

MOVIE NIGHT



#9

silent comedy, slapstick, music hall.



CHARLEY CHASE

All Talking!
All Singing!
All Dancing!

also featuring

FRANK RANDLE

and lots more!



MOVIE NIGHT ISSUE 9



CHARLEY CHASE

THE SOUND YEARS 1929 - 1933

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ALL CHANGE!



Welcome to issue 9, which will be the final edition of MOVIE NIGHT, at least in its current form. Don't panic, we're not going anywhere, but it's time for a bit of a shake up, including a new name. The next issue will be the tenth since we started in the summer of 2011, and that seemed as good a milestone as any to make some changes.

First of all, the name. Originally, MOVIE NIGHT was named after the classic Charley Chase two-reeler of that name. That film is a love-letter to silent cinema spectatorship, in line with what I wanted to achieve. Furthermore, Chase is one of my favourite of all the more forgotten comics, and one who this magazine aims to celebrate. However... as a title and brand, MOVIE NIGHT also seems a bit generic. As time has gone on, I've become more aware of this, and have found that it is particularly hard to Google the mag effectively. In addition, I don't want to be restricted to movie comedy. What about music hall, vaudeville, radio and early television? All these had a part to play in the classic comedy era, both for the careers of cinema stars and those of their own making.

So, after umm-ing and ahh-ing, I've settled on a new name that I hope you'll like. Again, I've taken inspiration from a film title.

Drum roll, please...

'THE LOST LAUGH' was the title of a 1928 film starring forgotten comic Wallace Lupino (see issue 8). When I watched it, it occurred to me that this was the perfect title. It puts our comedic focus front and centre, acknowledges the 'lost' comic aspect and doesn't pin us down to film; any forgotten or underappreciated comedies can come under this banner. I also enjoy the pun!

Next up, online content. Occasionally, I've been asked why I don't just run a blog or website. I still think there's a place for a magazine, even in this digital world. There's just so much *stuff* out there on the internet that personally I like to have physical copies of articles able to be printed out. By being available both as print and digitally, MOVIE NIGHT has straddled the line between both mediums, and allowed readers to print at home if they wish, keeping costs down. I've dabbled with blogs and Facebook, but truthfully I've struggled to keep up with this. That said, the world has become even more digital since issue 1. While 'THE LOST LAUGH' will continue in print and pdf exactly the same as before, I'm going to make a more concerted effort to release online content, including videos to accompany articles. These films were meant to be seen, not just read about, after all. I'm also aware that 'news' is often quite out-dated by the time it reaches a completed issue, so this especially will be released online. The forums for this will be a Twitter account, and a new blog, lostlaugh.wordpress.com.

Other than this, normal service will carry on, and all subscriptions will continue to be fulfilled. I hope you continue to enjoy the magazine and its online associates as we prepare to enter double digits! If you have any thoughts or suggestions, please do drop a line; contact details will remain the same, at least for the present.

Thanks for your support, and happy reading!

Matthew

**MOVIE NIGHT/
THE LOST
LAUGH
IN PRINT...**



Movie Night/The Lost Laugh continues to be available in print for those desiring it. £5.50 per colour-printed issue, or £15.00 for 3 issues. Back issues can also be ordered.

Paypal payments accepted to mattthewross22@googlemail.com, or cheques can be sent to:

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...AND ONLINE!



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www.lostlaugh.wordpress.com

NEWS

film rediscoveries

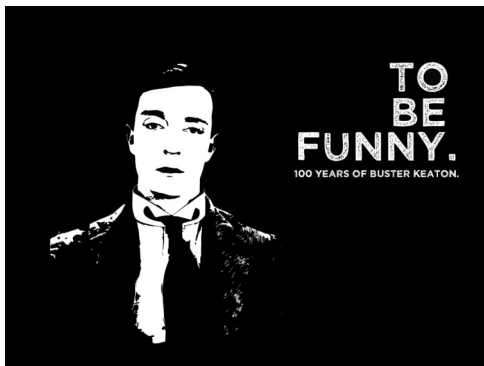
The run of exciting silent comedy rediscoveries continues apace! The biggest news of late is undoubtedly the discovery of the complete, epic pie fight from Laurel and Hardy's 'THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY', but there have been other rare comedies unearthed.

Historian Steve Massa has announced the location of a handful of lost Harold Lloyd and Monty Banks films. The Lloyd films date from his early days playing the Chaplin-lite character 'Lonesome Luke'. This is an important discovery as nearly all the Luke titles, hugely popular in their day, went up in smoke in a vault fire. The recovered titles are 'TINKERING WITH TROUBLE' (1915) and 'LUKE DOES THE MIDWAY' (1916)

Dapper, Italian Monty Banks was kind of an Indie Harold Lloyd in the 1920s. Making an array of shorts and features for independent companies throughout the 1920s., he favoured a similar mix of gags and thrills to many of Lloyd's best pictures (most famously 1927's 'PLAY SAFE'). Two of his shorts from 1923 have resurfaced, 'ALWAYS LATE' and 'SIX A.M.'



Read more about the rediscovery of 'THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY' on p7



NEW BUSTER KEATON DOCUMENTARY

'To Be Funny' is a new documentary currently being prepared by filmmakers Jess Roseboom and Gavin Rosenberg. Recently successfully crowdfunded through Kickstarter, it promises to be "A non-traditional documentary exploring Buster Keaton's enduring legacy in cinema...100 years after his first appearance on film". You can find updates on twitter @tobefunnynyc or at their Facebook page.

BRISTOL'S SLAPSTICK FESTIVAL: DATES FOR 2016

Bristol's annual celebration of silent and visual comedy returns for 2016. Full programme yet to be announced, but the dates have been revealed as January 21-24th, 2016. Details of the opening gala are also available now; this year Chaplin's THE KID features, with a live performance of Chaplin's own score. Supporting programme comes from Charley Chase and Buster Keaton in some classic two-reelers.

Tickets are available now: More details at www.slapstick.org.uk

@slapstickfest



Stop press:

A SILENT LAUGHTER SATURDAY!

A reminder of another impending event previously sent to the mailing list. Kennington Bioscope's SILENT LAUGHTER SATURDAY at London Cinema Museum in Kennington on Saturday October 24th is a full day of classic and rare silent comedy. Tickets are still available, so why not make a last-minute booking if you've not already? See p. 7 for full details of the jam-packed programme!





JEAN DARLING 1922—2015

Terribly sad news. Jean Darling, one of Our Gang's stars and fond honorary member of the Sons of the Desert, has passed away aged 93. Jean's tenure with the gang was during of its now more overlooked eras: the late silent and transitional early talkies, predating the iconic Spanky-Alfalfa dynasty. While she might not be as well remembered by as Spanky, Alfalfa or Darla, she was very talented, with a distinct personality, and had some brilliant moments in her films. She was also one of the most lovable gang-members, latterly as a wonderful guest at film festivals and Sons of The Desert conventions., where she charmed everyone she came into contact with.



Born in August, 1923, Jean was taken to Hal Roach Studios by her mother, and began with the gang in 1927. With her sweet looks and angelic blonde curls, she was the glamorous blonde of the kids, the heartbreaker. She may have followed in Mary Kornman's place in the gang formula as such, but she was by no means a carbon copy.

Jean developed her own individual style, loveably mischievous, capable of being both sweet and devilish. In some of the films she is the poor little rich girl, winsome and lonely before experiencing real life through joining the Gang's adventures. Many of her best films, though, present her as a wickedly naughty little madam. In *CRAZY HOUSE* (1928) she is again ignored by her indifferent parents, but her response is to cause trouble to attract their attention. She then goes on to invite all the Gang kids into her tricked-up house, even forcing Harry Spear to change clothes with her so she can be a boy! One of the best films to showcase Jean's talents, *CRAZY HOUSE* ends in a striking climax featuring her and the gang frolicking in a room filled with hundreds of balloons.



BARNUM AND RINGLING, INC., sums up her character beautifully in a title card, "Jean—A rich little girl with one bad habit—she sticks pins in people." Chief target for this hobby is poor Farina, before she follows him to where the gang are putting on their own animal circus, and again joins in with their adventures.

Jean was on hand for the Gang's first, transitional talkies. Her best is *BOXING GLOVES*, showing off her wicked side as the objet d'amour of both Joe Cobb and Chubby Chaney. Jean takes great delight in playing them off against each other to buy her raspberry sodas, then sitting back and giggling with glee.

Soon after, Jean left the gang. She would turn to vaudeville, but would return to Roach for a small role in Laurel and Hardy's *BABES IN TOYLAND*. She would later recall having a huge crush on leading man Felix, She also had fond memories of Both Stan and babe, especially Stan. Jean's mother was at one time a love interest of Stan's, by would later break it off. Jean recalled being upset by this, asking Stan what a womaniser was:

" He looked at me sadly and said, "well, Jeanie, it's somebody who hasn't found what they're looking for yet."

Jean later starred in the first run of the musical *CAROUSEL*, and in her later years moved to Ireland, where she acted as 'Aunt Poppy' on radio and wrote short stories. Right until the end, she remained active and ebullient. More than just a link to the past, Jean was alive in the present, an adorable lady who won the hearts of many L & H and silent film fans at her recent convention and festival appearances.

The news of Jean's passing is especially hard to accept because she never really did seem to grow old. She had such spark, such vivacity even in her 90s, ribbing interviewers, breaking into song and even once yelling at a chatty crowd! Rest in peace, Jean; you were far more than just a little rascal.





DICKIE MOORE 1925-2015



It's been a tough time for Our Gang fans of late. Dickie Moore, who had a brief but sparkling membership of the gang, died just a week after Jean Darling's passing, 2 days before his 90th Birthday. Unlike many of the Our Gang stars, Moore also went on to a successful career in other areas, becoming a high-profile child star in many 1930s and 1940s films, and even gave a 14-year-old Shirley Temple her first screen kiss.

A handsome child with fair hair and a cherubic face yet also dark, brooding eyes, Dickie Was a proper little leading man! His potential as such was recognised as early as 11 months of age, when a Fox casting director claimed he was a ringer for Lionel Barrymore! He made his screen debut soon after in *THE BELOVED ROGUE* (1926). He continued to make appearances as a young boy, notably in *PASSION FLOWER* (1930) and Cecil B DeMille's *THE SQUAW MAN* (1931). This film was not one he recalled fondly, finding DeMille to be 'insensitive to people's feelings', 'a bully and a bastard' who struck him during filming.

Happier times were to come when he joined Roach studios the following year, possibly as a result of appearing in *Deception* (1932) with Thelma Todd. Director Robert McGowan was pretty much the polar opposite of Cecil B DeMille, affectionately called 'Uncle' by many of the kids. Dickie was an ideal replacement for Jackie Cooper, who had left the position of fair-haired juvenile lead with a hint of rough vacant.

Dickie's first appearance is *BIRTHDAY BLUES*. Dickie's dad has forgotten their Mum's birthday, so Dickie and little brother Spanky hit on a scheme to buy her a present. They bake a giant, disastrous birthday cake to sell to the local kids... The end result, of course, is a very messy kitchen! Dickie and Spanky had great chemistry, and would often be teamed together as siblings. Typical of their teamwork is this great exchange from *BIRTHDAY BLUES* as they browse a pawn shop window. Dickie is examining dresses, but Spanky is fixated on a popgun..

DICKIE: gee, what should we get Mom?

Spanky: how about a swell shotgun?

DICKIE: aw, what'd she do with a shotgun?

SPANKY: Shoot Pop!

They are brothers again in *HOOK AND LADDER*, a tale of the gang starting their own fire department. Dickie's status as fire chief is constantly undermined by having to give Reluctant Spanky his medicine, and stopping him undressing himself. This leads to the memorable line from Dickie, "Come up and help me, I can't get the assistant chief's pants on!"

FREE WHEELING gives Dickie a great role as a pampered rich kid, who is nursed to within an inch of his life. When he escapes his prison, he is given a ride in the gang's home-made taxi, and has his stiff neck cured by Stymie, who yanks it back into place!

Dickie is also central to perhaps the wildest and funniest of all *OUR GANG* shorts, *THE KID FROM BORNEO*. Dickie and Spanky's Uncle George is the black sheep of the family since he ran off with the circus. Now, the circus is back in town and Dickie determines to meet him. When the gang turn up at the fairground though they mistake George's exhibit, the 'Wild Man of Borneo' for him, and invite him back to the house!

Following completion of the 1932-33 series, Dickie was snapped up for bigger roles, appearing in the title role of 1933's *OLIVER TWIST*. He continued in a number of notable roles, including 'THE LIFE OF EMILE ZOLA' and *BLUE BIRD* with Shirley Temple. He appeared with Shirley again in 1942 in *MISS ANNIE ROONEY*, playing the role of a rich high school boy who gave Shirley her first on screen kiss. He was now 16 and becoming tired of the Hollywood Machine. As he said later, "I knew what was wanted of me and I knew how to do it, but simply had little interest in the films or the characters,.". This self awareness helped him to survive child stardom better than many other Our Gangers. Dickie was always pragmatic about the business, later writing his memoirs, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star (But Don't Have Sex or Take the Car)' War service occupied his time, but future triumphs were to be had. He acted in, co-directed and co-produced a two-reel documentary called *The Boy and the Eagle*, about a disabled young man who nurses a wounded eagle back to health. The short film was nominated for an Oscar in 1949.

He would continue to act, direct and produce for a while, but was later content to take a more backseat role, writing for television and forming his own PR company. In 1988 he married the actress Jane Powell, with whom he spent the remainder of his days happily.

**MISSING
FOUND!
IN ACTION!**

THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY

Well, there's yet more proof that the unlikely and impossible can happen, at least where film preservation is concerned. The buzz of the silent film community in recent months has been the unexpected discovery of the full second reel of Laurel and Hardy's 'THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY'.

Long thought to exist only in fragments, rescued by Robert Youngson in the 50s when compiling 'WHEN COMEDY WAS KING', 'THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY' is now almost complete. The climactic pie fight, one of the all-time great silent comedy scenes, is now finally, uninterrupted, in all its original gooey glory. Along with the opening boxing scenes, discovered in the '70s, this gives us about 80% of the complete film. Only the middle scenes of Ollie taking some insurance out on

So, how did this discovery come about? In a dramatic cache of reels found in a Yukon ghost town? In a shipwreck off the coast of Valparaiso? In a Siberian film vault? Erm, well, no, actually. Rather more prosaically, it was discovered in a film can labelled.... 'BATTLE OF THE CENTURY' that had been around for years. Things are always in the last place you look for them....

This was Robert Youngson's own copy of the reel. Several classic Roach silent only now exist due to his hobby of sneaking a copy for himself (Chase's LIMOUSINE LOVE and THE STING OF STINGS among them). However, it was long thought that Youngson had ditched the rapidly decomposing reel and only made a copy of his finished sequence. Ergo, no-one bothered to check his reel, believing it would contain exactly the same edited footage we've always seen. Until, that is, collector Jon Mirsalis acquired the reel from the estate of Gordon Berkow. Jon noticed that the reel looked too long for the usual footage, "but sometimes Gordon had other things spliced onto a reel, so I didn't think much of it. I put it on the projector and I see Stan and Ollie walking down the street. I assume someone is about to get hit with a pie, so I wait... and wait... and wait... and realize there is a whole set of gags playing out before we get to the pie fight. I'm figuring that my memory is just bad so I keep watching, we go through the whole pie fight, and then it's the end of the reel. That's when it hits me that I just watched all of R2."



The footage was passed to Serge Bromberg of Lobster Films, who has completed a new restoration. This has now been seen publicly at the Telluride, Pordenone and London film festivals, with hopefully more screenings and a DVD release to follow. Reports so far are that, while we have seen many of the highlights already, this 'organic version' flows much better, as well as containing many new gags, and title cards. Most notable is the final gag, with a cop stopping Ollie to ask if they knows who started the pie fight. "What pie fight?" asks Ollie innocently, before the camera shows he street full of pie fighters! The cop is an inevitable recipient of some pastry in the face, and Stan and Ollie make a hasty retreat down the street.

We're so lucky that the list of L & H rarities has decreased even further, and yet again there's hope that lost films can defy the odds and turn up. With some more luck, maybe 'HATS OFF' will join that list someday.

The long-lost, final pie in the face is now rescued from oblivion!

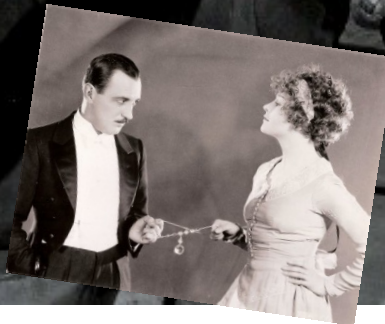
SILENT LAUGHTER SATURDAY

24 October 2015

10 AM PATHS TO PARADISE (1925)

Kevin Brownlow introduces Raymond Griffith's rarely seen comedy feature, directed by Clarence Badger.

