H in 'FROM SOUP TO NUTS'. After various mishaps with holes in the road (shades of L & H's 'YOUR DARN TOOTIN'), they arrive at Max Davidson's railroad diner. From here on in, it is slapstick all the way, and perhaps a bit too much of it. However, lessons have been learned from the Chase/ Laurel & Hardy school of slowed pace, and the slapstick is refracted through the slower late-20s Roach style, with ample time for reaction shots and personality to shine through. Marion's dizziness might be ladled on a little thick in the script, but she is very, very good at portraying it, especially in some great reaction shots. At one point, she places her hand in the middle of a cream cake, but remains totally unaware of this gooey development, in a moment of mental detachment worthy of Laurel or Langdon themselves. The shot holds for almost a minute, and Marion's gloriously blankpan expression is just priceless.

It is moments like these that, through all the slapstick, give character and humanity. 'FEED 'EM AND WEEP' is a bit of a step backwards from the Mabel Normand films in that this slapstick isn't really the ideal material for girls. Nevertheless, at least there are punctuations of character and femininity, and we're still a long way from the frenetic early-20s films.

The next film, 'GOING GA-GA' is a further step in the right direction. For years lost, fragments of the film have finally been reassembled and we can enjoy it once more. (a tip of the hat here to Stefan Drossler's excellent restoration work). The short gives us more slapstick, but in a more situational context. There are also some great character touches and bizarre sight gags, making this much more of a winner. Again, there is a strong supporting cast.

Edgar Kennedy and his wife have had their baby kidnapped, and detail Max Davidson to effect a rescue, offering a large reward. With the police on their trail, the crooks plant the baby on our two hapless flappers. The rest of the film plays out in two parts. First are the girls' attempts to rid themselves of the child, which they eventually accomplish, mixing him in with a group of children headed for the orphanage. When they find out about the reward however, they disguise themselves as men and try to sneak into the orphanage to get the child back...

There are some nifty running gags in the film. Trying to rid themselves of the baby, Anita knocks on the door and retreats. Instead of opening the door, a hand appears from a secret panel proffering a glass of bootleg beer; the girls have tumbled on a speakeasy. Looking for another avenue of disposal, they head on, but suddenly Marion has disappeared. Seconds later, Anita finds her, stumbling along carrying the empty beerstein! The girls pass the doorway several times during the film, and each time Marion manages to sneak away. The payoff comes when she receives her share of the reward money, and goes straight back to the speakeasy.

'GOING GA-GA' is a very enjoyable film, but the best was yet to come. Anita and Marion's third film together is a classic by any standards, and has long been praised. For, in 'A PAIR OF TIGHTS', the Roach staff got everything right. Situation came first, then slapstick was fitted in appropriately. Marion gets to actually look like herself and plays a more realistic part; she's still very funny, but it isn't rammed down our throats with clown makeup. Even the title is terrific, a pun on the two tightwads (Edgar Kennedy and Stewart Erwin) who take the girls out. Marion is keen to go on the date, but Anita is sceptical; her expression when Edgar removes his hat to show his bald pate is hilariously pained! Things go from bad to worse on the date itself, as the boys plot to buy the girls ice cream so they won't have the appetite for an expensive dinner. However, Marion's attempts to buy 4 cornets continuously end in disaster, and soon they are forking out more for ice cream than for a three-course dinner. This is Roach studios comedy at it's finest, with a dazzling array of variations on a gag. To make matters worse, there is a traffic cop constantly moving the car on, and soon there is a giant street battle going on. These brilliant scenes were excerpted by Robert Youngson in 'WHEN COMEDY WAS KING', but the whole film is a gem, blending character, situation and slapstick, and best of all allowing its female stars to shine.

Too bad, then, that this was the last Byron-Garvin film! History has not recorded why the series was not continued, but it's a great shame. Still, at least the pairing left us with at least one classic film to enjoy. Marion Byron appeared in one more film at Roach, a delightful Max Davidson short, 'THE BOY FRIEND', before being snapped up by bigger studios. As for Anita Garvin, she continued making fabulous supporting appearances for a little while longer, before sadly fading away from cinema screens. However, while personal tragedy had kept Katherine Grant and Mabel Normand from achieving their potential at Roach, Anita had the happily anomalous distinction of being kept back by personal fulfilment. Her marriage to bandleader Clifford 'Red' Stanley in 1930 forever banished her interest in stardom, although to our benefit she did continue to make occasional appearances throughout the 1930s.

