

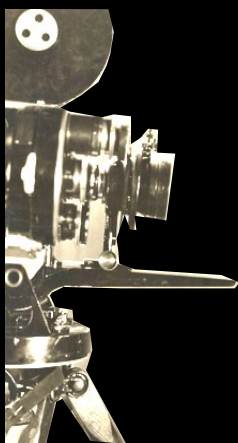
THE

LOST LAUGH

(formerly 'MOVIE NIGHT')

#10

silent comedy, slapstick, music hall.



Will Hay

*Britain's
Greatest
Screen
Comedian*

also featuring....



**Moore Marriott
& Graham Moffatt**



Charley Chase



Marjorie Beebe



Laurel & Hardy

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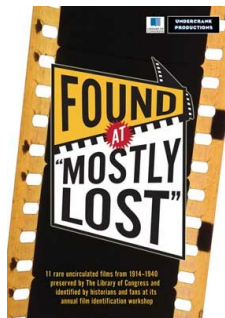
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DVD NEWS

MORE 'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED' GEMS

Ben Model's Undercrank productions continues to be a wonderful source of rare silent comedies. Ben has two new DVDs, one out now and another due for Autumn release. 'FOUND AT MOSTLY LOST', presents a selection of previously lost films identified at the 'Mostly Lost' event at the Library of Congress. Amongst the most interesting are Snub Pollard's '15 MINUTES', George Ovey in 'JERRY'S PERFECT DAY', Jimmie Adams in 'GRIEF', Monty Banks in 'IN AND OUT' and Hank Mann in 'THE NICKEL SNATCHER'/'FOUND AT MOSTLY LOST' is available now; more information is at www.undercrankproductions.com



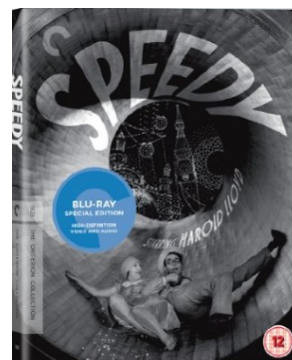
The 4th volume of the 'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED' series, showcasing 'orphaned' films, many of which only survive in a single print, is due soon. This volume focuses on the 9.5mm format originating in Europe, and will include:

- **Nonsense** (1920) - Jack White Mermaid comedy, with Lige Conley and Sid Smith
 - **The Wages of Tin** (1925) - Glenn Tryon comedy
 - **Oh, For the Noble Art** (1924/25) - Bobby Ray comedy
 - **'Morning, Judge** (1926) - "Carrie of the Chorus" series, starring Flora Finch, directed by Dave Fleischer
 - **Walter's Paying Policy** (1926) - Walter Forde comedy
 - **A Man's Size Pet** (1926) - western comedy with Ben Corbett and Pee Wee Holmes
 - **The Ninety and Nine** (1922) - one-reel edition of a rare, early Colleen Moore feature
- The Tides of Passion** (1925) - two-reel edition of late Vitagraph feature starring Mae Marsh, Ben Hendricks, Jr, and Winter Blossom; directed by J.S. Blackton; this print is all that survives of this film

Hats off to Ben for continuing to give a new life to such forgotten films!

CRITERION COLLECTION MAKES UK DEBUT WITH HAROLD LLOYD

The celebrated Criterion Collection BluRays have begun being released in the UK, starting with Harold Lloyd's 'SPEEDY'. Extra features include a commentary, plus documentaries on Lloyd's making of the film and on guest star Babe Ruth. Rather oddly, the film has a '12' rating! Must be something in one of those documentaries...



SILENT COMEDY FEATURES FROM GRAPEVINE

Grapevine Video offers DVDs of two rare big studio comedy features from the 1920s. Wallace Beery & Raymond Hatton, another entry in the late 1920s craze for comedy teams, appear in 'WE'RE IN THE NAVY NOW', and the wonderful Raymond Griffith appears with Betty Compson in 'PATHS TO PARADISE'. For more on the Griffith film, see p20 of this issue.

MORE HAL ROACH RARITIES FROM ALPHA

Budget releases continue from Alpha videos. There's been less on the comedy front lately, but one recent release of interest is a Hal Roach 'Early Pathé Comedies' DVD including some fairly rare films starring Clyde Cook, Snub Pollard and Glenn Tryon, amongst others. Quality is likely to be low, but these films aren't often seen, so its probably worth the risk! Full contents:

"45 Minutes From Hollywood" (1926), "Tight Shoes" (1923), "Years to Come" (1922), "At First Sight" (1924), "A Straight Crook" (1921), "Merely a Maid" (1920), "The Bouncer" (1925), "Be Honest" (1923), "Tell It To a Policeman" (1925), and "What's the World Coming To" (1926).

Also from the Hal Roach Pathé era is the Mabel Normand featurette 'RAGGEDY ROSE', a great little film that has lots of interest for Laurel & Hardy fans: co-starring James Finlayson, Max Davidson and Anita Garvin, it was also co-directed by Stan Laurel. This edition comes coupled with Normand's earlier Goldwyn feature 'WHAT HAPPENED TO ROSA'. It would be lovely to see the surviving Mabel Normand-Hal Roach films properly restored and released one day, but until then, at least this gets one of them out on DVD.

Titles are available to order from oldies.com



**MISSING
FOUND!
IN ACTION!**

'MONSIEUR DON'T CARE' (1924)

Way back in the first issue of MOVIE NIGHT, I wrote about the missing Stan Laurel film 'MONSIEUR DON'T CARE'. Made in 1924 for independent producer Joe Rock, it was, until now, the only one of the 12 comedies not known to exist in any form. Happily, in November last year, a restored 7 minute fragment found in Italy was revealed to the world again at a screening at MoMA in New York. It seems to have received little fanfare - I can't find any reviews or comments on the screening as of yet. Nevertheless, for Stan fans, this is an exciting discovery.

Before teaming with Oliver Hardy, Laurel's niche was parodying popular film hits of the day. 'BLOOD AND SAND' becomes 'MUD AND SAND', 'UNDER TWO FLAGS' becomes 'UNDER TWO JAGS', 'DR JEKYLL & MR HYDE' becomes 'DR PYCKLE & MR PRYDE', and so on. These are the films that first made him stand out from the masses of baggy pants film comedians, and so form a crucial part of his development as a comic. Many of them are also great, fun comedies in their own right, prescient of the Monty Python style of robust burlesque. Since Stan's great Robin Hood parody 'When Knights Were Cold' turned up (or some of it, anyway), 'MONSIEUR..' has been just about the only one of Stan's parody films not around in any form. Even more interestingly, it revisits Stan's parody of Rudolph Valentino in his earlier classic 'Mud and Sand'. Stan's version of the great lover is given the glorious appellation of 'Rhubarb Vaselino', and presents lots of opportunity for the silly parody that the British sense of humour does so well. Here, Stan turns his sights on another Valentino film, 'MONSIEUR BEAUCAIRE', in which he portrayed a favourite courtier of Louis XIV, forced to flee to England and pose as a barber. As a vehicle for Valentino, it was perfect, allowing for lavish costumes, swashbuckling duels and romance. Stan's version apparently followed the original story fairly closely, but obviously put a comic twist on the scenes.

On its original release, the *Kinematograph Weekly* sniffily griped that there was an excess of slapstick in the film, surely missing the point that its contrast with the high society and great romantic dignity of the Valentino original was the point of the comedy. Anyway, few could do slapstick like Stan Laurel. The other Rock films are generally all very good, and start to show signs of Stan's talent maturing, so I'm certainly hopeful for this one. The most similar film from the series to 'MONSIEUR..' is 'DR PYCKLE & MR PRYDE', which is the best of all his parodies, perhaps even his best solo film. With a little luck, this film matches up to its high standard.

Just before this issue was finished off, 2 minutes of the footage were posted online by the Cinemeteca Nazionale. The footage, jumpy though it is, does indeed have some great moments. There's a healthy dose of the comic anachronism that makes Laurel's other parodies, like 'WHEN KNIGHTS WERE COLD', such a delight, as New York yellow cabs roam the streets of 17th Century France. Most interestingly, at the end of the scene, there's a forerunner of the legendary Hal Roach bottomless mudhole™ that enlivened so many Laurel & Hardy films. Stan is attempting to escort the lady across a puddle in the street, and lays down his coat, Walter Raleigh style, on top of the puddle. Stepping on it, Stan and escort disappear beneath the water. Sound familiar? With the coat replaced by a kilt, the scene is reworked as a running gag in the seminal L & H film, 'PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP'. Considering this, and the atypical role of Stan as woman chaser in that film, and it turns out a big chunk of 'PHILIP' was quite possibly inspired by 'MONSIEUR DON'T CARE'. Who knew?