"When Griffith saves Betty Compson (so he thinks) from a criminal gang, he becomes involved in a diamond robbery and a chase pursued by what appears to be every available motorcycle cop in the country."



11.30 LAUREL & HARDY REVELATIONS

Some recent Laurel & Hardy discoveries from their careers both together & individually. ('WHEN KNIGHTS WERE COLD', Stan Laurel's favourite Hollywood spoof, is the only title we can reveal before the day!). David Robinson will also discuss his acclaimed interview with the team.

David Robinson (writer, Times film critic and

2.15 SILENT CONTENDERS

The top international comedians that we know and love today - Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon, were rivalled by many other silent screen talents at the time. Matthew Ross (editor of 'Movie Night' magazine) introduces us to some of the performers who almost overtook the big four - Charley Chase, Max Linder, Lupino Lane and Lloyd Hamilton to name a few.



5.35 YOU'D BE SURPRISED (1930)

Walter Forde is considered by many to be one of Britain's best silent comedians. "You'd be surprised" was also directed by Forde and made in 1930 on the cusp of the transition to sound. This was Forde's last starring feature film.

"In trying to get an audition for a song he's written, Walter somehow ends up in a prison escape, handcuffed to a serial killer and suspended from a plane during a wild storm, and that's just for starters."

Introduced by Tony Slide, author of more than 70 books on silent film and friend of Walter Forde during his last years in Hollywood.



4 PM A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW

Kevin Brownlow discusses Buster Keaton and the Emmy Award winning TV series that he made about Keaton in collaboration with David Gill. They produced 3 programmes for Thames Television and Channel Four. This unique presentation will include extracts, hopefully some never-before-seen out takes. This will be followed by a Q & A, a great opportunity to ask Kevin about Keaton and the making of this series .

Hosted by David Wyatt.

8.30 GIRL SHY (1924)

One of Harold Lloyd's best, most gag-filled comedies.

"When the girl Harold meets on a train (Jobyna Ralston) is about to marry the wrong man, Lloyd's furious reaction initiates arguably the greatest chase climax of the entire silent cinema!"

"What he goes through to get there is beyond the mere power of a typewriter to describe" Variety.



LAST-MINUTE TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE!

<https://www.tickettailor.com/check-out/view-event/id/32664/chk/b2c7>

Chasing Charley Through the Years



PART 2:

THE EARLY SOUND YEARS 1929-1933

Now in
**ALL TALKING
COMEDIES**



HAL ROACH
presents
**CHARLEY
CHASE**

Continuing our look at the various stages of Charley Chase's film career, we're moving on to the sound era. Charley's sound shorts have been much neglected due to their absence from DVD. In their absence, the general unchallenged consensus has been that they are the weak link compared to his silent shorts. It's often been easier for historians to lump them in together and dismiss them as they have been hard to track down. In recent years, though, they have been revived for showings on TCM in sparkling prints, and some have even found their way to the home video market. What is revealed is an incredibly rich and diverse bunch of films; not perfect, sure, but certainly worthy of greater consideration. In fact, there are so many interesting shorts among them that I've split the sound era into two sections: the early years in this issue, the concluding part in the next issue.

At the close of the silent era, Charley Chase's career was at its peak. His run of shorts for Hal Roach were attracting more and more attention and praise, especially with prestigious distribution by MGM. In the last years of the silents, he had been pushing the envelope more and more in finding new comedy situations and twists on his established character. The onset of Talkies was hardly set to slow him down, either. Unlike many stars, Chase must have had few worries about the advent of sound: he had a warm speaking voice, and loved to sing. Furthermore, the situational humour he specialised in provided a natural forum for dialogue. As some of his earliest publicity had pointed out, Charley wasn't "a grotesque with a red nose and an Adam's apple like a watermelon; [he was] a real person!" There was no need for him to resort to silly, gagged up dialogue in his films, he could just talk naturally and be himself.

The received wisdom among comedy buffs and film critics is that Chase's talkies are not quite up to the quality of his silents. Ok, it is true that the precision and consistency of his work from 1925-27 was never quite reached again. As I discussed in part 1 of this article, those films maintained a clarity of vision and consistent comic style that makes them stand out from the crowd. Charley's later films, beginning with his last silents, experimented more, taking a more laissez-faire approach to the comedy from film to film. Inevitably, some of these ideas were more successful than others, and so the films seemed less consistent.

I'd argue that this isn't especially a *bad* thing. As brilliant as silent farces like 'MIGHTY LIKE A MOOSE' and 'THE CARETAKER'S DAUGHTER' are, to me they seem more special because they weren't repeated ad nauseam. Sure, Charley reused aspects of these films later on, and did turn out similar farcical shorts, but he didn't always stick to the safe option. He chose to experiment and try new ideas, rarely just resting on his laurels. If some of the films didn't quite work out, they were balanced by an equal number of films that worked beautifully, succeeding to equal his silent work, and often pushing his comedy in exciting new directions. I think it's worth making a comparison to the work of Edgar Kennedy and Leon Errol at RKO. Both were very funny, gifted comics who turned out very funny films. However, each man literally made hundreds of two reels in a similar vein, and after a while the films become pretty formulaic. This is one thing that certainly could not be said of Charley Chase's Hal Roach talkies!

BIG SQUAWKS: THE EARLY TALKIES

Chase's initial transition to sound was pretty seamless, with the variety of approaches and invention that characterised his 1927-29 MGM silents still alive and well. The presence of sound encouraged it, if anything. Among his first talkies, we've got similar fluctuations between domestic farce and romantic comedies, with Charley variously dapper suitor, shy young man or henpecked husband. Interestingly, however, one of the mini-genres he had been especially fond of in his late silents disappeared; after the start of the sound era he very seldomly employed the theme of Charley as family man, embarrassed by the situations his children get him into. This had provided a rich vein of comedy in films like 'THE FAMILY GROUP', 'MOVIE NIGHT' and 'IMAGINE MY EMBARRASSMENT', so its sudden abandonment is puzzling (It could have been especially apt as he advanced into middle age). I believe the reason is probably Charley's approach to film making. The man known as 'One-take Charley' by colleagues possibly didn't have the patience for the tricky task of coaxing kids into speaking dialogue, especially with the difficulties of the new technology.

While the 'family' films may have disappeared, Charley was able to find new possibilities in the sound era. His first bunch of films included not only his normal romantic farces ('THE BIG SQUAWK'; 'STEPPING OUT'), but also allowed him to indulge his fine musical talents. 'CRAZY FEET' lets him show off some dancing skills, 'LEAPING LOVE' has him as a nightclub singer, and 'GREAT GOBS' presented him as a sailor prone to breaking into song. Charley's use of romantic songs to woo his leading lady perhaps also inspired him to follow plotlines in which he is a suitor, rather than an already-married character. This was perhaps also encouraged by the presence of a new leading lady, who Charley was pretty much infatuated with in real life, too! Thelma Todd's partnership with Chase resulted in some of the best films of his career. Her first appearance is in 'SNAPPY SNEEZER', where Charley calls on Thelma at her home; unfortunately, her father is the same guy (Anders Randolph) who Charley has been annoying all morning with his constant sneezing. Reluctantly, he agrees that Charley can come for a drive with them. Before the predictable runaway car finale, there is a fantastically risqué Chase embarrassment sequence, as he is faced with the unlikely problem of removing one of his driving gloves from a mule's behind! Annoyingly, 'SNAPPY SNEEZER' is one of the few of Chase's 1929 talkies to have seen the light of day. Charley's talkies have always been harder to see than the majority of his silents. It's criminal that most of them have never seen DVD release, as there are many classics among them. This scarcity is especially true of his first few sound films; for years, all his 1929 films existed only without their soundtracks. Recently, four of them – THE BIG SQUAWK, LEAPING LOVE, SNAPPY SNEEZER and STEPPING OUT – have been restored, but are only let out of the vault for occasional screenings.

STEPPING OUT: CHARLEY & THELMA TODD

'SNAPPY SNEEZER' was the beginning of an auspicious partnership for Thelma Todd and Charley Chase. Thelma's roles soon developed to be much more than simple romantic leads; Charley was always generous with his co-stars, and allowed Thelma to thrive as much more than just a pretty face. Unlike many comedies of the time, they seem like a genuine couple, sharing human foibles. You can't fake such chemistry, and it's no surprise to hear that Chase and Todd were very close in real life, with many rumours of offscreen affairs.



Charley's first two years of talkies were highlighted by his partnership with Thelma Todd. Top to bottom: 'CRAZY FEET'; 'LOOSER THAN LOOSE'; 'THE NICKEL NURSER'

Even in the films where Thelma's role is fairly small, the chemistry between her and Charley is the highlight of the film. ALL TEED UP is a prime example; mainly less than stellar comedy of Chase as a rookie golfer, its highest spot comes at the beginning as Charley bumps into Thelma at a soda fountain and the pair are mistaken for a couple.

Charley knew a good thing when he saw it and Thelma's roles soon became much more prominent. In the best of their collaborations, the pair are virtually co-starred, each adding equally to the comedy and story. 'WHISPERING WHOOPEE' has a great role for Thelma to show her versatility as a gum-chewing good-time gal hired by Charley to help 'persuade' some businessmen to buy his property. When they turn out to be strait-laced, Charley has to pass her off as a society girl.

'DOLLAR DIZZY' sees Charley inherit a fortune, and so he books himself into a swanky spa resort. He soon becomes aware that gold-diggers are everywhere, as a series of girls all try similar tricks to woo him. Locking himself in his hotel room, he is unaware that millionaires Thelma has been double-booked into the same room. Thelma is also on guard for fortune hunters, and the pair each become convinced that the other has broken in to get a piece of the money. This sort of proto-screwball comedy, with Charley and Thelma both strong-willed, is one of the special aspects in these films. Thelma isn't just a piece of eye candy on a pedestal, she contributes actively to the comedy of the films.

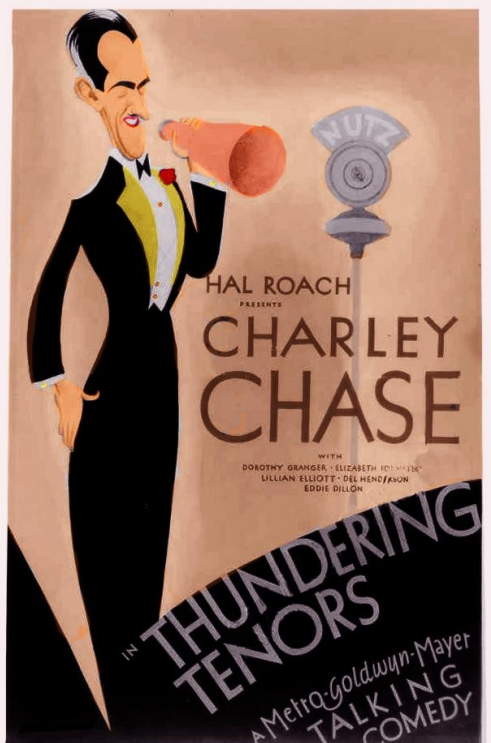
LOOSER THAN LOOSE is, for me, one of the most under-rated Charley Chase films of all. Charley has just got engaged to Thelma when his boss calls up with an assignment; he is required to entertain one of the company's clients, Mr Henderson. Unfortunately, this Mr Henderson insists on wild parties with good time girls, much to Thelma's jealousy. She insists that she come along as one of the girls. Things go from bad to worse at the nightclub; the other girl is cackling Dorothy Granger who insists on removing Mr Henderson's toupee, and generally being obnoxious. Henderson takes Charley aside and insists they change girls, then tells Thelma it was Charley's idea as he likes Dorothy! This leads to an escalating scene wherein Thelma takes her revenge by flirting with Henderson; Charley responds by snuggling with Dorothy, leading Thelma to up the ante, and so on. Things come to a head when Charley mistakes Edgar Kennedy and his squeeze for Henderson and Thelma, and knocks him unconscious. The blame is planted on Henderson; Charley and Thelma forgive and forget, making a hasty exit. With a similar plot to 'WHISPERING WHOOPEE', 'LOOSER THAN LOOSE' stands above that film thanks to some subtle plot changes that heighten the effectiveness of the comedy. For one thing, the film places a focus on Charley and Thelma's relationship at the centre of the situations. They obviously care deeply about each other, making us care about them more. Much of the funniest moments come less from gags, than their facial expressions: Charley's pained look when he realises he'll be in hot water with Thelma, a wonderfully acted scene of disappointment as Thelma sees her new engagement ring for the first time, the pair's false smiles through gritted teeth. Best of all is the scene where they try to make each other jealous by flirting with their new partners: their giggly smiles are punctuated with hilarious snarls and sneers!

Secondly, Charley is now an underdog; he only goes along with the evening because his boss insists, and because he is at the mercy of the client's whims. This makes us root for him more, especially as the other characters give him such a hard time! 'LOOSER THAN LOOSE' shows the mastery of character dimension that added such charm and realism to even the wildest, silliest of Chase plots.

This is also a hallmark of the best-known Chase-Todd film, 'THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG'. It's the most celebrated of these films, and rightly so. A simple story of that timeless awkward situation, the blind date, it milks every possible bit of comedy, adding a huge dose of charm and warmth. Charley is dragged along by room-mate Carlton Griffin as a companion for Thelma, who is visiting Griffin's girlfriend. He is reluctant to attend another blind date, having been stung by loud, dumpy Kay Deslys before. Eventually, he compromises; he will go along, but will make himself as distasteful as possible. So, he wears Griffin's old suit, doesn't shave and chews garlic! For his part, Griffin takes advantage of the situation by borrowing Charley's fancy new suit.

When Charley finally meets Thelma, he instantly realises his mistake, and spends the remainder of the evening trying to remedy things, shaving in the reflection of a man's shiny jacket and drinking perfume, all whilst trying to dodge Kay Deslys and

Charley plays a radio singer in 'THUNDERING TENORS'. Ironically enough, this is one of the few films he doesn't sing in!



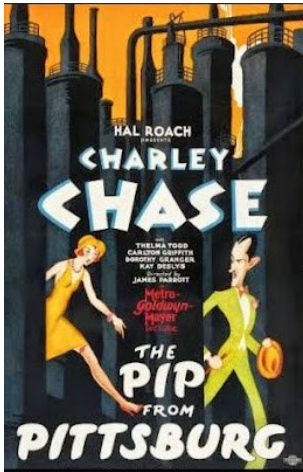
dance with Thelma. The topper comes as he has to reclaim his suit from Griffin, doing so piece by piece during the blackouts of a 'moonlight dance'. Each time the lights come back on, the two are in a different state of undress, including at one point sharing the same pair of trousers!

Thelma, for her part, is wonderful. Though her glamour plays a large part in her role, she is much more than just a pretty face. She is quick-witted as she gets wise to Charley's schemes, teasing him about his shabby suit. Again, they make a truly charming, convincing couple in a film which remains one of the most timeless in Chase's canon of work.

Charley had plans for all his comedies to team him with Thelma. Hal Roach, sadly, had other ideas; Thelma was taken to star in her own series with Zasu Pitts, leaving Charley without one of the biggest assets to his sound work.

She would return for one more film after 'THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG'. 'THE NICKEL NURSER' is another underrated comedy, with timid spendthrift Charley hired to teach a millionaire's daughters the value of money. Two of the sisters persuade Thelma to swap places with the Swedish maid Greta (a devastatingly funny Garbo parody) so that she can cosy up to Charley and persuade him not to cut their allowances. Greta's jealous husband, the butler, isn't too happy about all this, and there is some great bedroom farce before things end happily. Though Thelma has less to do here than in 'PIP', their scenes together are great, and this is a funny, fast-moving film that ends their partnership on a high note.

While it is these brilliant romantic comedies that are most indicative of this era, the early sound years were also marked by Chase's continued experimentation with a variety of approaches. As he became more confident with sound, he would experiment with different ideas and themes from one film to the next. While few of his films consecutively followed such diversions, some themes emerge that he kept returning to. ..



MINI MUSICALS & OTHER DIVERSIONS...