Although the 1920s gave few starring roles to Hal Roach's funny ladies, they were lucky to find many, many opportunities to provide sparkling comedy, and were integral parts of the studio's brilliant late-20s output. While not gaining star billing, their presence as members of the Hal Roach stock company brightened immeasurably these comedies, and provided us with many fantastic moments; Amongst many other standouts are Viola Richard's naked panic in 'LIMOUSINE LOVE'; Garvin and Kay Deslys as dates for Laurel and Hardy in 'THEIR PURPLE MOMENT', Martha Sleeper's frenzied chicken impersonation in 'PASS THE GRAVY', and Katherine Grant's jealous rages in 'THE CARETKER'S DAUGHTER'. These may not be star comediennes in name, but anyone who has seen these classic moments knows that they have been in the presence of true greatness.

***Roach didn't give up at creating female stars, and as the studio looked towards the sound era, his most high profile comedienne was just about to be signed... Find out more in the next issue...***



**Allowing the team a more naturalistic look in 'A PAIR OF TIGHTS' paid dividends. Sadly, it was their last film together.**

## HAL ROACH'S FUNNY LADIES—WHO'S WHO

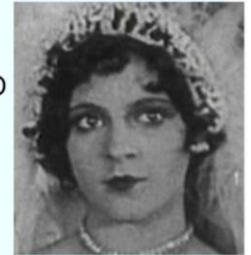


### BEATRICE LA PLANTE

'Who's Who on the Screen', from 1920, reports that "Beatrice La Plante was born in Paris, France and enjoys the distinction of being one of the must petite players on the screen. With her dearest friend, Gloria Swanson, Miss La Plante was a shining light of the Christie Comedies and when Gloria was given the first opportunity to play in drama, Miss La Plante also received her chance. . She is four feet ten inches high, weighs eighty-eight pounds and is typically French, being petite and vivacious. Her greatest charm lies in the way she uses her eyes, which are extremely large and of a velvety brown. Her charm wasn't quite great enough to become a real success, and after appearing in Roach comedies and opposite Gaylord Lloyd, she seems to have retired.

### MARTHA SLEEPER 1910—1983

Martha Sleeper was hired by Roach aged just 13. Already too old for Our Gang, she soon became a very young, but very talented leading lady for Charley Chase, starting with..... Standouts include 'TOO MANY MAMAS' as an Apache dancer, 'LONG FLIV THE KING' as a Ruritanian queen and FLUTTERING HEARTS as a flapper. Also starred in 'SURE MIKE', and prominent in the 'All-stars' entries 'THE HONOURABLE MR BUGGS'. Later often played Max Davidson's daughter, especially in PRUDENCE', and 'PASS THE GRAVY', her funniest role. Continued to appear away from Roach into the 1930s, but married into society and moved to Puerto Rico after falling in love with the island on holiday. Later became notable as a jewellery designer.



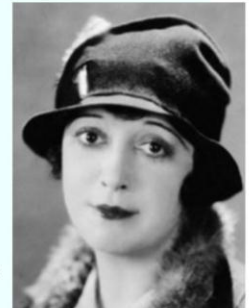
### KATHERINE GRANT 1904— 1937

Katherine Grant's roots lay in Manchester, England; she was born after her father's family had emigrated to the US. Found work at Hal Roach in 1923, specifically as leading lady to Stan Laurel in his solo series of '23-24. Then played suspicious wives opposite Charley Chase in his two-reelers in addition to Glenn Tryon and starring in one short, 'LAUGHING LADIES'. A car accident led to nervous collapse, exacerbated by an eating disorder. Died tragically young of Tuberculosis.