It's always fascinating to see more footage of L & H turning up, especially when it helps to fill in pieces of the puzzle we didn't even know were missing. Here's hoping we can see the whole 7 minute extract soon. Come to think of it, it'd be a nice extra on a DVD of 'THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY'!

Also discovered and restored by the Cinemeteca Nazionale was another L & H solo; A Jimmy Aubrey film, 'MAIDS & MUSLIN', featuring a 'heavy' appearance by Babe Hardy. Both this and the full extracts found of 'MONSIEUR DON'T CARE' should be making their UK screening debuts at SILENT LAUGHTER SATURDAY on October 22-23 at London's Cinema Museum. See p 23 for more details.

And that's not all! Just before we went to press, the classic Charley Chase film 'THE WAY OF ALL PANTS', for years known only in a cut-down version saved by Robert Youngson, has turned up complete and has been shown at the USA's Cinecon. Charley's MGM shorts are rare as hens' teeth, so this is a great discovery!



Above: Rudolph Valentino in the original 'MONSIEUR BEAUCAIRE'

Below: frames from Stan's version, including a familiar looking mudhole...



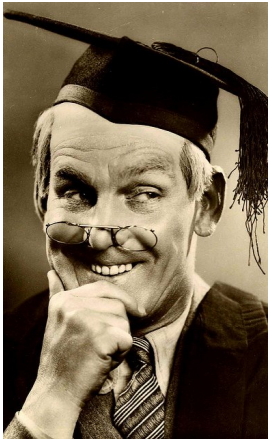
WILL HAY: *Master of Comedy*



The greatest asset to British comedies of the 1930s was the rich talent pool of the music hall and Variety theatres. Swathes of comics had a try at starring on the silver screen; some managed only a film or two, while others went on to make successful series of features lasting several years. Amongst the latter group, Will Hay was certainly the finest, and undoubtedly the one whose work stands up best today. For 30 years, on stage, radio and a series of brilliant comedy films, he mined a rich vein of character comedy from his creation of a broken-down old schoolmaster. Everything about this tattered pedagogue suggested a fraying, blundering seediness: the mortarboard crumpled slightly, the gown a little tatty. A pair of crooked pince nez perched perilously on the end of his nose, allowing him to peer shiftily at a world forever on his tail. Across his bald head there was a doomed combover almost valiant in its failed optimism. Coughing and sniffing haughtily, he spewed out garbled excuses and tried in vain to maintain control of his class. Barely a step ahead of his students, and always with some superiors out to fire him, it was bluff alone that carried him through the day.

The idea had been many years in development before settling on its eventual, glorious form. Born in Stockton-on-Tees in 1888, Hay was busy building a career in concert parties and music halls, when he was inspired by his sister Eppie's tales of her life as a schoolteacher. The idea worked through various incarnations, including a drag act as schoolma'am and a comic song titled "Bend Down", before expanding into a sketch, "The Fifth Form at St Michael's". The act began to take on classic status when Hay began to eschew gags and monologues, focusing instead on the interactions, and reactions, in the classroom. Obviously, to do this, the school master required a class to derive the maximum comic interplay. Setting his efforts apart from standard schoolroom knockabout, Hay hit on the inspired idea of adding an old man, so dense he has never been allowed to graduate from school. Thus he established in his 'school', three ages of ignorance. One of his most inspired comic ideas, this would later form the basis for his best films. Hay would attempt to preside over the class, his efforts to impart learning brought down by a combination of his own ignorance, the pranks of his children, and the total dumb incoherence of the old man. As a result, lessons would descend into elongated, confused discussions based around the class's misunderstanding, and Hay's failed attempts to sort them out with his own lack of knowledge. In contrast to the majority of comedians at this time, Hay actually used very few gags. The standard school room vaudeville act of the time—think of later scenes in the 'OUR GANG' films—contained lots of quick reaction, pun answers to questions. While Hay did have some typical schoolboy howlers in his act, the comedy came less from these than their deconstruction into finely executed reaction comedy.

A quick Christmas Cracker-standard joke could thus become the basis for a 10 minute routine of wonderfully spiralling frustra-



Hay in his stage costume for the schoolmaster, c 1930

tion and reaction comedy as the class tried to discern if Joan of Arc was Noah's wife, or what (watt) is a unit of electricity . It was less the gags than the spaces between them - a look or sniff here, a wonderfully timed pause there – that created belly laughs.

Edgar Kennedy, himself a denizen of reaction comedy, and Hay's co-star in 'HEY! HEY! USA!' , noted the following:

"Well, it's a swell act, all right. He has that gag, "Moses was the daughter of the Pharaoh's son", and one of the kids asks him to write it on the board, and he writes "Moses was the daughter of —" and then stops there, with his back to the audience and his arm in the air to write and does nothing. It gets the biggest laugh in the whole act. Now, I ask you, why? Would it be funny if he said "I can't spell Pharaoh"? It would mean exactly the same as stopping there. But the way Will does it, the audience gets to use its judgment, and that's why they think it's so good"

It takes a special talent to get laughs with one's back to the audience, and this skill at subtle reaction comedy came with great effort. Like Buster Keaton, Hay applied an engineer's precision to his comedy.

"Everything goes under my microscope," he once said, as he would tinker obsessively with the wording of lines or timing of pauses. He was once known to have timed all his laughs wrong, resultantly flopping the act, just to prove his point of the value of timing. A keen comedy theorist, the real Will Hay was actually a *very* intelligent man who could not have been more unlike his comic character. An astronomer who discovered a white spot on Saturn, he was also a polyglot, trained engineer, and a pilot who gave Amy Johnson one of her first flying lessons! It was, paradoxically, this hyper-intelligence which helped him to fine tune his comedy and refine the subtleties of his buffoonish character, giving extra depth and humanity to what could have been a much more two-dimensional creation.

For, although the on-screen Hay gave the appearance of constantly teetering right at the frontier zone of his minimal competence, he was at least streetwise. Prone to blackmail and corruption, he could also be quickwitted with a muttered quip or a scheme to save himself. Unlike many fellow comedians, he wasn't playing a *complete* fool, and it was this that gave the character depth that has helped his films to endure. A great example occurs in 'GOOD MORNING BOYS!' he has just found his boys writing horseracing odds on the board, and is just about to rub it off when the school governor arrives. In a tour-de-force, he manages to explain it away and save his skin by incorporating all the contrived names of the horses into a lecture on The Battle of Agincourt.

It took a little while for this full complexity of the character to be developed onscreen, however. Hay's first films transmit his character to the screen cautiously, of his own volition; he shared with many music hall stars the fear of using up material quickly. Rather than filming his schoolmaster act, his first two starring vehicles for British International Pictures were adaptations of respectable Pinero plays. 'THE MAGISTRATE' begat 1934's 'THOSE WERE THE DAYS', while 'DANDY DICK' was allowed to keep its original moniker. Both films now seem rather tame compared to the later gag-packed anarchy of his heyday (Hay-day?), but on their own merits are quite agreeable. It's certainly easy to see what drew him to appear in them, as both feature characters who are outwardly respectable but prone to lapses in judgement and temptation. 'THOSE WERE THE DAYS' is the better of the two films, Hay a kindly Victorian magistrate whose step-son Bobby (an incredibly young John Mills) leads him astray. Bobby is actually a wild young man, but because his mother knocked 10 years off her age when marrying Hay, is forced to play the act of a boy. He convinces the Guv'nor to take a night out to the music hall, which gives the excuse for recreations of lots of music hall acts, including G.H. Elliott, and impersonators of Marie Lloyd and Little Tich. Hay plays his part very well, and playing a more respectable, 'light' comic role of this kind no doubt helped build his screen acting technique.

DANDY DICK sees him in a similar role as a kind hearted vicar who abhors horse racing, but gets mixed up in it when his sister buys a race horse and he badly needs money to repair the church steeple... Again, it's a perfectly good early 30s stage adaptation, lightly entertaining, but lacking the acidity and invention that come to highlight his work later on.

After these films, and a guest spot in the all-star extravaganza 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935', Hay was finally ready to bring his schoolmaster to the screen. Even so, he cautiously adapted to it an already established brand. BOYS WILL BE BOYS features not his traditional St Michael's scholars, but the world of J.B. Morton's 'Narkover', a fictitious public school where most of the pupils are criminally minded. Hay melded the styles together in his own screenplay very successfully indeed, and 'BOYS WILL BE BOYS' presents the 'real' Will Hay to us at last. There's one of his typical extended reaction scenes making gold out of an excruciating pun, as the question "How high is a Chinaman?" spirals into an extended debate before we find out that 'How Hi' is actually his name... There's also one beautiful visual gag that sums up Hay's bluff perfectly. As he is teaching, something flies and hits him on the back of the head. Turning around, he sees a boy fiddling with his catapult, daring a confrontation.