Beginning with 'GREAT GOBS', Charley would increasingly indulge his musical whims beyond a mere song. He made a habit of turning out a couple of films every year that presented some of his (usually self-composed) musical numbers. Many of these also centred around his barbershop quartet, 'The Ranch Boys'. 'HIGH CS' and 'ROUGH SEAS' are the most commonly seen pair of this group. Both are set in WW1 France, the former with Chase and the boys spending more time singing and dodging the guardhouse than fighting, the second chronicling their return to America after the armistice. Present in both is Thelma Todd, as Charley's French girlfriend. While HIGH CS focuses more on music and romance, ROUGH SEAS succeeds more as a comedy. Charley's attempt to smuggle Thelma on board in a sack leads to a treat for the boys as her leg punctures the sack; he then attempts to disguise her as a private with the aid of a mismatched uniform pilfered by his pet monkey! It's a fine comedy, with nice music and the always natural charm of Charley and Thelma's romances. Chase also has an interesting approach to his performances, his character being much more self-assured and wisecracking, the bane of his Lieutenant's life. Private Chase is more similar to his boisterous characters in the silent 'FIGHT PEST', and the future 'THE HECKLER' or 'SONS OF THE DESERT'.

Together, HIGH CS and ROUGH SEAS are companion pieces, which could be shown together as a Chase feature film. However, the saga of the Ranch Boys doesn't end there! Charley returned to his wartime-themed musical endeavours, and this more boisterous character, a few more times, though these films seem to be forgotten about. 'FIRST IN WAR' sees Charley and the boys embroiled in a Latin American revolution after they write a new national anthem. 'ARABIAN TIGHTS' takes them, more exotically still, to the deserts after accidentally joining the French Foreign legion while on an army reunion. Publicity for the 1933 Chase series made

More Charley and Thelma! 'THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG', 'HIGH CS', and 'THE REAL MCCOY'



Charley with musical comrades 'the Ranch Boys' in 'HIGH Cs' and, at right, solo in 'THE TABASCO KID'.



it out as though these musicals were returning by demand, but it's more likely that was spin to cover for his lack of inspiration at this time. It was easy for Chase to turn out a musical comedy, but truthfully the quality of these shorts was declining. While 'ARABIAN TIGHTS' has some fun, bizarre gags in it, 'SHERMAN SAID IT' is a very loose, sloppy, noisy entry in the Ranch Boys canon. Chase must have realised that these films had probably run their course, as there were no more entries. The Ranch Boys did reappear in civvies, though, as Charley's painter buddies in 'LUNCHEON AT TWELVE'. Ranch Boy and Chase co-songwriter Jimmy Adams died shortly after this film, further putting paid to this strand of films.

Another relatively blind alley was his use of stereotypical Hillbilly settings. This was an occasional theme, including 'THE REAL McCOY', 'ONE OF THE SMITHS', 'SOUTHERN EXPOSURE' and even the later Columbia film 'TEACHER'S PEST'. These films have their moments in the incongruity of the modern, dapper Charley in unsophisticated rural surroundings, but Chase's human comedy doesn't need two-dimensional comic surroundings to function effectively. He had all the comic material he needed in the everyday metropolitan environment of offices, drawing rooms, dinner dates and hotel lobbies, and it is the films set in these environments which remain his best talkies.

Closer to his usual formula, Charley also turned out some romantic and farce comedies, but ones that simultaneously made experimental and oddball stylistic leaps. 'FIFTY MILLION HUSBANDS' and 'IN WALKED CHARLEY' have an interesting twist in having Charley only tangentially connected to the unfolding farce, rather than at its centre. Meanwhile, 'THE PANIC IS ON' is an overlooked gem, a great spoof of the Depression, a topical angle that Chase never followed again.

Significantly, these more off-beat efforts were usually his films without Thelma. Chase was always very perceptive to the talents of his co-stars and co-directors, and while he was the driving force, he had a natural tendency to mould them toward who he was working with. If his leading ladies were less notable, he seems to have used it as an opportunity to indulge a comic whim. With the two-dimensional, squeaky-voiced Gay Seabrook on board, he returns to a more slapstick-based comedy for 'THE HASTY MARRIAGE'. Chase always did his slapstick with style, however. 'THE HASTY MARRIAGE' makes much out of a simple love triangle between Charley, girlfriend Kitty and pompous Streetcar inspector Eddie Dunn. Proceedings are brightened by the presence of James Finlayson as Kitty's streetcar driving father and much location shooting on the Los Angeles Street Railway. The core comic sequences are excellent, including Charley conning Eddie into a phone conversation with a warbling gramophone record so he can make time with Kitty, and a slapstick fight on the streetcar. Best of all is a sequence where Charley uses increasingly unorthodox methods to get Fin's permission to marry Kitty.



Inspector Dunn is keeping watch to ensure that Fin doesn't speak to any passengers, leading Charley to clamber all over the streetcar roof to try and catch his attention. Thwarted, he hitches a ride on the front of the streetcar, but is hurled into the luggage-rack on the front of the car when Fin stops suddenly. Eddie is becoming suspicious, so Fin locks Charley in the luggage rack until he leaves. Unfortunately, as the streetcar moves along, Charley's exposed position leads him to encounters with a workman's blowtorch, a street sprinkler and a painter's bucket of whitewash. Finally, singed, soaked, whitewashed and half-crippled, he gets what he was after!

All in all, 'THE HASTY MARRIAGE' is a wonderful little film, rich in verbal and visual gags and great situations, if not the charming romance of the Chase-Todd films. It also has a great supporting cast, with Eddie Dunn in one of his best roles, Fin, matronly Lilian Elliott, and a great cameo from Billy Gilbert (in one of his first Hal Roach appearances). As Charley sits aboard the crowded streetcar, burly Gilbert glares at him. Eventually, Charley offers him his seat. In the blink of an eye, his gruff façade melts, and he responds "Ohhh, **THANK** you!" in the most effeminate way possible!

This little gag is indicative of another emerging theme in Chase's work in the early 30s. He experimented several times with camp humour, from little moments such as this to basing plots of his films around them. A natural extension of his use of risqué humour, this does represent a more dated aspect to his work. For instance, both 'FAST WORK' and 'IN WALKED CHARLEY' centre around Chase humouring apparent lunatic Del Henderson, and in both situations Chase finds himself forced to dance with Henderson. Obviously, this was fairly non-standard, edgy stuff in 1930, but now the shock value has long gone. Indeed, Henderson's dialogue, intended to be comedic, now seems totally reasonable:

HENDERSON: ... Well, after all, men play sports together and eat and drink together. Why shouldn't men dance together?

To be fair, although the comic attitude is dated, it's intent is harmless enough. Really, the humour is not from poking fun at gay people, but at Charley's embarrassment in dealing with the situation, and the contrast in the gentle, dignified Henderson's eccentric behaviour.

The most bizarre of Charley's effeminate moments is 'GIRL SHOCK' (1930). Here, just to come in to contact with women causes him to launch into a shrieking, giggling Pan-like mania. Doctors advise him that a shock could cure him. Charley decides that a dog bite would do the trick, but he can't persuade any dogs to bite him, so he walks around with sausages tied to the back of his trousers! Finally, a blood transfusion is suggested from a suitably masculine donor, which should give enable him to take on more of this personality (decidedly dodgy biomedical theory, this!) Charley's prospective father in law Edgar Kennedy is selected as donor, and the operation is a success. Unfortunately, Edgar's true personality is now revealed as Charley turns into a woman-chasing dynamo; Mrs Kennedy is less than pleased, and exacts her wrath upon Edgar! One of Chase's most obscure films, this is also one of his very strangest.

This early talkie era of Chase's career draws to a close at the beginning of 1932. He was consciously feeling this at the time; in a rut at Roach Studios, he longed to make features. However, Roach was preoccupied with Laurel and Hardy, and MGM weren't interested in a Charley Chase feature. Charley left at the close of his 1931-32 season, but returned when offered a better contract. The last few films before he left show him starting to shift toward a new character, partly inspired by the knowledge that he was approaching 40. In 'THE TABASCO KID', 'THE NICKEL NURSER', and 'IN WALKED CHARLEY' he makes the first steps away from his carefree, 'Goodtime Charley' character to a more fussy, harassed white collar worker type that would dominate his next season...

ENTER THE 'NANCE': 1932-33

Chase's first few releases of 1932 mark a turning point in his career. If the last few films



The immaculately tailored, self-assured 'Goodtime Charley' of old was replaced by the nervous, fussy 'Nance' character for Charley's 1932-33 season. Above are two photos used in promoting the new character.

showed him moving towards a new character, now he plunged into it wholesale. Where the old Charley was confident, self-assured and romantic, the new character would be nervous, flustered and helpless. 'Goodtime Charley' was something of a playboy, who was usually busier chasing romance than holding down a job; now he was definitively fixed in clerical roles. Chase dubbed his new character the Nance, adding glasses, an oversized suit and a nervous laugh he called his "fig bar". He had once expressed the belief that a comedian could make a fresh new comic approach based on assimilating the mannerisms of a comic very different in appearance. Disturbingly enough, he seems to be trying out that theory based on using the hugely irritating Ben Blue's mannerisms! Blue was at this point newly signed to Roach and beginning work in the ill-fated *Taxi Boys* series; there is definitely a similarity in the twitchy, whimpering 'Nance', even down to his use of body language, that is surely more than coincidence. Thankfully though, Chase is much more skilled at using these devices. Nevertheless, it still comes as something of a relief when tones this down after the first few films. .

As part of the greater creative control Chase received under his new contract, Chase chose to work with his brother James Parrott as director again. The new contract, chance to work with Jimmy and the time off, seemed to have reinvigorated him; on returning to the studios, he shot his first 3 films back to back in a matter of weeks. Furthermore, the films that resulted are amongst his funniest work.

There was also a fresh approach to the comedy. The invention and variation in the 1932-33 season is incredible. If Charley had previously experimented with ideas, he now threw everything he had at the comedies. Within the first 6 films of the season, situation comedy, camp humour, sci-fi, visual puns, and surrealist comedy all make appearances. Each is also stuffed full of gags, resulting in some of Chase's funniest films. He almost seems to have been testing the possibilities of the 'Nance' by testing him in every imaginable way!

YOUNG IRONSIDES got the series off to an exceptional start. One of Chase's all-time funniest, it simply brims over with great set-pieces, snappy dialogue and fast-moving situations. In need of \$1000 to pay his rent arrears, Charley advertises in the newspaper as 'Fearless', who will undertake any job to get the cash. He is engaged by Clarence Wilson, who plans to stop his daughter Muriel from entering the Miss World competition and bringing shame on the blue-blooded family. On the train to Atlantic City, Charley unknowingly sits next to Muriel and falls for her as they share a table in the dining car. A very funny sequence follows as Charley struggles to eat some decidedly wayward, rubbery asparagus that goes anywhere but in his mouth. Charley's facial expressions are absolutely hilarious here, especially the murderous look he gives the steward who recommends the asparagus to Muriel! Muriel Evans is an excellent foil for Charley too, barely able to conceal her mirth. The train enters a tunnel, and Charley plucks up the courage to chat to her, telling her "I'm awfully glad I sat next to you...in fact, you're just the sort of girl I've always been looking for" as the camera blacks out. Just then, light is restored, and it turns out Charley has actually been talking to Billy Gilbert! Charley apologises profusely, only for the suddenly bashful Gilbert to coyly tell him, "oh, that's *quite* alright!".



In Atlantic City, Charley arouses the suspicion of the house detective (Heinie Conklin), and the two continue a game of cat and mouse that will punctuate the rest of the film. Meanwhile, Muriel tricks him into thinking that the girl he is looking for is someone else entirely. Following her to the beach, Charley manages to lose his bathing suit in the water. He summons a boy to fetch him some clothes; the boy obliges by filching a bag from a launderette, but it turns out to contain only collars. Not to be defeated, Charley fashions a grass skirt from them! Now we're into a classic Hal Roach scene of crowds following him along the street, including suspicious cop Harry Bernard. Bernard gives chase, the two ending up in the middle of a Hula Dance show, dancing their chase in time to the music. Charley gives him the slip, and makes it back to the hotel just as the competition is about to begin. Denied entry, he masquerades as 'Miss Hamburg' with the aid of a makeshift costume and a sign stolen from a hamburger stand. Making it to Muriel's room, he believes he has locked her in the closet, but when her father arrives it turns out to be the house detective! Muriel arrives on the scene and Charley learns the truth. All is not lost, as Muriel an-



Scenes from Charley's excellent 1932 films. Top-bottom:

With Muriel Evans in 'YOUNG IRONSIDES'; Charley has 'GIRL GRIEF'...or is that 'CAT GRIEF?'

Working out a plan to hitch a lift in 'FALLEN ARCHES'.

nounces that she will not enter the contestant and instructs her father to pay Charley. Charley pays his bail money and the pair make a happy exit... only to run into a service trolley full of asparagus!

It is impossible to recount the sheer number of gags and bits of business in YOUNG IRONSIDES. With a clever plot reminiscent of his silent films, a great supporting cast and brilliant, often risqué sight gags in the best Chase tradition, this got the 1932 season off to an excellent start.

Very nearly as good is the second short, 'GIRL GRIEF'. Revisiting his silent 'WHAT WOMEN DID FOR ME', bashful Charley is sent to teach music at a girls' school. In fact, the comparison is a good illustration of the difference between his classic silents and the approach he was taking at this time. While the original was more tightly plotted, 'GIRL GRIEF' abandons the more meticulous, farcical elements and instead goes off out of leftfield, taking a comic detour to follow one gag sequence as far as it can go. The girls lay catnip in Charley's bed as a gag; soon he is over-run with felines, and has to come up with increasingly creative solutions to dispose of them. Finally sleeping, the experience seems to have had a profound impact on him, as he begins to meow in his sleep, before sleepwalking around as a cat, causing chaos in the rooms and fighting with other tomcats. Finally, he is awakened, and he and Muriel embrace, as they are pounced upon by about 50 kittens! While the silent films would never have settled for such a loose ending, many of the sound films, especially from the 1932-33 series, are content to just ramble along as long as something funny is happening. To be fair, whilst this is much sloppier storytelling, the comic highs in these films more than make up for it. In 'GIRL GRIEF', for instance, Charley's cat impressions are spot on and absolutely hilarious.

Working with Jimmy Parrott must have helped inspire this gagged-up approach. Jimmy was a gagman extraordinaire just like Charley, and the two fed off each other. It's surely no coincidence that the 1932 films are similar in style to the films Charley directed starring Jimmy a decade earlier. Jimmy's starring films tended to use exactly such a method to eke all the available material out of one gag sequence. POST NO BILLS, for instance, taps a wonderfully rich vein of Jimmy's attempts to paste up his advertising posters, taking his commitment to manic levels as he plasters them on anything in sight.

'FALLEN ARCHES', directed not by Jimmy but Gus Meins, also follows this approach. Charley has a tendency to take things literally that borders on autism, and is driving his boss Billy Gilbert insane. After lots of visual puns to illustrate this, Gilbert tells him to hike out to the San Francisco office for a while; Charley responds literally by hitch-hiking! Some of the 'literal' gags are a bit feeble, but things pick up hugely as Charley gets out on the road. Best of all is a sequence revived from his silent 'ALL WET'. Chase pushes the car he is hitching a ride in to get it started; unfortunately, he pushes it straight into a Hal Roach Studios Gigantic Mudhole™. Charley's single-mindedness in this film makes it totally logical for him to dive straight in and attempt repairs! Eventually a cop comes by, telling them that they can't park there, and asking for the licence plate number. When the driver says he can't remember, the cop dives straight in too to have a look!

'MR BRIDE', directed by James Parrott again, follows one gag as far as it can possibly go to an even greater extent; it is also the apotheosis of Chase's experimentation with camp humour. Charley is again a fussy clerk, assistant to the even more anally retentive Del Henderson. Henderson plans everything out in meticulous detail, not just in work but in life too. He is planning to get married, and takes Charley along on a practise honeymoon for his upcoming wedding. He also decides that, to make things as authentic as possible, Charley should role play the part of 'Mrs Henderson'. Charley's frustration as he is forced to go through the motions of a new bride—walking to the wedding march, checking into a hotel, making small talk at a dinner party, having his hair permed - for an entire two reels is absolutely wonderful, and perfect material for his comedy of embarrassment.

What makes things funnier is that he does all of this not dressed as a woman, but as his normal self. Henderson could have chosen to dress Charley in drag, which would have made a much more standard comedy. In keeping Charley in his normal outfit, the incongruity is much funnier, especially as none of the other

characters question it. Charley was clearly having a whale of a time pushing his fussy, uptight new character to his limits by placing him in contrasting situations that would make him extremely uncomfortable. NOW WE'LL TELL ONE plays with a similar idea, adding in a touch of sci-fi. A scientist has invented an electric belt which transfers the personality of a subject to the wearer. By accident, Charley, who has been dumped by Muriel for being too timid, comes to wear it. In the course of the scientist's experiment, he comes to exhibit the personality of a bal-



Charley tries out his Tarzan impersonation in 'NATURE IN THE WRONG'. Muriel Evans is, surprisingly enough, convinced!

let dancer, a romantic Sheik, a drunkard and a trick motorcyclist, all at inappropriate times and to Muriel's bemusement! Fortunately, he redeems himself when taking on the personality of a prizefighter, just as some burglars invade Muriel's home. The limp personality of the Nance makes the contrasts more amusing than they would have been with his previous character, but unfortunately, much of the comedy suffers from some of the budget restrictions affecting Roach films at this time. One key sequence, Charley's wild motorbike ride, suffers from the same obvious back projection that sabotaged the climax of Laurel and Hardy's 'COUNTY HOSPITAL' around the same time. 'NOW WE'LL TELL ONE' falls short of the previous films, but is still a much more original, imaginative comedy short than those being made by almost anyone else at the time.