*See Bill Capello's detailed biography at [www.charley-chase.com](http://www.charley-chase.com) for full details of Katherine's life.*

### MABEL NORMAND 1894—1930

Mabel Normand 's greatest fame of course came much earlier than her work with Hal Roach. While working for D.W. Griffith at Biograph, she met Mack Sennett and left with him when he set up his own operation, the fledgling Keystone. As Keystone's first real star, Mabel became the screen's first comedienne, and was soon directing her own films. She also worked opposite Chaplin and formed a charming partnership with Roscoe Arbuckle in films such as 'FATTYAND MABEL ADRFIT'. Graduated to features, moving from Sennett to Goldwyn, but illness, rumoured drug problems and (innocent) involvement in the murder of William Desmond Taylor led her into exile. Her films with Roach were an attempt at a comeback, but the actress was by now too fragile. As she grew weaker, Mabel moved to various sanatoriums, but was carried off by Tuberculosis at the age of just 35 in 1930.



### MARION BYRON 1911—1985

Petite leading lady and comedienne, Marion Byron is today most fondly recalled for her presence as Keaton's leading lady in 'STEAMBOAT BILL, JR'. Following this, she signed with Roach and appeared with Anita Garvin in three pseudo-laurel and Hardy shorts. She also appears with Gene Morgan, Max Davidson and Fay Holderness in the charming all-star short 'THE BOY FRIEND'. Later appearances include Warners musicals 'BROADWAY BABIES' and a singing role in 'GOLDEN DAWN' (1930). She married screenwriter Lou Breslow in 1932, and in 1938 retired from acting. She lived on, happily married, until 1984.

### ANITA GARVIN 1907—1994

Icy Anita Garvin began as leading lady, alternating these roles with more Vamp-ish bad girl parts, as in Stan Laurel's 'THE SLEUTH'. Laurel later recommended her to Roach and she appeared opposite Mabel Normand in 'RAGGEDY ROSE'. Anita had standout roles in Charley Chase's ' NEVER THE DAMES SHALL MEET', Laurel and Hardy's 'SAILORS BEWARE', 'THEIR PURPLE MOMENT' and 'FROM SOUP TO NUTS', as well as in her own three starring films with Marion Byron. She alternated her work at Roach with roles at Fox (with Clark & McCullough) and Educational, often opposite her first husband Clem Beauchamp (aka Jerry Drew), She was especially noteworthy opposite Lupino Lane in 'FANDANGO'. Although she semi-retired to raise a family in 1930, she greatly enhanced the L & H talkies 'BLOTTO' and 'BE BIG', and also appeared opposite Charley Chase in 'HIS SILENT RACKET' and Leon Errol in 'TRUTH ACHES'.



## A NEW SILENT COMEDY?

Kate Hunter spotted this on the BBC News Entertainment website...

### **“ BBC announces new Matt Lucas silent comedy *Pompidou*”**

*Matt Lucas has become famous for his comedy catchphrases, such as Vicky Pollard's "Yeah but no but", Daffyd's "I'm the only gay in the village" from **Little Britain** and Precious's "We gat milk, we gat shoogah, we just don't gat no cah-fee" from **Come Fly With Me**. But for his next series, the comedian will be keeping very quiet. The BBC has announced Lucas's new comedy series will be entirely without dialogue. The comedian is*



*a fan of silent comedians such as Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin and Mr Bean and will draw on these influences for *Pompidou*, a series of six, half-hour programmes. ‘*Pompidou*’ focuses on an elderly aristocratic English oddball, who has fallen on hard times.*

*Lucas said: “I'm delighted to be back at the BBC with another show full of new characters – however, unlike *Little Britain* and *Come Fly With Me*, this one has no dialogue at all. "I've been working for a while with two great writers – Julian Dutton and Ashley Blaker – to create a bunch of new faces which we hope will appeal to audiences in Britain and beyond.”*

*BBC Controller of Comedy Commissioning Shane Allen said: “The concept is wonderfully imaginative, the writing hugely inventive and it's the perfect vehicle for Matt – one of a handful of performers in the whole world who could pull this off.”*

How times have changed that there are “only a handful of performers” capable of doing visual comedy! Great to hear a shout-out to the classics from a well-known performer. It sounds like this programme could be interesting, if done well!

