

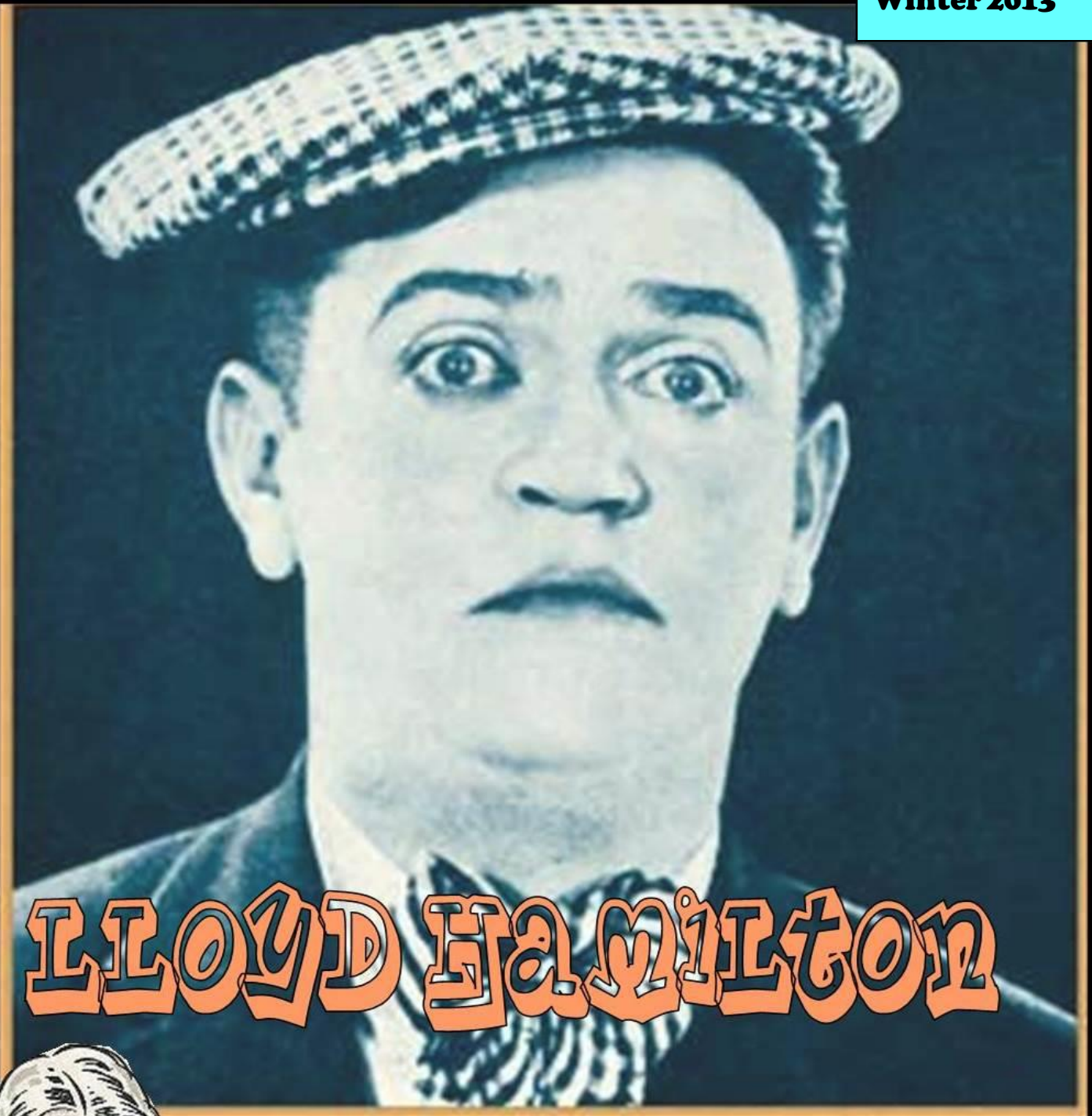


MOVIE NIGHT



The Silent comedy, slapstick and music hall magazine

#6
Winter 2013



LLOYD HAMILTON



THELMA TODD
ZASU PITTS
PATSY KELLY

BRITISH RADIO
STARS ON FILM



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Many thanks to all those who have contributed news, articles, information and proofreading to this issue. Special thanks to David Glass for his fantastic detailed article about Slapsticon, and to David Wyatt for his Bobby Dunn piece.

This issue has been a long time coming; sorry about that! I hope the wait was worth it. Thanks for your continued support and please do feel free to get in touch with articles, questions, opinions etc. at matthewross22@googlemail.com



SLAPSTICK FESTIVAL



NEWS from SLAPSTICK

BRISTOL'S ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF SILENT & VINTAGE COMEDY

OMID DJALILI LEADS THE WAY AS SLAPSTICK MARKS 10th BIRTHDAY WITH CHARLIE CHAPLIN SALUTE

Friday 24 – Sunday 26 January 2014

Britain's biggest festival of silent and visual comedy returns to Bristol with a 10th birthday edition that will offer three laughter-filled days of films, music, archive discoveries, vintage television and celebrity guests. The programme opens with a gala, hosted by Omid Djalili, paying an extra-special tribute to Charlie Chaplin and the centenary of his most famous character, the Little Tramp.

Comedian, film actor and Charlie Chaplin enthusiast **Omid Djalili** is to host the gala evening of film and music that will open Bristol's tenth annual Slapstick festival of silent and visual comedy on Friday 24 January 2014. The gala event at Colston Hall will not only launch what is now acknowledged as the UK's biggest celebration of screen comedy but will also be the first in a series of global events marking the centenary of Charlie Chaplin's best-loved character, the Tramp.

As a result, the Gala will have a special Chaplin focus, including a screening of the 1931 feature CITY LIGHTS, accompanied live by a 39-piece orchestra – the largest ever to appear at any Slapstick event.

Festival organiser, Chris Daniels, says: "We're absolutely thrilled that Omid Djalili is coming to Bristol to launch both our 10th birthday festival and the world's centenary salute to one of cinema's most iconic figures. Omid is not only a talented and popular performer but he is a genuine fan of silent film comedy and particular admirer of Chaplin."

Other gala highlights will include a showing of the classic Laurel & Hardy short TWO TARS (1928), accompanied live by the European Silent Screen Virtuosi, and a rare chance to see PASS THE GRAVY (also 1928) which shows off the lesser-known but equally adept comic talents of Max Davidson.

Tickets for the 2014 Gala are already on sale priced at £23.50p, full; £20, concessions and £10 for under 16s. To book, visit the box office, phone 0117 922 3686 or go online to www.colstonhall.org

The rest of the programme for 'SLAPSTICK' is now online at www.slapstick.org.uk. Amongst the highlights are Keaton rarities, including newly discovered footage from 'THE BLACKSMITH' (see page 5), a variety of Chaplin events, 'SAFETY LAST', Constance Talmadge's 'HER SISTER, FROM PARIS' and a show of Max Davidson's best shorts. Best of all is Raymond Griffith's rarely seen masterpiece 'HANDS UP'. There are also a selection of other events connected with British comedy, such as Benny Hill, Monty Python and comedian Harry Hill picking his top comedy moments.

BOOKS GALORE!

2013 is shaping up as a bumper year for books. After the definitive Langdon book reviewed in the last issue, this year has so far seen the publication of 3 new books likely to become definitive classics.

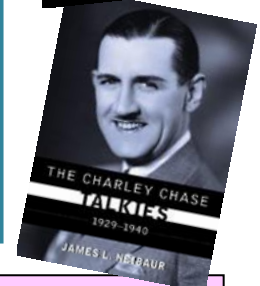
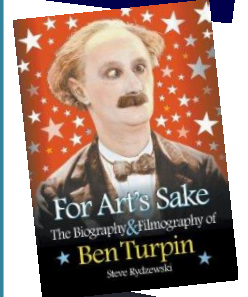
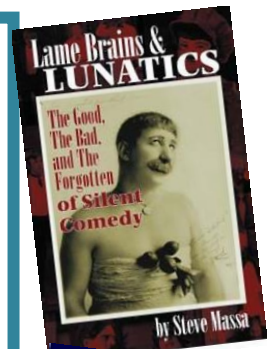
First up, Steve Massa presents 'LAME BRAINS & LUNATICS'. Its title reminiscent of the classic silent comedy book 'CLOWN PRINCES AND COURT JESTERS', this is a book with a similar remit to illuminate the less-known corners of silent comedy. Rather than a complete overview, it presents snapshots of many very interesting elements of silent comedy; there are chapters on comedy teams, Charley Chase's directing career, and Al St John, for instance. This works in the book's favour; rather than attempting to cover too many bases, Mr Massa chooses his focus areas carefully and does them justice. Lavishly illustrated, impeccably researched and entertainingly written, this is likely to go down as a classic.

Similar in style is Richard M Roberts' new book on Hal Roach studios. 'PAST HUMOUR, PRESENT LAUGHTER: HAL ROACH' is not a comprehensive overview of the Roach studios, Again, rather than go over well-turned ground, Mr Roberts focuses on the areas hitherto neglected.

Equally definitive is Steve Rydewski's biography/filmography of Ben Turpin. Turpin may not have been one of the greatest comedians, but he was (and is) certainly one of the most iconic. This new book really sheds light on Turpin, and fleshes him out from a cartoonish totem to a colourful performer and person. There is also a complete filmography.

Finally, James L Neibaur presents 'THE CHARLEY CHASE TALKIES 1929-1940'. Only the second book devoted purely to Chase, this is sure to be an interesting one. It will be especially informative to read about the early Chase talkies, and the more obscure Columbias. My only objection is (like all McFarland books) the high price tag. \$66.98 doesn't make this an easy purchase, especially considering the much thicker books detailed above are all cheaper! Still, great to see something like this being published at all!

FOR ART'S SAKE: THE BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY OF BEN TURPIN is reviewed on page 42. *PAST HUMOUR, PRESENT LAUGHTER: HAL ROACH*, likewise, on p41. *LAME BRAINS AND LUNATICS* will be reviewed next time.



WHEELER & WOOLSEY NEWS



Brian Kirkpatrick is one of a dedicated band of Wheeler and Woolsey fans, who maintain a W & W website, and produce a very nice quarterly newsletter. Check out the website at <http://users.wowway.com/~stogeman/> for more details.

THE LEGEND OF LANGDON

Interesting news of a new Harry Langdon appreciation project. Tim Greer has maintained a fine Harry Langdon website at www.feetofmud.com for the last few years. Now, Tim has announced plans to launch 'THE LEGEND OF LANGDON'. Originally conceived as a Langdon appreciation society, it has now been changed to a blog, enabling more access for all. Contributions are promised from a variety of esteemed Langdon scholars, and the blog should be launching soon. Watch this space!

Farewell to 'BOWLER DESSERT'

Willie McIntyre's fantastic 'Bowler Dessert' magazine is coming to an end. The final issue is available now. 'Bowler Dessert' has long been a major source of information, entertainment and communication for Laurel and Hardy fans, and will be missed. Congratulations to Willie on such a long and successful run. www.bowlerdessert.co.uk continues to be updated.

THE MYSTERIES OF KEATON'S 'THE BLACKSMITH'.

It's an incredible pleasure to be able to report on yet another discovery of previously unknown footage. Every time I come to compile a new issue there always seems to be some new revelation or rediscovery to comment on. This time we have some 'new' Buster Keaton footage!

'New' bits and pieces have turned up from a handful of Buster's silent shorts over the last few years. We've been fortunate enough to see long-lost gags and sequences restored to 'HARD LUCK', 'THE LOVE NEST', 'DAYDREAMS' and 'CONVICT 13' on recent DVD releases. While substantially complete, for years many of these prints were sourced from slightly choppy source materials, and subsequent discoveries of more cared-for copies have revealed the new moments. As lovely as it is to have these extra scenes, only the rediscovered ending to 'HARD LUCK' really made a significant difference to the film.

By contrast, rediscoveries from 'THE BLACKSMITH' have begun to alter our perception of the film quite radically. The newest 'new' footage from 'THE BLACKSMITH' has been discovered on a 9.5mm excerpt; what makes it especially interesting is that, rather than just a simple rediscovery of a missing gag, it is another piece in an already ongoing puzzle.

When Lobster films issued their definitive BK collection 'Les Integrales des Courts Metrages' in 2002, their version of 'THE BLACKSMITH' was notable for containing not additional footage, but *alternate* versions of scenes. Big Joe Roberts was seen breaking free from jail by bursting through the wall of the jail, compared to previous versions where he was shown merely snapping his handcuffs and walking off. Later in the Lobster version, Buster rescued Virginia Fox entirely differently, against a different backdrop. Was this some sort of alternative preview cut, containing sections later re-filmed and replaced? Perhaps a foreign version or reissue that replaced scenes with alternative versions. Could this have been due to some damage to the original negatives when the second version was compiled? Keatonians everywhere scratched their heads and theorized.

Jump forward to the present, and our newly discovered footage. Buster is fleeing Joe Roberts (presumably after Joe has returned from jail). He approaches some trees, where there is an advert for a Ford, featuring a life-size wooden cut-out of the car. Buster hides behind it, adopting a driving position. Joe is fooled momentarily, but the ruse does not last. In a favourite Keaton gag of the stationary object turning out to be attached to a moving one, the car display is revealed to be mounted on the back of a truck, which drives away, leaving Buster hanging on for dear life. After narrowly avoiding a collision, he falls off into the road. All in all, a nice little gag sequence (incidentally, a fragment of the truck gag had already been turned up by David Wyatt in a 9.5mm extract, but the new discovery fleshes out the footage and helps it make sense with the following scenes). Meeting Virginia Fox, Buster proposes to her outside the Chamber of Commerce. He is interrupted by the arrival of an irked Joe Roberts. Thinking quickly, he locks Joe in the building. Virginia gives Buster the air and dejectedly, he walks off.

So where did this scene slot into 'THE BLACKSMITH'? This looks like a case for the crime-crushing criminologist, Sherlock Jr!

Let's return to the Lobster Films version (I hope you're all following this, because there will be a test at the end). The new footage answers one of the problems of 'alternate' scenes. I mentioned Joe Roberts breaking out of jail by breaking through the wall; well, look closely and there is something fishy about this scene. The building here doesn't match the jail we have seen earlier. Come to think of it, it doesn't even look like a jail. Who builds a cell to hold hardened criminals out of thin wood? Moreover, when we see inside it looks awfully comfortable in there; there are armchairs and a vase of flowers on the table. Either there was some serious prison reform going on in 1922 California, or this isn't a jail at all. Here, the new footage helps us. The building Joe breaks out of is actually the Chamber of Commerce.

With that in mind, here's a possible running order for 'THE BLACKSMITH':



One of the new scenes features Buster with Virginia Fox outside the Chamber of Commerce...

SECTION A: All prints run the same from the main titles to the moment where Joe is carted off to jail.

SECTION B: Joe breaks away from the jail by snapping his handcuffs. Present in most DVD versions, but absent from Lobster's version.

SECTION C: 'new footage'. Joe comes after Buster, who hides behind the model car. The model car is carted away on the back of the truck. He collides with Virginia Fox, and takes her to the Chamber of Commerce. Big Joe appears and Buster locks him in the house. Virginia gives him the air.

SECTION E (all versions): Buster back at work in the forge, attempting to repair the car and inadvertently wrecking a limousine.

SECTION F (Lobster films version): Joe breaks through the wall of the house and returns to get Buster.

SECTION G: The final battle with Joe and escape. Either the Lobster or Kino rescue of Virginia Fox would fit here

SECTION H: The domestic post-script after BK and Virginia are married. The End.

The alternate rescues of Virginia Fox continue to pose a conundrum. It still seems as though they belong to two entirely different versions of the film.

One possibility is made clear through the trade magazines of the time. Film Daily's review of 'THE BLACKSMITH' began with the portentous words, "it is a sad day when one of our leading comedians lets us down...". This review appeared in the *January* 1922 issue, even though 'THE BLACKSMITH' wasn't released until the Summer. Given the relatively quick turnover of short production, it was very rare for a two-reeler to be held back for release so long. Disheartened by the reviews, did Keaton put 'THE BLACKSMITH' back on the shelf as he had done with 'THE HIGH SIGN' a year earlier, pending a rescue job? If Keaton and his collaborators returned to the short and tried to improve it, it is quite possible that there would be a significant change in content, resulting in at least two versions: the reviewed version and a final, released cut.

This in itself gives us yet *another* question! Which version was which? Across the internet, and following a showing of the new version at Pordenone this year, there has been speculation that the 'new' version is actually the intended final released version. Certainly, the new footage contains some gag highlights missing from the rather flat versions we're used to, and why would these have been edited out? Perhaps our familiar version was inherited from Keaton's own personal cache of films, as discovered by James Mason. If Keaton had retained the first cut amongst his collection, this could have come to be accepted as the final version. Or maybe different versions were somewhere sent to the US and international distributors? So many questions, so few answers.



New information and theories continue to surface, and it's very likely that, by the time you read this, my own ideas will have been contradicted or disproved by someone who knows a lot more about it.

Maybe yet more footage will turn up yet too, but anyway, there you have it. The new scenes don't elevate 'THE BLACKSMITH' beyond being a lesser Keaton short, but it is fascinating to see new light thrown on a film we thought we knew so well. And who's ever going to complain about more Buster turning up?

Don't forget, you can catch the 'new' version of 'THE BLACKSMITH' at Slapstick 2014, in Bristol.

MOVIE NIGHT ON THE WEB

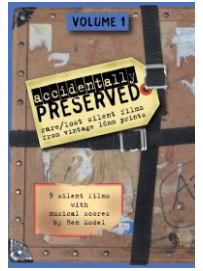
After leaving it slumbering for a while, I've been attempting to revitalise the Movie Night blog. There are a few posts on there with bits of news and Youtube links etc, and future posts will focus on some of the films featured in this issue. Watch while you read at www.movie-night-magazine.blogspot.co.uk

Movie Night also now has a presence on Facebook. Search for 'Movie Night Silent Comedy magazine, or use the direct link: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Movie-Night-silent-comedy-magazine/389243954535140>

DVD NEWS

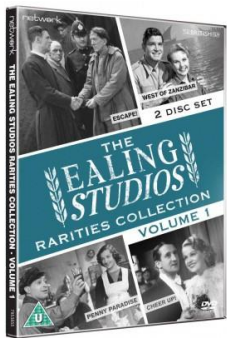
ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED.

The talented silent film pianist Ben Model has branched out into DVD production. Funded through the online donation system Kickstarter, he has raised enough to fund a collection of rare comedy obscurities. The title of the set reflects the contents; these are films which have escaped the ravages of time by accident rather than by design, and in many cases are the only surviving copies.. Available from Amazon, the set is priced at just \$19.99, a real bargain for the rarities contained. This sort of release seems to open up a whole new avenue for future DVDs; I think it's a great idea, and has already been successful enough to both return the investment and inspire a second (forthcoming volume). A full review follows on page 30.



Ben also has his own scored version of a Jonny Hines feature called THE CRACKERJACK available through Amazon. Hines was a sort of Harold Lloyd-lite, who was quite popular in a series of features. This one is also priced at \$19.99.