Even more wild is NATURE IN THE WRONG, which again plays on the comedy contrast between Charley's Nance and some traditionally masculine roles; This time, he imagines himself to be Tarzan! Investigating his family tree in the hope of finding nobility that will impress Muriel's parents, Charley's response is inherited by his rival Carlton Griffin. Griffin forges a letter telling Charley that he is a direct descendent of Tarzan of the apes! initially distressed by this news, Charley warms to it when Muriel tells him how romantic she thinks Tarzan is.

Things now get pretty way out, as we see Charley and Muriel setting up home in the jungle, chatting with their neighbouring gorillas and a lion (dubbed with the voice of James Finlayson, of all people!). Full of broad, wild parody, this is one of the shorts most reminiscent of the Snub Pollard and Jimmy Parrott shorts Charley directed in the early 20s.

The partnership between Jimmy and Charley was broken up for now, though. Jimmy's personal problems were catching up with him, making it impossible for him to take on the responsibility for directing films himself. While he would still contribute gags and direct other comedians' films occasionally, his and Charley's close partnership on set was now at an end. 'NATURE IN THE WRONG', 'HIS SILENT RACKET' and 'ARABIAN TIGHTS' would all be released without director credit, but with the bulk of the work done by Charley.

Of course, Chase was more than capable on his own, and 'HIS SILENT RACKET' ranks as one of his all-time funniest. Charley is conned into part-ownership of James Finlayson's failing dry-cleaner business after Fin has created an elaborate charade of a thriving enterprise. This has included his wife Anita Garvin, posing as a sultry satisfied customer (not to mention offering extra persuasion with her bathtub gin!) and legions of employees who turn out to have been standing in their underwear, pressing their own trousers! The unsuccessful business has also been targeted by racketeers, who deliver a time bomb disguised in a package. Charley ends up driving around with it in the back of the company van. As the inevitable explosion occurs, Charley, Muriel, the racketeers and half of Culver City's police squad end up wearing randomly mixed-up clothes!

While excellent comedies such as these continued to emerge, they were becoming more sporadic. In contrast to the sparkling start of the series, as 1933 wore on Chase was turning out some extremely mediocre comedies. Despite a promising set up of Charley in charge of boy scouts, the most 'MIDSUMMER MUSH' can offer is him repeatedly falling in a lake. 'LUNCHEON AT TWELVE' is ok, but fairly pedestrian slapstick. 'SHERMAN SAID IT', meanwhile, is perhaps the weakest short he ever made, a randomly connected series of shrill WW1 gags and tepid songs that is a pale, etiolated shadow of 'ROUGH SEAS'.

Despite his own capabilities, the loss of Brother Jimmy had definitely affected him. He, too, was having his own troubles at home. Furthermore, the continued success of Laurel & Hardy in feature could only have added to his malcontent, stuck in shorts. Even his brilliant role in 'SONS OF THE DESERT' was a supporting role that amplified the division.

From the self-assured, creative burst of energy that heralded his arrival into sound shorts, and the creativity of the 1932 shorts, Charley seemed to have descended into a rut. Of course, anything with Charley in it has at least some merit, if only his natural charm. Leonard Maltin nailed it when he said that "the charm of Charley and the Roach staffers mean that even his lesser shorts compare favourably to some of the most ambitious efforts of other studios."

Happily, Chase's rut was just about to end as he entered another phase of renewed creativity. The films which would follow in 1934-36 are vastly under-rated, but are some of his most meticulously crafted films ever, many hitting the high watermark of his early 30s work, and even his silent, also offering a much greater consistency to boot. The inconsistencies of his work in the early sound years have frequently tarnished the reputation of his sound work as a whole. Yet, there are so many great little films in this bunch, and a brilliant range of comic experimentation that for every dud, turned out some truly original, funny little films. From sci-fi, to musicals, to romance, to out and out slapstick comedy, Charley showed that his fertile comic mind could tackle almost anything. Now that these films have been seen a bit more widely on TCM, we can start to appreciate this. If only a DVD boxed set would come along! In the mean time, beg, borrow and steal as many of you can of Charley's experiments in sound comedy and enjoy this diverse, charming and funny bunch of films from the heyday of comedy's greatest studio.

NEXT TIME: 1934-40 Discover Charley's latter-day classics for Roach and Columbia



THE STREETS WHERE MAGIC HAPPENED

Standing on the shoulders of Munchkins, and walking in the steps of Comedy Giants in Culver City...

Culver City is a pleasant district to the SouthWest of Los Angeles, not far from LAX airport. Not one of the tourist hotspots of L.A, it barely registers in guidebooks, but to classic comedy fans it is a special place of pilgrimage. Once home to both MGM and the Hal Roach Studios, it was the birthing pool of countless treasured films.

Nucleated around Culver and Venice Boulevards, Culver City was founded by Newspaperman Harry Culver in 1917. Thomas H Ince established the first studio there in 1918, followed by Hal Roach a year later. Most prestigiously, The Goldwyn studios were built in the early 20s, and later inherited by MGM. This behemoth of a studio survives, given a new lease of life as Sony Pictures Studios. It is even open to the public for daily tours.

‘THE LOT OF FUN’

Unlike MGM, Hal Roach’s elegant white wooden-fronted studio has not survived. It was torn down in the early 60s and now nothing remains. Yet, paradoxically, more of the spirit of the ‘Lot of Fun’ remains, in the streets and buildings of Culver City. While MGM’s stars generally remained cloistered on studio sets, Roach’s film-makers took every opportunity to film out on the streets. Time and time again, recognisable landmarks pop up as backdrops to the comedic action: the pie-slice-shaped Culver Hotel, the squat storefronts of the buildings, the wide intersections where mayhem takes place. All of these, clean and sunlit in the then brand new suburb, become almost as recognisable as the bit part players, offering a comfortable familiarity to the viewer and a continuity to the films.

Until last Summer, I had never been there before, but yet I felt I knew the place already. While passing through LA I had to make a visit, but prepared myself for disappointment. Surely time would have warped the streets beyond all recognition, the love and laughter put into the films long since departed...

Well, happily I was wrong. Naturally many things have changed, but these are still recognisably the same locations immortalised on film. What helps is that, despite having the whole of Los Angeles as a playground, the Roach film makers were particularly fond of a small handful of streets. This means that we have seen these locations countless times, from all angles. Best of all, it is this handful of locations that have remained the most unchanged. Unlike the scuzzy downtown locations favoured by Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd, Culver City is also a very pleasant part of L.A. Recently it has been promoted as an art and food quarter, and makes very pleasant strolling. The traffic lights even emit a ‘kuku’ noise when it is safe to cross! Coincidence...?

Washington and Venice boulevards divide at the heart of Culver City, moving apart in a ‘V’ shape. Between them lies Main Street, a short road lined with storefronts, trees and alleyways. Main’s intersection with Washington is spacious; on the southeast side sits the elegant Culver Hotel. This small collection of roads and buildings formed the bulk of backgrounds in Roach films. The use of these locations reaches its apex in the MGM silents from 1927-29. Though many earlier and later films also used them, this particular run of films all seemed to feature crowds gathering on streets, to watch a Max Davidson dilemma, Charley Chase embarrassment or Laurel and Hardy fracas. Pick any Roach silent from this time and you can pretty much play Culver City Bingo!

Main Street, with its single storey shops, very much gives the appearance of a small town high street. Any-time street scenes were required that weren’t filmed on the backlot, they were usually filmed here. Laurel and Hardy’s hilarity in ‘LEAVE EM LAUGHING’ occurs here, and the Max Davidson films ‘DUMB DADDIES’ and ‘THE BOY FRIEND’ also make prominent use of the street. In between the shops are alleyways, a staple of slapstick chase scenes. One of the alleyways on here was the scene of L & H’s infamous pants-changing in ‘LIBERTY’, and also appeared in their pre-teaming short ‘45 MINUTES FROM HOLLYWOOD’.

Many times, this one little street was shot from different angles and made to represent a whole host of different locations in one go. ‘PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP’ is one of the most notable examples of this; L &





The Culver Hotel.

H's adventures all over town are actually a merry dance up and down the same short length of street! The presence of the Culver Hotel is a giveaway to this. Looking out for the looming building is a key to spotting scenes filmed on Main Street. In '45 MINUTES FROM HOLLYWOOD', a tourbus heads down this way, as do the open topped buses in Chase's 'THE WAY OF ALL PANTS' and, again, 'PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP'!

The Culver Hotel, built in 1923 by Harry Culver, was the focal point of Culver City, and remains so today. It's elegantly austere exterior meant it could stand in for civil buildings, an office block or fancy restaurant, as well as a hotel. The unusual shape means that it also had entrances on the corners. This made quite a visually arresting, 'clean' space to film a scene, with little in the background to distract. Charley Chase's wedding, in 'LIMOUSINE LOVE', for instance, takes place here. The hotel's 'island' status, surrounded by roads, adds to the plot as Charley drives around and around it, unable to stop because of the naked woman in his car!

The back entrance, on is also the entrance where Laurel begins chasing Dorothy Coburn in 'PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP', as seen in the still below. Into the Talkie era, the hotel seemed a natural taxi pickup point for 'THE TAXI BOYS' in films like 'HOT SPOT' and 'BRING 'EM BACK A WIFE'. The hotel also played a key role, albeit offscreen, in later film history. When 'THE WIZARD OF OZ' was filmed at MGM in 1939, it became living quarters for the Munchkins, who famously held debauched parties here!

With the hotel in the background, the Washington-Main intersection is where crowds all gather in the famous scenes from 'PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP' (left).

Washington itself, busier and more recognisably metropolitan than Main Street, is featured in a number of car chases – 'THE TAXI BOYS' films, notably, and Chase's 'THE COUNT TAKES THE COUNT'. Walk a little further southwest, and you come to the site of the Culver City Hall. This was disguised as a courtroom in L & H's 'GOING BYE-BYE', and was the eponymous 'COUNTY HOSPITAL'. Sadly, the original was demolished, but an impressive replica façade has been erected in the exact same spot.

So many films took place in this little area that it is impossible to list them all. Indeed, I struggled to even process them all while there. While the Music Box Steps in Silverlake are justifiably iconic, allowing you to follow in L & H's footsteps, Culver City is actually a much more immersive experience. My favourite thing about standing in the spots where my heroes stood was not the chance to do a copy-cat photo, but to look out at the view they would have seen as they filmed. Suddenly, they weren't confined to frames of film. The disappeared scene around those frames filled out; I could see the colours, hear the noise of traffic, feel the heat of the California sun. I imagined Stan Laurel or Charley Chase briefing the cameraman on the angle they wanted, then walking back to take their position, ready to be immortalised. I imagined the halted traffic on Washington Boulevard, or the crew walking back down Main Street, satisfied with a funny scene. Perhaps they conferred on this street corner, or under the shade of that awning, shaping the scenes that we now know and love. In such a well-filmed part of town, surely each corner had some part to play. If you use your imagination, you can step back in time in Culver City, and imagine you are part of it too.

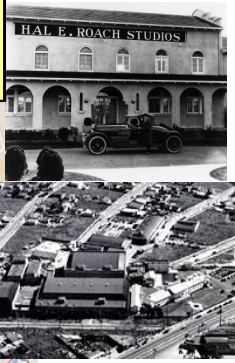
Alas, time has marched on, and the Lot of Fun is long gone. So too are the laughter-makers, and in their places only the naked streets remain. The secret of Hal Roach studios was never in these streets themselves. There's no magic in the humdrum concrete, no secrets in the fabric of the walls. But, on these pleasant yet unremarkable streets, a crowd of immensely talented people passed by briefly to weave their dreams. They congregated daily, on a mission to create laughter. On the plain concrete and through dark alleyways, in the shadow of that big hotel, they did so, giving of themselves to make audiences forget their troubles. Almost 100 years later, new audiences are still doing so in their company. The people responsible have long since gone, but they transcended these everyday streets into a place that feels special, an inventory of happy memories and smiles. Now, that is magic after all...



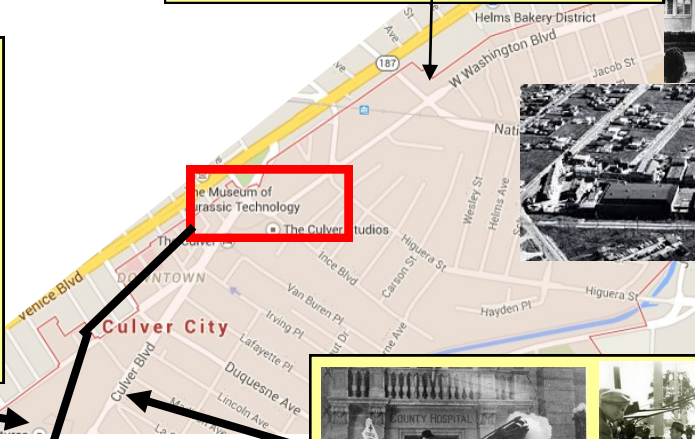
The Culver City Hall, doubling as 'COUNTY HOSPITAL', has been torn down. In it's place is a replica façade, which your editor is enjoying above!

A tour of Culver City..

The Hal Roach Studios were located at the corner of Washington and National, but were sadly torn



Also in Culver City is the former MGM studios (Now Sony Pictures Studios), whose front gate features in Buster Keaton's 'FREE AND EASY'.



Main Street's small town vibe features in (amongst many), 'PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP', 'DUMB DADDIES', 'LIBERTY' & 'LEAVE 'EM LAUGHING'

The Culver City Hall doubles as 'COUNTY HOSPITAL' and a courtroom in 'GOING BYE-BYE'

The Washington-Main intersection features in many, many films. Its wide open space was great for scenes of gathering crowds and streetfights, such as Charley Chase's 'THE FAMILY GROUP', L & H's 'PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP' and 'HATS OFF'. The intersection is dominated by The Culver Hotel (see below).



Shot from many different angles, The Culver Hotel's grand facades made it suitable to also portray offices, civil buildings and mansions. From left-right, some of the most famous Roach scenes that took place at various angles around the site: Jean Harlow's cameo in 'LIBERTY'; the moment where Stan regains his lost underwear, to the amusement of onlookers, in 'PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP'; the wedding scenes of 'LIMOUSINE LOVE', where Charley Chase tries to conceal the naked lady he has innocently picked up in his car!