### **BFI LAUNCHES NEW ONLINE CATALOGUE...**

The BFI website has a great new feature; now their holdings are fully searchable, making it possible to find out exactly what films and documents they have in their archives. You can search by star/director too, by inputting names in the *surname, name* format. This is a brilliant tool for researchers and the curious, and much easier to access than the previous system, by enquiry.

Not all of the films that show up are available for viewing, but even so you can find out what is around in some format, somewhere.

Access the database online at

# Faces from the films:



# EDDIE DUNN

You've seen Eddie Dunn before. Probably most of the time, you've never even noticed him. He's the taxi driver in Laurel and Hardy's 'ME AND MY PAL' (above) and the butler in 'ANOTHER FINE MESS'. "Ah yes", I hear you say. Once you think about it a little more, you remember all the other things you've seen that face in; opposite Chaplin, in RKO shorts, and of course in other Hal Roach series. When I was writing the Charley Bowers article in the last issue, I realised that he even turned up in those films, and that I really didn't know anything about him. Well, even Glenn Mitchell's *Laurel and Hardy Encyclopedia* doesn't really add much beyond his work with L & H and some basic dates. Collating all his appearances and doing a bit more digging reveal an interesting and busy life, however.

Dunn's talkie roles reveal his New York origins, where he was born Edward Frank Dunn in 1896. By 1915 he is at New York's Vitagraph studio as part of the supporting cast, frequently mentioned as a member of 'The Big V Riot Squad', which was Vitagraph's answer to the Keystone Kops.

At Vitagraph he supported all the comedians, including Mr and Mrs Sidney Drew, Jimmy Aubrey and Hughie Mack. Many of Mack's films, such as "Sands, Scamps and Strategy", were written and directed by future star Larry Semon, who began his own series in 1917. Dunn is credited with appearances in many Semon films from this period, but unfortunately the majority of these are missing or at least elusive. In October 1917, the New York clipper reports that "Ed. Dunn, a member of the Big V comedy company, of the Vitagraph studios, has been released from the Thirteenth Regiment, in order that he may go to France immediately. He will drive an ambulance wagon"

This fits with Dunn's absence from the studio's films after this point. By the time he returned from service, Vitagraph was winding down its operations in the East, and production was shipped out to L.A.. Eddie seems to have missed this boat and the trail goes cold for some years in the early-mid 20s; two reported sightings of him have actually proved to be dead ends. He has been claimed in a small part as the postman in

Snub Pollard's 'IT'S A GIFT', but I believe this is in error. The actual actor is the similar looking Charley Young, who was at Roach for many years. Eddie wouldn't make his debut at Roach for some years to come.

The second sighting is rather more outlandish; it has him as agent/general factotum for singer/actor George M Cohan. It's easy to see where this comes from. Cohan was based in New York and did indeed have an agent called Eddie Dunn, and both the time period and location fit perfectly. If only the gap could be plugged so easily! In fact, this Eddie Dunn served with Cohan from at least 1915, surely too early for our then-teenage Eddie. One description of him refers to his "bald pate and well-filled clothes", rather the polar opposite of the lean, full-haired Dunn! He also had a different middle name, Wallace. Most conclusively proving the mix-up is a 1931 article referring to George M Cohan's assistant, 'the late Mr Dunn'.

What this Eddie Dunn got up to in the early 20s is yet to be discovered, but it seems fairly likely that he stayed in the East during these years. This puts him in the right place to join Charley Bowers' Long Island company in 1926 as gagwriter and actor.

As some of the Bowers films are lost, we can't be completely sure how many onscreen appearances he made, but he is prominent in at least three.



**Eddie steps out of character to introduce Harry Langdon in a promotional reel. 1929**

'FATAL FOOTSTEPS' has him in an Al St John-type 'rube costume' as a farmhand constantly at odds with Charley. 'MANY A SLIP' sees him as

a tin-whistle playing brother-in-law (!) who ends up at the mercy of one of Charley's inventions, frozen in his bathtub and only freed when Charley turns up with an ice axe!

In 1928 the Bowers company went west to Hollywood to make a series for Educational, so Charley Bowers was actually indirectly responsible for Dunn's move to Hollywood and his later, most notable work. Dunn went on ahead of Bowers to work on scripts for the new series, and is credited with the story for Charley's most surreal film, 'THERE IT IS'. He also makes an on-screen appearance in the only other surviving Bowers Educational, SAY AHH, playing a valet.