EALING RARITIES

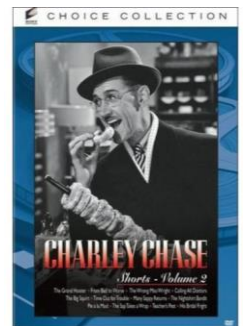


A similar 'deep cuts' approach is shown in Network DVD's new series of 'Ealing Rarities'. Yes, there was more to Ealing than 'THE LAVENDER HILL MOB', and each disc showcases 4 interesting but obscure films that have slipped through the cracks. Not limited to comedy, there is a mixture of genres on each disc. But several noteworthy comedies have appeared so far. Of the discs so far released, volume 1 features the rather superb Stanley Lupino in 'CHEER UP' (1936), and volume 3 gives us Harry Secombe's starring showcase 'DAVY' (1957). Also of interest to comedy fans is volume 2, featuring 'THE BIG BLOCKADE' (1941), which includes a cameo by the great Will Hay.

Another parallel series, 'Lost British Musicals' has begun with Stanley Lupino's wonderful 'OVERSHE GOES' (1937). The releases are all priced reasonably at £12.99, and the full range can be viewed at www.networkdvd.co.uk

MORE CHARLEY CHASE COLUMBIAS!

As we go to press, a second volume of Charley Chase's Columbia shorts has been announced. Hooray! This second volume features all his remaining Columbia two reelers, including the classics 'THE BIG SQUIRT', 'THE WRONG MISS WRIGHT' and 'HIS BRIDAL FRIGHT'. The other shorts are 'THE GRAND HOOTER', 'PIE A LA MAID', 'THE NIGHTSHIRT BANDIT', 'TIME OUT FOR TROUBLE', 'MANY SAPPY RETURNS', 'THE SAP TAKES A WRAP', 'TEACHER'S PEST', 'FROM BAD TO WORSE' and 'CALLING ALL DOCTORS'. Release date is 5th November and it's available to pre-order now.



ALPHA VIDEO UPDATES

Since the last issue, Alpha Video have continued to turn out some interesting silent and sound comedies on their budget volumes. Some are familiar films, while others are a bit more of a surprise. Some of the highlights include:

- SILENT COMEDIENNES, featuring Mabel Normand and Louise Fazenda in a selection of Keystone films, plus Gale Henry.
- LOST COMEDY CLASSICS is a mixture of silent and sound shorts, including Marie Dressler & Polly Moran in 'DANGEROUS FEMALES' and Langdon's 'THE STAGE HAND'
- A third volume of Edgar Kennedy shorts, including his driving safety promotional film, THE OTHER FELLOW.
- 'HAL ROACH RARITIES', including Martha Sleeper's 'SURE MIKE' and the proto-Our Gang short 'THE PICKANINNY' (shame about that title..).
- 'VISUAL COMEDY PIONEERS', featuring Charley Bowers' mind-bogglingly good 'THERE IT IS'.
- Syd Chaplin in 'A SUBMARINE PIRATE' and Lupino Lane's rarely seen 'MOVIELAND'.
- A forthcoming collection of shorts starring the underrated team of CLARK & MCCULLOUGH. Space forbids a full description of all the interesting titles, but there's lots to savour. As usual, these are unrestored versions and what you get is a bit of a Russian Roulette. I'd say it's worth the risk though, at \$5.99 a pop. The full catalog can be viewed at www.oldies.com

SLAPSTICON and MORE!

Dave Glass reports back on a trip to the world's #1 silent comedy festival...

So there I was, thinking how nice it would be to attend the biggest festival of Slapstick on planet Earth for a second time, when that fellow film fan David Wyatt (DW) rings me up and says "hey I'm going to the biggest festival of Slapstick on planet Earth. Care to join me?" So after I'd mulled it over for approximately 0.00002 seconds, I said..... "Oh, alright then!"



Our intrepid travellers!

In case you didn't know, Slapsticon is the annual celebration of early comedy film stuff. Not just silent but sound too (but mostly silent!) And no, it's not just Chaplin, Lloyd and Keaton – it's mainly the next tier down... and then down further! Yep, you really have to be a film historian, archivist or just a big buff (!) to appreciate some of the rare morsels that ringmaster Richard Roberts (RR) and the team dredge up from the deepest depths of the archives. This is the tenth anniversary of Slapsticon, and this year also saw a new home for the festival – Bloomington, Indiana – a few blocks west (700 miles to be exact) of Rosslyn, Virginia, the previous home of the event. More than 100 films to be screened from lunchtime on Thursday til late afternoon on Sunday (30th June). Phew-wee.

Now, I'm not going to list all of the wonderful (and not so wonderful) films we saw. It would take up too much room and make Matt's mag sag! I suggest you take a peek at the Slapsticon web site <http://www.slapsticon.org/> if you're interested in the list. Instead, I'll highlight those films that were of particular interest or were seemingly most appreciated by the audience, as well as mentioning the other highlights we enjoyed on the trip.

When I attended Slapsticon in 2007, I'd arrived the day before the event and spent most of the time in the movie theatre fighting the urge to fall asleep. This time however, Mr Wyatt and I were flying out to Washington a few days earlier to meet and stay with Rob Stone. Rob is the Moving Image Curator at the Library of Congress; he authored (with DW) the essential book 'Laurel or Hardy' (soon to be re-published in a revised edition – you heard it here first folks); and is also a very funny fellow!

Rob and his family made us extremely welcome, and during the two days we had before the trip, we visited the Packard Campus facility of the Library of Congress – their audio-visual conservation home. 90 miles of

shelving housing the world's largest collection of film and audio.

"Immense and amazing" doesn't begin to describe it.

<http://www.loc.gov/avconservation/>

George Willeman, the nitrate film vault manager, gave us a tour of the vaults where they keep the nitrate for Columbia, Disney and many others. They're accepting

more original nitrate now than they've ever done! Their restoration programme is to be truly admired.

Whilst there, Rob showed us a few 16mm films from a collection they'd recently received. We saw a rare Billy Franey comedy 'No.13' made for Reelcraft; 'Roars and Uproars' a great Jack Cooper comedy with spectacular lion stunts; and 'The Tenderfoot'. This was a real find, as it was a rare Bull's Eye comedy starring Harry Mann, Billy West and Charlie Chase, who had also directed it, and appeared in most of the film as "the baddie". Great stuff.

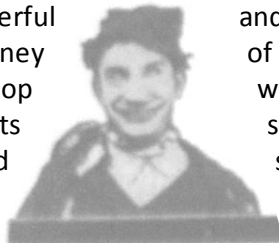
The next day we set off. The main reason for the "road trip" was to transport the 35mm films from LoC to the Slapsticon event. I'd visited the USA many times, but never done a real "road trip" before so this was something I was excited about doing. Rob made the trip even more enjoyable with his various stories... and he did all the driving too!

So let's get on with the event... The first film shown, as a "warmer-upper", was the Robert Youngson compilation 'Laurel & Hardy's Laughing 20s'. This went down very well and was swiftly followed by the Weiss Brothers programme, which has become a bit of a tradition. Turpin, Pollard and others entertained us. Whilst not particularly hilarious, the Jimmy Aubrey 'Excess Relatives' 1927 short was personally, the most interesting to see.

One of the great things about Slapsticon are the little extra "surprises" that RR likes to pepper the programme with. On this first day we were treated to the Harry Langdon talkie 'Goodness a Ghost' (supplied by DW) and the Billy Franey short 'The Dancer' (particularly un-funny!). Oh well.

After dinner, we caught the 'Marx Brothers Rarities' programme which included some interesting video, supplied by Glenn Mitchell, of Chico Marx on the David Nixon 'Showtime' prog on BBC TV. I have to admit that the following item, 'A Tribute to Jiggs and Maggie' was a little difficult for most of us to stay awake in.

In the following morning's 'Early Comedies' programme, we were subjected to a wonderful selection of polite correctness (Mr & Mrs Sidney Drew and the De Havens) and a wonderful dollop of political incorrectness! Particular highlights were 'Ham among the Redskins', a Ham and Bud comedy as politically incorrect as they come. They even beat up an indian child!!



'The Child Needs a Mother' was another twisted stand-out for me, featuring Frank "Fatty" Voss in drag as a child, continually beating up his dad!! However, my favourite comedy from this section (and one of my favourites from the festival) was 'Local Showers'. Starring Harry Watson Jr, this was one of the Musty Suffer series of shorts. I'd not heard of these before, so was completely taken aback by the incredible quirky nature and inventiveness on display. This one featured a trip to the dentist which Musty barely lives through! By now, I'm sure you'll have heard that there's a DVD due to be released of Musty's adventures which, up until now, have been hidden away in the LoC vaults. Great news!

Musty Suffer: an, erm, unforgettable face...

11.00am and it's time for 'Kids n' Animals'! In the interests of "pacing ourselves", some of us had agreed to have a longer lunch and miss some of this, but I persuaded our gang (!) to hang on a bit, so I could see the first two films on display in this section. The first was a Hey Fellas short, which are pretty hard to come by, called 'The Home Wreckers'. Like the title says, this consisted of the kids wrecking an art collector's collection – each ornament conveniently placed on a wobbly pedestal, to make it a little easier to wreck! The next film was pretty good too. 'No Children' was the first in the 'Smitty' series, based on the Walter Berndt's strip, created by the Van Buren studio in the late 20s. It featured a family, who in an attempt to find lodgings, get their two kids to act as ventriloquist dummies. Each of the Smitty films featured a cameo of someone famous (this one had boxing champ Jack Dempsey), and later shorts had Billy Bevan and Lloyd Hamilton. Love to see those! The next two films (an Our Gang and Mickey (Rooney) McGuire) were both known to me, so that's when we snuck out...

After lunch... 'Hal Roach Comedies'. Harold Lloyd's 'Follow the Crowd' was followed by Snub Pollard's 'All in a Day'. Now, I always get a little excited when I'm about to see a "new" Snub, but I'm often left with a feeling of disappointment after watching it. Unfortunately, this was no exception. However, it featured Sunshine Sammy and was set in the Ocean Park Amusement Pier, and I'm sure if I saw it again, I'd enjoy it more. Quite common with the Pollards! It was good to see Charlie Murray's only Roach short 'Somewhere in Somewhere' and a more entertaining 'All-Star' Roach from the following year called 'Never

Too Old' starring James Finlayson, Tyler Brooke and Vivien Oakland. This had the added interest of being co-written by Stan Laurel. A fun comedy with Finlayson doing his thing! Finishing off this section was the splendid Charlie Chase sound short 'Girl Shock'.

The next item on the menu? 'Rob Stone Rarities'.

When I attended Slapsticon 2007, Rob worked at UCLA, and I remembered his 'Rarities' slot being a little light of surprises. This was due, as Rob said, to Mr Roberts grabbing all the best stuff for the rest of the programme! So, bearing in mind, half of the films being shown at this weekend seemed to be from the LoC vaults, were we going to get a 'Rob Stone Rarities' show that we could easily fall asleep in? Not on your nelly! First item? A longer chunk, than what we've previously seen on DVD, of the Hardy and Davidson short 'Love 'em and Feed 'em'. This featured a bit more footage of Hardy and Max together. Then, an LKO 1915 short with Billie Ritchie & Alice Howell (her first LKO) 'Father was a Loafer', followed by 'Pants' (great title!) a 1919 Bull's Eye comedy with Gale Henry. Another rare Snub Pollard followed, 'Run 'em Ragged' (1920) and a Jimmy Aubrey Vitagraph directed by Larry Semon called 'Rips and Rushes' – this was pretty good! Both of those films had been repatriated from the New Zealand archive.

Two weeks previously, Rob had run the 'Mostly Lost' weekend at Culpeper – an event designed to identify film – and the next film shown here was one that didn't make it into that weekend's programme. It was about a reel's worth of a Monty Banks comedy, circa 1924, which featured a few Rube Goldberg inspired gadgets. Sadly no one knew the title. OK, next was one I was eager to see. Those wacky Hall Room Boys in 'Hams and Yeggs'. This featured Al Alt, George Williams and Bud Jamison but... there was a slight problem. After about 1 reel's worth, the continuity got a little strange to understand. Then, for no reason, we suddenly got a chunk of footage that was obviously from an earlier part of the plot. And then "the finale" ... and then some more footage that belonged earlier. Hmmm. As Rob was at great pains to point out, the LoC have to "preserve as found", and this print had obviously been messed around at some point before restoration took place. Ah well, it raised some additional laughs! Rob says the LoC have around two dozen Hallroom Boy comedies.... (cue sound effect of dribbling) We then had a portion of Pokes and Jabs (Bobby Burns & Walter Stull) in 'Devilled Crabs' (Jaxon 1917) and 'Stripes and Stars', a 1918 Vitagraph starring Walter

Hall and Billy Ruge and to round off Rob's Rarities we had a 1916 Vim starring Harry Myers called 'A Strenuous Visit'. Phew.

After dinner we returned to the first of the Lloyd Hamilton shorts we'd brought with us – 'Dynamite', which in case you don't know is set in a dynamite factory. Shades of 'Ham & Bud' still lingering on... Another highlight followed – the recently restored Monty Banks feature 'Atta Boy' (1926). I've always enjoyed Monty's films and my expectations of this were definitely met. Apart from a great story, and a sparkling print, there were some wonderful set pieces to enjoy - one involving some illegal liquor - and another, the finale, featuring some spectacular stunt work and effects, similar to the yet-to-be-made 'Play Safe' (more on that later). A popular hit for many. There was still Keaton's 'War Italian Style' to be shown, but we called it a day. We wanted to end on a high! Day 3 began with the traditional Cartoon Show, however this year it was a memorial to Dave Snyder, the founding father of the animation section of this



That famous still: Charley Murray cowers from Kalla Pasha in 'GEE WHIZ' (1920)



Lloyd Hamilton in APRIL FOOL (1920)

festival, who has sadly passed away. Eight rare toons were shown - from Lantz and Van Bueren to Iwerks and

Disney.

Next was the traditional 'Sennett Spot', hosted as usual by Brent Walker. Unfortunately 'Cohen Collects a Debt', an early rare 1912 Ford Sterling, hadn't made it from the lab in time, but there were many other delights to be savoured. The stand outs for me were 'What Happened to Mrs Jones' - one of the rare Sennett Woodley Specials released 1917 – and 'Gee Whiz', a Sennett-Paramount from 1920 starring Charlie Murray, Kalla Pasha and Jimmy Finlayson. Although this had Dutch titles the plot, involving developing some incriminating photos, was easy enough to follow, and included the famous scene captured on the front of the Kalton Lahue book 'Clown Princes & Court Jesters'. Wonderful!

There was another rarity from the mythical Sennett-Paramount era – about one reel's worth of the Turpin short 'She Loved Him Plenty'. Great to see, if not particularly funny. To finish off this section was another "surprise" extra – this time supplied by yours truly. I've always loved the Billy Bevan Sennett comedies, and one of my favourite "lost" films of his was 'Wall Street Blues', excerpted in a couple of the Robert Youngson compilations. This is the film that includes that iconic shot of a car hanging off a cliff attached by a rope to Billy Bevan's neck! I'd recently acquired some previously missing footage and also acquired from the Sennett Archive, copies of the inter-title sheets. Armed with these I was able to do a full reconstruction of the film, which is a wonderful example of Del Lord's work for Sennett from this period. It was "snuck in" before we broke for lunch and went down well (as did the lunch!).

At 2pm we were dealt another Lloyd Hamilton – this was DW's print of 'Moonshine' (directed by Charles Parrott) which was enjoyed by all and, appropriately, this was followed by 'David Wyatt's Rarities'. Now, you have to understand, dear reader, that up until this point Mr Wyatt had been agonising over which of the many films he'd brought should be inflicted upon the assembled Slapstickonians. He thankfully had decided upon the following...

First off was the 9.5 print of 'Honourable Mr Buggs' featuring the lovely Martha Sleeper, Anna May Wong and Oliver Hardy in blackface. Not funny but incredibly watchable! Next up was another unidentified film – Al St John as a bike messenger, who gets involved with a gang of crooks and a stolen necklace. The plot was the same as Al's 1919 'Speed' made for Warner Bros but looked like it was made later. It co-starred Anita Garvin and, possibly, Glen Cavender. It didn't match any of the filmography in Steve Massa's book, so Mr Massa is currently "on the case"! We then had Mike and Ike's

'All for Uncle', followed by another crowd pleaser – a rare Lupino Lane (again from 9.5) called 'Hectic Days' – a western containing all the usual Lupino Lane trademarks (although I only counted two scissor-jumps, which is well below the expected quantity!) This was followed by another one of my "re-assembly" jobs – 'Hard Knocks and Love Taps' a missing 1921 Sennett comedy starring Charlie Murray and James Finlayson. The finale was the gorgeous print of the Our Gang short 'Your Own Back Yard'. You may have seen this restoration by Mr Robin Cook Esq, as it's been shown at Bristol's Slapstick event. It's the one that worryingly features Farina crying... a LOT!



After David's presentation, we saw his print of Lloyd Hamilton's 'April Fool', which was followed by the Harold Lloyd talkie 'Professor Beware'. I can't remember why but I missed this one. Probably coming up for air!!

After dinner – my print of Lloyd Hamilton's 'The Simp' was enjoyed (it would have been DW's but mine's got more footage!) and then (start the fanfare) the Main Feature of the day.... (slight pause for dramatic effect). In fact, the film that Richard Roberts had flown over from the BFI at great expense (further pause and drum roll) the Walter Forde feature 'Would You Believe It?'!!!..... (cue sound effect of crickets chirping and sagebrush being blown across the plains.....) Sorry, I'm British and therefore inclined therefore not to get over excited about "one of our own". It has to be said though that the film was lapped up by the audience and has been cited since as a highlight of the festival. Well done Walter! (wasn't that the title of one of his shorts?)

So what could follow that? Well, gentle slumbering noises from many. Although the next presentation (at 10pm!) included 4 great Columbia sound shorts featuring Langdon, Chase and Co., many of us had over-indulged in the feast of comedy we'd been served. At least that's how I accounted for the noise coming from David Wyatt's nose.

We were a little late arriving the next morning, so unfortunately missed the Arbuckle directed short 'Idle Roomers' starring Frank and Alfred Malino. However, we enjoyed the following three sound shorts, especially 'Free Rent' with Monte Collins and Tom Kennedy. Columbia were going for a Laurel and Hardy type teaming with these two and it's always interesting to see how they pulled it off (or not as this particular film demonstrated). Still good to see though. There was also an "extra" in this programme – Charley Chase in 'Snappy Sneezers'. I've always wanted to see this, having seen the mute footage included in the Youngson compilation 'Laurel & Hardy's Laughing 20s'. You may recall Charley sneezing profusely on a trolley car, mostly in the direction of Anders Randolph, who plays Thelma Todd's father in the film. Excellent! After lunch, we had Harold Lloyd's "replacement" Glenn Tryon. 'Battling Orioles' had been planned for Lloyd but when he left Roach, Hal had a problem, so he catapulted Glenn into a feature. Interestingly, this was actually the second feature he'd shot, but was released before the first, 'The White Sheep'. I'd seen both previously and, although I like Tryon, he's no Harold Lloyd and there's something lacking in his personality which makes it hard for him to sustain a feature. The audience loved this film though, so I'll slide into the minority over in the corner...

Wanda Wiley's 'Queen of Aces' was a hoot (try and see her 'Speedy Marriage' on line – it's great!) and then Billy Dooley's 'Misfit Sailor' had me laughing like a drain! Oh, no sorry, I meant something else involving a drain... I've got a really splicy, tatty 16mm of Jimmy Adams' 'Swiss Movements' so it was great to see a good print of that one next, and then... goodness... it's the last programme of the festival!

Richard programmes some 'old favourites' for the last section, and this time we were treated to Laurel's 'Short Kilts', Lane's 'Who's Afraid' and Our Gang in 'High Society'.