Randle's Scandals

*MEET Frank Randle: COMIC KING OF CHAOS, EMPEROR OF MANCU-
NIAN FILMS, BREAKER OF TABOOS, HURLER OF DENTURES....*



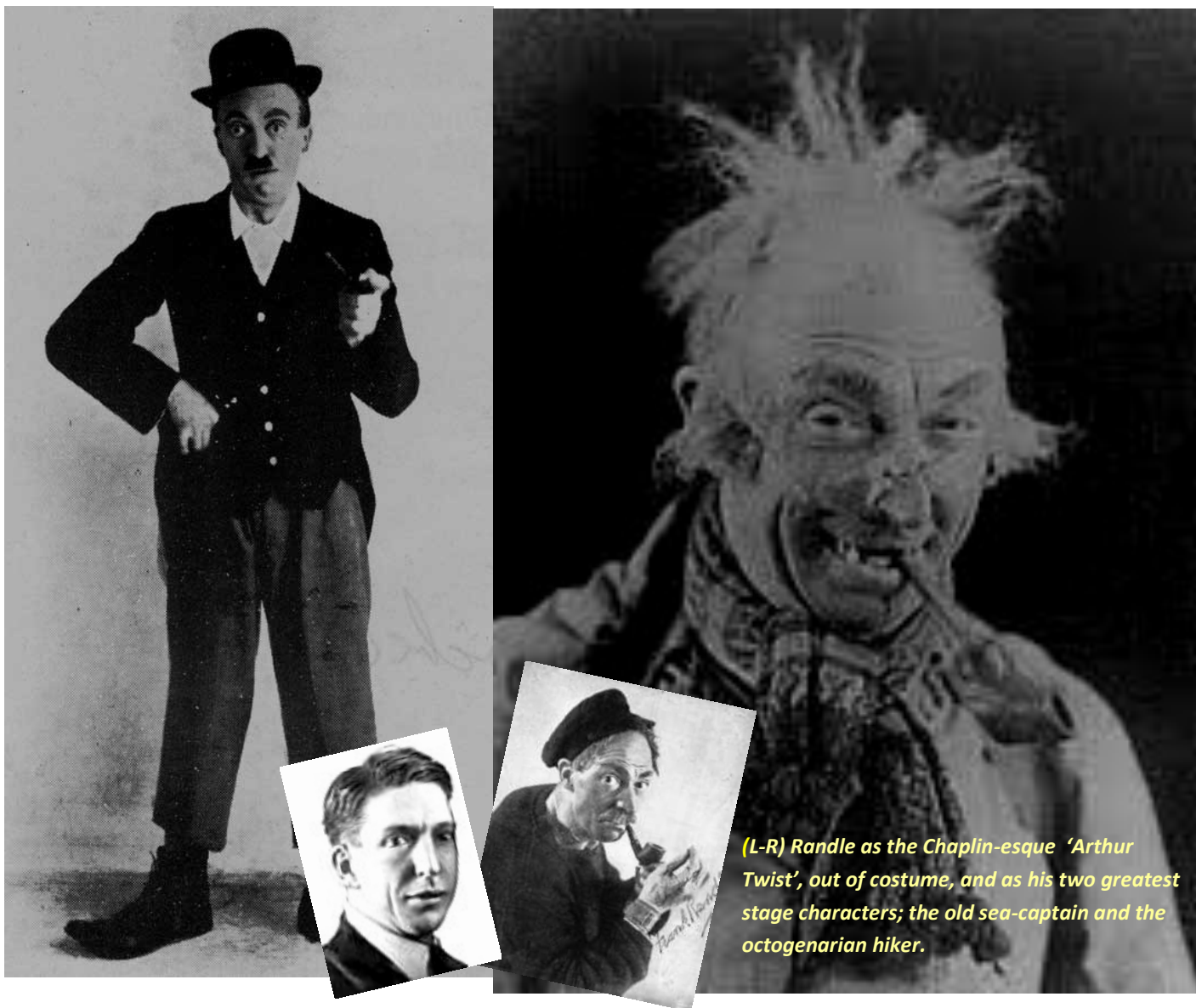
One of the most fascinating aspects of comedy is its extreme subjectivity. Spatial, temporal or hierarchical boundaries can make or break a comic, the difference between side-splitting joy and stony-faced silence. The great divide of the Atlantic is the most prominent example; how many British Variety or film stars failed to make it in the States? Even within their own country, audience reception for these stars ran to volatile extremes. Perhaps no performer exhibits this better than Frank Randle. A character comic of the 1930s-50s, he specialised in masterfully crafted human caricatures. Though carefully drawn, the 'types' he chose to burlesque were specific not just to Britain, but to the distinct identity of the Northern working classes. As a result, even within his own country he was of a highly localised appeal, both geographically and within the class system. Opinions on him violently jostled shoulders with one another, and still do. Revered as a demi-god by many, he has been equally reviled as "pure filth" by others.

Randle was the epitome of "low comedy", in behaviour and appearance. His body was a terminally mismatched assortment of gangly limbs, forever flapping in a glorious, dipsomaniac incoherence. His face was pure clown: a nose that drooped like a melting candle stub over a toothless mouth, curved up into a crafty grin or lecherous gurn. His eyes were piercing flashlights, alive with shifty glances and a dangerous glint. His was not the wistful clown-white mask of a Langdon or Keaton, nor even the cheeky, grinning façade of a George Formby, but the face of a comic anarchist. Randle's anarchy was exhibited through performance and real-life. At his peak of notoriety, he broke middle-class taboos, ridiculed sacred cows and flouted authority. On stage, he belched, cursed, and spoofed dignity, but his real-life antics were even more colourful. Legends abound of his Plinian temper, of his firearm rages; of his dentures hurled into the front row of audiences; of wrecked dressing rooms or arson attacks on hotels that met his disfavour. Yet his public loved him for it. John Fisher likened Randle to the trickster Gods of Native American folklore, an excellent analogy. He seemed to exist to cause comic disruption, to ruffle stuffed shirts and, as he might put it, "poke me eye in the finger" of social convention. On-screen and off, Randle was a pulsating bundle of conflicting emotions that just could not be contained. He was, above all else, fascinating, as a comic and as a human being.

RANDLE THE STAGE COMEDIAN

To understand the comedy and personality of such a specifically contextual performer, we need to dip into his background. When he was born Arthur Hughes near Wigan in 1901, he entered an industrial landscape of hardship, of creaking, mildewed houses stacked rank upon rank, large families crammed into their tiny rooms. Men and children were sent to work punishing shifts down pitch-black coal mines, where they suffered sunlight deficiency and worked in the stench of their own body fluids under the constant threat of pit explosions. This was a monochromatic world of rain grey skies leaden with smog, the hacking coughs of Tuberculosis a constant echo. Above all, there was the preaching hypocrisy of tyrannical millowners and puritanical reformers who could not understand why the working classes 'chose' such squalor to live in.

Anyone born onto this rung of the caste system was an outcast from polite society from birth, and it is no wonder that young Arthur developed a strong dislike of authority and official systems. His non-conformism was also heightened by an even greater burden: he was illegitimate. Sent away to live with family friends to avoid scandal in Edwardian England, the psychological impact on the young boy was considerable. He would develop an outsider personality from an early age, and



(L-R) Randle as the Chaplin-esque 'Arthur Twist', out of costume, and as his two greatest stage characters; the old sea-captain and the octogenarian hiker.

drifted through a variety of menial jobs, determined to escape the grind of pits or factories. In his teens, he found himself drawn to perform, initially as a street performer impersonating Chaplin. Though not successful – he was once chased away from Blackpool pier – he would in time develop superb ability with physical comedy. This was matched by a talent for athletics and acrobatics, as he toured in juggling and trampoline acts, under the name Arthur McEvoy. Later, as Arthur Twist, he would maintain an even more Chaplinesque appearance. For all his seeming lack of coordination in movement, Randle actually was a superb physical comedian. Had he been born ten years earlier, he might have followed in the footsteps of Chaplin, or another North Country comedian, Stan Laurel. While it's unlikely that he would

**They said that
Randle was
wired to the
moon. A full
moon would
come along
and he'd go
quite mad...**

Bob Monkhouse

have rose to the artistry of either, he could have at least given the Chaplinesque Billy Ritchie a run for his money. The savage, baggy pants slapstick of Randle's later films is not a million miles away from Ritchie's own oeuvre, and his gurning goonery is at times reminiscent of Larry Semon. Had Randle chosen to exploit his visual humour along these lines, he could well have succeeded as a silent comedian of more versatile appeal. However, films were still a long way off in his career. We'll come to those in a little while, but the stage acts he developed were the source of his initial fame, and deserve discussion separately. While physical comedy would remain in his act, it was increasingly used more as an adjunct to dialogue-based character humour. Now performing under the name of Frank Randle, he was persuaded to perform a monologue to cover a scene change. He chose to do so in the guise of a character he had come to know well, the old sailor running pleasure boat trips at the seaside. Such figures roamed the seafront in Randle's adopted



The Hiker captured on film in 'SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND', and on parade in the same film.



town of Blackpool, and were familiar to audiences.

Randle's take was a broken down old sea captain with bushy moustache and pipe, his craft a broken down old wreck, and an almost total lack of passengers. His hustling cry of "Enny more fer sailin? Just room fer one or two more" was comically pathetic given his total lack of custom.

The success of the character led him to introduce more such figures, and during the 1930s he carved out a niche in portraying defiant decrepitude. Perhaps the greatest in his triumvirate of legendary characters was based on another real life figure. During a cross-country race, Randle had met an 82-year old hiker, proudly full of vigour. He was inspired! In

his version of the hiker, Randle amplified the comic theme of decrepitude from his sea captain. The hiker, gnarled and bow-legged, clung to a huge branch for support; in his own words, he looked like "a monkey up a stick". Attending a funeral, he recounts how he was told, "It's not much use you going home at all!".

Geriatric he may have been, but he was growing old disgracefully, for in his other hand was a giant bottle of ale, from which he supped frequently. His imbibing was invariably accompanied by loud belches, and risqué tales of his encounters with young female hikers:

"We walked along fer miles without saying a word... then I said to her, "A penny fer yer thoughts".

She gave me such a clout, eeee! I said "What's to do? I only said "A penny fer yer thoughts"

"Eeee," she said, "I thought you said a penny for me shorts!"

This sort of material seems pretty tame now, and the printed page doesn't really do it justice. It was the comic incongruity of the little old Romeo that put it across. He was a classic earthy, red-nosed pantomime clown (indeed, in 1938 the hiker was incorporated into a hugely successful version of Aladdin). Randle himself termed his humour "Honest-to-goodness vulgarity", a description right on the button. The hiker was an honest expression of the lust and pleasure of man, undimmed by age. It was given even greater honesty, and humour, by the fact that such characters really existed, still do, roaming the fore ale bars and five-bar gates of the North Country. Such types, locking innocent bystanders into rambling, incoherent conversations, aware of their own terminal decay yet still occasionally swayed by the chest-puffing delusion that they can play at being men-about-town, are living embodiments of Randle's hiker. And, although this is a specific regional comparison, age and insobriety have been staples of comedy for as long as people have been laughing.

The dual decrepitude of the hiker – the unavoidable ravages of time, and the self-inflicted insobriety – were to become Randle staples. He combined them both again in another, later character. Randle's 'Grandpa' was, like the hiker, aged and infirm but comically feisty. Peering through bottle-bottom glasses over a huge setaceous moustache, he arrived back from a night on the tiles. Swaying from side to side, he entered carrying a workman's red lamp, used to denote a hole in the road: "Look what some damn fool's left by th' roadside!" he would exclaim, before toppling over.

Capturing the misguided flailing of a drunkard's lack of control over their own body actually requires precise body control, and Randle's drunk sketches, like Chaplin's, allowed him to draw on his acrobatic skills.

'At The Bar', captured on film in 1940's 'SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND', is a beautiful two minutes of body control and dialogue. Randle arrives at the bar as a well-to-do chap is chatting to the barmaid. His difficulties in breaking in to their conversation to be served are compounded by his physical difficulties in locating the foot-rail and his increasing confusion with what he is ordering. As time goes on, his repeated request for two ales becomes muddled in with their conversation, resulting in some amusing wordplay.

This sketch was originally featured in Randle's Scandals. The firebrand Randle, tired of run-ins with impresarios and censors, decided to form his own touring company, which would go strong for almost 20 years. He drew on a talented company of comedians, musicians and stooges, many of whom would go on to appear in his films. Notable among these were bald, banjo-playing Ernie Dale and cadaverous, camp Gus Aubrey who appeared as a dame in many pantomimes with Randle.

The Scandals format was ideal for Randle's comedy. It was freewheeling, he had control over his material, and could appear

in numerous self-contained sketches ideal for make up changes. He was now at the top of his game, at least in the North of England, and the silver screen came calling...

RANDLE'S FILMS

Randle's films are an odd bunch to be sure; even more than his stage work, they belong to an extremely specific time and place. No major London studio would have taken a chance on the unpolished Randle. Instead, his film debut arrived under the auspices of John E Blakeley's Mancunian films. Blakeley, based in Manchester, was a remarkable entrepreneur who set up one of the first sound film companies outside the capital, and proceeded to make a series of unpretentious, ramshackle vehicles for the Northern comedians he loved. Blakeley's biggest success had been introducing George Formby to cinema audiences in 'BOOTS! BOOTS!' (1934). Now he was ready to try again, engaging a number of Northern comics, including Randle, for 'SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND'. Mancunian films were totally aimed at their regional audiences, and were put together with love, if not always with bucket-loads of cinematic technique.

The films were really not so far removed from the revue style of the 'SCANDALS' shows. Blakeley's usual method was to hang together comic scenes with a bunch of comics, tag in a plotline with some appalling romantic leads, then climax with some kind of show-within-a-film as an excuse to show off the comic's sketches, along with any other random guests Blakeley could hire. Thus, we get Randle sharing the bill with comic singers Gloria and Arnley, brass bands, and even classical pianists Ranawicz and Lauder! While this set up provides a neat continuity to the scandals shows, in other ways the films presented a different side to Randle's work. On stage, he was king of monologue and sketch, portraying characters carefully drawn. On film, he was rarely given chance to follow such characterizations, only using them for fleeting moments, usually as part of the sketch-within-a-show-within-a-film format. As a result, his films are in some ways a lost opportunity; certainly, his admirers were sometimes disappointed in them, and it's a shame he never got to follow one of his characterisations to a greater degree. Randle appears in more natural make up, usually under his own name; this has led to many assuming he plays "himself". More realistically, his character is an amalgam of his stage characters with an enlarged, grotesque version of himself – the mood swings, crudity, disrespect for authority and fondness for a tippie are all



Wigan Peers

Frank Randle and George Formby were both born in Wigan, within three years of each other. They went on to become Kings of Northern England comedy, and are often lumped in together when British comedy is discussed. Although their comedy shared some common ground, they increasingly went their own separate ways.

Many sources claim that they were childhood friends, but this seems unlikely. In later years, their relationship was one of distant, hostile rivalry, which once allegedly saw Randle lock Formby in a lift!

Formby's early work sees him much more similar to Randle's later film ventures; he is cocky, dodging work and abusing authority, though not to the extent that Randle dared. Significantly, these films were made for Mancunian Films, later Randle's kingdom.

When courted by the Southern studios, Formby underwent a makeover to make him harmlessly acceptable to the middle classes. In his films, he became the underdog, clumsy stuttering and love-lorn. He was always being threatened by authority, rather than actively baiting it in the way Randle did. Randle chased women and bounced on their beds; Formby was deathly afraid of girls.

This softening of Formby's character, and his war-time exploits entertaining troops, made him beloved as the North's wholesome family entertainer, part of the mainstream. Randle would remain the bastard child of Northern comedy.

There are some similarities in their comedies, though, aside from the Mancunian rough and tumble of Formby's early films. Both made films with an army setting. Before Randle appeared on film, Formby had joined the airforce for 'IT'S IN THE AIR'. as Randle was on his fourth 'SOMEWHERE.. Film', Formby was in the home guard for 'GET CRACKING'. Most notably of all is Frank's ersatz Formby impression in 'SOMEWHERE IN CAMP' (above). One cast member recalled that "He couldn't play the damn thing, it was just impudence."

Randle is said to have despised Formby's dilution of his technique, and his acceptable cheekiness. Ironically, it is these assets that have helped his name endure more than Randle's.



Randle and his regular film co-stars, 'SOMEWHERE IN CAMP': Bookended by his regular stage stooges Ernie Dale and Gus Aubrey, also present are Dan Young, Robbie 'Enoch' Vincent and Sgt Harry Korris.

SOMEWHERE ON FILM...

The 'Somewhere...' franchise of Randle films, beginning with 'Somewhere in England', are his best-remembered films. Yet, they were not just vehicles for him, being ensemble pieces featuring a variety of other forgotten comics...



HARRY KORRIS

Rotund, Manx-born Harry Korris rose to fame on the radio show 'HAPPIDROME', playing Mr Lovejoy, the eternally chagrined manager of the eponymous theatre. His methodical delivery was more suited to radio than film (he seems quite camera-conscious), but he had a wonderful line in stoic, long-suffering delivery. As well as the 'SOMEWHERE' films, he appeared in a film version of 'HAPPIDROME', also for Mancunian. He later appeared in the early 60s TV show 'OUR HOUSE', and died in 1971.

ROBBIE 'ENOCH' VINCENT

Pint-sized Robbie Vincent (real name Vincent Robinson) was the perfect contrast to Korris, in appearance and temperament. The pair had worked together on stage since 1926 and he was also present for the 'HAPPIDROME' radio series. In the show, he played the part of 'Enoch', a slow-witted dogsbody who was the cause of much of Mr Lovejoy's suffering. His trademark was a very slow way of speaking which showed off his mental faculties, and his catchphrase became beginning sentences with "Let... me.... Telllll you...." delivered in an awkward, strung-out delivery. He died in 1968.



DAN YOUNG

Monocled, toothbrush-moustached silly ass Dan Young toured music halls with Scottish comic Tommy Lorne, before becoming a Mancunian Films mainstay. Usually billed as "the dude comedian", he was a reliable supporting character comic in almost all of the films, including most of Randle's. With a confident delivery and great comic timing, Young was one of the best film comic sof the Mancunian studios. As well as the Randle films, he appeared in 'OFF THE DOLE' with George Formby, 'DEMOBBED' with Norman Evans and 'CUP-TIE HONEYMOON' with Sandy Powell. He continued to tour in revues and pantomime, and apparently gave a young Ken Dodd his first break in show-business! Dan Young died in 1970.



there, but of course are exaggerated for comic effect. A parallel might be made to W C Fields' character which enlarged his dipsomaniac, misogynistic characteristics to make him the glorious caricature he was.