When the Bowers series ended, Dunn easily found work at other studios. He was fortunate that his brother Bill had also moved west and become a successful casting agent, a great ally to have in Hollywood. No doubt helped by this influence, he appeared with Clara Bow in 'THE FLEET'S IN', the first of three appearances opposite the It Girl.



**Eddie in the all-star courtroom comedy 'MADAME Q' (1929).**

Also in 1928 he made his first appearances at Hal Roach, in the all-star silent films, 'WHY IS A PLUMBER?' and 'THE UNKISSED MAN'. When sound arrived, Eddie was obviously considered an asset to the studio. His New York accent was strong and warm, and he featured prominently in the studio's early talkies, including the first, 'HURDY GURDY'. Dunn was ideal casting for this New York tenement comedy, playing a wise-guy Iceman. Although billed 5<sup>th</sup>, he actually has the second largest role after Thelma Todd, and even gets to sing a duet with her! His confidence with sound and generally pleasant demeanour served him well in another early appearance as emcee

for Hal Roach's Harry Langdon preview reel, notable for allowing Dunn to step out of character when introducing Langdon.

Roach also attempted to present Eddie as something of a leading man, notably as a young lover pestering Edgar Kennedy's daughter in 'DAD'S DAY'. He also featured prominently in the all-star short 'MADAME Q', played a young father in Our Gang's 'BOUNCING BABIES', and showed up in several of Langdon's shorts, most notably in 'SKY BOY'.

He was also loaned out to other studios during this time, his New York accent probably helping to secure him more roles against fellow easterner Clara Bow in 'THE SATURDAY NIGHT KID' and 'TRUE TO THE NAVY'. Back at Roach, he showed up with Laurel and Hardy several times, and as Zasu Pitts' boyfriend in 'THE PAJAMA PARTY'. Probably his best role with Todd and Pitts was in 'ASLEEP IN THE FEET', as an obnoxious sailor determined to dance with Thelma.

He was busy behind the scenes too. As a gagwriter at Roach, we can sometimes spot connections with Eddie's earlier films and speculate on his contributions. The Our Gang short 'HI NEIGHBOR' features a scene showing the aftermath of the gang's attempts to purloin materials to build their fire engine; a window cleaner is left stranded without his ladder.

This scene is very reminiscent of a sequence in Charley Bowers' 'EGGED ON' where Charley searches a farmyard for materials for his machine.

Most intriguing is a 1917 clipping from Vitagraph mentioning a short comedy made called 'A PERFECT DAY' which 'depicts the efforts of a party of picknickers to find solitude'. Sound familiar, Laurel and Hardy fans? Is it too much to speculate that Dunn brought the original idea and title up in a gagwriters' conference?



**Eddie and Charley Chase are love rivals in 'HASTY MARRIAGE' (1931)**



Eddie's work as gagwriter also spilled over into work as director. He helmed an all-star short, NEXT WEEKEND, in 1934, and also co-directed 5 of Charley Chase's films from the same year: THE CRACKED ICEMAN, I'LL TAKE VANILLA, ANOTHER WILD IDEA, FOUR PARTS, and IT HAPPENED ONE DAY. He seems to have had a close relationship with Chase; as well as co-directing, he appears prominently in many of them, and even co-wrote some songs with Chase. His most notable on-screen appearance in the series is as Charley's rival in HASTY MARRIAGE (1931). This is virtually a co-starring role, as Charley and Eddie continually try to get one over on each other. Eddie plays an insufferable 'jobsworth'-type streetcar inspector who is forever trying to stop Charley from asking driver James Finlayson for his daughter's hand. There is a very funny scene where Charley distracts Eddie into listening to a record played down a telephone, and the film climaxes in a slapstick fight aboard the streetcar. One of Chase's most underrated comedies, 'HASTY MARRIAGE' owes a good deal of its success to Dunn's support.