It's then customary for some surprises to be thrown in, as a final finale type o' thing.... So there we all were, sat, with bated breath, waiting for the "extras" that Big Dick had in store... Well, first of all we were treated to a repeat performance of the "new" Chaplin find 'The Thief Catcher' which was good to see in its entirety.

This was followed by an excellent Edward Everett Horton short called 'No Publicity' involving Edward trying to get a photo for a newspaper and managing to get in drag along the way. A great, fun short.

Another Mr & Mrs Sidney Drew comedy was next called 'System is Everything' which was polite, charming and instantly forgettable. Then we saw 'Kick' (Reelcraft 1920) with Milburn Morante, but I'm afraid to say, I can't remember anything about it. Senility setting in...

Next up though, we had a real winner – 'Way Out West'! Nooo, not L&H. This was a Hank Mann short (Arrow 1920) directed by Charles Parrott and was really good – as most of Hank Mann's films seem to be. It also starred James Parrott and Vernon Dent as a bonus!

Finally, finally, finally, we were subjected to a recently preserved (but fairly decomposed print) of the Clyde Cook short 'Scared Stiff', written by Stan Laurel. Although uneven in places, it was hugely memorable, mainly due to the 'giant' chimpanzee 'Kajanka'!! who kept stumbling through the special set (that looked like a Dippy Doo Dad's cast off). Clyde Cook also did his thing, which made me laugh anyway...

And that was that. We stumbled off to an Irish Pub for an evening meal and the following morning, Rob, DW and I loaded up the films and started back to Culpeper. Time to reflect... Aside from seeing (and sometimes remembering) some GREAT films, most of which were sparkling 35mm prints, we'd also met some sparkling people too – previous and new acquaintances - Rob Farr, Chris Seguin, Jim Kerkoff, Joe Adamson, Rob Arkus, Gary Johnson, Brent Walker, and many more fellow film folk who share this strange passion for funny old films. Sigh...



Ben Turpin and Billy Bevan in 'BRIGHT EYES' (1922)

But there was more to come!...

After returning safely to Culpeper, we spent a few jolly hours watching even more rare stuff at the Library of Congress. Highlights included Billy Bevan's 'Bright Eyes' (which I was overjoyed to see as it's the only complete print in existence); an Unidentified Sennett with Jack Richardson (which I've now managed to identify); two

Hall Room Boys comedies 'Pretty Soft' and 'After the Dough'; Billy Franey and Gale Henry in 'The Inspector's Double' (Joker 1916) and 'Lady Baffles & Detective Duck' (what a great title!); a 3 reel Billie Ritchie comedy 'Silk Hose & High Pressure' which obviously had a bigger budget than most; a Harry Mann "doing Chaplin" comedy called 'One Night Only' (directed by Charles Parrott) which had a wonderful poster displayed outside the theatre that made me giggle for a while – 'Tonight Hamlet. After Hamlet – Big Prize Fight!'

We'd also requested the Max Linder Essanay comedy 'Max Wants a Divorce' but disappointingly it was less than 1 reel in length and badly decomposed making it almost impossible to gain enjoyment from. Ah well. We had better luck with Snub Pollard in 'Rockabye Baby' and 'Speed to Spare'; a couple of Bobby Ray's which were good fun - 'Flapper Handled' and 'Dizzy Days'; Paul Parrot's 'Rough on Romeo'; and we even managed a Bobby Dunn called 'Poor But Honest'

We somehow found time to also see Monty Banks' feature 'Play Safe' which had been shown at a previous Slapsticon that I'd been unable to attend. His films definitely deserve to be seen more widely. And we saw an intriguing reel called 'Unidentified – Censor Cuts' which included cut scenes from many comedies including Billy Bevan's 'Golf Nut'; Turpin's 'Broke in China'; 'Honourable Mr Buggs' and Laurel & Hardy's 'Duck Soup'. (It was the scene involving Stan in drag in the bathroom, which does exist in the French 9.5 version I believe).

So, were we suffering from 'Slapstick-itus' by this stage?

I think so. We caught the next plane home – ironically leaving on Independence Day! – and nursed our wounded eyeballs. Would we do it again?

You bet!

Many thanks to Dave for sharing his account; it sounds like a fantastic trip. I myself am deeply jealous!



Scenes from the 'DUCK SOUP' censor cuts...

THE MEDIA HISTORY DIGITAL PROJECT

Previously, I've raved about the Internet Archive's fantastic collection of old film trade magazines and fan publication. A great tool for research and aimless browsing alike, this has now been made more instantly accessible with the introduction of 'Lantern'. This is a search facility that can locate search terms from anywhere in the collection, and instantly provide the relevant pages. For instance, you can search "Buster Keaton" and be provided with every mention or photograph of BK in any of the magazines. You can also limit the search by year and publication. It's simply a brilliant resource, accessible at lantern.mediahist.org. On this page, I've collated a sampling of some of the rare and unusual treasures to be found in the collection...



A beautiful cartoon depicting Buster Keaton's 'THREE AGES', from 'THE EXHIBITORS' HERALD'.



It seems like old times to be captioning a photo of Mabel Normand. The feminine funster is here shown talking it over between scenes with Charley Chase, another Hal Roach star appearing in Pathe comedies.



Charlie Chase, below, in "Thin Twins," exhibits starved-looking calves.

A trio of rare Charley Chase pictures. From left to right: Chase visits Mabel Normand on the set of her 'RAGGEDY ROSE'; in drag for the lost 'CHASING HUSBANDS'; the only still I've yet seen from his penultimate silent, 'THIN TWINS'.

Finally, a couple of Laurel and Hardy items: a contemporary advert for their talkie debut, 'UNACCUSTOMED AS WE ARE', and a candid of Stan Laurel visiting Hawaii with daughter Lois in 1931.

LOOK WHO'S TALKING!

Hal Roach's First
ALL DIALOG COMEDY

"The Funniest
Picture You
Ever Played!"

"Get Ready!
Release is
MAY 4th"

STAN LAUREL and OLIVER HARDY

in "UNACCUSTOMED AS WE ARE"

Now playing with \$2 engagement of "Broadway Melody" at Columbia Theater, San Francisco

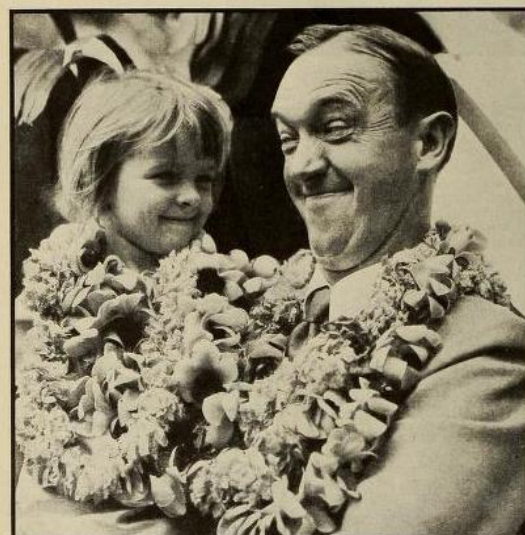


"OUR GANG"—LAUREL—HARDY
CHARLIE CHASE—ALL STARS

HAL ROACH
ALL TALKING
Comedies One
Each Week

M-G-M

The TALKIES of
The Industry



International Newsreel Photo

Stan Laurel, the popular comedian of the team, Laurel and Hardy, took his little daughter, Lois, along when he went on a vacation trip to the Hawaiian Islands recently. Stan has a lot of admirers but none of them equals little Lois.

HAL ROACH'S FUNNY LADIES

THE SOUND YEARS



In the last issue, we looked at Hal Roach's attempts to promote female stars in the silent era. He had his greatest successes in the sound era; here is the continued story of those films, and the terrific funny ladies in them...

By the end of the silent era, the Roach studios had figured out how to use female comedians for maximum impact, both in support of others, and as stars in their own right. 'A PAIR OF TIGHTS', the all-star short starring Anita Garvin and Marion Byron, was everything that a Hal Roach two-reel comedy should be. It was witty, character-based, and moreover, based on a situation that wasn't just recycled from a story starring male comedians.

Yet, sadly, it was to be the last film this team made together. Changes were afoot at Roach, and throughout the industry in general. Budget cuts caused starlets Edna Marian and Viola Richard to have their contracts terminated. Marion Byron went elsewhere and Anita Garvin stepped down her appearances as she entered a happy marriage. Add to that the introduction of talkies in 1929 and the Roach stock company really was in a state of flux. Roach was on the lookout for new stars who could talk, and was especially interested in carrying on the idea of female comedians. (As his later repeated attempts to create another Laurel or Hardy or Our Gang show, Roach was always reluctant to give up on a successful formula).

In 1929, he found a star with real potential. A former schoolteacher, Thelma Todd had been going around under the name of Alison Lloyd. She had appeared opposite Ed Wynn in the light comedy 'RUBBER HEELS', and in a handful of Educational talkies such as 'LOOK OUT BELOW'. An attractive leading lady, she had the advantage of a ready sense of humour, which made her an ideal fit for light comedy roles at Roach.



A barely recognisable Thelma Todd as a New England schoolteacher, c 1925.

Much has been written about Thelma Todd, but sadly much of it is centred around her often chequered existence and tragic death rather than her appearances in comedies. Some of the books about her almost seem apologetic when they have to mention her films!

Thelma began her appearances at Roach with the first talkie, 'HURDY GURDY'. A fairly feeble comedy, it is based around her keeping a seal in her bath during a heatwave (!). There isn't a whole lot for her to do here, but leading lady roles opposite Laurel and Hardy, Harry Langdon and Charley Chase gave her more room to flex her comic muscles. Her role in 'UNACUSTOMED AS WE ARE' with L and H led her to some charmingly innocent flirting with the gallant Mr Hardy, as well as the chance to turn into a formidable force when confronted with her husband's philandering. There is also the first instance of what came to be a trademark of Thelma's Roach appearances, namely losing her dress. I can't think why the film-makers kept including scenes of this, can you..?

Though this and her other appearances with Laurel and Hardy show her off to great advantage, it was with Charley Chase that she came to be most closely associated. Their first short together, 'SNAPPY SNEEZER', already showcases the chemistry between them. Chase was an excellent trainer of new stars, and always generous with his leading ladies; Thelma is allowed to do much more than sit and look pretty, adding comic character touches to her part. One of the biggest laughs is hers, when Charley asks her what kind of car her father has and she replies "It's a blue one".

While she charmed opposite Chase, Thelma's roles against the infantile Langdon allowed her to present a comedic contrast through portraying vamps and fierce wives. In 'THE FIGHTING PARSON' she is a western floozie who bewilders him, while 'THE SHRIMP' sees her as a cruel bully constantly teasing Harry. Her best role with Langdon is in his last short, 'THE KING', where she plays the shrewish, domineering queen constantly chasing her wayward husband. There is one absolutely magnificent shot of Thelma storming towards the camera with a face like thunder, as a horde of maids follow behind carrying the train of her royal gown.

One of Thelma's best appearances in her first year at Roach is in The Boyfriends short 'LOVE FEVER', where she sends up herself as a histrionic actress who the boys all fall in love with. This ability to laugh at herself and her natural sense of humour were key reasons for appeal. One of her most



charming scenes is where she seems to genuinely break up during a scene with Stan Laurel (dressed as 'Agnes') in 'ANOTHER FINE MESS'.

Thelma had shown her versatility in these initial appearances, and was clearly headed for bigger things. Her roles opposite Charley Chase had grown to virtual co-starring status, the pair's on-screen chemistry tipping over into a real-life affair. 'HIGH C'S' and 'ROUGH SEAS' make up two of their most celebrated teamings, with Charley as an army private in WW1 France, who meets charming Antoinette (Thelma) and tries to smuggle her back to America with him. The most-celebrated scene has Charley getting her on-board ship by stuffing her in his kit bag. Unknown to him, Thelma's leg has ripped through the bag, giving all the other soldiers a treat as Charley walks on, blissfully unaware!



'DOLLAR DIZZY' is almost an early screwball comedy, with Chase and Todd both newly rich and convinced the other is a gold digger. Another short, 'LOOSER THAN LOOSE', contains my favourite moment in all of her pairings with Chase, as she steals the film with one close up. Charley has just proposed, and we go to a tight shot of Thelma as she opens the engagement ring. Gradually, her expression changes from excitement to a resigned disappointment as she looks at the contents of the box. We never see the ring, but Thelma's expression beautifully conveys its meagre appearance.

"It's a solitaire," says Charley.

"Yes.. I see it is.." replies Thelma, clearly disappointed but still very much in love with him. Her expressions and delivery of this simple line make the scene into something very funny yet poignant.



Chase and Todd's most famous appearance together is of course 'THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG'. Charley is sick to death of being dragged out with blind dates who always turn out to be awful, so when he is persuaded to be Thelma's date (sight unseen), decides to make himself as distasteful as possible. He chews garlic, fails to shave and swaps his brand new Sunday suit with his friend's tatty old work suit.

Upon finally being introduced to Thelma, he does a magnificent double take and spends the evening trying to sneakily rectify his mistake, shaving in his reflection on a shiny jacket, drinking aftershave and stealing his suit back, piece by piece. Although most of the laughs come Charley's way, Thelma's reaction shots, and amusement as she comes aware of what he is doing, greatly add to the fun.

Furthermore, the comedy just wouldn't work without Thelma. Her beauty, charisma and charm are what motivate Charley, and make the great lengths he goes to seem believable.

Scenes from Thelma's supporting roles at Roach. From top, caught in the clinch with Harry Langdon; breaking up with Stan Laurel in 'ANOTHER FINE MESS'; joining the army with Charley Chase in 'ROUGH SEAS'; with Charley in 'THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG'.



Chase wanted to make their teaming official in his series of films, but Roach had other ideas. Thelma *would* be starred, but in a revival of his previous plans to produce an all-female comedy team. Chosen to be the other half of the team was Zasu Pitts. A fine actress, Zasu could tackle both tragedy and comedy with flair. In the silent era, she had won plaudits for her role in Von Stroheim's 'GREED' ('24). However, as Picture Play magazine put it in 1934, "only fans with long memories recall Zasu Pitts as a great tragic actress and, believe it or not, she was. And still is. But the talkies developed her as a comedienne and Zasu cleverly adapted her hands and voice and entire personality until now she is valued almost beyond price as a getter of laughs."

The many faces of Zasu Pitts... 1) as wan dramatic actress, 1920s; 2) in more familiar spinster mode; 3) In 'ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT', before being replaced in the eventual film (4).

Valued so much, in fact, that soon audiences could no longer accept her in serious roles. Apparently she had to be replaced in a role in 'ALL

QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT' when audiences immediately started laughing on seeing her. Laugh-getting would become Pitts' bread and butter work from now on, much to the distress of Von Stroheim, who lamented, "She should not be in comedy, for she is the greatest of all tragediennes". Drama's loss was comedy's gain, however; Zasu Pitts played her comedy roles magnificently, and it is criminal how she remains overlooked.

Since the last female team shorts at Roach, Laurel and Hardy had continued to go from strength to strength. Their influence on the new series was directly referenced in publicity to launch it, which was given the tagline "HAL ROACH DOESN'T REST ON HIS LAURELS AND HARDYS!".

Roach saw the new series as something of a pet project, and took responsibility for directing the first entry, 'LET'S DO THINGS' (1931). This short picked up where 'A PAIR OF TIGHTS' had left off, tackling the saga of a disastrous date. From the outset, the girls' roles are well-defined. Thelma is glamorous and worldly wise, but is ever embarrassed by the eternally gauche Zasu. In this first effort, Zasu is smitten with her lunkhead boyfriend Milton, who is more interested in the contents of her fridge than he is in her. Thelma can't stand Milton, and is less than happy when Zasu drags her along on a double date. Her partner for the evening is a loopy osteopath (Jerry Mandy). When Thelma feigns a headache to cry off the date, he insists on giving her a "cranial massage", by shaking her all around and knocking her head about! This later leads into a fantastic gag at the night club the mismatched gang visit; there is a floor show of dancers, and Dr Mandy complains that "there isn't one decent spine amongst them!". He sneaks away to work his miracle cure, with the result that when the dance troupe reappear, they are all hobbling along, bent double with agony! Things go from bad to worse, with Zasu accidentally ending up sozzled and wedged in a waiter's trolley; eventually they return home and Milton has a big question to ask Zasu.... "Can I have a piece of pie?!". Thelma lets him have it!

Although a bit padded at three reels, 'LET'S DO



MGM made no bones about the influences on the Pitts-Todd films.



THINGS' is a fun film with good characterisation and gags. A template for the series had been formed. Roach continued to maintain close control over the shorts, directing every other entry. The other films were to be directed by Marshall 'Mickey' Neilan. A talented director, he had worked with Mary Pickford in the 1920s, and so seemed a good choice to direct female stars. His initial effort, 'CATCH AS CATCH CAN' showed this to good effect. As Leonard Maltin has noted, it isn't a hilarious short, but it has a wistful charm all of its own that makes it very watchable.

Sadly, Neilan was in an alcoholic doldrum and was unable to maintain this high standard. His next short with the girls, 'WAR MAMAS', was a misfiring comedy with a WW1 setting. It was to be Neilan's last short in the series.

Hal Roach fared much better with his own attempts. 'THE PAJAMA PARTY' is a cracking fish-out-of-water comedy, with the girls invited to a society ball when the hostess runs into their car. Thelma is in her element, but Zasu is

hilariously awkward. The girls are assigned French maids, and Thelma bluffs speaking French. Mustering all her feminine dignity, she sashays into the bathroom and...falls straight into a sunken bathtub. "Imagine my embarrassment..." she giggles charmingly, still trying to preserve a sophisticated air.

Things go from bad to worse at the party. Thelma is constantly paid attention by men wanting to "show her the Japanese Pagoda". Each time she goes, she returns a second later in a huff, her male companion sporting a fresh black eye! Meanwhile, no-one shows any interest in Zasu at all, and she wanders around like a lost sheep. Observing some drunken practical jokes, she remembers Thelma's advice to "just try and do the same as they do", and so ends up giving the treatment to all the outraged party guests!

'ON THE LOOSE' is the best-known of all these shorts, principally because of a cameo by Laurel and Hardy. On its own terms, though, it is a fun comedy of the girls' disastrous date at Coney Island. The funniest moment takes place on a helter



'THE SOILERS' attempt a sale...

skelter. Thelma descends the ride, and at the bottom finds a kid looking around for his lollipop, which he lost on his way down. Thelma bends over, and suddenly the outline of the lollipop becomes very visible inside her skirt! Spotting it, the kid seizes his moment. He ducks out of the camera short, and a second later there is a scream from Thelma. "I paid a *nickel* for that!" says the indignant child, storming off with his salvaged goods.

As 1931 rolled into 1932, Roach could no longer afford the time to direct the shorts personally. The impetus behind a female comedy team always seemed to come from the boss directly, and once his personal involvement waned, the series lacked a strong guiding hand. There was none of the sustained vision of Stan Laurel, Charley Chase or Robert McGowan in the Todd-Pitts unit. In the absence of this, the films were solely reliant on the quality of gags, the skill of the director and the personality of the leads to pull them through. This would be seen very clearly in the films made in the following year.

'SEAL SKINS', with direction shared between Gil Pratt and Jefferson Moffitt, has the extraordinarily contrived premise of the girls on the trail of a stolen royal seal, but winding up with the animal variety instead! They find it in a spooky house full of circus performers, and soon we're into scare comedy territory. There are some good gags though, and the girls' personalities win out. The sight of Zasu making a seal follow her around the house by gingerly throwing sardines at it is almost worth the whole thing!