"Stand up!" demands Hay. The boy does so, turning out to be a giant, towering above him. With a sniff, he pauses, then turns to a much smaller boy.



The typical power struggle in a Hay classroom: BOYS WILL BE BOYS (1935), with Jimmy Hanley calling the shots.

"You stand up," says Hay to the boy, who is very small indeed.

"Don't do it again!" he says, clouting the small boy on the ear.

Such material presents his character as reprehensible, often downright callous, yet we still root for him. Hay was a great admirer of W.C. Fields, and there are certainly parallels between them. Both present essentially unlikeable characters but make us warm to them by presenting a distorted view of our own foibles. It's hard not to feel sympathy for Hay's character, such is the continual extent of his floundering. Yes, he behaves unpleasantly, but mainly out of desperation to save his own skin.

Fields was at his most effective against the backdrop of smallminded, traditional small town America. Hay worked in similarly parochial settings and institutions, whose strachy tradition and stiff upper lips provided a great foil for his slipshod chaos. There was in fact a tangible link between the two men's films: William Beaudine, who directed Fields' 'THE OLD FASHIONED WAY' (1934) worked closely with Will on 'BOYS WILLBE BOYS', and the two pictures that followed, as he was forming his approach to screen comedy.

There was also more than a hint of Oliver Hardy's comic philosophy present in Hay's work; in Hardy's words, "There's no one as dumb as a dumb guy who thinks he is smart".

The success of 'BOYS WILL BE BOYS' guaranteed a continuation of his film career. Still cautious about using up his school material, Will sought a fresh setting for his character. He found it as a disreputable lawyer in 'WHERE THERE'S A WILL'. Although a lesser film due to it's rushed production, it contained some fine sequences nonetheless, and proved that the character could work in another setting. Indeed, the beautiful thing about the schoolmaster character was that it was infinitely transferable to any position of untenable authority. Furthermore, as a master of bluff, it seemed totally natural that his sense of fraudulent self importance could see him bluff his way into any authority position – shyster lawyer, a corruptible station master, fireman or police sergeant – and wreak havoc upon it. The Will Hay films made at Gainsborough studios in the late 30s provided a stream of variations in this line and in the process produced the best British film comedies of the 1930s.

WINDBAG THE SAILOR (love that title!) is the first really successful vehicle to transfer his character to another setting. It also introduces us to his partnership with Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt, who were to assist Hay brilliantly in transferring his "three ages of ignorance" from sketch to screen. Master of make-up Marriott played the toothless old codger whose incoherence was the butt of most of Hay's frustration; young, cherubically chubby Moffatt was the insolent youth. Again, though, neither character was just two-dimensional. Despite Hay's superiority, Moffatt and Marriott were often devious in getting the better of him.

Co-scripted by Hay and again directed by Beaudine, 'WINDBAG' finds Hay as an old canal barge captain who brags of his imaginary exploits on the high seas ("We were 35 miles off Valpairiso with a cargo of, er, barbed wire and ... oranges"). This leads to him being invited to address the local sea scouts in one of his usual incoherent lectures. Overhearing is the crooked Yeats, owner of a broken down old shipping vessel, *The Rob Roy*. Planning to wreck it, he sees Hay as the perfect cat's paw to take the fall if the ship meets its fate. Yeats publically offers Hay the command of the ship, knowing that he won't dare turn it down and reveal himself as a fraud. Petrified, Hay enlists the help of his elderly brother in law Harbottle (Moore Marriott) and nephew Albert (Graham Moffatt) to bring him a telegram with news that he cannot sail. Albert & Harbottle however, fancy a sea voyage, and instead of bringing the telegram, stow away with him.

Hay's ignorance soon becomes glaringly obvious, as he spends most of the journey being seasick. Believing he is bound for Norway, he is oblivious to the fact that the crew are secretly steering the ship to the South Seas to wreck it. When he finally cottons on to the fact that the weather is becoming somewhat tropical, he, Albert and Harbottle attempt to use their navigation skills to work out where their position might be.

Albert: We need to work out our latitude and longitude

Hay: Well how do we do that?

Albert: We need to find where the sun is.

Harbottle: That's easy. It's up there.

Hay: Ah, there we go. So it's 1512 divided by the sun up there...

Albert: How can we divide by the sun up there?

Hay: Er, well, I don't care how you do it, one way's as good as another... Tell you what, it's half past 4; let's

multiply by 430. So that's 1512 x 430.

Albert 16,4800012.

Hay: Cor, haven't we come a long way? **Alright, gimme that tape measure (wrapping the tape measure 3 times around the globe)** Well, according to that, we're about 3 1/2 miles from Birmingham...

This wonderful scene represents the moment when Hay's schoolroom idiom crystallises in other contexts. From now on there would be no turning back.

Ultimately, Hay gets wise to the wrecking scheme, and when he tries to assert his authority, the crew hold a mutiny. From now on it's equal parts 'MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY' and a riff on Keaton's 'THE NAVIGATOR' as Hay, Moffatt and Marriott find themselves drifting towards a cannibal isle. With the aid of their radio set, which they pass off as a god, "Voice-in-box", they manage to survive, and make it back to the still-drifting ship, and sail back home victoriously.

The next film, 'GOOD MORNING BOYS', didn't have a part for Moore Marriott, but retained Graham Moffatt as chief prankster in Hay's class as he returned to the classroom setting. It also saw the addition of the final parts of the team that would make Hay's best films: screenwriting team Val Guest, Marriott Edgar and J.O.C. Orton. As headmaster Dr Benjamin Twist, Hay is again at the mercy of his boys, as well as a pompous school governor out to have him fired. In order to save his job, the boys are required to enter an inter-schools French examination, his fate resting on their results. After accidentally coming into possession of the exam papers, the boys persuade the weak-willed Twist to let them cheat, leading to a hilarious examination where Hay and the boys contrive to cheat, simultaneously nobbling their swotty young rivals (including a very young Charles Hawtrey). Coming out on top, the boys are rewarded with a trip to Paris, where they get mixed up with the theft of the Mona Lisa. The lack of Marriott has sometimes seen this film skimmed over, but it's excellent all the way through, containing many of his funniest schoolroom scenes. As well as the above mentioned scenes, there is the "What is a unit of electricity?" routine, and the whole thing zips and zings with one liners.

Even better was the next film, which saw the return of Moore Marriott. 'OH! MR PORTER' was destined to become the most fondly remembered of all Hay's films, a classic voted into more than one 'Top 100' film lists. It was simply one of those glorious instances of everything coming together. Hay, Moffatt and Marriott are together again, all on top form. The story, adopted from Arnold Ridley's play 'THE GHOST TRAIN', contains mystery and suspense to enhance the comedy, and the screenplay by Guest, Edgar, Orton and Frank Launder is simply brilliant. Add in a dose of nostalgia courtesy of steam trains and the bucolic pre-war English countryside location shooting, and you have an eternally wonderful film.

Hay's officious, bluffing bumbler has an ideal role as William Porter, a lowly wheeltapper, who has tapped steam engine's wheels for 40 years without a clue why he is doing it. His sister, wife of the railway's managing director, is appalled to find him in such menial work and insists that Hubby pulls rank to get him a better position. To get Porter out of his hair, he posts him to Buggleskelly in Northern Ireland, a remote station where trains only stop on Tuesdays and all previous incumbents have gone mad or died!

Arriving at Buggleskelly in torrential rain, Hay is told the tale of One-eyed Joe, a phantom miller who haunts the railway line that killed him. Brushing the story aside as superstitious nonsense, he arrives at the tatty station to a less than enthusiastic response ("Next train's gone!") from porters Albert and Harbottle. They are less than keen on his officious manner, which only worsens when he finds that they are slackers who have been living on a subsistence diet found in railway parcels! Setting about brightening the halt, Hay also embarks on a task to make more trains stop, including running his own excursion train. Business is non-existent, except from a mysterious one-eyed stranger, who summons Porter into a darkened room and buys all the tickets, with the caveat that the train must run at 6a.m.