The biggest problem with these films, as with most British comedies of the time, is that they should never have been feature length. There are great sketches and scenes, but the budget and talent are severely stretched over 80 or 90 minutes. Nevertheless, the films have great energy and are a valuable record of many performers. Many moments in the films present Randle's anarchic spirit at its most undiluted, and in age where it is much easier to pick and choose the scenes we want to view, they do have much to recommend them. Many have sniggered at the home made quality of the Mancunian films, but like Randle, they are remarkable for the fiery, have-a-go independence in an upper-class, London-centric industry. Besides, many performers like Randle, would have slipped totally from memory without them!

On the basis of his films, we can see how the Randle's manic tendencies exhibit themselves not just in real-life libertine behaviour, but through the vibrant energy of his performance. Eccentricities, flailing limbs and gibbering malapropisms provide the perfect outlet for his own peculiar brand of comic madness. Frank Randle on film is, like his real self, torn between happy-go-lucky excitement, anti-authority behaviour and Stooge-like violent slapstick, even within the same line of dialogue! He will bounce around like a sprite on the first day of his holidays, or approaching a pretty girl; he will put on a fancy accent to seem respectable; when spurned or foiled his big toothless grin magnificently double takes into an angry crescent moon. Comic incoherence remains a theme whatever his mood; he is equally muddled when falling over himself in his excitement to see his new babies in 'HOME SWEET HOME'. When angry, the incoherence reveals itself in similar ways, in a stream of Dogberryisms and insults.

Sometimes, he is wilfully random, interrupting dialogue with an Army major with the random comment, "Here, I'll draw yer a chicken, sirl!" for no apparent reason! His inability to articulate himself is only heightened by the lack of his teeth, which renders his already thick Lancashire accent into a slushy mess of consonants. The result is a performance that can be baffling for those The perfect situation for this pulsating bundle of polarity was to put him into a situation requiring discipline and consistency – the army. Randle's best remembered films today are his initial efforts for Mancunian, a series of films feature him in this setting, beginning with SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND (1940).

This films also features Northern comics Harry Korris, Robbie 'Enoch' Vincent and Dan Young (see sidebar for more information), and sets the stall for the films that followed.

SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND begins by introducing us to Randle and co as your typical awkward squad. Enoch is slow-witted, Young ('the dude comedian') monocled and highly strung, Randle insolent and incompetent. Rotund, sad-sack Korris is the long-suffering sergeant with a nice Hardyesque line in fallen dignity, frequently uttering his catchphrase, "Eeeee...if ever a sergeant suffered!"

A typical exchange:

KORRIS: *What were you in Civilian life?*

RANDLE: *(with toothless smile) A dentist!*

KORRIS: *You look it! A fat lot of good you'll be in the army with no teeth!*

RANDLE: *I thought I had to shoot Germans, not chew 'em!*

ENOCH: *Let – me – tell – you...*

KORRIS: *I'm not talking to you, Unconscious! How do you think I became a sergeant?*

RANDLE: Bravery?

KORRIS: No, bribery!

The last line offers a clue to another facet of his character. Put-upon he may be, but he can give as good as he gets, doling out K.P. duties to his love rivals, bribing the men to take them off duty if they buy him pints, or calling cigarette breaks for the troops when he fancies pinching one! It's a seedy line of authority not far removed from that of the great Will Hay.

These sketches with their comic give-and-take are classic music hall material and great fun. The number of performers involved saves them from becoming monotonous like many double act crosstalk routines. Certainly, they must have provided some inspiration for the parade scenes in *DAD'S ARMY*, which draw upon a similarly rag bag bunch of recruits. Truthfully, Korris and Vincent are both somewhat bound to awkward radio delivery of their lines, but Young is really rather good. Randle is a natural fool, always acting some piece of business to steal attention away from others. The effect of these squad scenes is almost reminiscent of 'THE ROUNDERS' and other Keystones, with a half-dozen performers all vying for the comic spotlight as a single camera struggles to capture all the madness. The sloppy editing sometimes results in Randle's compulsive ad-libs being cut off mid-shot. One gets the sense that he was impossible to rehearse with!

As well as the squad scenes, Randle always has some opportunities to push his edgy side when insulting the upper-class, commissioned officers and their ladies. Asked if he can jitterbug, he replies "Ah'm a reet jitter-bugger." Most outrageous is his scene discussing his newly born twins with his commanding officer:

OFFICER: I'd like to give you something. Here's five pounds.

RANDLE: Thank you, sir. And I'd like to give you something in return, sir.

OFFICER: What's that?

RANDLE (sticking two fingers up at officer): The Twins, sir!

No wonder Randle was loved by the working classes! Still, it remains remarkable both that such moments should slip through the censors, and, more so, that films were being made in wartime England showing the armed forces to be so incompetent!

More conventionally, there are also some more broad slapstick scenes inserted. The slapstick is sloppy and very, very messy, but saved from mediocrity by the complete vigour it is put over with. Randle slapstick has less in common with methodical L & H slapstick than the random, devilish chaos caused by Harpo Marx. The routines may begin in accidental damage, but quickly escalate into random, wilful destruction.

In *SOMEWHERE IN CAMP*, there is a trip to a vicious dentist reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy's *PARDON US*, which ends with him running around the dentist's surgery trying out all the dentures. We also witness his attempts to clean a billiard table unsuccessfully, with him stood on top, smashing beer glasses on to it and sweeping the whole soggy, jagged mess on to the floor, then flinging billiard balls at passers-by!

SOMEWHERE ON LEAVE has a savagely funny scene involving moving a piano. 'THE MUSIC BOX', this isn't, though. Randle, lapsing into his posh voice, can't resist tickling the ivories. "I will now play a Pizzicato arrangement," he says, before proceeding to hammer blue murder out of the keys, pulling them out as they meet his displeasure. Private Enoch arrives with a bucket of water to wash the piano, which gets poured in the lid. This leads to some split second -timed rough slapstick with the piano lid, which culminates in it being ripped off. Randle's solution is to hammer the lid back down, tap dancing on top to ensure the job is comple. "It sounds better with th'lid fast anyway" he concludes!

Occasionally, there are some surprises in the visual comedy. In 'SOMEWHERE ON LEAVE', he is ordered to attend a commando training course and is put through physical jerks. From predictable slapstick, this blossoms into some-



The Hiker visits London Zoo to promote some London appearances.

That's him on the right...

thing quite magnificent as he shows his old acrobatic skills on the trampoline in some very funny manoeuvres synchronised to music. For two whole minutes, the film transcends its ragbag nature and is quite, quite wonderful.

Less wonderfully, the 'SOMEWHERE' films mix in some tedious subplots into the mishmash, usually a pair of star-crossed juvenile leads whose precocious stage-school accents and naïve technique render them hopeless next to Randle and co. Don't lose any sleep over their troubles, though; they always make it up in time to embrace awkwardly at the end, to say nothing of singing at the camp concert!

Much more interesting are the turns presented in these concerts. In *SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND*, Randle's hiker sketch is preserved for posterity. *SOMEWHERE ON LEAVE* sees him in the same make up for the sketch 'PUTTING UP THE BANNERS'. Korris and Young make great foils as a vicar and Randle's intended bride (!) respectively, as the randy old hiker prepares to get married.

KORRIS: I see you have been married four times before, Mr Clutterbuck.

RANDLE: Aye. If the Lord keeps providin' em, I'll keep buryin' em!

The trilogy of Mancunian *SOMEWHERE* films were followed by *SOMEWHERE IN CIVVIES*. This was actually unconnected to the original franchise, save for Randle's involvement, but was given a similar title to cash in on the success of the films.

Virtually indistinguishable from the earlier efforts, *SOMEWHERE IN CIVVIES* is probably the best of this bunch of films, including the best entrance for Frank. Arriving on parade atop a regimental mascot donkey, he is confronted by the Sgt:

SGT: what do you think you're doing?

RANDLE: I'm sat on me ass!

CIVVIES replaces Korris et al with an excellent cast of other actors: pompous walrus H F Maltby, conniving Joss Ambler, and several members of Randle's own 'SCANDALS' company. Gus Aubrey was one of Randle's closest partners, his effete delicacy providing a great contrast to Randle's firebrand crudity. Often a pantomime dame in his shows, in *CIVVIES* he is Randle's sidekick as the pair try to set up a painting and decorating business.

'*SOMEWHERE*' films present Randle's purest comic mayhem, the loose nature of awkward squad army comedy and the gang show providing an ideal formula for him to shoehorn in as many bits and routines as possible. The authority and discipline of army life are also a feat foil for his contrarian, untameable persona.



When peacetime came, his films placed him in a more domestic idiom, epitomised by the title of his first post-war film, *'HOME SWEET HOME'*. With this, the films entered even more into the regional world of their audience, the world of the two-up, two-down terrace house, the factory job and the seaside holiday.

This works somewhat less well for his persona, as Randle needs some form of rigorous discipline to be his most effective, especially to a wider audience. That said, 'Two-Tonne' Tessie O'Shea made a formidable comic spouse for Randle in *'HOLIDAYS WITH PAY'* and the now missing *'SOMEWHERE IN POLITICS'*. Despite the shift in setting, there wasn't much variety in the Blakeley formula. The mixture of comic set pieces, juvenile leads no-one cares about, and a concert climax featuring all sorts of moonlighting variety acts remains constant.

The only other film Randle made away from Blakeley was the only one to really vary this formula. *WHEN YOU COME HOME* (1948) exploits the pathos and acting potential of Randle's characters to an extent never seen before. Framed by his 'Grandpa's Birthday' sketch, it takes place in flashback to the era of the Victorian Music Halls, with the old man recalling his youth (acted by Frank). There is a more sustained storyline, and a much more relaxed tone overall, melancholic and nostalgic. This extends to Randle the underdog, a much more down-to-earth, crumpled George Formby-type character in this instance. He does a credible job of acting the part, but is undeniably constrained, and the pathos does seem a little forced. This is probably his best-crafted film, but far from his funniest or most representative. In one aspect, though, the Blakeley formula remains. *'WHEN YOU COME HOME'* was directed by John Baxter, a devotee of



Some characteristically rambunctious Randle comedy: "Sat on his ass" in SOMEWHERE IN CIVVIES'; With 'Two-Tonne' Tessie O'Shea in 'HOLIDAYS WITH PAY'.



With his dentures in and glasses on, Randle could almost pass for respectability...

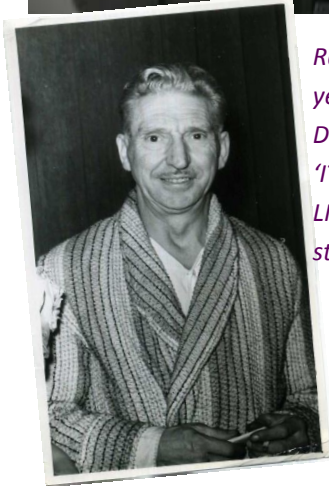


music hall acts, resulting an other chance to show off a collection of other acts, including The Two Leslies.

Another moment for Randle to show his acting skills is 'RANDLE & ALL THAT', a 1946 film composed of a scene ultimately cut from 'HOME SWEET HOME', but released as a separate short. Here, Randle acts as Grandpa again, but at work in a cobbler's shop. This scene, more wistful with lightly amusing moments, shows what he could have been capable of as a character actor in better vehicles.

The schizophrenic nature of Randle's talents reveals itself not just in his screen work but in tales of his real life personality. Depending on who you ask, Randle was either charming and gentlemanly, or a complete holy terror. Many of the tales of his rages are verifiable; he was known on more than one occasion to threaten co-stars or theatre workers with physical violence. At other times, a missed line in a sketch would cause him to unleash a verbal tirade of blue language, at least once or twice on stage. Most famously, he planned to charter an aeroplane to bomb the town of Accrington with toilet rolls, after audiences had been unappreciative. And yet, many found him a gracious performer who was sweet and kind to child stars and acts further down the bill. His contradictions became the source of some very strange theatrical superstition...

Randle in later years: with Diana Dors in 'IT'S A GRAND LIFE', and back-stage.



"They all said he was moon mad because once in a while he'd just go potty and disappear," recalled Roy Castle. Bob Monkhouse also expressed the opinion that "Randle was a genius but very definitely wired to the moon!"

The theories of Randle's lunar influence were so widespread amongst the interviewees of Philip and David Williams' biography of the comic that they named their book 'WIRED TO THE MOON'. Certainly, Randle's behaviour was contradictory and often downright bizarre, but many traits of this "moon madness" could have, more objectively, been rooted in schizophrenia or Bipolar disorder. His heavy drinking, illnesses and unhappiness would only have exacerbated this. Certainly, he was not in good mental health, and in an age when this was less well understood as an illness, the moon provided a convenient diversion from the real issue. In his later years, his alcoholism and bizarre behaviour increased, the demons only amplified by another struggle. Randle was dying of tuberculosis.

As the 1950s dawned, Randle's slide was just about to begin. There was still time for one more go-round with Mancunian Films, but it was necessary for him to put up much of the money for the film personally. 'ITS A GRAND LIFE' returns him, one last time, to the army. All the old army schtick is present, including Dan Young. So too, more than a bit incongruously, is 'blonde bombshell' Diana Dors! The presence of Dors is Blakeley's concession to the advancing modernity of the 50s. This, and the film's slicker productions pay lip service to changing times, but it still seems a hugely antiquated film for the atomic age. The presence of Dors serves to only make Randle's humour seem more obsolete; with sex so openly on a plate, his innuendos and disregard for stiff society now seem a little more 'safe'. 'ITS A GRAND LIFE' marks a step toward the transfer from danger to cosy innuendo in comedy most marked in the CARRY ON franchise. This sort of comedy was content to titter in the corner, while social taboos moved more toward politics, and were left to the younger generations. It's inconceivable, for instance, to think that 'IT'S A GRAND LIFE' was made only 6 years before 'BEYOND THE FRINGE'!

Audiences agreed, and by the mid-50s Randle's career began to slip. In his last couple of years, though he still worked, his bookings became less prestigious and less regular. He soldiered on far longer than he probably ought to, professing a wish "to die in harness, like Tommy Handley." He more or less did so. His last appearance was in May 1957, in the small town of Crewe; Not two months later, he was dead. Ironically, the man who had so carefully crafted elderly characters was not even to make it to retirement age.

Randle's life is yet another of those tortured comic beings whose demons both drove them and held them back from achieving full potential. Even his epitaph, which he chose himself, referenced his inner, self-sabotaging conflict:

Despite myself, my prayers were answered.

I was, amongst all men, richly blessed.

And now, he seems almost like some bizarre Pterodactyl fossil, a strange looking, archaic creature that it is hard to believe ever seriously walked the earth. In the 60-odd years since his heyday, social convention, entertainment and cinematic technique render him a hopeless relic. Or do they? There is much about Randle that is timeless, unique and fascinating. He drew careful, if broad, character profiles, and, like Spike Milligan after him, was able to will his demons to create a comic mania that one must admire for its sheer gusto. He played his own rules in maintaining his independent maverick status, and played a key role in developing the regional film industry in the UK. It's worth giving Frank Randle's films a chance, or at least excerpts of them. Even if you don't take to him, there's something captivating in his madness, a very unique comic talent. Or maybe that's just the full moon talking...

MANCUNIAN MAVERICK

Frank Randle's film career would probably not have existed without John E Blakeley. The story of Blakeley's independent outfit Mancunian Films is a fascinating one, that led the way to future regional and Indie film production. This 1950 profile of Blakeley, from 'John Bull' MAGAZINE, provides a valuable insight into his work.



Blakeley ponders a new script. He treats his actors rough: music hall slapstick is his material, custard pies and bags of flour his stock-in-trade

Slapstick king rides the film crisis

by *NORMAN PHILLIPS*

Critics may sneer, the censor raise eyebrows—but the North of England film-maker claims to know "how to keep the cinemas going"

JOHN EDWARD BLAKELEY, a sixty-one year old Manchester grandfather, is a cheerful sort of chap whose idea of good, clean fun is to throw a £1,000 a week pair of comedians into the murky waters of the River Irwell. The fact that a large percentage of the population between Oxford and Newcastle-upon-Tyne enjoys this sort of antic enables Blakeley to indulge in such whims and, at the same time, earn steady and handsome rewards in an industry which is anything but stable.

By self-appointment film maker to the North of England, Blakeley is currently one of the few successful and contented men in the cinema world.

The incident on the Irwell, a

sluggish stream flowing through Manchester, involved two otherwise immaculate comics, Jimmy Jewel and Ben Warriss. As author, director and producer of a film entitled, not without reason, *What a Carry On*, Blakeley had his stars chase a man along the river bank.