The films directed by George Marshall fared much less well, and Leonard Maltin has rightly pointed out that he took the "female Laurel and Hardy" theme entirely too literally. His films are loaded with clunky slapstick routines that might have worked for the boys, but just don't work with two young ladies. No, thank you, I don't want to see Zasu's limbs bent around like a contortionist by Bud Jamison, or the girls being stuffed in a hospital cart. Not only is the slapstick too rough at times, but the material was sometimes downright poor.

'THE OLD BULL' features an incredibly inept back-projected runaway car sequence à la the end of Laurel and Hardy's 'COUNTY HOSPITAL'. The L & H film at least features 15 minutes of vintage character comedy before this letdown to make up for it; 'THE OLD BULL' *starts* with such a lack of inspiration and continues fizzling out for another two reels.

To be fair, not all the George Marshall films were this bad. 'THE SOILERS' is an overlooked gem; snappy and fast-moving, there is a good dose of dialogue and character comedy amongst the slapstick. The girls are working their way through college by selling magazine subscriptions, with a rehearsed pitch that will become a running gag, as they launch into it at any given opportunity.

Thelma tries the soft sell approach, slowly lifting her hemline as she tries to charm a middle-aged businessman into buying her pitch. Zasu is totally oblivious to what she is trying to do, and keeps trying to pull her skirt back down. She then keeps trying to elbow in on Thelma's sale...

THELMA: I'm working my way through college, and if you'll subscribe to this magazine...

ZASU: the magazine contains rich, ripe and racy news...

THELMA: Pardon me. *I'm* working *my* way through college..

ZASU: Well, I'm working my way through too!

One of the girls' prospective customers is Judge James C Morton. The judge is already enduring a bad day, having received death threats from criminals. As the girls continue to bump into him and cause slapstick catastrophes, he becomes convinced that they must be his pursuers. Things complicate further with the arrival of a bomb from the real villains!

The slapstick is well integrated into the storyline, and physical



Oh, look, Thelma's lost her dress again... This example is from 'SHOW BUSINESS'. Anita Garvin is on the left, while Otto Fries plays the ineffectual Hal Roach policeman to a tee.



Top: the charming end scene of 'ASLEEP IN THE FEET'.

Above: Thelma has just discovered the new anti-burglar device in 'THE BARGAIN OF THE CENTURY'.

gag sequences are very well executed. There's an especially good routine with a ladder and a revolving door that is one of the best slapstick moments in any of the girls' shorts. But crucially, this material isn't the whole show. There is a winning mixture of character and verbal humour thrown in. The results are great and it's a shame that none of Marshall's other films matched up to this one.

Surprisingly, one director with a well-established penchant for violent slapstick actually turned out a pretty good, well-balanced short. Future Three Stooges director Jules White helmed 'SHOW BUSINESS', presumably as a sabbatical from MGM's main shorts department. The result is a curio. It contains many elements typical of the White/Columbia style (monkeys, Monty Collins, punning dialogue) but retains the background music, slower pacing and familiar faces of the Roach studios. Most welcome amongst these is Anita Garvin, returning to the fold for a fantastic comic performance. Sending herself up as a prima donna actress, she is a constant headache for manager Monty Collins. Reviewing a full-page ad for her show, she shrieks, "look at my name, it's barely readable! That might be alright for Garbo, but *not* for Garvin". Of course, the girls and their pet monkey turn out to be the undoing of her dignity when they join her entourage, setting up some magnificent tantrums from Anita! White would later adapt the short for the Stooges as 'A PAIN IN THE PULLMAN'

At the end of 1932, the series really hit its stride again with the appointment of Gus Meins, one of Roach's very best directors. Meins had taste and the knack for getting natural, human comedy from situations (he would soon direct many of the best 'Our Gang' films).

'ASLEEP IN THE FEET' is a little reminiscent of Mabel Normand's 'THE NICKELHOPPER'. Hard-up, the girls are persuaded by Anita Garvin to earn some cash at a dime-a-dance club. While Thelma spends the evening fighting off men (principally an overzealous sailor), Zasu attracts very little custom at all. Anita attempts to doll her up, accompanied by a lesson in hip-swaying. Subsequently, Zasu's plastered on make-up and misguided hip-grinding make for a bizarre and raunchy spectacle as the Sheriff arrives to inspect the respectability of the establishment. The climatic dance hall sequences have a fantastic rhythm, all edited to hot Duke Ellington jazz instead of the normal Hal Roach tunes. It is one of the best-edited of any Roach sequences and a great climax.

Meins' shorts matched this directorial flair with firmly delineated characters, making the girls seem like real people by coaxing out their natural charm. In 'ASLEEP IN THE FEET', for example, there is a beguiling moment where Thelma, cross with Zasu, eventually succumbs to good-natured laughter, her giggles seeming very genuine.

'MAIDS A LA MODE' was another excellent short, with the girls wearing some dresses they are supposed to be delivering for dressmaker Billy Gilbert. Of course, the dresses don't survive for long! Flustered, bewildered Gilbert was a great foil for the girls in several of the shorts, most especially in 'THE BARGAIN OF THE CENTURY'.

This short was directed not by Meins but by Charley Chase, who cribbed the setup from his own classic silent 'FLUTTERING HEARTS'. Racing to beat the crowds to a sale, the girls run afoul of cop James Burtis, but Thelma charms him into letting them off the hook, lying that she is the Police Chief's daughter for good measure. Of course, the real chief arrives just as Burtis is in the middle of laughing and flirting with the girls, and strips him of his badge. Feeling guilty, Thelma and Zasu let him move in with them, but he proves to be less than an ideal houseguest... One of his preoccupations is to make a series of Rube Goldberg-esque anti-burglar devices, such as a springloaded boxing glove hidden in a cupboard, which inevitably hits Thelma smack in the face. Keen to get rid of Burtis, Thelma seizes her opportunity when she bumps into the Police Commissioner (Billy Gilbert). Inviting him home for dinner, she hopes that Burtis will be able to impress him and win his job back. At the flat, Zasu makes ice cream while the hapless Burtis tries to impress Gilbert with a watch trick... of course, we all know that the watch will not survive, but the punchline is masterfully extended. In fact, Burtis has accidentally dropped the watch into the ice cream maker, something he only becomes aware of when bits of springs start showing up in the finished ice cream. Chase now borrows from another classic silent, Max Davidson's 'PASS THE GRAVY', for the climactic scene, as Thelma, Zasu and Burtis all try to stop Gilbert from finding the remains of his watch. The only way they can do this is to shovel ever increasing amounts of ice cream into his bowl. At first, Gilbert refuses politely, but soon starts becoming exasperated until he finally bursts into an apoplectic rage: "With tears in my ears, I am begging you...NO MORE ICE CREAM!" Of course, the game is eventually up, and Gilbert flies into a mad rage. Just in the nick of time, Burtis' burglar device knocks him out; shortly after, the police show up and reveal that he was actually a dangerous criminal posing as the Commissioner. Burtis is reinstated and Thelma is elated that he won't be hanging around anymore... until Zasu reveals that she and Burtis are engaged!



ENTER PATSY KELLY... Thelma's new partner was a contrast to the dizzy Zasu.

'THE BARGAIN OF THE CENTURY' really is a little gem of a film, showcasing the warmth and humour of the girls, with a strong supporting cast, a good measure of comic tension and direction by an expert comedy craftsmen to boot.

Sadly, there would only be one more film in the Todd-Pitts series. After completing 'ONE TRACK MINDS', Zasu left Roach over money matters. She was a hugely popular actress, always in great demand. In 1932 alone she appeared in 17 features as well as her shorts! Such demand meant that Zasu could call the shots, and Roach could simply not afford to meet her salary demands. Zasu went on to brighten numerous



comedies of the 1930s and 40s, including an entertaining musical comedy, 'SING AND LIKE IT', 'MRS WIGGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH' with W C Fields and some pairings with Slim Summerville.

Pitts' departure left Thelma without a partner. Rather than let her continue solo, Roach recognised that Todd was most successful in partnership, and begun his search for a new comedienne.

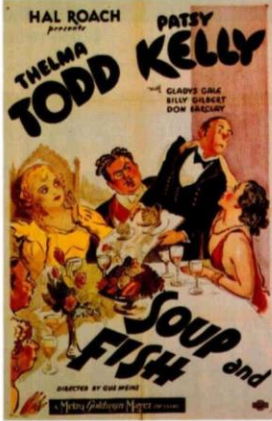


On a trip to New York, he happened to catch a review titled 'FLYING COLORS'. In the cast was a wise-cracking young star named Patsy Kelly. Miss Kelly had made a few film appearances, notably a starring short called 'THE GRAND DAME' (1931) but had mainly concentrated on Broadway.

It's indicative of the changing state of film comedy at this time that Pitts' replacement was such a snappy, wisecracking type of comedienne. Patsy was both a good contrast for Thelma, but also embraced the fast-moving dialogue humour of mid-30s screwball comedy, a direction Roach was clearly hoping to move in.

A new partner didn't end Thelma's troubles. Patsy could be equally relied on to get the girls into hot water, out on the streets (in 'BEAUTY AND THE BUS' or in 'Dates (in 'THREE CHUMPS AHEAD')')

The dynamic of the series would remain that of composed, elegant Thelma being embarrassed by her partner. Miss Kelly, however, was gauche in a different way. A fiery Irish type, she was gobby where Zasu had been dizzy, and confrontational rather than shy. This made for a good contrast with Thelma, but such a character needed very careful handling. Whereas the Zasu Pitts character was warm, likeable, and given a tinge of pathos by Pitts' experiences in drama, Patsy's character could easily veer into becoming overly loud and annoying. There needed to be a careful balance of character and situation for it to work, but this didn't always remain constant throughout the series.



Certainly, though, the first films were a strong start. Gus Meins had stayed on as director, ensuring a quality and continuity in the shorts. Kelly's debut was in 'BEAUTY AND THE BUS', a simple story of Thelma winning a brand new jalopy in a raffle. Of course, with Patsy's clumsiness and temper, soon the girls are in trouble with the police and the other road users of Culver City. Safe to say, the car doesn't survive intact to the end of the second reel!



The pairing works well; though given to fits of temper, Kelly comes across as essentially likeable, a diamond in the rough. Also of benefit is the presence of character comic Don Barclay. Barclay essayed prissy, self-important types, his humorously florid language contrasting beautifully with Kelly's simple brusqueness. The highlight of the film is where the girls accidentally run into his car, and his condescending tone eventually winds Patsy up to the extent where she starts smashing up his car deliberately!

Barclay remained on hand for the next two shorts, 'AIR FRIGHT' and 'BACKS TO NATURE'. The former has the girls as air hostesses, and the latter has them camping out in the woods. This situation made ideal comedy for the pair's relationship; Thelma would pull in the direction of polite femininity, while straight-talking, unsophisticated Patsy enjoyed the simple pleasures. In 'BACKS TO NATURE' Patsy extolls the virtues of a night in the woods, forcing the reluctant Thelma on a camping trip. However, after slapstick troubles with the cooking stove, a bear and a lion, she is soon reconciled to urban living...



SOUP AND FISH reverses the dynamic for similar effect and is just as much of a delight. Here, Patsy is reluctantly dragged to a stuffy society gathering with Thelma. To entertain herself during the impossibly dull evening, Patsy brings along an array of little toys and party tricks, much to Thelma's annoyance. The party is in honour of visiting Duke Billy Gilbert, and the guests all fawn over him with tedious small talk. The duke, however, is more interested in Patsy's tricks and practical jokes, much to the horror of the toffs. Patsy is seen to her best advantage in such a situation, where her straightforwardness is a breath of fresh air amongst all the insufferable snobs. We delight in seeing her bring them all down a peg or two!

THREE CHUMPS AHEAD returns to the successful formula of disastrous-double-date comedy. Thelma is blindly in love with a cheapskate layabout. Pragmatic Patsy isn't fooled, and does her best to be obnoxious and put him off. To try and engineer some time alone with Thelma, the beau sets Patsy up with his dumb brother (Benny Baker), and off the not-so-jolly foursome go on a double date.

When she overhears the boys plotting to spend as little money as possible, Patsy goes for the works, finding every conceivable expense to add to the bill. Unfortunately, she gets her come-uppance as the boys manage to sneak out of the restaurant, leaving Thelma and Patsy with a gargantuan pile of washing up to attend to.

The most famous, and one of the best, of the 1933-34 season, is 'BABES IN THE GOODS'. Thelma and Patsy play shop-window demonstrators. They have been told that as long as they have an audience, they must keep on demonstrating. Unfortunately, drunk Arthur Housman stations himself on a fire hydrant outside the window, forcing them to keep on going well into the night. By this point, they have been forgotten and accidentally locked in, forcing them to spend all night there!

Sadly, Gus Meins didn't remain on the series, and after his absence the shorts become more inconsistent. Again, different directors tried their hand, with mixed results that varied in quality wildly from one film to the next. James Parrott had mixed results; THE TIN MAN is a dull scare comedy, with personality right out of the window, but 'TREASURE BLUES' was a solid effort, and 'SING SISTER SING' might just be the best of all the Todd-Kellys. It has that crucial element of carefully delineated characters, and the contrast between them is the source of most of the comedy. Thelma has invited Patsy to move in with her. However, Patsy discovers that the arrangement will not be quite as rosy as she imagined, as the fastidious Thelma has created a list of roommate agreements and conditions, such as who can use the bathroom when, when the windows can be opened, and so forth. She also insists that whenever one of them grows tetchy with the other, they sing to release the tension. By the end of a stressful two reels coping with the OCD Thelma, Patsy is practically screeching the song! The topper comes when in is *Thelma* who asks Patsy to move out, as she thinks Patsy is too difficult to live with!



Thelma has a less than delightful visit from Patsy and friends in 'TOP FLAT'.

The other one of the later shorts to reach a high standard was 'TOP FLAT'. Thelma falls out with Patsy, claiming that she has been dragging her down. The pair go their separate ways, and when Patsy next sees Thelma, she is exiting a limousine and going into a lavish apartment block. What Patsy doesn't realise is that she is actually just a maid to the wealthy couple living in the penthouse apartment. Suddenly forgetting the feud, Patsy turns up at the flat that evening with two obnoxious boyfriends and proceeds to make herself at home. Fortunately, the owners have gone out for evening, so Thelma plays on, but things accelerate into farce as she must cover up the chaos caused by the visitors and try to get rid of them before the real owners return. 'TOP FLAT' is a great character-based situation comedy and is a winner from start to finish.



Thelma Todd and Patsy Kelly play Double Solitaire between camera shots on the Hal Roach lot

However, while great shorts like these did continue to pop up, they were becoming the exception rather than the norm. From late 1934 onward, there really did start to be a winding down in the series. 'BUM VOYAGE' pits the girls against a gorilla with less than glorious results. Such hackneyed devices are poor substitutes



indeed for genuine character comedy. (Incidentally, it's surely significant that Laurel and Hardy's weaker shorts, like 'MURDER CASE' or 'THE CHIMP' resort to similar devices).

Generally, a cobbled-together feel started to take over as Roach looked toward features. Just look at the ever-changing directors for the series, for instance: relative unknowns like Nick Grinde; random Roach employees like editor William Terhune thrown a directing bone. It's clear that "anything goes" was becoming the policy for the once meticulously supervised series.

Even with a good director, the scripts could seem slapdash. James W Horne directed some of the best L & H shorts, but 'HOT MONEY' has hardly a single laugh. This tale of a gang murder and some stolen money left in the girls' room is just too morbid, and there aren't enough gags to cover up the foreboding atmosphere. Part of this is certainly hindsight; Thelma Todd's ultimately fatal involvement with the mob would catch up with her just a month after the short's release.

Much has been written about Todd's death in December 1935. Ruled as accidental carbon monoxide poisoning, it is now generally considered a well-covered mob hit. It's not the place to speculate here; all that need be said is that simply a talented, beautiful actress was taken away from us far too soon. Although the last few shorts had shown a falling off in quality, her performances were sparkling to the last. Rest in peace, Thelma.

* * *

The passing of Thelma Todd very likely obliterated Roach's already flagging enthusiasm for the series. Nevertheless, there were still 3 shorts to be delivered under contract, so the studio made do and mended. Patsy was given a new partner for a try-out, Pert Kelton. Their short together, PAN HANDLERS, features them selling pots and pans door-to-door. Given the cobbled-together circumstances, it's a pretty fun short, but Kelton was a very similar comedian to Patsy, brash and wisecracking. There just wasn't enough contrast between the two to justify any long term pairing.

A better match was Patsy's next partner, Lyda Roberti. Polish Lyda was sort of an attractive, dizzy update on Zasu Pitts. Blonde, foreign and easily confused, she made a great foil, enabling Patsy to play the straight role, with plenty of opportunities for wisecracks and asides. It's a shame that their two shorts together, 'HILL TILLIES' and 'AT SEA ASHORE' give every appearance of being exactly what they were: fulfilment of a contract and nothing else. With better material, they could have been quite entertaining.

However, the pairing was strong enough to merit a feature 'NOBODY'S BABY'. Patsy fit right into Roach's plans to meet the world of 30s screwball films head on. He had already starred her in 'KELLY THE SECOND' with Charley Chase, and 'NOBODY'S BABY' was an attempt to fit the female comedy team idea into features. Featuring Patsy and Lyda as nurses who end up taking care of a baby, it wasn't a world beater, but certainly better than their shorts.

Although not teamed in this sense again, Patsy and Lyda next appeared together in 'PICK A STAR', a pleasant, mildly funny film now most famous for its guest appearances by Laurel and Hardy. Any hopes for a continued partnership would again be scotched by tragedy, as Lyda Roberti too died horribly young, of heart disease.

Patsy would remain a regular Roach face over the next few years, never quite achieving the breakthrough stardom that Roach hoped for her, but adding a nice snappy zest to the mild late features made by the studio, such as 'THERE GOES MY HEART' and 'ROAD SHOW'. In 1941 she appeared in a Roach film, 'BROADWAY LIMITED', sharing comedy scenes with, of all people, Zasu Pitts! The female comedy teams had come full circle at Hal Roach studios, and this was a fitting end. As for Patsy Kelly, she had been alternating her Roach appearances with other in-character roles, such as the excellent 'EVER SINCE EVE', with Marion Davies. As the 1940s wore on, she fell out of the limelight, but later reappeared in small parts in some high profile films, such as 'ROSEMARY'S BABY' and 'FREAKY FRIDAY'.

The experiments with female comedy teams had produced some really interesting results at Hal Roach studios, especially in the sound era. A female comedy team proved a fragile thing to sustain effectively, though. Scripts and direction well suited to the special talents of these funny women could often prove elusive, especially in an environment dominated by male slapstick. However, when things were going well, they went *really* well, and there are at least 10 films from this group that stand as some of the most charming and watchable shorts made at Roach. Regardless of material, the stars always shined. At a time when few studios really allowed women a leading role in comedy, these films were a very forward-looking idea. Thelma Todd, Zasu Pitts and Patsy Kelly had warmth and humanity that make the best of these films still stand up well today.

Thelma Todd's Travels

As well as her achievements at Hal Roach, Thelma Todd was hired out to enhance many other comedies and dramas. Here are some of the best of these appearances...