On the day of the excursion, Porter dispatches the train for the stranger and his passengers, only to find that it never reaches the signal box. As no-one else has even seen the train, Albert and Harbottle believe he is losing his mind like all the previous incumbents. Not to be outdone, Hay forces them on a mission to find his train, with the assistance of the aged shunting engine Gladstone. Noticing an abandoned loop line beneath the haunted mill, Porter explores, and in a tunnel, they find the stolen train. It turns out that 'Joe' is head of a gun-running gang, using the mill's reputation to keep locals away while they use it as a base to ship guns across the border to Eire using the loop line. Caught snooping around, they are locked in the windmill, but escape by jumping from its sails; making it back to Gladstone, they couple up to the stolen train, and take off towards Belfast. Thus begins



The 'three idiots' attempt navigation. Moffatt, Hay and Marriott in a classic scene from 'WINDBAG THE SAILOR'



a fantastic climatic scene of the gunrunners trying to stop the train as they speed toward the end of the line. A message in a bottle brings the police just as they crash into the buffer stops. Congratulations are offered all round, but it has all been too much for Gladstone, who explodes. The trio doff their caps as the last post plays.



A synopsis alone cannot capture the humour and vintage charm of 'OH! MR PORTER'. Virtually every line is a gag, there are some wonderfully colourful supporting characters (most memorably Dave O' Toole's postman who follows Hay's every move with a gleeful "You're wasting your time!"). Even Gladstone the engine seems to take on a life of its own! There is also an abundance of simply terrific setpieces. As the bungler who finds himself suddenly in control, Hay gets ample opportunity to show off the comically imperious nature of his character, only to have his ambitions thwarted by the disdain of others and his own eternal incompetence. So, we get some fine scenes descended from his classroom antics, but applied gloriously to a new context. There is his insistence that the express train stops, just so the guard can make his acquaintance, his dictatorial efforts to brighten the station, sabotaged by Albert and Harbottle, and his feeble attempt to use a selection of garbled railway bylaws to explain to a customer how the pig in transit ended up as bacon for the station staff...



Best of all is another mathematical calculation scene, as the trio try to ascertain the effect of British Summer Time on the train timetable. Their excursion carriage is blocking the main line and the express is due any minute. A flash of inspiration arrives in the form of a telegram:

PORTER: "On April 19th, summertime will begin. Clocks should be adjusted accordingly. To adjust the service to the new time, the 11 o'clock express on this day will run at 12 o'clock summertime." Well, what are we hurrying for?

ALBERT: How do you make out we've got two hours?

PORTER: Well, if we put the clocks back an hour, the train's an hour late, that's two hours isn't it?

ALBERT: Nah, you put the clocks forward and the train back.

PORTER: Well, what do we get then?

ALBERT: You got the express coming any minute.

PORTER: What you talking about? Listen, if a train's late, how can it be coming

now?

HARBOTTLE: It's summertime.

PORTER: Summertime! The old fool's potty. Summertime or wintertime, if a train's late, it's late!

ALBERT: Yes, but you put the clocks forward.

PORTER: But if the clocks go forward, then the train's already gone!

HARBOTTLE: No, no, you put the clocks back.

PORTER: Of course you do. You lengthen the day by taking an hour off the end, and sticking it on the beginning

HARBOTTLE: No, you take an hour off the beginning and stick it on the end.

PORTER: That's wintertime.

ALBERT: No, wintertime, you put it back!

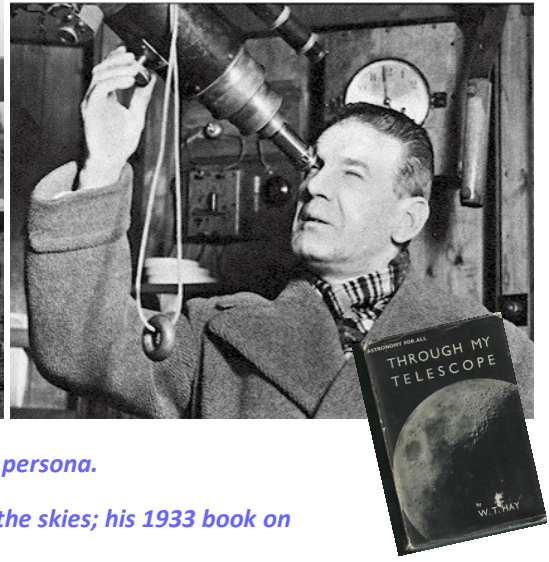
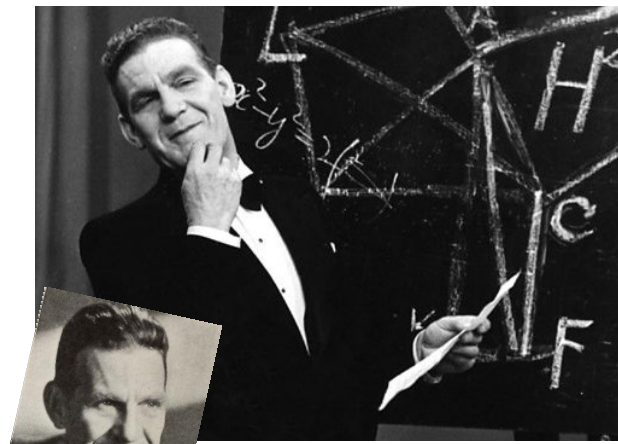
PORTER: Well, that's what I said!

After some more confusion, Porter puts his foot down. Of course he's right. He knows what he's talking about. The train won't be here for another two hours. Of course, at exactly the moment he has said this, a whistle is heard, along comes a train, and the carriage is smashed to smithereens. Will's summation of the situation?

"That's your fault. I said we should have put the clocks forward!"

'OH MR PORTER' straddles a perfect line between cosy nostalgia for the pre-war rural England and old railways, and a more modern irreverence in character. The dialogue, too, has a wonderfully idiot savant logic to it, reminiscent of the Marx Brothers that helps the films carry much more bite than the average British comedy of the 1930s. It formed a template for another four films showcasing the "three idiots", as they were fondly called by Val Guest.

Scenes from the classic comedy that is 'OH! MR PORTER'. Still an influential benchmark for British comedy.



Hay the renaissance man in real life; a far cry from his ignorant on-screen persona.

Above L-R: Posing for the BBC's 'BRAINS TRUST'; with his plane; scanning the skies; his 1933 book on

Carried along to the other films were the settings of disreputable service employment – fire service, police force, colonial rule, prison service. There would always be some criminals out to take advantage of their ignorance, too. More specifically, the films would often contain some sort of antiquated prop of the Gladstone ilk – an old steamer or antique fire engine – and the mathematical calculation sequences were always worked into the plot. There's no denying that the Hay-Moffatt-Marriott films were formula film-making. However, the talents of all involved were such, and the variations so rich, that they remained a consistently brilliant set of films.

'CONVICT 99', the follow up to 'OH MR PORTER', rose to the challenge and was very nearly as good. This time, Hay was again a schoolmaster, down on his uppers, who is elected governor of a prison through a clerical error. After initially being mistaken for an inmate and forced to share a cell with ancient convict Jerry the Mole (Marriott), who has been trying to escape for 40 years. When the mistake is finally sorted out, he is installed as governor and learns of the error. After seeing his new salary, he decides not to mention it; after all, how hard can running a prison be...? Applying his schoolmaster's behaviour management techniques, Hay soon has the inmates walking all over him, forming their own committee, having baths and being served hot drinks in sun loungers all day. It doesn't take long for the villainous Schlesinger and his girlfriend to take advantage of his weakness to gain a forged cheque for the entire funds of the prison trust. Hay, the other convicts and prison warder Albert (Moffatt) break jail to track Schlesinger back to his Limehouse lair, and to sneak into the bank and put the forged cheque back in Hay's deposit box. All ends happily, and Hay's techniques are hailed as a giant leap in prison reform.

Perhaps the most satirical of Hay's films, CONVICT 99 points to another of the reasons that the films have endured so well: they pull no punches in laying waste to British institutions at a time when many doffed their caps reverently. Their anti-authoritarian tone chimes very well with our cynical modern existence, in which politicians and public figures constantly disgrace themselves and blunder through. While the public school world the schoolmaster inhabited has mainly gone, Britain's educational climate is now a floundering one, full of endless paper trails and performance management; a perfect setting for Dr Twist's incompetence and obfuscation, surely! Indeed, it would be very easy to see Hay and co existing in many settings in the current day, not just in education, but perhaps in the world of politics, or as the disreputable clergy of a rural parish. In fact, they could neatly slot into 'YES MINISTER' or 'FATHER TED', two sitcoms that surely bore their influence.