"We had to catch the fellow and then all fall in," Jewel recalls. "The Irwell is just about the filthiest place imaginable. When we climbed out we looked like a couple of sweeps. And there was Blakeley laughing like a blinking drayman."

Despite this addition of insult to injury and a score of other indignities in the interests of comedy, Jewel and his partner retain a warm affection for Blakeley. "Quite a nice bloke," Jewel says, "even if he does get a bit het up at times."

Blakeley's temper is, indeed,

almost as marked as his taste for low comedy. He is ready to admit a low boiling point and his fiery nature is partly responsible for several of his current feuds. Two of these running battles, both without malice, involve the censors and the critics.

The censors and Blakeley do not see eye to eye on the artistic merits of a household utensil common to many bedrooms. In one of his films an illusionist transforms a top hat into one of these objects. "Cut it out," said the censors. "It's vulgar."

"Of course, it's vulgar," says Blakeley, who prides himself on his ability to produce films suitable for family consumption. "It's a gag I've used before and everyone got a good laugh—even the censors who passed it."

The second and more spirited of

Blakeley's vendettas is with the critics who scorn his productions. His Mancunian ire is directed in particular towards London reviewers whom he regards as effete and completely out of touch with the average filmgoer's tastes.

"How can anyone in London judge a film of mine," Blakeley asks, "when they don't know the first thing about the people for whom I cater?"

One trade paper has made so many unkind remarks, according to Blakeley, that he finally banned it from his previews. "But they got in somehow," he says sadly. Blakeley then countered with a bold advertisement: DON'T RELY ON PRESS REPORTS.

"It's hard work battling with critics," he declares. "It's bad enough competing with U.S. films without being hampered by slams from reviewers. Still, I keep on going. They've been saying things about my films for ten years and they haven't stopped me yet."

One of the remarks Blakeley resents most is that his films are "not good box office." He can show that his pictures get regular showings in 2,000 North of England cinemas. Even the first George Formby picture he made in 1934 (and Blakeley admits it is "shocking"), is still being shown today.

Blakeley made the Formby film in two weeks for the sum of £2,750, a financial and technical feat which even he cannot hope to equal. Nowadays, when a low-budget picture costs anything upwards of £100,000, the Manchester studios are turning out features for £40,000 to

£50,000, but it is a scale Blakeley did not dream of sixteen years ago.

"The first Formby film, *Boots*, *Boots*, was made in one room over a garage," Blakeley recalls. "It was finished in two weeks because everyone worked night and day. At the trade show they all hissed at it."

While passing through Walsall one night, Blakeley decided to break a firm rule of his and take a look at one of his own films. He noticed *Boots*, *Boots* playing at the local cinema and tried to get a seat. He was told the theatre had been full all the week. People were paying to see the picture the experts had sneered at.

Confirmed in his faith in the regular cinema patron, Blakeley made *Off the Dole* with Formby on a slightly larger scale. It cost £7,500 and took three weeks to make. Since then he's averaged two to three productions a year.

The reason Blakeley never goes to

see one of his own films, he says, is "I can see too many mistakes in them. Anybody can do better a second time."

Whatever he considers his mistakes, Blakeley is by no means repentant when it comes to custard pies, pails of water and other household utensils with which he stocks his slapstick pictures. If there is a bathroom scene in one of his films, the patrons can count on someone, fully dressed, falling into a tub full of water. If there's a billiard table in evidence, the props will include a set of eccentric balls that wobble all over the place.

For many of his gags Blakeley frankly acknowledges his debt to the music hall. He is a frequent visitor to the Palladium in London where he usually sits in a box so that he can watch the audience rather than the stage.

This is so he can gauge the effectiveness of the entertainers. If a

comedian can't rock the gallery, he's not Blakeley's style.

His original entry into the cinema world, and the one which qualifies him as a dean of the industry, was at Warrington in 1908. There he converted a shop into a 200-seat picture house and showed two-reel productions starring such forgotten heroes as Broncho Billy and John Bunny.

From cinema manager, Blakeley progressed to film renting and further increased his knowledge of the patron's tastes. One lesson he learned from Charlie Chaplin, whose first films came to Manchester about thirty-five years ago. Chaplin started with one-reel productions and finally moved up to full-length features. The first of these was *Tillie's Punctured Romance* with Marie Dressler.

"The renters all turned it down," Blakeley says. "They couldn't see it as a feature picture." Blakeley could see Chaplin's possibilities and he went to London with £1,500 to buy the rights for the cinemas in Lancashire, Cheshire and the Potteries.

Tillie's Punctured Romance was earning money until about four years ago. Recently it made a re-appearance in a shortened version and it still attracts the customers.

Started With Operas

The influence of the early Chaplin films, with their comic cops, bags of flour and other slapstick effects, remains with Blakeley. Strangely enough, when he first went into production in the twenties, he was involved, not in comedy, but in film versions of operas.

He made twelve of them. It was only when he began starring such musical hall favourites as Formby, Jewel and Warriss, Frank Randle and Tessie O'Shea that Blakeley found himself in his element.

The Blakeley technique with these artists is somewhat removed from ordinary studio procedure. There is a script and its general outlines are sometimes followed, but his stars are accustomed to being told to go ahead on their own.

"I'll never forget my first day," one comedian says of Blakeley. "He asked me what I was going to do and when I asked for a script he said: 'You think of something to say. Be funny.'"

These methods of producing and directing, while apparently haphazard, have their appeal for artists who trek to Manchester for a Blakeley rôle. "There's a sort of family atmosphere about the studio," one London actor says. "You work hard but the money is good. You can't plan to get Saturday afternoon off or even Sunday, but you can be sure your cheque will be there every Friday."

Salaries represent the major portion of Blakeley's budget. He explains this by indicating the £1,000 a week paid Jewel and Warriss for seven weeks and the £642 a week fee to Norman Evans over a similar period. Frank Randle, according to the producers, draws down at least £500 a week, and as a director of the company, shares in the profits.

Because he does not use either the Oxford or B.B.C.'s rules of pronunciation, Randle makes an ideal Blakeley star. According to one of his associates, Blakeley is honestly revolted by the Oxford method of speaking and about the worst thing he can say about an actor or a screenplay is that it's "la-di-dah."

To his scorn for anything

la-di-dah, Blakeley adds a reasonable horror of waste or extravagance. "He can do for one shilling what would cost the Rank organization five shillings," says one of Blakeley's admirers. While there may be some exaggeration in this comparison, the Manchester studios can give the British film industry some lessons in economic operation.

Blakeley himself receives visitors to his studio in an office which is far removed from the usual plush elegance of a cinema mogul. Although he is the director, producer and managing director of the firm, Blakeley works in simple surroundings.

He sits on the same canvas folding chair, marked RESERVED FOR MR. J. BLAKELEY. PLEASE KEEP OFF, as he uses on the set. His only extravagance is an electric fire and a coal fire to keep the place well above normal temperature.

A Fatherly Figure

Blakeley's only concession to the sartorial extremes of the cinema world are the occasional red bow tie and the grey, red, black, white and yellow braces he affects with his conservatively cut business clothes. Rather than the producer of slapstick comedy, he suggests the father of five and grandfather of ten children that he is.

A horseshoe, the gift of one of his daughters, is one of the few decorations on his office walls. This room adjoins the two studios which Film Studios (Manchester) Ltd. has created out of an abandoned Methodist church.

When the church was taken over after the war (it had been an A.R.P. centre), it was complete with stained glass windows and a marble pulpit.

The stained glass in a movie studio offended Blakeley's well-developed instinct for removing waste and he spent considerable time in trying to persuade the Methodist church to take the windows away at his expense. When he was unsuccessful in that direction, he offered them to the Roman Catholic authorities, who gladly accepted them for use in the next church they build.

"They were worth well over £1,000," Blakeley says, "and the colours could not be duplicated today. I can't understand anyone not wanting them."

Uses Audience

Possession of its own studios keeps the Manchester company's budget down. Blakeley is also partial to out-of-door scenes or locations such as factory canteens. "We give them some entertainment," he says of his factory visits, "and then use the people in one of our scenes."

Blakeley, his cameramen and actors are also familiar to patrons of Manchester ballrooms. One of these holds 4,000 dancers who have found themselves as extras in the films. "We give them lucky spot prizes as high as £250," Blakeley says. "The audience loves it and we get our shots."

The same people, Blakeley believes, are among the patrons of his films. "They're the people who keep the cinemas going," he declares. "They go once a week, no matter what happens. To them it's a religion."

And John Blakeley, whatever the London critics say, is going to give them what he's sure they want. One thing is certain, it won't be anything la-di-dah. THE END



Frank Randle, an ideal Blakeley star, has a director's share of profits



Music hall comedy on the screen: Jewel and Warriss in *What A Carry On*

More on Mancunian...

If you want to find out more about Mancunian and its comedies, 'HOORAY FOR JOLLYWOOD' is an independently printed book by Philip and Martin Williams. They have also put together two books about Frank Randle, 'WIRED TO THE MOON' and 'THE THEATRICAL WORLD OF ARTHUR TWIST'. More details at www.hoytpublishing.co.uk



DVD NEWS

Will Hay: the complete works!

The superb British comedian Will Hay is the subject of a comprehensive box set that has been lovingly compiled by the Will Hay Appreciation society. For the first time, all of Hay's films for various companies, including the once-lost and long obscure classic 'WHERE'S THAT FIRE?' have been licensed together in one amazing collection. These are simply the cream of British comedy films, and have left a long shadow, influencing, amongst others, 'DAD'S ARMY', 'HANCOCK'S HALF HOUR' and 'FATHER TED'. Add to all the classic comedy contained herein some extreme rarities—the wartime propaganda short 'GO TO BLAZES', rare silent footage, cameos and a bonus audio cd.—and this is a truly awe-inspiring, definitive set. Details on purchasing at www.buggleskelly.co.uk and www.facebook.com/WillHayComicActor If you're new to Will's work, fear not: He's next issue's cover star!



ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED, VOLUME 3

Ben Model's superb 'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED' series of rare comedy short DVDs continues. Hooray! Here's Ben's run-down on the contents of the latest volume, newly released in September:

- "No Vacancies" (1923) - Arrow comedy shot in 1921 but released 2 years later, with an ensemble cast including Jay Belasco, Blanche Payson, Billy Armstrong and Jack Duffy – razor sharp original from the '30s is the only extant print at its complete length, courtesy of Ralph Celentano

- "Service á la Bunk" (1920/21) - Tusun comedy starring Bobby Ray – very little is known about the film, this 1940s NuArt home movie release is a very rare print, courtesy of Rob Farr.

- "Wanted: a Nurse" (1915) - Vitagraph comedy starring Mr. & Mrs. Sidney Drew – is a very rare print of this rare Drews short, courtesy of Rob Farr
- "Love's Young Scream" (1928) - Christie comedy with Jimmie Harrison, Anne Cornwall, Jack Duffy, Glen Cavendar et al – gorgeous, very-sharp complete version, courtesy of Dennis Atkinson, Sr.
- "Whose Baby?" (1929) starring Arthur "Dagwood" Lake – this 16mm is the only extant print, courtesy of Shane Fleming (he's only 11!).
- "The Whirlwind" (1922) starring & directed by Joe Rock – razor sharp Kodascope printed in 1926, only other print is a 35mm nitrate with French titles at LoC, from Ben Model's collection.
- "Hot Luck" (1928) with Malcolm "Big Boy" Sebastian – rare 1930s print, from Ben Model's collection.
- "A Citrate Special" (19??) cast largely unidentified includes "Tonnage" Martin Wolfkeil, screened at Mostly Lost last year and still unidentified – from Ben Model's collection.
- reel 2 of "Half a Hero" (1929) with Billy Barty, in a rare print struck in 1930.

British film releases continue from Network

In the UK, Network DVD's series of British Film DVDs continues to turn up many new and exciting surprises. While the Ealing Rarities collection seems to have reached its conclusion for now at 14 volumes (!), many other interesting releases continue to appear. Stanley Lupino, Gene Gerrard and Ernie Lotinga, once barely more than names in the history books, now find themselves fantastically well-represented on DVD! The celebrated Aldwych Farces also continue to trickle out, with volume 3 now available. There's a wealth of material to discover of little seen comedy here. If you've purchased any of these, please drop a line with reviews and recommendations!



AND IN THE WORKS.....

Paul Guiriecki's Cinemuseum company, architects of the superb Mack Sennett BluRay collection, are preparing an equally comprehensive Roscoe Arbuckle set. This promises to be a massive overhaul of 2005's 'FORGOTTEN FILMS OF FATTY ARBUCKLE' set, with many new titles previously unreleased. Mr Guiriecki has recently revealed that he is at work on restoring Arbuckle's incredibly rare Paramount features, made just before his career was curtailed. No definite release date yet, but this is definitely one to watch out for!

Two of Buster Keaton's biggest influences together: Roscoe with Harry Houdini on the set of 'BACKSTAGE' (1919).

NEW CHAPLIN DOCUMENTARY

A pleasant surprise recently was a television documentary on Charlie Chaplin, hosted by ex-Python TERRY JONES. Jones has publicly made his fondness for the silent clowns – especially Buster Keaton – well-known in the past, including introducing films at Bristol’s Slapstick festival. To my knowledge, though, this is the first time he has presented such a programme.

The documentary covered Chaplin’s whole life story, but placed especial focus on Chaplin’s early years. Jones, as many others before him, believes these years of hardship on the streets of South London to be a key source for Chaplin’s later greatness. He trod familiar ground in East Street, Lambeth and the Kennington Workhouse, but an interview with son Michael Chaplin also made reference to the recent revelations that Chaplin may have actually been born in Birmingham. (Of course, regardless of where he was born, it was undoubtedly his youth in London that sculpted Chaplin’s future artistry.)

The Interviews with Michael Chaplin were one of the most interesting features of this new documentary. Once a fierce critic of his father, including controversial memoirs entitled ‘I Couldn’t Smoke the Grass on My Father’s Lawn’, his opinions seemed to have mellowed with the perspective of time. He provided an honest, but balanced, portrayal of Chaplin in his later years.

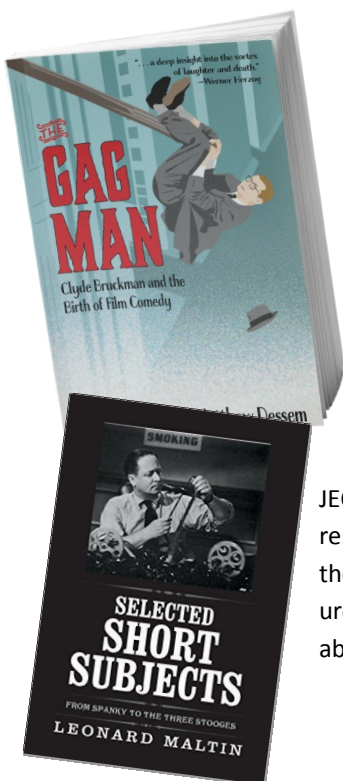
Perhaps a few more extended clips would have helped this doc; after all, funny walk and costume aside, are contemporary audiences really that familiar with what Chaplin actually accomplished? It’s a sad truth that these days, we cannot take for granted the fact that people already have an awareness and appreciation of classic performers, and a certain amount of ‘legwork’ is required! This minor quibble aside, this was a fresh, informative and entertaining documentary full of heart. Let’s hope that some new viewers will be persuaded to delve more deeply into Chaplin’s work.



NEW BOOKS

Matthew Dessem has released a new biography of gagman and director Clyde Bruckman. Bruckman worked with many of the greatest comics, including Keaton, Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy and W.C. Fields, yet led a chequered existence involving plagiarism suits, ending in his own suicide. THE GAG MAN should be an absorbing read.

Leonard Maltin’s classic tome ‘SELECTED SHORT SUBJECTS’ a.k.a. ‘THE GREAT MOVIE SHORTS’ has been re-released after years out of print. This wonderful guide to the talkie shorts of classic comics puts many neglected figures in the limelight and is an essential read. It is now available in paperback and Kindle editions.



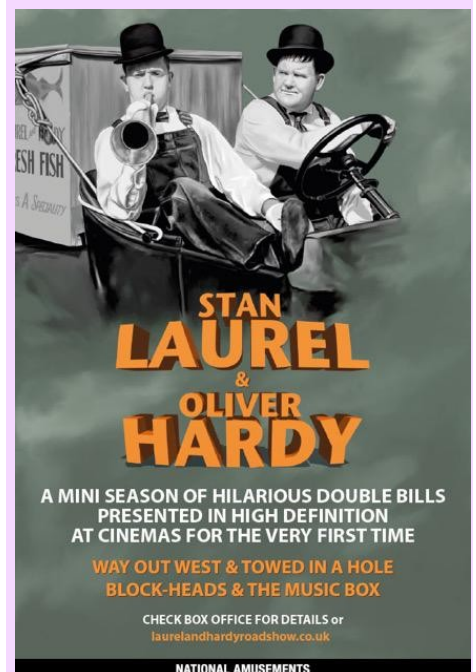
New STEAMBOAT BILL JR. restoration

Steamboat Bill Jr has recently been re-released to UK cinemas in a sparkling new 4k restoration.