SPEAK EASILY

Buster Keaton considered this 1932 film the best of his MGM features. Thelma plays a bad girl trying to take advantage of innocent Keaton's fortune. She ends up trying to get him drunk by mixing a 'Thomas Collins', and the two end up plastered in a variant of Keaton's famous 'putting the drunk woman to bed' routine.



BROADMINDED

Joe E Brown is chiefly remembered today for his role as Osgood Fielding in 'SOME LIKE IT HOT'. Almost 30 years earlier, he starred in a popular series of comedy features. 'BROADMINDED' is a middling comedy with Brown playing a playboy type not unlike a younger version of his most famous character. Thelma is on hand in another vamp-type role, but the oddest cast member has to be Bela Lugosi, playing a *Brazilian* heavy!!



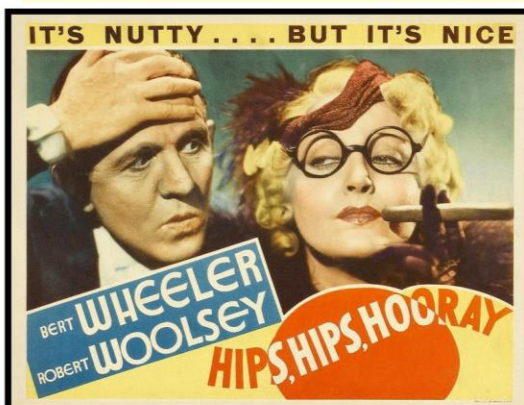
'MONKEY BUSINESS' and 'HORSE FEATHERS'

Two of Thelma's best, and best-remembered, appearances away from Roach were with the Marx Brothers. Her ability to handle physical comedy was a plus for working with Harpo, and her looks made her ideal material for some Groucho lechery! One of the highlights of 'HORSE FEATHERS' is the sequence where all 4 Marx Brothers (yes, even Zeppo) turn up to serenade her. Chico's attempt is of course on the piano, which he disguises as a singing lesson when her boyfriend shows up. This sets up one of the all-time classic Chico puns...

CHICO: You sing good, eh?

THELMA: Yes, I have a falsetto voice.

CHICO: At's-a funny, my last pupil, she had a false set o' teeth!



'HIPS, HIPS, HOORAY' and 'COCKEYED CAVALIERS'

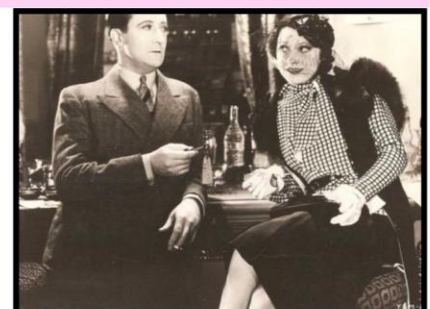
Wheeler and Woolsey were certainly influenced by the Marx Brothers in their films, especially when they inherited Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby as writers. They also followed in using Thelma in some of their films after her success opposite the Marxes. Her appearances in a pair of W & W films helped to make them two of their best.

'COCKEYED CAVALIERS' is a fantastic period comedy, giving Thelma a role reminiscent of her part in L & H's 'FRA DIAVOLO'.

'HIPS, HIPS, HOORAY', often cited as the best W & W vehicle, sees Thelma promoting her beauty business, with help/hinderance from W & W.

'YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU'

One of Thelma's most unusual appearances was in a British comedy of 1934. She was accompanying Hal Roach on a promotional junket and, whilst there, found time to appear in this feature. 'YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU' stars Stanley Lupino (father of Ida, cousin of Lupino Lane) and was directed by former silent comic Monty Banks. A witty, modernized update of Shakespeare's 'TAMING OF THE SHREW', it has won praise at a few recent showings.



"...And this is my friend MR LAUREL"

A review of a new play...

Actor Jeffrey Holland, best known for his roles in English sitcoms 'HI-DE-HI', 'YOURANG, M'LORD' and 'OH, DR BEECHING', recently debuted a new one-man play in which he plays Stan Laurel. Mr Holland has long been public in his admiration of L & H, and bears something of a resemblance to the great Mr L, making him an ideal candidate for the role. Indeed, one episode of 'HI-DE-HI' saw him playing Stan to Paul Shane's Ollie.

Written by Gail Louw and Holland, 'MR LAUREL' initially played a short run at The Gatehouse Theatre in Highgate, London. The one-act show takes the familiar tack of Stan visiting an ailing Babe Hardy during his final illness. Seen most recently in Neil Brand's drama 'STAN', the new piece nevertheless manages to add some new ideas and emotional depths of its own, whilst meticulously striving for accuracy (The earlier show took a few, er, creative liberties in the name of drama).

As this is a one-man show, an empty bed substitutes for Babe while 'Stan' soliloquizes on a variety of memories, and looks to an uncertain future. As one would expect, given the setting, mortality looms large in Stan's monologues. A new spin on this is given by reflection on the early death of his own mother (when Stan was 18), and, especially, his 9-day old son Stan Jr. A facet of Stan's life often overlooked in emotional significance, this addition caught us off guard, and, in many ways was the most touching aspect of the whole play.

The reflections on life, death and his marriages are kept accurate and in-character, especially aided by a peppering of genuine Laurel quotes on many of these subjects. This did give a big boost to convincing the audience that they could have been listening to the real Mr Laurel. Also like the real Mr Laurel, Holland's Stan didn't stay serious for too long at a time. Like the real Stan surely did in such situations, he subtly horsed around in his attempts to cheer himself and Babe up. Sometimes, he lapsed into L & H dialogue routines to entertain 'Babe'; at other times, these were asides inserted as a sort of verbal freeze-frame, providing comic counterpoint to the weighty matters at hand.

In these asides, 'Stan' would don a bowler hat and be spotlighted, a simple but effective way of distinguishing between the real Stan Laurel and the Stanley character. I've also got to give special praise to Jeffrey Holland's tackling of the distinctive SL voice. Always a nettle for impersonators to grasp, his flat Anglo-American accent proves no match for Jeffrey Holland, who has all the vocal inflections down perfectly. Dick van Dyke, Larry Harmon and Roy Castle, et al never quite got it, but Mr Holland has it down pat. His facial expressions are also excellent.

Another real highlight was the focus on Stan's continued creation of new gags for the pair, even when there was no hope of another film. 'MR LAUREL' picks on some of the unused gags collected in 'THE COMEDY WORLD OF STAN LAUREL' book, and extrapolates them nicely. It got me thinking, a nice idea for a similar play would be following Stan in the 60s, perhaps going about his daily business, but unable to stop creating and acting out gags while he does so.

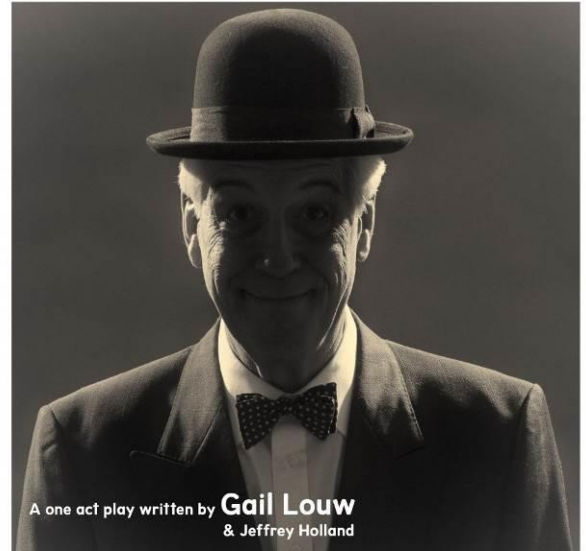
All in all, this was a great show. Jeffrey Holland's respect and admiration come beaming through; that, coupled with his excellent impersonation and the mix of comedy and pathos, make this a really worthwhile show. There are currently plans for more appearances, so do make sure you catch it if it comes near you!

The Finishing Touch Company presents

Jeffrey Holland in

...and this is my friend

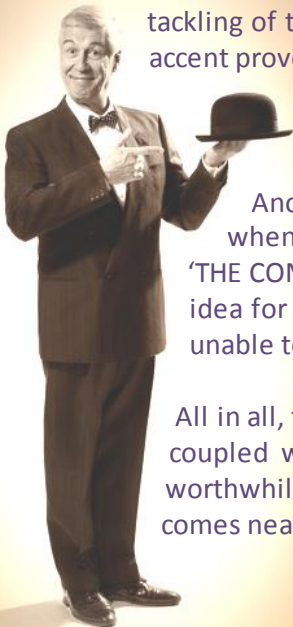
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LLOYD HAMILTON



Searching for Silent Comedy's Lost Soul

"Ham Hamilton was one of the funniest men in pictures" – Buster Keaton

"Lloyd Hamilton had it. Comic Motion. He could walk across the screen and apparently do nothing but just make you laugh" – Mack Sennett

"He would ask himself, "How would Ham Hamilton play this?"" – Billy Gilbert, on Charley Chase.

Lloyd Hamilton was a comedian's comedian. Popular with the public, his peers and the critics, he was inventive and influential. In fact, he was reportedly described by Chaplin as "the one actor I am jealous of". Yet, despite being all these things, Lloyd Hamilton is also forgotten. Go figure.

On the surface, it seems extremely odd that a performer so revered could become so neglected. Why are his films not shown, his name not mentioned by all but the staunchest silent comedy buffs? Well, unfortunately, to sing Lloyd Hamilton's praises is to immediately start with a disclaimer. A dismaying chunk of his filmography is nowhere to be seen. Of the existing films, many are disappointing examples from the bookends of his career: early films before he developed his style, or from later in life, when his work was marred by personal problems and weak material. Between these extremes, though, lay the magic so vividly described in contemporary sources. Thankfully, there *are* scattered fragments left of this for us to enjoy, but nonetheless we are left with the pieces of a detective puzzle: just what is it that made Lloyd Hamilton so special?

Perhaps the key to his appeal in his day, and his strongest claim to an enduring greatness, is his unique approach to his work. Certainly, this goes a good way to explaining his popularity as a "comedian's comedian". For Hamilton owed very little to Chaplin at a time when most others did, certainly nothing to Harold Lloyd's cheery optimism. Although he shared similarities with Keaton, Hamilton went far darker than Buster, greeting his misfortunes with despair rather than stoicism.

It is surely significant that the most relevant comparisons are to performers who achieved their greatness *after* Hamilton had peaked. Only Oliver Hardy would suffer as continually; only W.C. Fields could present such a negative worldview and still be likeable. When Robert Youngson described Charley Chase's screen life as "one long, embarrassing moment" he could have easily been referring to Hamilton. Chase might have possessed more debonair equipment, but he had explicitly considered Hamilton when forming his approach to his films, and was the first to admit the influence

The eventual unique Hamilton formula was some years in the making. Born in California in 1891, Lloyd Vernon Hamilton had initially sought a career in repertory theatre. He subsequently showed an interest in directing, and then acting in, the nascent motion picture industry. His earliest big performing successes were at Kalem studios, where he formed half of the 'Ham & Bud' comic team with tiny Bud Duncan. Ham and Bud were essentially a pair of vicious tramps, totally lacking in audience sympathy. Worse, Hamilton, later known for his exquisite facial reactions, wears a behemoth moustache that totally obscures them all! Hamilton later looked back on these early films dismissively, calling them "very crude". He wasn't joking. A typical example of these films is 'HAM AMONG THE REDSKINS', in which they decide to go beat up some Native Americans. Feeling a little rusty on their ethnocentric psychopathy, they first capture a small child and practice beating him with their clubs... It's fairly safe to assume that this isn't the film that earned Chaplin's admiration; even his roughest Keystones pale in comparison! He had, of course, long moved past this kind of thing, and it's instructive to note the Ham and Bud



Hamilton in his 'Ham & Bud' make up, and a rare shot out of character.



approach to a situation versus the Chaplin approach. Both Chaplin's 'THE PAWNSHOP' (1916) and Ham & Bud's 'A FLYER IN FLAPJACKS' (1917) contain a scene detailing the sale of an alarm clock. From this simple premise, Chaplin fashions a pantomimic tour de force; all Ham and Bud can manage is to start a fight over the clock.

Hamilton was clearly looking to spread his wings, and in 1917 jumped ship to LKO, beginning an unfortunate habit of working for studios whose films have now vanished. In the few films that survive from this period, like recent discovery 'HIS MUSICAL SNEEZE', one can see the beginnings of a more distinctive style emerging. Gone is the huge moustache, revealing a round, baby face. This means that Hamilton can now start to react to things, and accordingly there is more space in the films for him to do this.

In 1920, Hamilton began his own unit at the newly founded Educational Pictures, working alongside director Jack White. Educational Studios would remain Hamilton's home for the next decade, and it is here that he really built his reputation. His 'Mermaid Comedies' gave him chance to really crystallise his character, working alongside craftsmen like White, Charley Chase and future director Archie Mayo. Beginning with 'DUCK INN', the series continued the focus on a more innocent, hapless character. 'APRIL FOOL', directed by Chase, has him suffering a barrage of practical jokes, edging toward the eventual Hamilton formula. Gradually, the process described by Walter Kerr as "an outline becoming a character" began to take shape, as Hamilton's natural equipment suggested deeper possibilities.

The baby face had already suggested innocence. Now, the tubby physique stuffed into slightly -too-small clothes created a sense of shabby dignity. Hamilton also added an ill-fitting chequered cap that sits atop his head like a pancake, its balancing act seeming to mirror his teeter-totter walk; this prissy way of walking was actually the result of a leg injury, but added greatly to the character. Like Chaplin's tramp, Ham carried himself with high dignity totally unmerited by his lowly status. Unlike Chaplin's tramp, who (in his earlier films, at least) usually comes out on top, Ham is merely setting himself up for a fall. As these elements of a character coalesced, the "real" Lloyd Hamilton emerged, as a sort of overgrown mummy's boy, naively carrying his sense of self-importance headlong into disaster.

In his 1921-22 series of films, Hamilton really established this character, with critics sitting up and taking notice from the first release, 'ROBINSON CRUSOE, LTD'. Frustratingly lost, this would be used as the yardstick to measure Hamilton's comedies by for years to come. The very next release from the series, 'THE VAGRANT', is extant however, and is Hamilton's earliest surviving masterpiece. Virtually plotless, the key elements are Hamilton being constantly shoved around by a harsh world and moved along by a suspicious cop. It might not sound much, but the gags come thick and fast, leaving the viewer breathless with laughter. Perhaps the most representative gag is a moment where Hamilton finds himself with one foot on a jetty, and the other on a boat drifting further from the quay. A simple gag used elsewhere by Buster Keaton and Lupino Lane, Hamilton makes it his own. While he is swaying perilously, a man appears, observes his plight, and runs off in panic. A moment later, he returns, not with any sort of assistance but with his camera. Imploring Hamilton to "hold that pose!", he snaps a photo and walks off, satisfied, as Hamilton takes a dip.



Right: The Hamilton equipment; toffee apple physique, prissy expression, too-tight clothes and checkered cap.

Below, left to right: Disgust! Disdain! Outrage! Hurt dignity! Just a sampling from Ham's great arsenal of facial expressions.





Lane and Keaton would employ this gag for suspense and to showcase their acrobatics. Hamilton shifts the focus from the thrill or the splash to how the world reacts to it, and in doing so makes the gag his own. He had found his style.

Consider these similar gag instances, for instance:

- 1) Superstitious Ham sees a black cat sat in his path. He decides to decoy it out of the way with a saucer of milk. Suddenly, from nowhere, he is showered with about 50 more black cats.
- 2) Ham needs to tie his shoelace. Spying an ashcan to rest his foot on, he is constantly prevented from reaching it by pushy passers-by. When he finally makes it to the ashcan, the refuse men arrive to haul it away. Ham sits on the back of their street-cleaning truck and is sprayed by water.
- 3) Dressing for work, Ham's jacket is too tight, and the buttons pop off. Bending to pick them up, his sleeve becomes detached and falls off. Flinging it in the bin in disgust, the rest of his jacket sleeve goes with it.

The key theme here is the methodical, almost gleeful, destruction of Ham's dignity by hostile strangers, animals and even inanimate objects! While the situations are funny in themselves, what really makes them hilarious is Hamilton's reaction comedy. That baby face would be soured by some side-splitting looks of disdain, disgust and hurt pride. Like Oliver Hardy, Hamilton turns a pratfall or pie in the face into high comedy by simple little gestures; a slow-burn glare and roll of the eyes, a twiddle of the fingers and a dignified waddle away from the scene. In his best films, he doesn't even need gags as such, just a selection of misfortunes to gang up on him. He does the rest.

Such humour hinted at an underlying despair, and there was underlying tragicomic quality to the Hamilton Comedies. This was reflected in the titles of the shorts; 'LONESOME', 'CRUSHED', 'NOTHING MATTERS' and 'NO LUCK' sound more like works by Kafka than silent comedy laugh riots! Lloyd trod the fine line between humour and pathos brilliantly, winning increasing acclaim for his unique approach.

Sadly, the fertile creative period heralded by 'THE VAGRANT' is the greatest gap in the Lloyd Hamilton filmography. Just as he hit his stride, producing work critically revered and hugely popular with audiences, the films disappear. These years were the source of classic two-reelers that became yardsticks in his career; his later films would often be judged against films like 'POOR BOY', 'ROLLING STONES' or, especially, 'ROBINSON CRUSOE, LTD'.

Missing scenes from Lloyd Hamilton's film career.

From top: Hired to teach table manners to burly Dick Sutherland in 'KILLING TIME'; with child actor Robert De Vilbiss in 'ROLLING STONES'; an action-packed moment from 'THE SPEEDER'; facing adversity in 'LONESOME'; receiving unwanted attention in 'MY FRIEND'.

All of these short films are lost.

While we can no longer enjoy these films, it is clear from reviews that they must have been very funny indeed, as well as continuing Hamilton's idiosyncratic approach. 'THE OPTIMIST' was an elaborate parody of the pilgrim fathers; 'THE ADVISOR' featured him giving counsel to a selection of former US presidents! 'POOR BOY' was one of the few silent comedies to make humour from church-going, which was quite daring at the time, really. (I've collated details on some of the most interesting missing films at the end of the article).



Hamilton's standing as a truly great comic really does rest on these films, so it is difficult to assess him fairly. However, if his later great comedies really do pale in comparison to these earlier shorts, then the loss is nothing short of tragic. Happily, films start resurfacing in 1924. 'JONAH JONES' is a fun short featuring his romance with tubby Babe London. Even better is 'CAREFUL PLEASE', which begins almost as Lloyd Hamilton's version of 'EASY STREET'. We are introduced to a dead-end street, where "the people are so tough they pour maple syrup on stove lids and eat them for hot-cakes". Chief amongst these is the burly Dick Sutherland. Enter Hamilton as a debt collector coming to repossess Sutherland's furniture. The master of the house is out when Lloyd arrives, but he does encounter the harridan Mrs Sutherland, and their baby son, who sits in his highchair sharpening a razor! With his customary officiousness, Lloyd begins removing the furniture by hurling it out into the street below. Enter Mr Sutherland, who looks less than pleased. Without saying anything or missing a beat, Hamilton turns and begins returning all the battered furniture. On the rough street, Ham discovers a kidnapped heiress and affects a rescue; in gratitude he is invited home for tea. This consists of sardine sandwiches, but unfortunately, the sardines keep falling out into his lap. Hamilton is unaware of this until he comes the subject of some unremitting feline attention. This is the comedy highlight of the film, giving Hamilton full reign to his facial reactions. (This routine was such an ideal showcase that he used variants many times, with a menagerie of animals; he is bothered by butterflies in 'HIS DARKER SELF', deluged with dogs in 'MY FRIEND' and succumbs to a squirrel in 'HOOKED'. Is it fanciful to suggest that Chaplin's inspiration for the scene with the monkeys in 'THE CIRCUS' could have been Hamilton's animal adventures?)