'OLD BONES OF THE RIVER' maintained the satirical vibe, sending up the missionary movement as Hay's schoolmaster went to colonial Africa to 'civilise the natives'. This is a film that can only be seen at a disadvantage now; the context leads to some very dated and unfortunate racial moments. However, it must be said that the wince-inducing moments arise more from the 'serious' plot footage. Hay's incompetence and utter unsuitability to 'civilising' the natives – planning to hire a bicycle to cycle across 500 miles of African jungle; combining his mortar board and gown with tropical shorts; trying to apply a taxation system to a tribe who are much smarter than him and bamboozle him – are actually damning satirical indictments of the British Empire's hopelessly jingoistic techniques of 'civilising' indigenous people. Moffatt and Marriott are along for the ride on the ancient steamboat *Zaire*, a variation on *Gladstone*, hindering Hay's attempts to collect taxes. There's also this wonderful exchange, as Hay produces his own tax return to explain the system:

Moffatt: Don't earn very much, do you?

Hay: I don't want any impudence from you. Anyway, that's nothing to do with what I earn... That's what I declare.

Perhaps the ideal line to sum up Hay's shifty character.

If parts of 'OLD BONES' and 'CONVICT 99' owed a debt to the trio's adventures in Buggleskelly, ASK A POLICEMAN pillages it



outright. Change uniforms from railway to police, villainous gun runners to smugglers, the tale of a ghostly miller to a headless horseman, and the speeding train finale for a bus chase, and Bob's your fictitious avuncular relative, OH MR PORTER is magically transformed into ASK A POLICEMAN. Controversially, it might actually be the funnier film, full of great scenes and dialogue.

Despite the quality of the films, Hay couldn't help but feel that the formulaic nature was getting a bit much. He had already protested and made one film without Moffatt and Marriott, 1938's 'HEY! HEY! USA!'. That this was a flop is less to do with Hay's shortcomings than its rather desperate attempts to make him appeal to the American market. As a porter who becomes an accidental transatlantic stowaway and falls in with a dumb gangster (Edgar Kennedy) and the kidnapping of a young heir, he is trapped into an all too phony version of Chicago clearly the invention of people who have never visited but are basing it all on a viewing of 'SCARFACE'. Hay and Kennedy worked well together though, but a far better solution would have been to incorporate the American element into Hay's usual idiom, perhaps by having Kennedy as a dumb tourist, or the young heir as a pupil at St Michael's. As it is, 'HEY! HEY! USA!' is a curio, but lacking in the individuality and charm of his other films.

Gainsborough pictures were understandably loathe to break up such a successful formula, but Hay was adamant that he wanted to try new things, and announced his notice on completion of 'WHERE'S THAT FIRE?'. The last of the films featuring 'the three idiots', it features them in yet another decrepit station; this time a fire station. Never mind the fire; it was for many years a case of 'WHERE'S THAT FILM?', as no copies were known to survive until one turned up at the BBC in the 1970s. Interviewed on the set of the film, Hay had noted the formulaic nature of his recent films:

"Firemen this week aren't we? We've been through all the uniforms in turn, and its sometimes hard to remember if we're policemen or firemen or what!" 'WHERE'S THAT FIRE?' does justify Hay's feelings somewhat, having a feeling of overfamiliarity. Just a notch below the sustained quality of 'ASK A POLICEMAN' and 'OH! MR PORTER', it does, however, also contain some of their very best scenes. Most celebrated of all is that involving the trio's incompetent efforts to erect a fireman's pole. Perhaps the most Marx Brothers-influenced sequence they ever did, this is actually based on a sequence from the Jack Hulbert vehicle 'JACK'S THE BOY' (1932), directed by silent comedian Walter Forde. Hay's version far surpasses the earlier one and is a masterpiece of escalating calamity. Realising the pole is the wrong way round, the trio take it out into the street to turn it around, jamming up traffic; their attempts to extricate the pole, while avoiding the helpful suggestions of schoolboy Charles Hawtrey, and the intrusions of a host of other characters, is a brilliantly built sequence.

Despite the excellence of the material, it was getting rather too slapstick for Hay's liking, and his mind was made up. He moved over to Ealing Studios in 1941, leaving Moffatt, Marriott and the team of scriptwriters behind. The one constant would be director Marcel Varnel, who directed his first Ealing film. Hay's films for Ealing don't exactly have a poor reputation amongst his admirers – he never made a bad film, as such – but they are certainly considered lesser efforts than his magnificent Gainsborough work. This is true, but all of them remain solid comedy vehicles that would have been career highlights for many performers, and one ranks amongst his very best.

While the loss of Marriot and Moffatt is certainly noticeable, the deficit was made up by some other excellent foils, showing that Hay's decision to work without them was not just egotism but a desire to mine fresh veins of comedy. He clearly recognised that he needed foils to enhance his own comedy, and his first Ealing film provides two brilliant ones in blithering Etonian Claude Hulbert and smart-alec Charles Hawtrey. 'THE GHOST OF ST MICHAEL'S' features Hay joining the staff of St Michael's boarding school, which for the duration of the war has been evacuated to a castle on the Isle of Skye. The castle is allegedly haunted, and caretaker John Laurie delights in telling all and sundry how the phantom pipes will be heard just before a death (his role as Private Fraser in 'DAD'S ARMY' was inspired by this film). Hay soon falls victim to the pranks of precocious Hawtrey and his classmates, and also has an enemy in another teacher, Humphries, who has worked with him in the past and relishes in tales of Hay's incompetence. However, both the headmaster and Humphries are soon found dead and suspicion falls on Hay. It's up to him, with the dubious aid of Hulbert and Hawtrey, to clear his name and get to the bottom of the 'phantom pipes' mystery once and for all!

'THE GHOST OF ST MICHAEL'S' certainly contains enough

Hay's success in Britain never did translate to the U.S., but Gainsborough certainly tried, albeit wrong-headedly. Their lack of understanding of the American market is evidenced by his co-starring film with Edgar Kennedy, 'HEY! HEY! USA!' and this cringe-worthy US advert for 'WHERE THERE'S A WILL'.





In uniform again: Hay in 'ASK A POLICEMAN', and with Moffatt and Marriott in 'WHERE'S THAT FIRE?'



classic Hay elements – an apocryphal legend à la the phantom miller, a schoolroom setting— but presents a different, and very funny, version of his eternal trio, giving his film career a shot in the arm and starting his Ealing work in fine style.

The next couple of films didn't quite match up to this high standard. THE BLACK SHEEP OF WHITEHALL has lots of positives; for one, John Mills returns as an excellent foil for Hay as the only student for his awful correspondence college. Mills is unsatisfied with Hay's incompetence and refuses to pay; Hay tracks him down to his Whitehall job where he is accidentally confused with a

visiting professor advising the government on South American trade. Put live on to the radio, he bluffs a wonderfully garbled interview about imports and exports. The real professor is clearly spooked by the mix up and Mills smells a rat; he and Hay set out to prove that the Professor is also a phony. Using a series of disguises, they discover he is actually an impostor and track down a ring of fifth columnists out to sabotage a government trade deal vital to the war. There are lots of marvellous scenes, but inspiration flags in the second half as the film descends into slapstick and silliness more in the George Formby line.

I have a personal theory that the more Nazi plots are put into a comedy film, the less funny it becomes. Hay's next, 'THE GOOSE STEPS OUT' is certainly evidence for that; it's my candidate for his weakest film. Originally intended as a short propaganda film, it grew to be a feature length comedy; both patriotism and padding show accordingly. This time he's the double of a German agent, and when the secret service get wind of him, he is parachuted into Germany to infiltrate a school for training enemy agents. It may be weak as a whole, but this film does have some glorious moments: a beautiful scene (sadly missing from the print on DVD) dealing with the intricacies of pronouncing British place names, and best of all, a scene where Hay tricks the whole class into giving a two-fingered salute (and not Churchill's version!) to a portrait of Hitler! These highlights are too few and far between, though. Hurting the film most of all is its loudness. Occasionally, Hay's barking of orders could push his comedy to be a little too shrill, but here he seems to yell every line. Top it all off with a loud, cramped runaway aeroplane sequence (cf Laurel & Hardy's 'THE FLYING DEUCES') and you've got a film far less likeable, original or funny than any he had previously made.

While the need for comics to engage in propaganda to boost morale in dark times is understandable, it doesn't make for the best comedy. Hay's character was most suited to fighting small battles over insolence in the classroom, against pompous school governors or small time crooks, than against the might of the whole German army. It's significant that his more low-key propaganda short 'GO TO BLAZES', where he incompetently shows how not to put out a fire bomb, comes off much better, and even more significant that his best Ealing film specifically eschews mention of wartime.