As work got sparser at Roach toward the mid-30s, Eddie freelanced at other studios. Along with many other familiar Roach faces, he jumped ship to RKO, supporting Clark & McCullough in 'FALSE ROOMERS' and 'A MELON-DRAMA', Roscoe Ates in 'THE GLAND PARADE' and Edgar Kennedy in several shorts, most noticeably 'DUMB'S THE WORD' as an irate neighbour and 'BEAUX AND ERRORS' as Mrs Kennedy's old flame.

Again, his brother's influence probably helped him at this time and he turns up, well, pretty much everywhere in the late 1930s and 1940s. Just a partial list of his appearances at this time includes supporting Harold Lloyd in 'THE MILKY WAY', Chaplin in 'THE GREAT DICTATOR', W.C. Fields in 'YOU CAN'T CHEAT AN HONEST MAN',



**Charley keeps Eddie at bay while Muriel Evans looks on in 'FALLEN ARCHES' (1933).**

Clark Gable in 'TOO HOT TO HANDLE', Buster Keaton in 'THE VILLAIN STILL PURSUED HER', Abbott and Costello's 'IN THE NAVY' and a brief reunion with Laurel and Hardy for 'NOTHING BUT TROUBLE'. He also continued popping up in Roach's more prestigious features, such as 'THERE GOES MY HEART', 'OF MICE AND MEN' and 'ROAD SHOW'. Most of these roles were small bit-parts, but there were also some more notable appearances. 'THE FALCON' series of films, starring George Sanders, gave him a prominent recurring role as Detective Grimes.

In 1946 he was the host of an early TV show, 'FACE TO FACE' which had a cartoonist attempting to draw a hidden celebrity based on their voice. Also on TV, he appeared in some episodes of 'THE LONE RANGER'. Increasingly, his parts had been typecast as both policeman and sheriffs and he made many appearances in westerns. It was in this genre that he made his last appearance, in 1951's 'BUCKAROO SHERRIFF OF TEXAS'. As the 1940s had gone on, Dunn had grown increasingly stocky and his hair had silvered; he looked older than his years, and was obviously not in great health. He died at the relatively young age of 55 on May 5th 1951.

Although Eddie Dunn was never a major player in film comedy, he was a familiar face who added to the fun both onscreen, and behind the scenes of many great comedies. Keep a look out for him next time you watch one; he's probably in there somewhere!



**A silver-haired Eddie with John Hubbard in Roach's 'ROAD SHOW' (1941).**

# SCREENING NOTES

## DUMMIES (1928)

*Directed by Larry Semon. Story by Larry Semon and C. Graham Baker. Produced by Chadwick Pictures, released through Educational Pictures.*

Larry Semon's late-period work tends to be forgotten about. Lumped in with his most familiar (and most disappointing) mid-20s work, we assume the decline of his work was exponential and terminal. Well, while there's nothing as creative as his best early work, there are some interesting gems to be had. Just the notion of Larry Semon making films as a contemporary of Laurel and Hardy and Harry Langdon is incongruous and intriguing in its own right. Semon's attempts to fit his slapstick into the brave new world of late-20s comedy, while not always successful, are at least interesting and throw up the odd good gag. If nothing else, he is at least experimenting with new ideas, rather than simply recycling the same chases on more and more lavish scales.

'OH! WHAT A MAN!' cast Larry as a detective with Keatonesque resilience, trailing a female crook, and the results were excellent. It is Langdon, however, who looms largest over these final films, from Larry's makeup to the plots and gags themselves. 'SPUDS', his final feature, channels a similar vein of the innocent in WW1 as 'THE STRONG MAN' and 'SOLDIER MAN'. In DUMMIES, his penultimate short, released through Educational in 1928, Semon explicitly bases an entire film around Langdon's pet routine of confusing humans and dummies.

'DUMMIES' opens with Larry employed by 'Professor' Jim Donnelly as a medicine show entertainer. He performs magic and ventriloquism alongside the Professor's daughter Marie Astaire and a monkey. Both the medicine show setting and leading lady Astaire are familiar Langdonia (from 'LUCKY STARS' and 'BOOBS IN THE WOOD' respectively), but the magic act, aided by some trick photography, owes more to Semon's past as son of magician Zera the Great. Dummies of both Larry and Marie are used in the act, leading to a scene that could have been made for Harry Langdon. Marie stands on a step so Larry can mend her heel. Inevitably, she swaps places with the dummy Marie and, equally as inevitably, Larry is unaware of the switch. To his horror, he pulls the dummy leg off, and is working out a way to reattach it when Marie returns, leading to a brief point where she seems to have 3 legs. Of course, he pulls the wrong leg, incurring Marie's wrath!