Mid-period Hamilton shorts continued his winning streak. From top; With Dick Sutherland in 'CAREFUL PLEASE'; A scene from 'WAITING'; In cameo as himself in Lige Conley's 'HELLO HOLLYWOOD'.

More broadly, the fish-out-of-water setting of 'CAREFUL PLEASE' was also a good match for Hamilton's comedy. Another 1924 film, 'GOOD MORNING', sees him invited to officiate at a local bazaar after rescuing the townsfolk from a bear! Trying to fit in and act the dignified host, his efforts meet failure at every turn. Highlights are his trying to sing in a quartet whilst suffering from hiccups, and a literal slow-burn scene as he gives a speech, becoming increasingly aware that his jacket has caught fire. In 'THE MOVIES', hick Ham ends up crashing a film set. The short has the intriguing prospect of Hamilton playing his usual character and himself; when the real Lloyd Hamilton injures himself, the 'other' Lloyd is enlisted to complete his film, with predictably disastrous results. 'THE MOVIES' was one of three Hamilton silent directed by Roscoe Arbuckle, a partnership that seemed to work successfully.



While many of these films have somewhat convoluted plots on paper, this is usually just an excuse to knit together as many extended sequences for Hamilton as possible. A case in point is 1925's 'CRUSHED'. The story is a patchwork quilt, beginning with Hamilton as a small-town inventor who has invented an anti-mosquito device. This is then completely forgotten as he goes to the city to collect an inheritance; however, he must be married to claim it and ends up betrothed to the Amazonian Blanche Payson. There's enough plot for three two-reelers, but no matter. All this is just an excuse for the central sequences of 'CRUSHED', namely Hamilton's misadventures on the New York Subway.

On his initial journey to the wedding, he is pushed from pillar to post on the heaving carriage, giving him full reign to his hurt pride. After the wedding he revisits and expands the sequence; having been sent shopping by his new spouse, Ham now returns laden with goods. How to make things even more difficult for him? Throw in a live duck amongst his shopping, naturally! This sequence is one of the best in all Hamilton's surviving work, as his troubles multiply and an ensemble of fellow commuters gradually become embroiled.

Shortly after 'CRUSHED' was filmed, Harold Lloyd would include a similar sequence with a turkey on a streetcar. This celebrated episode is excellent, but Lloyd's version is just as good. There is also a bizarrely funny topper to the sequence. The duck eventually escapes from the subway on to the streets, with Ham in pursuit. It seeks refuge beneath the voluminous skirt of a girthy woman. Lloyd's solution is ingenious, if bizarre: he chews gum and throws it onto the pavement in front of the woman. As she passes over, the duck is left behind stuck to the gum!

The schizophrenic plot of 'CRUSHED' matters not one whit when Lloyd is given such high quality comedy sequences. In fact, many of his best films don't even bother with such elaborate framing stories, merely getting straight down to such extended gag sequences. All Lloyd Hamilton really needed to make a classic film was to have a really *really* bad day. 'MOVE ALONG' has no plot at all, and has come to be considered the archetypal Lloyd Hamilton comedy. Again a hungry tramp, Hamilton is constantly moved along, first in his attempts to tie his shoe, and then as he moons around in search of food. Walter Kerr justly celebrated the scene where Hamilton wistfully watches a man eat from the wrong side of a restaurant window. Absorbed in the man's food, he begins to mime eating the meal and share the man's enjoyment. He becomes so engrossed that he fails to notice when a tray piled high food somehow transfers itself from a passing waiter's hand to the top of his head. Hamilton goes on looking longingly as the mistake is corrected, totally unaware of the free meal opportunity.

Returning home, Hamilton is moved on again when the landlady throws him out. Carting his possessions along, he sets up home in the street, with a shop front awning as the roof over his head. When a blizzard begins, he constructs a makeshift igloo around his home, enacting a 'GOLD RUSH'-esque scene where he eats an imaginary dinner, substituting a discarded rose for an artichoke. He awakes in his bed on the street to find it has been a dream and he is, once again, moved along by the cop.

'NOBODY'S BUSINESS' has only slightly more story; Lloyd prepares for work at his lunch wagon, endures a crowded commute on the streetcar and serves customers, ending with disaster when his wagon plunges into the sea. Here, the highlight is again an unpleasant journey on public transport. This time, we are on a crowded streetcar, and Lloyd is trying to read a letter from his family. Gradually he becomes aware that a group of passengers are reading the letter over his shoulder, his aggravation growing as they become more intrusive, asking him questions and demanding he pause before turning the page as they haven't finished reading yet! It's another one of those Hamilton scenes that plays much funnier than it reads due to his brilliant reactions, but it is excellent indeed.

These fantastic shorts were hugely popular with critics and the public alike, and by the mid-20s it seemed likely that Hamilton might be the next comedian to make the jump to feature-length films. His big break came in 1924 as replacement for Al Jolson, of all people. D.W. Griffith was planning a minstrel film featuring Jolson, who was of course the king of this act at the time. When Jolson baulked, Hamilton was chosen to appear in the film. However, soon after, Griffith's enthusiasm waned and he quietly exited the project. Hamilton did his best to mould the film into his own idiom, but it had been sold on blackface shtick that simply wasn't his forte. Of



*Top: With Buster Keaton and Lew Cody. Keaton was a big fan.
Middle: Travels with duck in 'CRUSHED'
Perpetually on the outside in 'MOVE ALONG'.*

course, this material doesn't stand up well today either, especially under the wince-inducing release title, 'HIS DARKER SELF'. The surviving two-reel abridgement does have some good gags, but doesn't approach his shorts in quality. One reviewer seemed to speak for most when he said "Hamilton's performance proves that Jolson should have done it".

Hamilton got a second chance with his appearance in a First National feature. Unlike his first effort, this wasn't a second-hand, cast-off script and Lloyd's hopes were higher. He would, however, be co-starring with child star Ben Alexander. Bearing a typically pessimistic Hamilton title, 'A SELF MADE FAILURE' was the story of drifters Ham and Ben, who end up in a small town. Hamilton is persuaded to pose as a doctor at a health spa, and the two end up helping an old woman at the mercy of mortgage brokers.

We can't judge how effective the film was, as (all together now) no copies are known to exist. 'A SELF MADE FAILURE' certainly got excellent reviews, but this didn't translate to especially good box-office. Nor did this necessarily make the film a good showcase for Hamilton. For one thing, he was hampered by a rigorous script. In his Hamilton biography, Antony Balducci analyses the existing script and notes that there aren't even that many comedy scenes for Lloyd to play, with more of the content being saved for maudlin drama. Although Hamilton undoubtedly made the most of the opportunities he had (and let's not forget that a printed script could hardly capture the full effect of his subtle reaction comedy), the fact is that it just wasn't enough. Chaplin, Keaton and Harold Lloyd had entered features with a bang from their first efforts; Hamilton had two damp squibs behind him and his chances were waning. Mr Balducci notes further that, at the same time, Harry Langdon was rising, and about to usurp Hamilton as the next big thing in comedy features.



Hamilton discovers 'HIS DARKER SELF'.

It was back to shorts with a heavy heart, and this is really where Hamilton's upward rise starts to plateau out. Ironically, this is also the point where his films start to reappear for our viewing in large numbers. Initially, there is no loss in quality, the aforementioned 'NOBODY'S BUSINESS' and 'MOVE ALONG' dating from this time. However, looking a little deeper, we can see that 'MOVE ALONG' reworks many of 'THE VAGRANT's earlier themes; another 1926 film, 'NOTHING MATTERS' reworked the same film's climax. 'AT EASE' and 'JOLLY TARS' warmed over standard military comedy. It's clear that, while still making some very funny films, the drive to innovate was starting to go out of Hamilton's career. The 1926 films would be his last real classics, and in 1927 the decline really sets in. 'BREEZING ALONG' is perhaps the most widely available of all Hamilton's shorts; it's also one of the very weakest. It has him working that old clichéd routine, hoovering a room and accidentally sucking up a dog's fur. Few of the other gags are better, and this is certainly no way to begin your appreciation of Lloyd Hamilton.

'SOMEBODY'S FAULT' is only a slight improvement. One review noted that "kudos should go the special effects men for supplying most of the humour in Lloyd Hamilton's latest comedy". That's because much of the savage 'humour' comes from the effects of him being electrocuted. Hardly vintage comedy, really. Not all of these later films were *bad* as such. 'BLAZING AWAY' is a fun little comedy concerning the rivalry between taxi drivers Lloyd and Kewpie Morgan; this extends from the taxi ranks to their participation in a football game. There are some elaborate, well-done gags, such as Hamilton's cab splitting in two during his journey, and the back half overtaking his portion (later seen as the finale of Disney's 'THE LOVE BUG'). The problem is that almost all the comedy comes from the gags, not from personality or reaction. Furthermore some of them are just too contrived; there happens to be an ostrich in a pen right next to the football ground, with the inevitable result that an egg is substituted for the ball. *Really?* It's hard to believe that is a comedy starring a man who once said "if mechanical gags take over, the comedian becomes a mere automaton". While 'BLAZING AWAY' is a slickly made, funny comedy, the special ingredient that



By 1927 Hamilton was abandoning his trademark costume, as seen in this triptych of stills from 'HERE COMES CHARLIE'

made Lloyd Hamilton stand apart is almost gone. It didn't go unnoticed. Reviewing 'ALMOST A GENTLEMAN' (1928), Motion Picture News' Raymond Ganly opened with "Remember how good Lloyd Hamilton used to be? Weep when you see him in this one".

The decline in quality was also being noticed by Educational Pictures. Once the company's brightest star, Hamilton was now slipping further down the list in their trade advertisements. Most of the big guns now went to promoting the more consistent Lupino Lane, and even the 'Big Boy' kid comedies were nipping at his heels.

Part of the trouble undoubtedly lies in Hamilton's disillusionment with the way his career was going. Previously, his shorts had been an entrée to appearing in features; now they were more of a grind, if anything a step down. His troubled private life was playing a part too. Beset by marriage troubles for some years, Hamilton had always been a heavy drinker. This began to affect his work, and as work became more unsatisfying, vice versa. It was a vicious cycle, leading him into trouble. Scandals around his alcoholism, women trouble and an (innocent) connection to a speakeasy murder piled up. In 1928 Hamilton was given a year's ban from appearing in films by the excessively moral screen authorities. His alcoholism worsened, and incredibly, he became homeless. Found unconscious one day, he was carried into a health club and gradually began a climb back to sobriety.



Hamilton's talkie comeback was with some fanfare.



Contemplating the use of some bad eggs in 'PRIZE PUPPIES'.

By the time his year-long ban was over, he was fit and healthy again. In the meantime, sound had arrived too, giving a double impetus to his comeback. Old friend Marshall Neilan gave him a part in feature 'BLACK WATERS', and there was also a role in Warner Brothers' 'THE SHOW OF SHOWS', appearing alongside Ben Turpin, Lupino Lane, Bert Roach and Lee Moran. Educational also welcomed him back, in a new series of sound shorts, promoted with great fanfare.

The available Hamilton talkies are not bad at all, certainly better than his last mediocre silents. However, on the whole they didn't live up to his classic films; something of the spark seemed to have gone during his absence. There were certainly flashes of inspiration showcasing the old Hamilton genius, however. 'PRIZE PUPPIES' begins with a priceless scene, as Hamilton attempts to prepare himself breakfast whilst his neighbours practise an array of hideous musical talents. Here, we get a full dose of the classic Hamilton reactions of old, mixed in with some great gags as he finds ways to silence the budding musicians.

Hamilton's later Educational talkies are hard to see, but sound like they have some very intriguing and promising setups. This is especially true of a handful directed by Roscoe Arbuckle; 'MARRIAGE ROWS' has him in a love triangle with Al St John as the other man, while 'UP A TREE' sees Hamilton taking up residence in a treehouse in protest at his wife's treatment of him!

In 1932, Hamilton began a series for Universal, and amongst these was a remake of his hallmark film, 'ROBINSON CRUSOE & SON'. Sadly, the remake, like the original, doesn't seem to be around in complete form. The Universal shorts were apparently a step down in quality and Hamilton's initial rejuvenation at the dawn of the sound era was beginning to wear thin. The twin spectres of bad luck and alcoholism once more appeared to taunt him; drunkenly stumbling down the highway, he was hit by a car and broke a leg. During his recovery, he apparently stumbled out of bed and... broke his other leg! The tragicomedy of his screen career began to blur perilously with real life.

His alcohol problems continuing to worsen, Hamilton began to run out of chances, his reputation becoming entrenched as "unreliable". Hal Roach considered hiring him, but had enough tippling stars with Stan Laurel and Charley Chase, and couldn't face another! A shame, as Hamilton's character comedy was a great match for the Roach studios. Ironically, it would be Roach's rival Mack Sennett who came to Hamilton's aid, signing him for a



Domestic bliss with Marjorie Beebe in 'TOO MANY HIGHBALLS', Lloyd's last great film.

day (Fields day?) in 'TOO MANY HIGHBALLS'.

It's a pitch-black comedy that meshes beautifully with Hamilton's own dark style. Ham is fed up with his freeloading brother-in-law (Tom Dugan). He's especially miffed at Tom always drinking his best whisky, and replaces it with castor oil. Thinking he's been poisoned by Lloyd, Tom calls the police and summons relatives. Meanwhile, Lloyd gets the tip-off of a sure thing at the dog-track from a friend. To arrange for him to miss work, the friend telephones Ham's boss, claiming that Hamilton's mother-in-law has just died. Of course, the news spreads and soon wreaths are arriving for the mother-in-law at the family home. Ham returns home, having of course lost his money, to find himself accused of not only poisoning his brother-in-law, but of plotting to make mother-in-law next! All works out happily in the end in this slickly plotted and made comedy. It really is a winner throughout, giving Lloyd plenty of opportunities for reaction comedy, and time for some great gag sequences amongst the situation comedy. Best of all is a routine that Fields later recycled for 'THE MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE' (and Bruckman later recycled for Keaton's 'NOTHING BUT PLEASURE'). Ham has parked his car, but upon returning to it, finds that he has been wedged in the space by cars on either side. He becomes so engrossed in trying to edge his way out of the narrow space that he totally fails to realise when the car behind moves off. Puzzled by the shuffling movements of Hamilton's car in the now empty space, a cop points out his error. Finally seeing the obstacle removed, Hamilton launches his car backwards...just as another car enters the space. Crunch.

'TOO MANY HIGHBALLS' is a fantastic short all round, but it was to be Hamilton's last starring film. The bottle was catching up with him, and he announced his retirement on health grounds. He would return to the screen for a few small, supporting roles, shadows of his former glory, opposite Andy Clyde and Billy Bevan.

His last appearance was in late 1934, in 'STAR NIGHT AT THE COCANUT GROVE'. Hamilton appears right at the tail-end of this Technicolor extravaganza, playing, of all things, a Hawaiian king. Someone behind the scenes must have been an old friend, as Lloyd isn't in any shape to be performing. Truth be told, he doesn't really perform at all. Looking painfully thin, he sits in front of some hula dancers, happily manipulating a marionette and smoking a cigar; he doesn't really seem aware of where he is. Then in long shot, he sways awkwardly to the music as the scene fades out. It's a tragic end for a performer who could once provoke gales of laughter from the tiniest carefully considered gestures.

A few months later, the end came with a stomach haemorrhage. Lloyd Hamilton died on January 8th, 1935, aged just 43. To make matters worse, the ill fortune that had dogged him in life continued in death. A vault fire in the late 1930s resulted in the loss of most of his classic silent films. Long dead by the silent comedy revivals of the 1950s, neither Hamilton nor his films were around to stake his claim on greatness as the history of the era was rewritten. Only recently have the flawed but brilliant remains of this idiosyncratic funnyman's career been given more consideration. Even in their tattered, tawdry and piecemeal condition, these remnants show flickers of true brilliance. Seek out what you can of Lloyd Hamilton and enjoy it; he was a true original and the praise by his peers was well-earned.

handful of shorts. Though late in his career, these two-reelers are some of Hamilton's best work in sound films. 'DOUBLING IN THE QUICKIES' is an amusing spoof of the movie industry, with Hamilton as sweetheart/would-be agent to budding starlet Marjorie Beebe. Marjorie thinks she has been hired as an actress, but is actually wanted as a double for the real star, forcing her to be subjected to all sorts of indignifying stunts. Hamilton shows real charm in his part, amazing considering the messy state of his life at the time.

His best opportunity at Sennett came by chance. W.C. Fields had been planning a new short for Sennett before disagreements with the studio led him to leave. Sennett held on to the scenario, re-fashioning it slightly for Hamilton. Inheriting some great material from Fields that fitted his character nicely, not to mention a great director in Clyde Bruckman, Hamilton has a field



The emaciated Hamilton of 'STAR NIGHT AT THE COCANUT GROVE' bore little resemblance to his sparkling 1920s self.

**MISSING
IN ACTION**

A LLOYD HAMILTON SPECIAL

Below you'll find details of some of Hamilton's most high-profile and frustrating missing films. The saddest thing is that these films represent just a fraction of his lost work. Could some of these be lurking out there, somewhere...?

ROBINSON CRUSOE, LTD (1921)

The most frustrating of all Hamilton's missing films, much of his contemporary high reputation rests on this one short. Released just before 'THE VAGRANT' it seems to have been the turning point in Lloyd's career. While his previous shorts had been successful, this is perhaps the point where his distinctive character and approach began to truly emerge. Moving Picture World called ROBINSON CRUSOE, LTD' "some of the best work of his career. It is a screaming burlesque on the story of Robinson Crusoe and is filled with laughable situations". For years afterwards, films would be compared, favourably and unfavourably, to this two-reeler.

The following synopsis is compiled from contemporary reviews and Antony Balducci's summary. The spoof of the Crusoe story is placed within a framework of Lloyd telling the story to his son (also played by himself).

Beginning on a cruise ship, Lloyd becomes afflicted with seasickness. The delirious effects lead him to mistake a mine for a whale, and he harpoons it, blowing a hole in the ship. As the passengers scramble for lifeboats, Lloyd insists on doing things properly and meticulously reads the lifeboat manual from cover to cover; sometime later, he is still reading it on the ocean floor. Eventually he emerges from the waves smoking a cigarette in a washtub pulled by a poodle (!!!). There he arrives on Crusoe's island, where he has run-ins with the natives. He escapes an execution by engaging the chief in a game of craps, winning his regalia and turning the tables on the execution. The chief escapes, however, and a chase begins. Lloyd runs across an ostrich which has swallowed gunpowder, and now lays exploding eggs! Riding the bird, he uses the eggs as grenades to tackle his pursuers, and rides back to safety. We move back to the present day, and Lloyd Jr is sceptical, until his father produces the ostrich as evidence!

So there you have it. This story certainly seems jam-packed with comic incidents, and plays to Lloyd's strengths in having a slightly bizarre plot, a series of surreal, original sight gags, and plenty of opportunities for reaction comedy (the seasick scenes surely allowed him plenty of opportunities for facial reactions). Some of the tropical-island-hostile-native humour would probably not have dated so well, but this is clearly just a small part of the intended humour. It would be fantastic to see this bizarre little short turn up somewhere, some day.