MY LEARNED FRIEND (1943) begins with a prominent title informing us that the setting is 'LONDON – PRE-WAR'. It sees the return of dithering Claude Hulbert as Babbington, a hopeless trainee barrister who is given one last chance to redeem himself. A fellow named Fitch has been held on a charge of writing 23 letters to gain money under false pretences; all Babbington has to do is have him convicted. Fitch is, of course, Hay. More dishonest and shifty than ever, his character has a newfound confidence as he proceeds to reel out a sly excuse to explain away each begging letter, baffling Babbington:

FITCH: I take it the first letter is dismissed, your worship?

JUDGE: It is. Leaving a mere 22...

BABBINGTON: "Madam, I have no husband..."

FITCH: Well, I suppose you're going to argue with that?

BABBINGTON: "...and every spare penny I have goes on my



Hay with Claude Hulbert, his wonderful stooge in 'MY LEARNED FRIEND' (1943).

three little tots." Can you honestly tell the court that you have three little tots?

FITCH: *I can. Every night in The Goat & Compasses. Three tots of rum. Is that 21 left, your worship?*

BABBINGTON: *Well, how about this? "I am an orphan"*

FITCH: *Well, so I am.*

BABBINGTON: *But you can't possibly call yourself an orphan at your age.*

FITCH: *Why not? It's people my age who are more likely to be orphans.*

BABBINGTON: *But you're not often called orphans. It's only the very young who are not orphaned so often...*

FITCH: *Er, say again?*

Fitch proceeds to defeat Babbington on every count, and the case is thrown out. They bump into each other later in a bar, and Fitch offers his commiserations, explaining that he used to be barrister ("Until I got accused of some nonsense about trying to bribe a witness. Well, I couldn't be bothered to argue the case, so I just disbarred myself..."). Sensing a cash cow, Fitch persuades Babbington to team up. They have their first case very soon, when Grimshaw, an unhinged former client of Fitch's appears. Menacingly, he tells them of his plot to kill off everyone involved in his trial, culminating with Fitch himself... "6 little dramas of retribution, all beautifully staged". It soon becomes clear that he means it, and the hapless pair embark on a race to a) tip off the other victims, b) persuade the police of their unlikely tale and c) stop the other murders so that Fitch will stay at the bottom of his list! The rest of the film is a wonderfully dark and cynical game of cat and mouse, that takes our heroes to a variety of improbable settings: an east-end dive bar, a home for mental patients, onstage at a pantomime, and finally to dangle from the hands of Big Ben as Grimshaw tries to bump off the whole House of Lords!

MY LEARNED FRIEND is simply a tour de force. Hay and Hulbert are brilliant together, the script is packed with gags and incident, and lightning-paced. While the war is absent from the film, its impact is noticeable in the casual attitude to murder soon to be seen in Chaplin's 'MONSIEUR VERDOUX' and Ealing's own KIND HEARTS & CORONETS'.

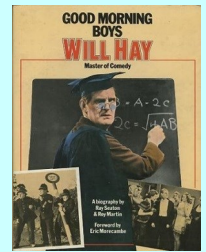
Different in tone to all Hay's other films, MY LEARNED FRIEND could have been the start of a profitable new direction, but it was to be his last. During filming, Hay was diagnosed with cancer and, though he was to have successful surgery, his health entered a terminal decline which reduced his activities to a few radio appearances. Though he harboured hopes of moving into producing or directing ("I could sit in a chair with my stick!") A series of strokes put paid to this idea, and he passed away on Easter Monday, 1949, aged just 60. It had always been ironic that such an intelligent man had played an incompetent teacher, and now in one final irony, he was dead at the scholastic retirement age.

Yet, the antics of Hay as Dr Benjamin Twist, William Porter and all his other creations live on. The films, though taken for granted somewhat, endure as wonderful comedies, certainly the best produced in England during the 1930s and early 1940s. Hay's comedy was to influence Tony Hancock, Dad's Army and many other beloved creations. Our modern world of corruption, gerrymandering, incompetence and red tape is all the poorer without his being here to present his own skewed, comic take on it. Will Hay was one of a kind, and his films are to be cherished.

Class dismissed!

Join and follow the Will Hay appreciation society on Facebook at

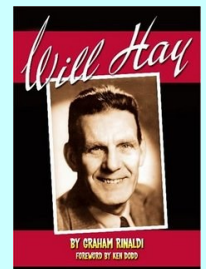
www.facebook.com/WillHayComicActor



'GOOD MORNING BOYS: Will Hay, Master of Comedy'

By Ray Seaton and Roy Martin

Published in 1978, this was for many years the only Hay book, it has some errors, but benefits from first-hand interviews with many of his family and colleagues. It's never been reprinted and commands high prices. Grab it if you can find it!



WILL HAY by Graham Rinaldi

Published in 2009, this hugely detailed biography is comprehensively researched and includes extracts from Will's unpublished autobiography, as well as interviews with surviving colleagues and family. Now the definitive book on Hay, and still in print!



FUNNY WAY TO BE A HERO

By John Fisher

This eloquent love letter to music hall and variety comedians features a wonderfully written chapter on Hay, focusing on his stage act. There's lots more to recommend it, too!

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF ALBERT & HARBOTTLE:



THE CAREERS OF GRAHAM MOFFATT & MOORE MARRIOTT

Graham Moffatt and Moore Marriott were a crucial part of the formula for Will Hay's best films, but they were far more than just stooges in the traditional sense. Both were great comic actors in their own right, together and solo.

As the elderly codger Harbottle was by far Moore Marriott's most famous role, it's quite a surprise to realise that Moore was actually only 4 years Hay's senior. Born George Thomas Moore Marriott in 1885, he had been a widespread actor in British films for years before his role in 'WINDBAG THE SAILOR'. He had been onscreen since at least 1912, appearing mainly in dramas, including 'THE FLYING SCOTSMAN', and 'BY THE SHORTEST OF HEADS', a horseracing drama starring a 10 year old George Formby. He continued ably into talkies, including 'THE SIGN OF FOUR' (1932), and was beginning to dip into comedy with Leslie Fuller's 'A POLITICAL PARTY' and even Hay's early film 'DANDY DICK'. His appearance in this film, barely noticeable as a stable hand, typifies the anonymity of many of his pre-Harbottle appearances.

Graham Moffatt's path to the Will Hay films was much more serendipitous. Born in 1919, he was an office boy at Gainsborough studios who was one day spotted by Aldwych farceur Tom Walls for a bit part in his current film. Walls needed a chubby choir boy for a gag shot in 'A CUP OF KINDNESS' (1934), and Graham was perfect. He can be seen, for all of about six seconds as a gum-chewing choirboy in the finished film. More roles followed, including a role opposite Hay in 'WHERE THERE'S A WILL' (1936). His scenes as the insolent office boy are the highlights of the film, summoning up the spirit of Hay's schoolroom act with great chemistry; he was a shoe-in for a part in future films, his crafty Albert character becoming very much his own incarnation of Hay's original schoolboy. WINDBAG THE SAILOR enhanced this by bringing in Marriott as the old man character, and the Hay-Moffatt-Marriott trio was gloriously complete.

As Hay later made overtures to going solo, there were plenty of other parties interested in maintaining the able support of Messrs. Moffatt & Marriott, and Gainsborough were keen to use them to add box office appeal. Thus, in 1938 they appeared as comic relief in the Will Fyffe-Margaret Lockwood drama 'OWD BOB'. The following year, they popped up in the proto-Ealing comedy 'CHEER BOYS CHEER', and that same year Marriott had a show-stopping solo role as a grizzled prospector in The Crazy Gang's THE FROZEN LIMITS. (In large measure due to his support, it's their funniest film). The gang brought him back the following year for 'GASBAGS'.

After Hay moved to Ealing, the team were placed into Arthur Askey's films. "They were foisted upon me," he told Ray Seaton and Roy Martin, "but I couldn't have found better companions." He wasn't wrong, as the pair really enlivened his films 'I THANK YOU' and 'BACKROOM BOY'. Their last appearance together was a brief appearance supporting yet another Gainsborough comic, Tommy Handley, in 'TIME FLIES' (1944).



As well as their wonderful comic chemistry on-screen, Moffatt and Marriott cultivated a real and genuine friendship off-screen. Marriott had taken the young Moffatt under his wing, giving him the benefit of his many years' experience. According to Graham Rinaldi's Hay biography, the men's families often shared day trips and holidays together, remaining close friends until Marriott's death in 1949. Graham Moffatt's acting career fizzled out without his friend and co-star, but he had a happy family life running a pub near Bath, making occasional returns to the screen, and hitting the headlines when he suffered a five week bout of hiccups! He died sadly young at the age of 46, in 1965.

The chemistry and warmth between Graham Moffatt and Moore Marriott came across vividly in their screen appearances together. They were always a highlight of whatever film they appeared in, and add depth and character to Will Hay's canon of work.