The slower pace of this scene suits Semon, with the Langdonesque minutiae a pleasing antidote to the overblown, destructive slapstick that brought about his downfall. While the hesitations belong to Langdon, Semon makes the blank face expressions his own, and is very funny. Especially good is his horror when the fake leg drops off, underplayed to excellent effect.

From here, there is more play with dummies as Semon eludes some gangsters kidnapping the professor by a switch with the dummy Larry. Then, we're into textbook Semon with a chase after the crooks, ending in an explosion. There's even the famous cliché of him barging out of a door and over a cliff edge. Interestingly, though, the scene shows what Semon has learned from the humanisation of



silent comedy; instead of merely falling on his head and then getting up, he milks the thrill by breaking up the fall with a 'hanging-on' segment à la Harold Lloyd. This is shot with an effective use of miniatures behind and extends the sequence. There is also an odd little moment where Larry looks down, then takes out a pair of pince-nez to get a proper look at the drop beneath him. (the pair of glasses resurface several times in the film, perhaps to add an air of incongruous sophistication to his character?). After this little pause, the fall and chase resume, but the odd little breather shows Larry integrating the slower pace of the late 20s. All ends happily of course, with one final surprise gag (I won't give it away here!).

Overall, 'DUMMIES' is a mixed bag of old Semon tricks awkwardly bolted onto a derivative new format. Semon is never quite sure if he wants to be an innocent dimwit or the clear-thinking hero of old (the little elf would never have initiated the chase after the villains in the way that Larry does), and perhaps the most stylistic similarity is to the early Langdon Sennett films, before Harry's pace had totally slowed. Nevertheless, there are several good scenes, benefiting from the slower pace which allows the comedy to develop. Semon also has some good sight gags and, given his poor health at the time, it's amazing that he could turn such a good performance. 'DUMMIES' is well worth seeing, and we can only wonder how he might have developed his style into the late 20s had his life not been cut short.

### Some thoughts on **PERFECT DAY (1929)**



The RHI/Vivendi Laurel and Hardy DVD set presents all their sound films for Hal Roach in chronological order. Having just purchased the set, I thought I'd work my way through them in this way. It's been interesting so far, spotting details I'd missed and developments from film to film. Especially absorbing is watching the 1929 films and seeing how the boys adapted to sound from film to film. Of these early films, 'PERFECT DAY' is particularly interesting, as the DVD presents two versions of the film. The one we're used to seeing is a 1937 reissue, enhanced with new title cards and a LeRoy Shield music track to back the action. The 'new' version on this disc is actually the

old version, with a music-free track, just as audiences heard it in 1929. Now, on the surface that doesn't sound like such a big difference, but actually I found it to be a minor revelation.

Shield's wonderful music has been praised for moving along the short, helping to make the editing seem smoother. How would the film seem without it? Naturally, many of these early talkies were quite clunky, and a lack of music would be likely to expose this even more. In fact, seeing the short *sans* music, I realised for the first time just how well edited it actually is. Especially after viewing 'MEN O'WAR', their previous short, I realised what a huge step upwards this film actually was. Even without music, it seems to move very smoothly indeed.

While music had the benefit of covering soundtrack 'hiss', it also drowned out many of the background sounds. Listening carefully, one finds that, in all it's naked glory, the soundtrack of 'PERFECT DAY' is actually far from barren. The background noises are actually quite integral to the comedy; the rustling of trees in the spring breeze only enhances the sunny nature of the film, and the incessant chatter of the wives makes Ollie's endless frustration seem even funnier. When everyone suddenly hides away from the vicar, the effect is much heightened by contrasting this sudden silence with the hubbub going on before. The minister's echoing footsteps in the still afternoon the only sound to be heard, this is almost a moment out of a Jacques Tati film. Finally, throughout it all we have the grumbling of Uncle Edgar.