THE EDUCATOR (1922)

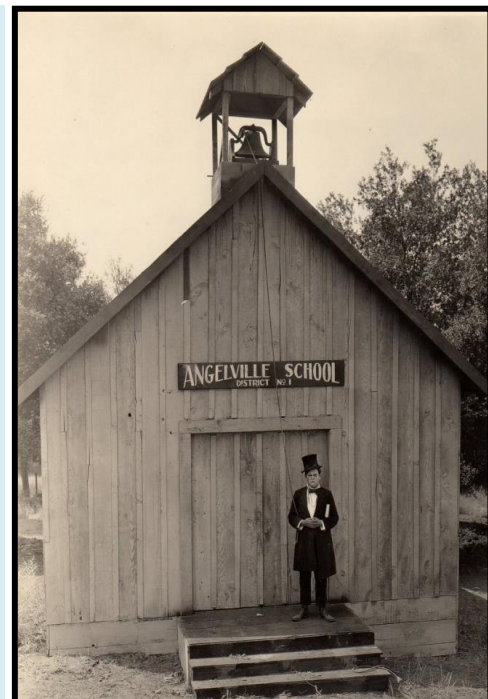
Hamilton's air of dignity and superiority was beautifully suited to playing a prissy teacher, and it's easy to imagine his fall from grace at the hands of unruly children. This short found Ham the new schoolmaster in a rough-and-tumble hillbilly town, where the locals are enthusiastically opposed to learning. The scene is set by Hamilton counting the number of stretchers passing by when he arrives

Film Daily's reviewer praised his subtle performance: "As the sissified professor he is not a caricature of this type of schoolteacher; he *is* the schoolteacher." As the film wore on, Lloyd found himself mixed up with moonshiners, hiding in a well full of the bootleg liquor. Film Daily continues, "As he walks along following this, everyone sniffs the air when he passes and stop what they are doing to follow him. Don't miss this one!"

Charley Chase later developed his fondness for Hamilton's comedy into a theory: by taking a situation or style from a performer physically very different and then assimilating it into his own idiom, he could create something fresh and different. We've already seen how Chase broadly used elements of Hamilton's style, but he seems to have applied the theory wholesale to this film, which he remade at Columbia in 1939.

'TEACHER'S PEST' features the same setting and some similar individual gags and proves Chase correct; it's a very good comedy. It would certainly be interesting to see Hamilton's original for comparison.

Hamilton reprised the role of educator in another short, 1927's 'LISTEN CHILDREN'. It's missing too. Doh!



'THE EDUCATOR' arrives at his new place of work...

ROLLING STONES (1922)

'ROLLING STONES' saw Hamilton teamed with child star Robert DeVilbiss. While the teaming may have been reminiscent of 'THE KID', reviewers were quick to note Hamilton's continued emphasis on comedy rather than pathos. "This is more a comedy about hats than about children," noted 'FILM DAILY', citing a scene where the boy starts knocking off hats of pedestrians; meanwhile, Hamilton collects the hats and sells them back to their original owners.

POOR BOY (1922)

Film Daily: "Lloyd Hamilton has produced a corking good comedy that equals and in many ways exceeds 'MR ROBINSON CRUSOE'. The gags come thick and fast, and many of them are original"

'POOR BOY' shows Hamilton's continuing experiments to obtain comedy from new areas. This short was unusual in making much of its comedy from church-going. Starting out as a vagrant chopping wood, he is persuaded to join a mission by pretty Irene Dalton. Cut to Sunday morning, and Lloyd readies himself for church. It's easy to imagine another one of his frustration scenes developing here, while he attempted to dress in his Sunday best. Film Daily elucidates a little more: "there is fun with a boiled short and a starch collar, then a mud puddle and a rock". Lloyd then helps out at the mission, but his attempts to lead the chorus of hymns are continually confounded by a dog. Ultimately, he ends up pulled out and along the road, riding the church aisle carpet.

Harold Lloyd later incorporated mission sequences into 'FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE' (1926). One wonders if the idea, or any of his gags, originated here.



LONESOME (1924)

'LONESOME' continued Lloyd's experiments with a soulful, melancholy brand of comedy. The story featured Lloyd homeless, meeting a girl on the run from her home. The two of them have adventures on the dark, wet streets, feeling the pangs of hunger. Amongst the pathos though, there were still some splendid gag opportunities. One scene saw Lloyd finally obtaining some clams to eat. "For fully five minutes he tries to get the best of those clams, but to no avail. They bite his fingers and shut tightly when he tries to pry them open, finally grabbing his cigarette and puffing it. This is a new gag and a very amusing one" said *Film Daily*. It sounds like this sequence gave full reign to Hamilton's reaction comedy, and it could well have been the inspiration for the famous Del Lord clam sequence performed variously by Billy Bevan, Clyde Cook and Curly Howard.

It was reported at the time that Hamilton and Ruth Hiatt suffered for their art, enduring several hours at once under the rain machines crucial to the film.

MY FRIEND (1924)

'MY FRIEND' sounds like a typically constructed Hamilton short, with two schizophrenic halves existing mainly to justify gag "islands". The short began with Lloyd on a park bench, attempting to eat his lunch. However, he meets with little success, as a succession of dogs are attracted to his sandwiches and continue to pester him. This is a tailor-made slow-burn sequence for Hamilton, giving him plenty of opportunities for facial reactions when being annoyed by one dog, building up to a fine, frenzied climax as he attempts to escape in a car, with the dogs still in hot pursuit. Somehow, during his flight, he manages to wind up in a job as a butler, leading to some typical fish-out-of-water comedy scenes.

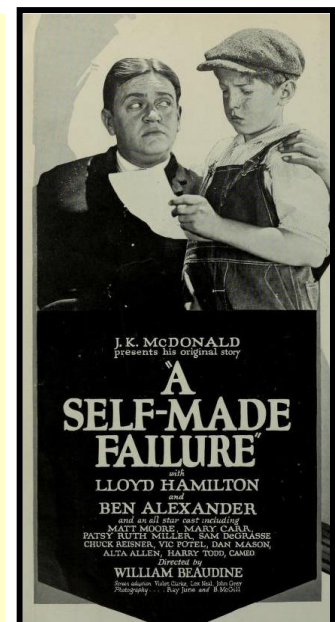
While finding praise for the whole film, 'FILM DAILY's' reviewer commented that "the long sequence with the dogs is best, and Hamilton has made nothing funnier".



A SELF-MADE FAILURE

The more well-realised of Hamilton's two features, this is undoubtedly one of his most important missing films. Seeing it would hopefully enable us to see why his career in features didn't take off. Reviews at the time were actually very positive, on the whole. 'MOTION PICTURE CLASSIC' described the film as "just about as enjoyable a picture as the month has produced". 'MOTION PICTURE NEWS' concurred, "a story in which there is the combined appeal of excellent comedy and heart interest and full play is made upon the sympathy of the audience".

So why were there no more Hamilton features? This film would probably be crucial to helping us realise why. Quite possibly, there was a little too much playing upon the sympathy of the audience... But who knows, perhaps this was a fantastic film that just never found its audience. Only the film itself could let us decide for ourselves. According to Richard M Roberts in *Classic Images*, the film's trailer does exist, at least.



THE INSPECTOR WYATT MYSTERIES...

A Bobby Dunn special...

Somewhat down the list of minor silent comedians (classed as demi clowns in Walter Kerr's excellent 'The Silent Clowns') is Bobby Dunn. Most books don't mention him; you won't find him on IMDb and he's mostly remembered nowadays for bit parts in some sound Laurel and Hardys (the shoplifter in TIT FOR TAT; the cross eyed messenger in ME AND MY PAL.)

But he did rise to starring roles at Mack Sennett teamed with Slim Summerville - then in his own series of Mirthquake Comedies for Arrow from 1922 -24.

The ones I've seen aren't exactly 'mirth quakes' but they are quite fun considering their low budgets. The most available is probably THE FAST MAILMAN and the best I've seen is HOT FOOT in which he and his dancing partner, Ena Gregory, win a marathon dance contest against Glen Cavender and friend, dancing continuously - on tops of cars, over rooftops, underwater, across various countries, etc - until it all turns out to be a dream. Several more can be seen on You tube -mostly not complete and under changed titles.

David Glass has asked if I can identify some 5 minute retitled clips that appeared on tv's 'Laff a bits' series, and as I can't, I'm hoping someone else out there can. And before you ask, yes I did try emailing Kay Arnold who produced the tv. series, but she couldn't provide a list of the original titles.

The clips come with all titles removed, often -random colour tints added and some non -period music, occasionally speeded up or slowed down to fit the action; ie. the musicians didn't change the speed, the man playing back the tapes did. Some were distributed by Britain's Trax Video in the 1980's as 'Laugh a Minute'. Anyway, here are the four Bobby Dunn extracts:

"The World's Greatest Waiter" has a big restaurant set considering it's a cheap Arrow comedy. Someone must have seen Chaplin's THE RINK because Bobby Dunn removes his top hat and coat to reveal waiter's clothes underneath and later a cat is served by mistake, revealed under a silver cover.

Other gags include B.D. throwing food from a tray to different tables, bending a customer's knife to stop him having trouble eating peas off it and providing ear muffs for a customer who complains about another's loud soup slurping. The climax is a fight in the kitchen.

"The Big Operation" has Bobby trying to get into a hospital to see his nurse girlfriend. When someone is hit by a street car he lays on the ground, is mistaken for



Bobby Dunn in Laurel and Hardy's 'ME AND MY PAL', and in his silent days.

the victim and carried off by ambulance to the hospital. A group of doctors plan to operate; Bobby keeps revolving on the table, then gets chased-including that old gag where shoes are held out on two poles to look like a body lying on a stretcher. (Bobby Dunn was in Sennett's earlier MARRIED LIFE where Ben Turpin did the same thing.) Escaping a fight, he rings a bell while holding a clock in the other hand as if it's a boxing match and finally dives out a window, lands on a stretcher and is carried straight back to the operating theatre.

"A Top Position" finds Bobby hiding outside a delicatessen, stealing bread. A cop chases him, sees through his female disguise when he dons a skirt and parasol, and leaves him at an iron works to find a job. A giant crane drops him onto a building site where he drops bricks onto fellow workers, climbs around on girders (a la Harold Lloyd's NEVER WEAKEN) and eventually drops onto a worker below, where the same cop has to rescue him from a fight.

Lastly "The Big Kidnap Caper" has B.D. rescuing a girl from kidnappers. Following their car to a low down district, he drags her off down fire escapes, knocks the villains out and drives them off in a truck. Reviving, they chase the couple on foot and tie them together in a shack. Blowing the place up, Bobby and the girl appear somewhat tattered, only the door remaining. The gangsters can't open the door - they don't think of going round it - and a cop turns up to arrest them.

Glenn Cavender plays the cop in the last two titles. A fifth 'Laff a Bits' Bobby Dunn extract can be seen on You Tube - 'Hospital Helper' -clearly from the same hospital comedy as 'The Big Operation'. By the time you read this David may have put these others there too, together with some other mystery extracts.

The only list I have of Bobby Dunn titles is in the Italian 'Griffithiana' - 'Forgotten Laughter' issue, by Karel Kaslavsky. Unfortunately it's incomplete and most of the titles that are listed are those annoyingly meaningless ones that don't give any hint of the film's plot. So if anyone can enlighten us about any of these shorts, please let us know - then we'll be Dunn searching! (and David Glass will be Dunn annoying me - about these anyway....)

DVD REVIEW: 'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED'



'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED' is a new release curated by silent film accompanist and historian, Ben Model. The title derives from the fact that this is a collection of films that have only survived through home collections and scattered 16mm prints, rather than through conscious efforts by archives. These films represent the only known prints, and the DVD is a way of sharing these long-lost gems. Read on for a review of the contents...

THE LOST LAUGH

Educational's Cameo comedies were one-reel shorts that enabled the studios' supporting actors to have their time in the limelight. Amongst these was Wallace Lupino, who did excellent support in his brother Lupino Lane's shorts. He made several 1 and 2 reel shorts between 1926 and 1929, of which only 3 survive. 'THE LOST LAUGH' ain't the best of them, but it's a fun little short. Less acrobatic than his brother, Wallace's shorts veer more to situational domestic comedies, but he always handles them excellently. The highlight of this one is a great scene at the breakfast table where he struggles to get to grips with that new-fangled invention, the toaster.



LOOSE CHANGE

Long before Moore Marriott or Clive Dunn, Jack Duffy specialised in playing old codgers twice his actual age. Often he played a tight old Scotsman, as he does here. The story has him being blackmailed to teach him a lesson, whilst avoiding the ire of burly Glen Cavender. They also make the most out of 'tight scotsman' jokes! Great stuff, and one of the funniest films on here.

WEDDING SLIPS

Another Cameo comedy, directed by future Three Stooges overlord, Jules White, and it's easy to tell. The star is Monte Collins, who pops up in countless Columbia shorts, and there are gags with bricks and a man in a gorilla suit. The weedy-looking Collins doesn't quite click as the leading man on honeymoon, but White's philosophy of "keep 'em moving so fast that if they're not funny no one will realise" just about pulls the short through.

SHOOT STRAIGHT

A Paul Parrott (aka James Parrott, aka Charley Chase's brother) short, this hunting comedy is another highlight. It's a typical example of one of his gagfests, which is to say it's very funny, and a bit surreal at times! Look out for Jobyna Ralston, best known as Harold Lloyd's leading lady.

THE HOUSE OF WONDERS

One of the two non-comedies on here, this is an absorbing documentary reel about a watch-factory. Not really up to repeat viewings (unless you're a horol... hirol... er, clock fancier), it's still a nice little time capsule. No pun intended.

THE MISFIT

Back in the comedy vein, this is a fantastic little short. Starring acrobatic comic Clyde Cook, this was made at the Keaton studios, and features Big Joe Roberts as the heavy. Similarly providing a comic contrast to the tiny Cook is Blanche Payson. Clyde is a henpecked husband who joins the army. Lots of laughs.



THE WATER PLUG

Billy Franey was a fairly minor comic in the early 20s. There are a few good gags here, but nothing much to crow about.

MECHANICAL DOLL

An 'Out of the Inkwell' short, this features an animated Koko the Clown interacting with his artist. Clever, engaging and very charming.

CHEER UP

Another Cameo starring forgotten comic Cliff Bowes. This is a rival suitor story, that basically winds up as a more psychopathic version of 'ONE WEEK': a sore loser, Cliff's rival turns up at his new marital home with a bag of tools and starts demolishing it! Great fun, with some wacky sight gags.

So, what do you get in 'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED'? Well, these aren't polished comedy masterpieces, but they are slickly made, fun shorts with some laugh-out-loud moments. You also get a rare chance to see some unfairly forgotten comics in films that nearly didn't survive. The presentation and music are great, too. This DVD is definitely worth having.

SCREENING NOTES

RADIO PARADE (1933)

A British International Picture. Directed by Richard Beville and Archie de Bear

This issue, we focus on an interesting British 'revue' film. In the scramble for fresh talent as talking pictures loomed, the leagues of radio and stage performers provided fertile ground. In the USA, there were a host of films showcasing them, not to mention the Vitagraph and Pathe series of shorts. The British film industry was also quick to capitalise on this. The appearance of many music hall, variety and radio performers on screen – Will Hay, George Formby, Arthur Lucan, to name a few - would usher in a golden period of British screen comedy. There were also many other talents who never made the leap to feature films, but whose acts have been preserved for posterity. As in America, these acts were tenuously strung together with a thin plot acting as a flimsy framework on which to hang many of the funniest and most unusual acts of the day.

Then, as now, the stories remain unimportant; the joy (and sometimes horror) of these films is their undiluted presentation of otherwise forgotten stage or radio acts. 'RADIO PARADE' is an interesting example that has recently seen new light. Missing its opening reel, this film was relegated to obscurity in the film vaults for many, many years. More recently, it has been plucked from limbo and returned to an unsuspecting world via the fantastic British Pathé website. It can be viewed there for free amongst many, many other treasures.

Appearing fairly cheaply filmed, it nevertheless preserves a treasure trove of variety and radio acts, several of whom made no other appearances on screen. There is also an interesting cross-section provided with the world of British Cinema comedy, with appearances by several screen actors and comedians of note helping to scaffold the ragbag assortment of 'turns'. The film was such a success that it spawned a much more lavish successor; 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935' is better remembered, thanks to an early appearance by Will Hay, and VHS/DVD releases.

But the original 'RADIO PARADE' has a charm of its own, as well as masses of historical interest. As with all such compendium films, there are both glittering gewgaws and stinking duds amongst the many acts. Here is a run-down of the many attractions in their film and some information on who they were...

CLAUDE HULBERT



You may recall that in issue 4 I gave some space to Jack Hulbert, star of missing film 'THE GHOST TRAIN'. Light comedian Hulbert also had a younger brother, Claude. Well-versed in the family business, the younger Hulbert brother came to specialise in portraying brainless upper-class twits on stage and radio. Although he was never graced with the success of his elder brother, actually he is the finer comic actor, specialising in a hilariously dignified befuddlement. His obituary in The Times described his style wonderfully:

As a comedian he was one of a vintage line which was directly descended from Bertie Wooster and was led by their chief exponent. Ralph Lynn. This was the chinless wonder brigade, elegant in appearance and affable in manner, well bred, well-to-do. and well intentioned, but absentminded and always a little weak in the intellectual stakes. Names such as Shakespeare, Napoleon, or Julius Caesar rang a faint bell in their subconscious, but they would have been hard put to it to say in exactly what connexion, for the old grey matter tended to move a trifle sluggishly under the well groomed hair... Claude Hulbert was one of those comedians who spend their careers doing what appears to be very simple, while hiding from their audiences the fact that it is not.

Claude's starring films were mainly cheap and quickly made, and many are now lost. He gained far better opportunities as a supporting actor of the first water (I would venture to say, one of the funniest British comic supports ever. Yes, he really is that good!). An excellent patsy for the opportunistic guile of Will Hay, he gets his best roles in Hay's 'THE GHOST OF ST MICHAELS' and 'MY LEARNED FRIEND'. He also gets good spots in 'THE GHOSTS OF BERKELY SQUARE' and supporting big brother Jack in 'BULLDOG JACK'. He even took on Jack Hulbert's role in 'THE GHOST TRAIN' for a later radio adaptation.

In 'RADIO PARADE', Hulbert is paired with character comic Gus MacNaughton as a pair of script writers. Their attempts to get joke ideas by earwiggling the various acts provide a linking device that is the film's rudimentary attempt at plot. Incidentally, Hulbert also receives a writer's credit for the film.

Fast-talking, wise-guy character actor MacNaughton proved himself an excellent foil for several British comedians, notably George Formby in 'Keep Your Seats Please' and 'TROUBLE BREWING'. His cunning conman types were an ideal match for Formby's blind innocence, a sort of swindling Bud Abbott to George's provincial Lou Costello. He was similarly matched against the bumbling Claude Hulbert. Neither of them are shown to anything like full advantage here, but it's nice to see them anyway. Their best scene together is their final one, where they sing a song, "Jolly Good Company" to a frosty reception from a room full of gangsters.

GERT AND DAISY

Gert and Daisy were the alter egos of Elsie and Doris Waters. A pair of wittering, gossipy middle aged housewives, they were based on overheard examples of very real British women prevalent at the time. Their humour was mild and mainly character-based, but followed its own distinctive line. The conversational, local nature of their comedy was surely an influence on later British patter comedians, and there is a clear lineage to the work of Victoria Wood, for instance. Much like Andy Clyde, the Waters' sisters creations were able to age gracefully, carrying on their fame on radio well into the 1950s. they also starred in three low budget films, and even lived on into the TV era with a 1959 series. Here their sketch is the usual gossip, taking place at a market stall.