Moore Marriott was actually only in his 50s when he portrayed the geriatric Harbottle. Here he is out of character, circa the late 30s.

MARJORIE BEEBE

THE SENNETT YEARS & THE TALE REVIVED AND REVERSED



One of the most underrated comediennes from the golden age of comedy, the terrific **MARJORIE BEEBE** added zest and sass to Mack Sennett's sound short comedies. **IAN CRAINE** sheds some light on this talented but neglected star...

Marjorie Beebe arrived in Los Angeles from Missouri in about 1922. A lot of details of her early life, and indeed her later years, are missing or confused. We do know that she was born in Kansas City on 9th October 1908 and was still of school age when she went to California. Her mother was with her but her father remained in Missouri. The young Marjorie was movie mad and seems to have frequented the studios almost as soon as she arrived. She was taken up by Universal as a young gofer and may have appeared in a couple of films in minor roles. She joined Fox in the mid 1920s and it was here that her acting career began to take off. She was still in supporting roles but her talent for comedy was becoming apparent. Her appearances were largely in feature length silents.

Then she was given the title role in *The Farmer's Daughter* (Arthur Rosson 1928). Contemporary newspaper reviews were full of praise for her performance- one described her as "the comedy find in years". Unfortunately *The Farmer's Daughter*, which may well have been the highlight of Marjorie Beebe's short career, is lost to us. Only some promotional pictures and the script survive. Beebe's humdrum life on the farm with her rustic old father and worthy but dull boyfriend was turned upside down by the arrival of a city slicker who initially at least made quite an impression on the farm girl.

It was not only reviewers who were impressed by Marjorie Beebe's talents. The King of Comedy himself, Mack Sennett, was taking notice. Sennett was often on the look-out for new talent, partly because he had a tendency to lose star actors through not paying them what they thought they deserved. In this instance he was in the market for a new female lead. He had tried a few in an effort to replace the irreplaceable Mabel Normand, and the career of the latest, Thelma Hill, was about to come to a premature end. Despite all her considerable experience at Universal and Fox, Beebe was still a minor in 1928 and her mother had to co-sign her first contract. But Sennett had backed a winner. Few comediennes of the era were quite as physical as Marjorie Beebe or quite as prepared to endure undignified stunts. Beebe clearly thought slapstick comedy was an equal opportunities endeavour. She was also very funny, with a considerable range of facial expressions and her own way of delivering an acerbic put-down.

Sennett's company was not overflowing with talent when Marjorie Beebe arrived. Andy Clyde was the most distinguished actor still available. Clyde had been experimenting with make-up for some years to create a comic old man figure. When he perfected it, with posture and delivery in tune with his appearance, he had created a character that would last him his whole career, which was a long one. Sennett and his scriptwriters now had to create suitable vehicles, ie two reel shorts, in which to feature the Clyde character, usually called "Pop" Martin. The comic *genre* chosen would be significant for the new arrival, Marjorie Beebe.



Pop Martin is a Janus figure that looks both backwards and into the future. Clyde came to play in a lot of Westerns and his old man routine would serve as a precedent for any number of "old buzzards" who regularly cropped up in horse operas over the years, the best of whom was perhaps Edgar Buchanan. But the character had a much longer history- in reality Andy Clyde had recreated Pantalone in the New World. Pantalone was the crabby old man in Italian *commedia dell' arte* which had flourished in the Renaissance and the centuries that followed. Of all comic forms *commedia* has perhaps the longest reach and the most influence.

Here's Marjorie smiling to camera and looking pleased with herself, and with the graffiti which she has just daubed over her father's fencing. 'THE FARMER'S

Charles II of England introduced it into the English speaking world where it gradually metamorphosed into pantomime. Pantomime in its early years was structured around the Harlequinade- the love affair of Harlequin and Columbine. The latter lived with her father, Pantaloon in the English, and had a dull

older fiancé, usually an associate of her father, whom she was doomed to marry. He was a dolt and was known as Fool or Clown. Then into this enclosed world came the handsome intruder, the prankster Harlequin with his coat of many colors and his magic bat.

The Farmer's Daughter seems to have been reaching out in that direction, though there Beebe turned her back on the intruder who as yet lacked the charm of Harlequin just as the boyfriend was not yet a complete fool. Now Mack Sennett gave his big star, Andy Clyde, the full-blown Harlequinade- daughter, associate, and incomer to turn the girl's head. Many shorts were made to this prescription. There was rarely a mother or a son, and rarely a sister for the daughter. Intentionally or not Sennett was re-creating the centuries old Harlequinade from British pantomime. He had a perfect Fool in big Harry Gribbon. And Marjorie Beebe was pencilled in to be the daughter.

To begin with these little twenty minute Harlequinades tended to be centered around sports themes- golf, football or boxing all starring Andy Clyde and Marjorie Beebe. Beebe was finding her feet. She brought an air of mischief to all her roles but she was not yet the real focal point of the films. Gradually she started to essay bolder roles away from the strict Harlequinades- a gangster's moll in *Racket Cheers* (Mack Sennett 1930) and a club hostess in *Dance Hall Marge* (Del Lord and Mack Sennett 1931).

The latter concept in particular could be seen as quite *risqué* and Pre-Code; perhaps Beebe was taking Sennett down roads he would not necessarily have traveled. She was making a name for herself too for the physical antics her roles involved. She had become an expert pratfaller and hardly a movie went by without her landing on her bottom. She was physically daring as well, and a fine swimmer and horse rider. Sennett had developed quite a fetish for underwater scenes in his later two reel shorts, which since 1928 had all been talkies. Beebe never played in a silent film for the King of Comedy, nor, with one exception, a feature length movie.

In the 1950s two Frenchmen cleverly created an ostensibly continuous narrative out of assorted slapstick clips and called it *Ça, C'est du Cinéma* (Claude Accursi and Raymond Bardonnet 1951). The only woman they granted star billing to alongside Keaton, Laurel, Lloyd, Turpin, Bevan and others was Marjorie Beebe. Watching her in *Dance Hall Marge*, diving off a ship to escape Gribbon's as ever unwelcoming, half staggering through shallow water, clambering up a pier and into a she then proceeded to reverse back off the pier and into the water, one can understand why.

Sennett himself had already pronounced her as potentially the greatest screen comedienne of them all. Her horse riding came to the fore in Westerns which he had his script department write for her. *Hold 'er Sheriff* (Mack Sennett 1931) was a return to Harlequinade, and Marjorie Beebe resumed her role as mischievous daughter, Marge Martin, though in this one Andy Clyde was not available to play Pop. She's the sheriff's daughter who got into all manner of bother when she fell in love with a bandit. But perhaps most interesting is the scene where a boy's hat blew off as she rode by. Without pausing for breath she leant out of the saddle and retrieved it, placing it back on the boy's head. The scene was completely incidental to the main plot. Its only purpose was to show off the consummate riding skills of Marjorie Beebe. Indeed the other time she went out West it was as a trick rider. Beebe was making countless shorts for Sennett but they were filmed quickly enough, and she had always combined her work there with forays to other studios. She was contracted to Mack and must have had his permission- perhaps more likely he helped instigate the arrangements and leased her out. 1931 was Marjorie Beebe's *annus mirabilis*. Hers was a short career and it developed quickly. In 1931 she was at her sassy peak.

Vitaphone made a one-reel short called *Hot News Margie* (Alfred J. Goulding 1931) in which she played an intrepid and intrusive newspaper reporter on the trail of a scandal involving a footballer. She gave at least as good as she got which included a security man's boot on her behind just as Chaplin or Arbuckle might have received. But *Hot News Margie* persevered and made it first into the men's locker room and then on to the pitch with the game in

Scenes from Marjorie's films (from top): 'DANCE HALL MARGE'; 'HOT NEWS MARGIE', and flirting with big Karl Dane in 'A PUT UP JOB'





progress- a trick she also pulled in one of her Sennett vehicles, *One Yard to Go* (William Beaudine 1931). In *A Put-Up Job* (Albert Ray 1931), a Dane and Arthur vehicle for Paramount, she merrily flirted with Karl Dane. In return in one scene Dane inadvertently stepped on her trailing suspenders bringing her pants down and then when she swallowed a harmonica he turned her upside down and shook it out of her. Marjorie Beebe was game for anything.