The release is also accompanied by a wonderful Carl Davies score, which is in my opinion one of the best silent film scores I’ve heard. The print is also sourced from the second camera negative, noticeably different to most of the DVD releases.

THE LAUREL & HARDY ROADSHOW

Ross Owen has been co-ordinating the fabulous idea of re-releasing laurel and Hardy films to family audiences at Multiples chain cinemas. The first run of SONS OF THE DESERT and COUNTY HOSPITAL was a tremendous success, and now two more UK-wide screenings are planned: WAY OUT WEST with ‘TOWED IN A HOLE in October, and BLOCKHEADS with THE MUSIC BOX in November For details of the extensive list of cinemas, see laurelandhardyroadshow.co.uk



SILENT COMEDY'S NAPOLEON COMPLEX



Abel Gance's 'NAPOLEON' is considered one of the masterworks of silent cinema. But Gance was not alone in his fascination with the Emperor. One of the great unfulfilled projects of the silent era is the plan to make a film about Napoleon by none other than Charlie Chaplin! Far from being a brief pipe dream, this remained an active idea in Chaplin's mind for around a decade. He had worked through various approaches to script level, and had some test photographs made in costume before ultimately abandoning the idea. Would he have pulled it off? What approach would he have taken? Would there have been a comedic element? Food for thought, indeed.

We'll get to that soon. However, while Chaplin might have given more serious thought to the topic, he was actually beaten to a portrayal of Napoleon by numerous other screen comics. Burlesquing Napoleon had been a sporadically popular film comedy idea for some time before this. Vitagraph, for instance, released the now obscure THE BOGUS NAPOLEON in 1912.



Unsurprisingly, it was in Great Britain where Emperor-baiting was relished the most. Here in the U.K., there remains in the national consciousness a tendency to treat the French with suspicion, if not hostility. This can be traced right back to the Norman conquest of 1066, but the Napoleonic wars only heightened this. To this day, British culture often sees the French to this day viewed at best as comic target and at worst with outright Xenophobia (See recent film 'JOHNNY ENGLISH' with Rowan Atkinson, which sees a French dignitary trying to usurp the throne). Disregarding any socio-political motivation, a character like Napoleon was ideal comic material for the British sense of humour. Round, short, frumpy and accessorised with what it is fair to describe as a silly hat, Bonaparte incongruously possessed such grandeur that he was a perfect target for the British puncturing of dignity.



'PIMPLE'S BATTLE OF WATERLOO' from 1913 is an early example of the British burlesque on Napoleon. This eight minute opus offers a crude, roughhouse parody of Napoleon's saga, and hints at the historical silliness so beloved in 'MONTY PYTHON' and 'BLACKADDER' in later years.

Starring Karno comic Fred Evans, this was inspired by a serious film, 'THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO'. As Bryony Dixon has noted, that film's lavish production values are lampooned here in a deliberate, accented cheapness, extending to cardboard scenery and deliberately fake props*. The music hall silliness, highlighted with classic pantomime and slapstick routines mounting horses and the like, presents itself through a series of vignettes from Napoleon's life.



This film, and the whimsical humour it represented, were to be a big influence on another English music hall comic. The young Stan Laurel, then still Stan Jefferson, had had vaudeville success with a similar style of silly historical comedy in 'THE RUM'UNS FROM ROME'. In the 1920s he made a very profitable habit of parodying popular dramatic features, many of them period pictures. In Stan's hands, 'BLOOD AND SAND' becomes 'MUD AND SAND', 'MONSIEUR BEUCAIRE' becomes 'MONSIEUR DON'T CARE', and 'DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE' becomes 'DR PYCKLE AND MR PRYDE', for instance. Before this heyday of parodies, he was indulging similar ideas from his very first film. Either titled 'JUST NUTS' or 'NUTS IN MAY' (1918), this centred around a character who escapes from an insane asylum wearing a business suit... but also a Napoleon hat. Commandeering a set of boy scouts as his troops, and later a steamroller, he is less preoccupied with trying to build an empire

From top: Abel Gance's celebrated Napoleon;

Chaplin in costume as Napoleon for a party, mid '20s.

Fred Evans ('Pimple'): 'PIMPLE'S BATTLE OF WATERLOO' (1915)

Stan Laurel in 'MIXED NUTS' (1922)

than with cracking some tough nuts. The film only partially exists, incorporated into a later Laurel film, 'MIXED NUTS' (1922), which follows a similar line.

This film features Stan as a book salesman who believes he is descended from Napoleon. Receiving a bump on the head, he imagines himself to be the emperor, and commandeers a motley group of boy scouts before encountering an army bugler.

One especially notable piece of business surfaces in this film, as Stan is seen to turn his bowler hat sideways to approximate the look of Napoleon's hat. This is likely a product of the music hall stages or the Karno company as Chaplin was very fond of it too.

While in his later career, Laurel had instantly recognisable mannerisms like his grin, headscrath and cry which he could call on before newsreel or home movie cameras, Chaplin was almost unrecognisable. Lacking this instantly familiar facial equipment, he often uses this bit of comic business as a gag greeting. In fact, he can be seen using it throughout his life. More on that later...

Inevitably, American comedians had less of a historical attachment to Napoleon, and so he is encountered less frequently. Notably, though, most famous sketches in their first Broadway show, 'I'LL SAY SHE IS' presented a burlesque on Napoleon. With Groucho taking the role, the sketch was a bedroom burlesque featuring Margaret Dumont as Josephine.

Later still, another Englishman, Lupino Lane, would present his own Napoleon and Josephine burlesque on stage. His 1936 stage revue 'SMILE' features a wonderful sketch with Lane and Beatrice Lillie as Napoleon and Josephine. Reading straight, dramatic dialogue, they provide each line with an amusing piece of visual business or slapstick as a witty counterpoint. Happily, this *was* filmed, by British Pathe cameras. Whilst the cavernous stage and lack of audience are always hindrances to such filmed performances, the energy generated by these two talented performers is enough to survive and create an entertaining piece of film. As of now, it can be viewed on British Pathe's online archives, and on YouTube.

Back to Chaplin. Through the 1920s, the idea of a Napoleon film had been brewing in his mind. But what drew him, at the height of his eminence, to consider abandoning the tramp to try historical drama? Initially, it was the desire to find a vehicle to star his leading lady Edna Purviance. Chaplin envisaged her as Josephine, but later recalled that "Napoleon just kept getting in the way!". Edna was instead starred as a more anonymous French woman, the eponymous "WOMAN OF PARIS", while Chaplin mentally filed the idea of Napoleon for later use.

It obviously stayed close to the surface, with him growing closer to the idea of playing the role himself. A photo shows him wearing one of Marion Davies' fancy dress parties which he attended in this costume. Later, he wears what appears to be exactly the same costume in another series of photographs. These photos, though, are formal portraits taken in his studios as a kind of costume test, showing that he was seriously considering the idea. Many have speculated over Chaplin's motivation for wanting to play the role. Was it the extension of his use of pathos, the desire to play Hamlet? Was it, more than this, an egotistical statement of his empirical status among film-makers? Did the fact that his mother told young Charlie that his father looked like Napoleon have a bearing on

Chaplin in costume for his Napoleon film. He fully intended to make it for several years.



Napoleon and Josephine burlesqued on stage: The Marx Brothers in their Broadway show 'I'LL SAY SHE IS', and Lupino Lane with Beatrice Lillie in one of their sketches from 'SMILE'.



one of the Marx Brothers'





Top: A less formal photo from the same session; Chaplin fools around with Harry Crocker.

Above: Chaplin slips into a dramatic Napoleon moment in Alastair Cooke's home movies.

it? More prosaically, Chaplin biographer David Robinson proposes that Napoleon is one of the few epic roles available to a short actor such as Chaplin. Perhaps he was just drawn to the same combination of comic dignity and fallen grandeur that enabled the tramp to carry off both comedy and pathos.

Probably, it was a mixture of these factors. Chaplin seems to have initially oscillated on whether to make a drama, a comedy, or a straight film with comedic elements. Possibly the success of Gance's NAPOLEON pushed him toward the potential for a drama. By the late 1920s, he is considering it as his follow up to CITY LIGHTS. In a letter to Charlie, brother Syd opines that it could be an excellent time to make the Napoleon film, "especially with millions now clamouring to hear you in the Talks." Making the film would certainly have provided a distraction from the difficulties of making the Tramp talk, and Chaplin followed this avenue for quite some time. By 1934, the proposed film was titled 'N', and had reached a screenplay stage, as well as a comprehensive battery of research compiled by young journalist Alastair Cooke. Cooke also recalled Chaplin slipping into the role aboard his yacht:

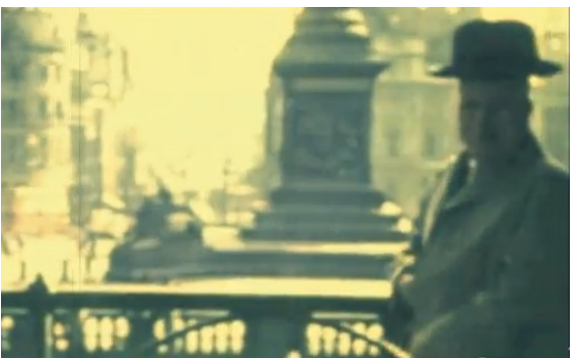
Chaplin suddenly asked me to take some photographs, both still and in motion, of himself as Napoleon. He pulled his hair down into a ropy forelock, slipped one hand into his breast pocket, and slumped into a wistful emperor. He started to talk to himself, tossing in strange names to me-- Bertrand, Montholon--and then took umbrage, flung an accusing finger at me and, having transformed his dreamy eyes into icicles, delivered a tirade against the British treatment of him on "the little island." His face was now a hewn rock of defiance. I still have it on film, and it's a chilling thing to see.

It seems that Chaplin had every intention of making this film for a long time, and might have done so had the treacle-viscosity of his methodical work pace not led to the delay in beginning. By the mid-30s of course, another self-styled emperor was rising from the shadows. By 1937, Chaplin had turned his attentions on the more contemporary despot Adolf Hitler. Certainly, the preparations for getting into character of Napoleon would have assisted him in taking on the role of a man set to make the world his empire. While Chaplin's Napoleon picture would undoubtedly have been fascinating, his take on Hitler, 'THE GREAT DICTATOR', is ultimately far more worthy. A hugely courageous film to have made, it turns Chaplin's period drama fantasies into a daring and biting political satire, that shone a light in some of the darkest recent history. For many people it stands for these reasons as one of his greatest achievements.

For Chaplin itself, it cleansed his creative palette and opened up a new world. The silence had been broken, the tramp and his moustache were now definitively gone, and Chaplin was free to experiment with any films he wanted. As for his original pet project, he had this to say in 1943:

"Every actor has a yearning to play Napoleon. I've got it out of my system."

Yet, there is one more footnote to the whole saga, which neatly ties together a few loose ends. In 1952, as Chaplin sailed to England, he discovered that his re-entry permit to the United States had been revoked. In London, facing an uncertain future, he looked to his past and visited many of his boyhood haunts. These moments were captured in home movies as he visits the street of his birth, the haunts of his Napoleonesque father, and the docks alongside the Thames River (ironically, not far from Waterloo!). Once more under the cine-camera's gaze, Chaplin returns to his standard piece of



business in these situations: the sideways hat Napoleon impersonation which likely originated here in the London Music Halls. This time, there is added bite to it. The irony of being exiled, like Napoleon to St Helena, can hardly have escaped Chaplin. Is it too much to speculate that this is his mute comment on events? Regardless of hindsight, these images provide a powerful, poignant image of a Comic Emperor, in exile. In an example of life imitating art, Chaplin did kind of get to play Napoleon after all.

The exiled Chaplin ironically revives his Napoleon impersonation. London, 1952.

Screening Notes

WHOOZIT (1928)

Long-lost Charley Bowers film relishes in the sinister and surreal

The fertile mind of Charley Bowers was responsible for some of the wildest and most creative comedy anarchy of the 1920s. His mixture of live action and animation, tailored to some of the most surreal plots in silent comedy, produced a body of work like no other*. Less than half of Bowers' shorts are available today, so the rediscovery of new footage is something of a big deal. The new Lobster films DVD release of Bowers' work includes a new discovery, 'WHOOZIT', unearthed at the Amsterdam Film Institute a few years ago. It dates from Bowers' 1928 series for Educational Pictures, a series in which his approach was becoming wilder and more anarchic than ever before. It is also a series with an abysmal survival rate—until now, only one complete short ('THERE IT IS'), and half of another ('SAY AHHH!'). This discovery is also only a partial film (the second reel), but still increases the Bowers Educational footage by a whopping 25%. The loss of the first reel is a shame, but as Bowers' climaxes were usually the wildest, most anarchic parts of his films, so this at least offers some consolation.

'THERE IT IS', the first entry in the Educational series, explores Bowers' unique use of camera trickery in the realms of scare comedy, taking that tired old genre to effective new heights. The startling puppetry and stop-motion add to the gags to create a disturbing and disorientating atmosphere that remains very funny. 'WHOOZIT', which came next in the series, builds on this, with a somewhat similar plot. In the place of dark haunted house scenes, it offers a rainbow-hued, opiate haze and some truly bizarre and unique characters.

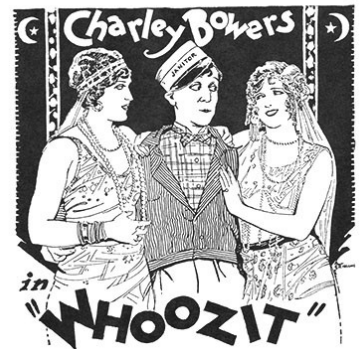
As the existing footage picks up, Charley is a harassed janitor in a busy apartment block, constantly called to the residents' problems. Trouble is, their problems are becoming more surreal and sinister by the minute! Strange disturbances are occurring, including oysters escaping the kitchen (animated oysters being one of Bowers' pet sequences), bizarre noises from a penthouse apartment and a terrifying man with a bushy beard who stalks the corridors sharpening a razor. In appearance and behaviour, he is basically a more human representation of 'the fuzz-faced phantom' from 'THERE IT IS', able to defy the laws of time and space to cause chaos anywhere. He especially has it in for Charley, haunting him in every door or cupboard he looks in, even somehow transforming into the case he is carrying on his back. The action is breakneck-paced and almost cartoon-like, as the bearded menace appears in all sorts of unexpected places. At one point, Charley nails him into a dog kennel, only to have him instantly reappear behind him!

Eventually, Charley escapes to a penthouse apartment, where he is confronted with all sorts of even more bizarre goings on. Finding a pair of magic glasses, He puts them on and is met with even more strange sights: birds, bearded dogs and a pair of Harem girls sharing a hookah pipe. They beckon him over, but just as he indulges, the scene dissolves and it turns out he is sucking on a gas pipe, the two beauties actually middle-aged harridans harassing him to do more chores. Taking in the scene, Charley sucks on the gas pipe again and is soon blissfully unconscious again!

'WHOOZIT' is a whirlwind of action, that doesn't quite manage to come up to the best of Bowers' other films. It's especially disappointing to see a scared black stereotype gag and dream ending in a film otherwise so rich and original. These points aside, however, there is loads to enjoy here; every Bowers film is a unique, individual experience unlike the films of any other artist. The rediscovery of this gives us a rare treat; we can only hope that more of these gems will turn up in the future.



BOWERS
COMEDIES



In the next issue of

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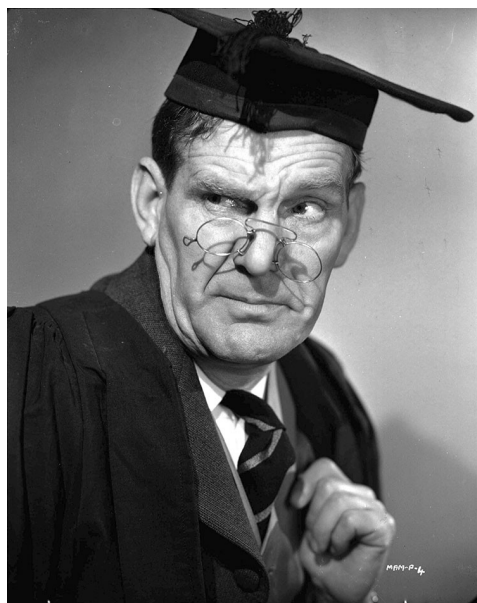
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