FLOTSAM AND JETSAM



Malcolm MacEachern and Bennett Hillingwood were an Anglo-New Zealand team specialising in the somewhat schizophrenic realms of comic dialogue and sentimental, patriotic songs. Flotsam would be seated at the piano whilst Jetsam sang in a bass voice deep enough to make people soil themselves. In many ways their combination of piano, gentle songs, patter and nostalgia for all things English marks them out as precursors of Flanders & Swann.

Sadly, RADIO PARADE foregoes their comic side and preserves their much less attractive patriotism, as they sing a dire song about soldiers in the colonies. They follow this up with a song, 'CHANGING OF THE GUARD', accompanied by footage of precisely that. Yawn. Better luck next time, chaps.

STAINLESS STEPHEN

Perhaps the most eccentric of all the performers in 'RADIO PARADE' is Stainless Steel. Taking his moniker from his Sheffield origins (then centre of the U.K.'s stainless steel industry), he continued the gimmick by wearing a stainless steel waistcoat and steel-rimmed bowler hat. Such gimmickry was really Stephen's forte. The core of his act was to soliloquize to himself whilst speaking all the punctuation, thus:

"What a life, comma, said Stainless Steel, semi colon, soliloquizing to himself..."



A little of this obviously goes quite a long way, and it's no surprise that he never carried full films or shows on his own, but as a short turn on the radio, or indeed in a film like this, he is a very amusing aside. 'RADIO PARADE' presents him sadly out of his normal costume, and portraying a railway guard grumbling at the lack of tips he receives. His three minute routine is really quite funny and one of the highlights of the film. Stephen's real name was Arthur Clifford Baynes, and his day job was as a school teacher, a job he continued for some time after finding success. This meant that he could only make appearances at weekends and during school holidays! (After a bit of research, coincidence has it that his workplace was the Crookes Endowed School, about 3 miles from my home. See photo at right.)





Legend has it that Stainless' lessons on Friday were always a bit light on the ground, as he spent most of the time leaving his classes to it whilst he wrote radio material for his weekend show! Stainless retired in 1952 to become a gentleman farmer in Kent, describing himself as "stainless, painless, brainless, shameless, aimless, semi-conscious and approaching semi dotage." He died in 1957.

(On a topical note, there is currently much panic in the U.K. over the introduction of a new punctuation and grammar test for Primary school children; this would surely have been a breeze for Stainless Stephen's classes!)

CLAPHAM AND DWYER



A classic straight man and funny man combination, Charles Clapham and Bill Dwyer are today a little known double act. Nevertheless, they have an excellent routine in 'RADIO PARADE' that is more than worth a second look.

Clapham played a stuttering dipsomaniac toff, always spouting malapropisms, while Dwyer was the straightest of all straight men, the nearest thing I've yet seen to a British Zeppo Marx. Much as Zeppo was to Groucho, he was merely a feed and reflective panel for the puns and nonsense ramblings of Clapham:

CLAPHAM: Oh I say, I must tell you this one. It's one of those conundr-diddle-driddle-er, things. It's very clever. Now, there's a man in a car going 40 miles an hour towards a level crossing. Get it?

DWYER: Yes.

CLAPHAM: Now, there's a train coming at 60 miles an hour. How did the man get across?

DWYER: How did he get across?

CLAPHAM: His widow bought it for him. Now, here's another one, er, what's the difference between a bird-fancier's daughter, er, three and a half yards of cheese, a black handled knife and the summertime in Mexico?

DWYER: What's what?

CLAPHAM: Eh? What? Well, wait a minute. There's a bird with no feathers, no, she's got a nice er, black handle, and at the other end she's got two, well, it's about half past six. In Mexico

DWYER: Where'd you hear that?

CLAPHAM: Oh, I made it up.

DWYER: Well, what's the answer?

CLAPHAM: Oh, I don't know. I only make the cadiddles, er driddle. I don't make the answers.

Great stuff, almost embryonic Goon Show material. All the time while this is going on, Clapham is waving a rissole about in his hand, and a man behind him is sneakily eating it. Obviously, this routine was considered one of the highlights of the film, as the pair were booked to appear again in the follow up, 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935'.

However, poor Dwyer had even less to do and the routine wasn't up to this one. The duo continued making broadcasts and records for several years.

Their most famous routine was a lampoon of the by rote alphabets taught to children (A for apple, etc). Clapham and Dwyer's version was a very English spoof, recorded as, variously, 'THE COCKNEY ALPHABET' or 'THE SURREALIST ALPHABET'. It ran so that each letter formed part of a word:

A for 'orses (hay for horses)

B for mutton (beef or mutton)

And so on.

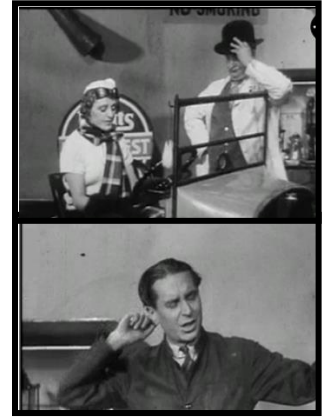
Clapham and Dwyer's was apparently the first use of this later much recycled routine; The Two Ronnies' beloved 'Four Candles/Fork Handles' routine follows a clear comic line from this.

Who knows what happened to Clapham and Dwyer? After the mid-30s they fall totally off the radar. There is some mention that they fell foul of BBC censorship after trying to tell an 'improper' joke. If so, maybe this ban was fatally damaging to their career. Still, at least they left us with a few nice routines along the way.

REGINALD GARDINER, JEANNE DE CASSALIS & HAL GORDON

One of the most well-developed scenes, cinematically, combines the talents of two radio stars and a film actor in a specially written sketch, rather than just another shoehorned in routine plucked out of the air.

Jeanne De Cassalis was a comedienne famous on radio for playing the scatterbrained Mrs Feather, a character in the line of Billie Burke or Gracie Allen.. She also gets a monologue, carrying out a one-sided telephone conversation, before confounding the garage owner and mechanic with her total confusion about cars as she absentmindedly powders her nose.



The mechanic is played by Reginald Gardiner. At this time he was best known for records where he basically made strange sounds. His most famous, 'TRAINS' has him impersonating a wide variety of engine sounds before concluding by yelling 'BACK TO THE ASYLUM!'

In 'RADIO PARADE' he gets a similar routine, where he instead focuses on the noises made by taxis. Gardiner later moved more into acting, and is best known today for his roles opposite major comedians. He is the straight romantic lead in Laurel and Hardy's 'THE FLYING DEUCES', and in Chaplin's 'THE GREAT DICTATOR' is the jewish barber's wartime friend, and later ally in the fight against Adenoid Hynkel.

The garage owner in this scene is played by Hal Gordon, doing double duty as straight man for both Gardiner and De Casalis. Gordon might be considered the Charlie Hall of British comedy films. Ubiquitous throughout the '30s and '40s, he appeared against pretty much all of the notable comics at one time or another, in roles ranging from plum comic supporting roles (a drunken sailor in George Formby's 'KEEP YOUR SEATS PLEASE'), small gag appearances (an unintelligible farmer in Lupino Lane's 'THE DEPUTY DRUMMER') to standard straight roles and bit parts. He pops up again and again in countless films with Will Hay, Gracie Fields and especially George Formby, keeping busy in such parts until his death in 1946.

STANELLI



Stanelli was a novelty/comedy musician, whom I have been able to find little about. Here, with his mysterious comrade 'Edgar', he noodles around on the violin and does some musical impressions, coaxing the instrument into sounding like bagpipes and a ukulele. It's quite a fun routine, but his most notable novelty is absent here; Stanelli was the proud innovator of the 'Hornchestra'. This was a collection of carhorns and bulbhorns of all different sizes and keys, enabling him to dextrously play entire songs. Fortunately, this intriguing prospect was preserved in 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935'.

LEONARD HENRY

Leonard Henry is one of those unfortunate patter comedians whose style has not really stood the test of time. Especially on film, his better jokes are spoiled by his over-the-top delivery and facial mugging. It's probably no coincidence that Mr Henry's biggest successes were on radio and record, where the latter would not have mattered, and a slightly enhanced delivery was generally the norm.

Nevertheless, he did leave a lasting impression on a later comedian, Bob Monkhouse. In his autobiography, Monkhouse recalled being a childhood fan and writing to Henry with some of his first gags. Receiving no reply, the unfazed junior Monkhouse eventually sent 9 copies of the jokes to various addresses..

"One day, my mother said "Robert, you've got a letter."

The notepaper was headed with a simple red, die-stamped LEONARD HENRY. It read:

Young man,

Please do not send me any more of your nonsense. For a boy of twelve, you are a very persistent and impudent fellow. I put you upon your honour to show this letter to your parents. To them I say this: If I had been such an arrogant child, my father would have administered corporal punishment. I say no more.

*Yours etcetera,
Leonard Henry.*

At the bottom of the page, in the same red, die-stamped letters, was the slogan 'LAUGH WITH LEONARD'."

'Nuff said.



FLORENCE DESMOND

Florence Desmond was a comedienne and terrifically talented impersonator. First exhibiting her skills in her teens, she soon began to specialise in imitations of radio stars and public figures. With the advent of talking pictures, this sort of work became much more accessible to audiences, and Florence came to specialise in hilarious impressions of everyone from Mae West, to Marlene Dietrich and aviator Amy Johnson.

She made several films, but few showed her to her best advantage. Whilst visiting America, she had already appeared in an episode of 'THE VOICE OF HOLLYWOOD' series, and in 'MR SKITCH' with Will Rogers and Zasu Pitts.

Back in her native England, Florence found parts in several films, but usually in dramatic or ingénue roles that allowed her little chance to shine. She had a second lead in Gracie Fields' debut, 'SALLY IN OUR ALLEY', but her best known roles are two leading lady roles with Fields' male equivalent, George Formby. 'NO LIMIT', Formby's breakthrough film, was an action-packed story set at the Isle of Man TT races. Despite the film's sunny atmosphere, there was actually much tension on the set, as Formby and Desmond couldn't stand each other. Nevertheless, the onscreen chemistry was winning, and the pair were reunited for a follow up, 'KEEP YOUR SEATS, PLEASE'.

While she was a success in these roles, there was little chance to show her flair for comedy. 'RADIO PARADE' was an ideal showcase as it allowed her to focus on her impersonations. Here she offers us Tallulah Bankhead and Marlene Dietrich, both done fabulously. Few other film appearances offered her such opportunities, the one exception being 'HOOTS MON', with Max Miller. This was an intriguing film in that it essentially allowed Miller and Desmond to play themselves, in a story of Showbiz rivalry. This is absolutely invaluable now, as it preserved large portions of their stage acts on film.



Florence with George Formby in 'NO LIMIT'.

Sadly, this was the only real chance Florence Desmond got to show off her skills in a full feature. Better outlets for her talents were her radio appearances and gramophone records, which showcased her impressions and some comic songs, such as the double entendre 'SHE HAD TO GO AND LOSE IT AT THE ASTOR.'

With Max Miller in 'HOOTS MON'. Stop press: you can see this film, and some rare Miller clips, at BFI South Bank on December 12. www.bfi.org.uk for more details.

So there you have it. A fascinating little film that gives a flavour of 1930s entertainment beautifully: sometimes corny or excruciatingly unfunny, occasionally downright bizarre, but often beguiling, charming and hilarious. You can watch RADIO PARADE at www.britishpathe.com. Use the search function to access it, and why not stay awhile for some of the other goodies...



THE BUFF'S BOOKSHELF

SMILEAGE GUARANTEED: PAST HUMOR, PRESENT LAUGHTER. MUSINGS ON THE COMEDY FILM INDUSTRY 1910-1945 VOLUME 1: HAL ROACH

By *Richard M Roberts, co-researched with Robert Farr and Joe Moore.*

Practical Press. 502pp.

Whew, try asking for that title in your local bookshop! Within this appellation, esteemed silent comedy expert Richard M Roberts presents a history of Hal Roach studios comedy, told especially via the stories of its lesser known film series. In his introduction, Mr Roberts describes this work as “the world’s longest footnote”, and, while that description doesn’t do justice to the wealth and depth of information here, it does sum up the spirit of the book. Perhaps a more accurate description might be “a compendium of articles and essays”. Let’s get it clear from the outset, this isn’t a holistic study of everything ever made at Roach. In his introduction, the author argues well his point that Harold Lloyd, Laurel & Hardy and Our Gang have already received definitive studies. In deliberately passing over the greats in these pages, he frees up space for films and stars that have rarely, if ever, been discussed before. Of course, the greats of the studio loom large anyway, referred to in passing, through comparison and in photographs. But the meat of this book is concerned with forgotten lights like Charley Chase, his brother James, Snub Pollard and Billy Gilbert, etc. These are the people who fleshed out the studios and set the stage for the better known classics to be made. So, no, not *everything* is covered, but once you get drawn in, you won’t really have time to care.

This sort of book might be described as a coffee table book; if that’s true, then I need a bigger coffee table. There is just an awesome amount of content here, text and images, a vast majority of which I have never seen before. Almost all of the studios’ series are dedicated an entire chapter each, with additional spaces for odds and ends. Lost classics are detailed, and it’s not forgotten that Roach actually turned out several failures. Reading about *The Taxi Boys*, *Clyde Cook* and the like are as instructive as reading about the successes, and make you appreciate the special alchemy of the classic films.

Mr Roberts’ writing style is lively and witty, invoking the spirit of the films he writes about. It can also be opinionated, but that is purely a reflection of the author’s passion for these films. He defends films and stars whose reputations have been sullied or unfairly neglected (Chase, Langdon), and is quick to debunk myths or take overhyped films down a peg or two. Anyway, in such a subjective area as comedy, part of the fun is agreeing or arguing with the author’s opinions. The only real criticism I have is the haphazard proofreading; there are several errors and a few sentences that trail off over pages. But that’s a problem I find in editing a small magazine, so God knows how difficult it must be in an opus of this length!

Aside from the main text content of the book, there are two other reasons that this is a must-have. First is the masterful filmography compiled in collaboration with Robert Farr and Joe Moore. This is the most complete listing ever compiled, and provides a host of details, including casts, production dates, synopses for many of the films, and information on if each film exists.

Secondly, the collection of images on show here is incredible. I’d estimate that I’d only seen 25% of these images before, and what gems there are! A sample of the offerings: incredibly rare stills of early star Toto the clown, who looks like a salamander in overalls; stills from missing Charley Chase MGM films like ‘OFF TO BUFFALO’; Chase appearing with Harold Lloyd in an early one-reeler; Snub Pollard without his moustache, Stan Laurel in his earliest films, and images of Fin galore!



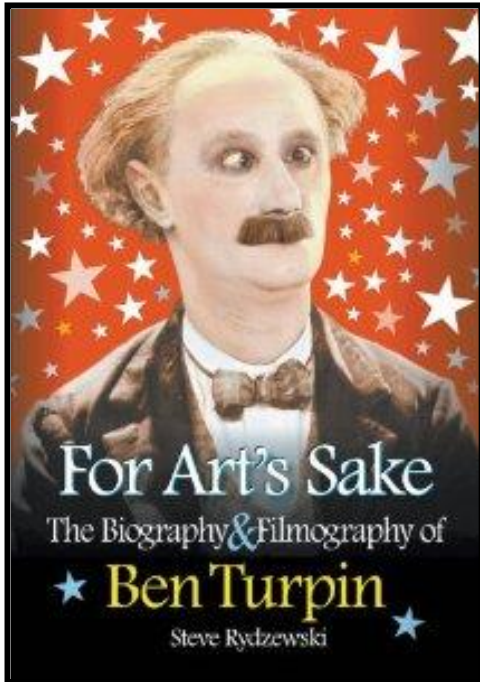
This isn't the only book on Hal Roach Studios you'll ever need, but it is definitely one of 3 or 4 indispensable ones. If you're a dedicated fan of *any* of the Roach studios' product (if not, then why are you reading this?), then there will be lots for you here. It's a book to refer to again and again, and apparently the first part of a trilogy. Roll on, part two!

Available from Grapevine Video website: www.grapevinevideo.com, or from www.amazon.com. RRP \$59.99.

FOR ART'S SAKE - THE BIOGRAPHY & FILMOGRAPHY OF BEN TURPIN

By Steve Rydzewski.

Published by Bear Manor Media. RRP \$31.00, Or available as a digital edition for Kindle, price \$6.74.



'Slapstick' magazine editor and Ben Turpin super-fan Steve Rydzewski presents a labour of love in 'For Art's Sake'. Like the fantastic new Langdon tome reviewed in the last issue, this book is a combined biography and impeccable filmography.

Mr Rydzewski's research is quite simply exhaustive. He has reached right back beyond Ben's Hollywood years to his childhood and even before, uncovering news articles and tidbits from every facet of Ben's life. In fact, he allows these stories to do most of the talking, linking them together when necessary and providing commentary. It's an unusual style that is a bit of a risk, but really pays off.

As a comedian, it's fair to consider Turpin pretty one-dimensional, but his life story and personality shine through as anything but. In his films, Turpin often played glamorous playboys, providing a comical contrast to his bizarre appearance. It's delightful to find that some of this incongruous swagger was actually part of the real Ben Turpin; the archival interviews reveal a delightfully cocksure confidence as he unspools his anecdotes. His voice echoes off the page throughout the book, making this much less passive and scholarly than many biographies.

The anecdotes and stories are fascinating, too. What a life this man led! Born in 1869, Turpin was much older than most of his contemporaries, and had already lived about 3 lives before he ever even stepped in front of a movie camera. His story takes us from the dusty, rough and tumble America of the 1860s, right through to the Machine Age and the cusp of WW2. Born in New Orleans to a French family, the adolescent Ben didn't fancy working for a living, and so dropped out to become a hobo. He happily rode around on trains, half-inching food and surviving the odd train wreck, for several years before, just as suddenly, dropping back in again and taking menial jobs. After that, he broke into vaudeville, finding a niche as an imitator of newspaper cartoon character Happy Hooligan. This is where the crossed-eyes look comes in, and yes, you do find out how it happened here, but I won't spoil that bit... There are also some rare pictures of Ben before his miasmia set in.

As you can see, this is a fascinating tale already, and we've not even got to the years of early Hollywood, Mack Sennett madness, or the pathos of Turpin's twilight years, caring for his ailing wife. Along the way, Mr Rydzewski gives many details of Ben's films and their making. There is also a complete, detailed filmography in the book, with credits and synopses.

Even if you're not really a Turpin fan, this is just a brilliant story from a vanished world, so different from our modern era. It's a story told with real flair, and a long-dead comedian has been fleshed out as a real person once again. A triumph.

NEXT ISSUE in 'THE BUFF'S BOOKSHELF': Steve Massa's masterly 'LAME BRAINS AND LUNATICS', and the updated reprint of John Fisher's classic Music Hall/Variety study, 'FUNNY WAY TO BE A HERO'.



In issue 7...



**THE FILMS OF
GEORGE FORMBY**



Was he just a gormless man with a ukulele or was he 'the Lancashire Chaplin'? Either way, he was Britain's number 1 cinema attraction in the late 1930s and early 1940s. We revisit the sometimes-neglected films that made it happen.

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**BUSTER
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BEVAN**



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CHASE**

and lots more!