The 1937 music still remains a wonderful addition to the film, but it's lovely to see so many forgotten details revealed, which add to the very natural, sunny and ad-libbed nature of this comedy.

# THE BUFF'S BOOKSHELF

## LITTLE ELF: A CELEBRATION OF HARRY LANGDON

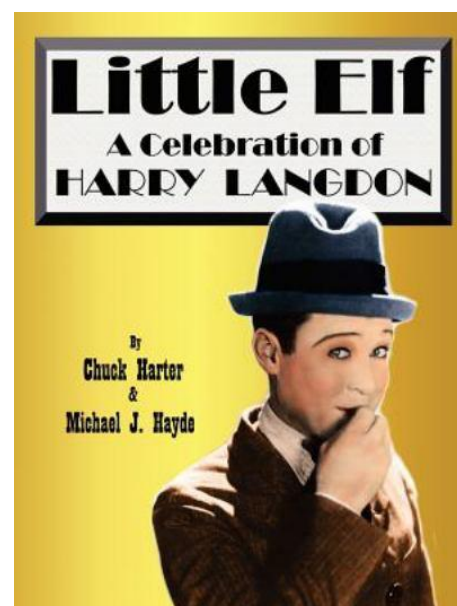
By **Chuck Harter & Michael J Hayde.**

Published by **Bear Manor Media**

RRP **\$34.00**

Last issue I mentioned a recently published book on Harry Langdon that looked very promising. Well, I've picked up a copy and am delighted to announce that it is indeed a magnificent achievement, superseding the (very small) handful of previous Langdon tomes.

Really, this is two books bound together; one is a detailed biography, the other a 'Complete Films of Harry Langdon'. The biography is richly detailed, and yet very readable. What is especially pleasing is that it gives even coverage to his whole life, not solely the years in which he was at his peak. In fact, as the book points out, Langdon later preferred to forget this period (the only one now talked about to any extent) as merely a few years from his long career when he may have been successful, but without personal happiness. So, our skewed perspective becomes some way to being corrected.



Particularly valuable in this whole-career approach is detailed coverage of his pre-film vaudeville career, which was almost equal in length to his film career. While Joyce Rheuban's previous Langdon book touched on the content of his act, "Johnn'y New Car", Hayde and Harter reveal that actually there were many different incarnations of the act. Quotes from the original script are especially interesting, as is the revelation that Langdon was reviving the sketch as late as the 1940s! Such tidbits permeate this book, providing many new insights. Another such revelation is that, in his youth, Langdon was something of a tearaway who had encounters with the police; quite a far cry from his innocent screen character!

Further insight is given into his forgotten later years, and the portrayal of his fall from grace is fair, balanced, and most importantly for a figure so slandered by rumour, *backed up with evidence*. Throughout there are quotes from archival sources, interviews with peers, associates and family. The authors have also carried out new interviews with Harry's son and those who worked with him late in his career.

All in all, the Langdon biography presented here is holistic, full of valuable new information, and stakes its claims with compelling evidence. Great stuff!

The second section, on Langdon's films, is just as comprehensive. Particularly valuable in detailing Langdon's lost and obscure films. It also gives us cast, credits, synopses and a good selection of stills. My favourite feature is the authors' choice of each film's "Favourite Harry Moment", which, described vividly, give lovely glimpses into films you haven't yet seen.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this book. Don't be put off by the \$34.00 price tag; it's actually tremendous value for money. Even if you like Langdon just a little, or are still on the fence, there's loads to love here, and it might even convince the doubters! (If you have a Kindle or suchlike, there's also an e-book version, priced very reasonably at around \$7.00.

*The authors also have a blog about the book and their mission to promote Langdon at <http://www.littleelflangdon.blogspot.co.uk/>*

IN THE NEXT ISSUE...



**LLOYD  
HAMILTON**

The Lost Soul  
of Silent Comedy

**THELMA  
TODD**



**Zasu Pitts**

**Patsy Kelly**

Hal Roach's talking comediennes

.....  
**Buster Keaton**

**Karl Dane**

**AND MUCH MORE!**