Beebe was twenty-two and right at the peak of her energetic slapstick powers. But she was getting a bit big to go on playing the madcap teenage daughter, Marge Martin. It was time for her to bow out in a bravura rendering of the old tale. For *Cowcatcher's Daughter* (Babe Stafford 1931) was not only a partial reprise of Marjorie Beebe's greatest success, *The Farmer's Daughter*, it was also a full-blown Harlequinade straight out of British pantomime at any stage in the previous two hundred years. Not only were the four stock characters on display but also the Sennett version of the pantomime horse and the Fairy Godmother, not to mention the slapstick itself. It should not be forgotten that the slapstick, for which slapstick cinema is named, was in its origins Harlequin's magic bat or paddle.



'THE COWCATCHER'S DAUGHTER', with Andy Clyde.

"Do the same only differently" is one of the studio mantras that producers preach to aspiring scriptwriters. By the time of *Cowcatcher's Daughter* something rather interesting was happening to the Harlequinade as portrayed by Mack Sennett and his troupe of players, something that had been developing for a while. In the previous year's *Campus Crushes* (Mack Sennett 1930) Beebe had played a college student who was giving her old father- Andy Clyde back in action- plenty of problems. One factor

that needs to be taken on board is that Mack Sennett did not have many young male leads, potential Harlequin figures in other words, who possessed much in the way of charisma. Marjorie Beebe on the other hand had bucket-loads of charisma- so much so that she was turning a very old tale on its head. She was becoming the prankster. Columbine, though often pert and mischievous, was normally in Harlequin's shadow. He was the one who played the tricks as he had in *commedia dell' arte* and pantomime. But a moment's thought makes one realise that the central figure in the Harlequinade is not Harlequin but Columbine. She it is who has deep connections with all three of the other principal character- as daughter, as fiancée, and as new lover. Compared to Columbine Harlequin is on the periphery.

Dance Hall Marge and *Hold 'er Sheriff* had both already announced through their titles that the protagonist was now the female character not the male. In *Cowcatcher's Daughter* Marjorie Beebe took full control and the male characters effectively danced attendance on her. She had literally become the trickster- the film opened with the revelation that she has run off to a Circus and Wild West Show and become a trick rider. The first that Pop Andy knew of this- be believed her to be at the posh Finishing School back East whither she had been despatched- was when he saw the Circus poster featuring his disorderly daughter. Back home Beebe had also taught the horse to push her hapless fiancé (Gibbon yet again) down the well as well as indulging in a spot of nude swimming. And there were other tricks up her sleeve, including at least one that harked back to the original *Iazzi*, the tales from *commedia dell' arte*.

As the name implies *Cowcatcher's Daughter* was at least as much about Columbine's relations with father Pantaloon as about her affair with Harlequin. This was the ultimate battle of wills between Sennett's two biggest stars left standing- Andy Clyde and Marjorie Beebe. Marge Martin knew full well that if she was going to get married it was definitely not going to be to the perennially hapless Gibbon- she would defy her father and take the consequences, until bit by bit her behaviour ground him down enough to give in to her wishes

But choosing your husband was only part of the journey to liberation. Beebe gave the distinct impression at the end of this two reeler that she was really in no rush to get married at all. There was always something of the Flapper Girl about Marjorie Beebe. She had grown up in the Twenties after all, but there is something different that separates her from the likes of Clara Bow or Colleen Moore. Beebe could perhaps best be described as Flapper Girl meets Mae West.



All dressed up for the moguls in 'DOUBLING IN THE QUICKIES'.

Cowcatcher's Daughter marked the effective end of Marjorie Beebe's young *alter ego* Marge Martin. In 1932 Andy Clyde jumped ship, the latest to protest with his feet over Sennett's contract negotiations. He went to Educational before finally hooking up with Columbia. Educational Pictures had been Sennett's own distributors. Marjorie Beebe stayed with her mentor, or at least the man who had kept her in the spotlight- her essential screen persona pre-dated his influence. In 1932 Sennett also made the ill-thought out decision to tie up some of his company including Beebe in the only talkie feature he made. *Hypnotized* (Mack Sennett 1932) was a Mack and Moran vehicle with Beebe in blackface. It is not a film to write home about.

There were still a few two reel shorts left in Marjorie Beebe. Now that Andy Clyde had left she was paired with Lloyd Hamilton. Though Hamilton was a wonderful comic actor the chemistry she had with Andy Clyde was missing from this screen partnership. Perhaps Beebe was not really suited to be one half of a couple. She was too much the individual and was better on her own as in *Hot News Margie* or as Clyde's unruly daughter.

Doubling in the Quickies (Babe Stafford, 1932) though was a partial delight. As in *Cowcatcher's Daughter* Beebe wanted to make the grade in show business. This time her target was Hollywood and the movies, and it was the boyfriend Hamilton from whom she ran away. She set off to Hollywood with her mother- so there was definitely a touch of autobiography in this short for Marjorie Beebe. The film is only a partial delight- the first reel is a joy as Beebe visited studio after studio to audition. Each time she made a complete hash of things usually by falling over, once on a mini ice rink and another time by languidly resting her foot on a chair which she had failed to notice was on casters. The pratfall and all the surrounding indignities were now second nature to Marjorie Beebe and she acted out the humiliations of her character with verve and insight.

She was finally given her chance, but as the title implies it was only as a double for the lead actress in one of the studio's quota quickies; she was engaged to perform the dangerous or humiliating stunts the main lady would prefer to avoid. The second reel is too frenetic. Hamilton re-appeared, wandering unknowingly on to the set in an effort to protect his sweetheart. All sorts of mayhem ensued, and all that Marjorie Beebe really had to do was scream loudly most of the time before deciding movies were not for her. So she went back home with Hamilton with her tail between her legs. The real Marjorie Beebe had been made of sterner stuff, and she was better on screen when she played a more independent and defiant character.

By 1932 Mack Sennett was struggling to remain afloat. Slapstick had come to be seen as old-fashioned; screwball comedy would become the new fashionable subgenre of comedy, something that was more in keeping with the age of the talkies. For those with a sense of history this may seem strange. After all the original slapstick of *commedia dell' arte* would have been a raucous affair and so was pantomime for the most part- which soon shed the mime aspect from its performances if not its name. Sennett and Beebe were also having their private and contractual differences; Beebe, like Thelma Hill before her, was beginning to drink too much.



In 1933 Mack Sennett was made bankrupt, and that, apart from a brief comeback two years later, was the end of the line for the King of Comedy. Marjorie Beebe's career nosedived. Her speciality had undoubtedly been the two-reel short, but she only did one more- with Leon Errol. She went back to second banana roles in B-features and they were not really right for her. Off screen there were too many husbands (three verified in the 1930s alone, and others rumoured) and too much drinking. In 1940 she called it a day. There were to be no comebacks from Marjorie Beebe- no more films, no stage work and no television, though she would have been just right for the sort of sitcoms that a new generation of dizzy comediennes would make in the 1950s when Beebe would still only have been in her forties.

But it was not to be. She slipped out of the limelight so completely that by her death on 9th May 1983 she had been completely forgotten, and not a single obituary for her has ever been uncovered. But in her day she was as talented as they came.

LAUREL & ... LANE?

The British Newspaper Archive is a tremendous place to procrastinate. A fully searchable database of regional and specialist British newspapers from the last couple of hundred years, it's great for searching film listings, theatre appearances and careers of British-born stars. One of the most interesting offerings is the complete archive of theatrical newspaper 'The Era'. I was idly searching Laurel & Hardy clippings within its pages when I found this curio from March, 1936, linking Stan Laurel with terrific acrobatic comedian Lupino Lane :

Two of my favourite comedians together! Now, there's a show I'd love to see. But was it ever *really* going to happen? Well, for starters, I don't believe that Lane and Laurel had ever "worked together on the English stage years ago." This is probably lazy journalism alluding to their both being graduates of the English Music Halls. However, I guess they could have worked on the same bill in their early days. Lane was at this point billed as 'Master 'Nipper' Lupino Lane, the boy comedian', a more successful contemporary of young Stan Jefferson. As Stan's stock rose, perhaps the two became acquainted; although I don't believe I've ever seen any reference to them being friends, Stan did love surround himself with music hall types so it seems like they would have got on. However, it should also be mentioned that Lane, in his memoirs, is quite a name dropper! Is this just another example, coincidentally providing some publicity for his current show...?

On the other hand, in early 1936, Laurel *was* at quite an uncertain point in his career. He and Hal Roach had already had a serious rift, based around disagreements over 'BABES IN TOYLAND'. For a time, Roach had announced the break up of the L & H partnership, threatening to replace it with 'The Hardy Family', teaming Babe with Patsy Kelly and Spanky McFarland. Facing an uncertain future, perhaps Laurel *was* open to moonlighting on the London stage, combined with the attraction of visiting his homeland again. The rapturous reception greeting him on his 1932 visit would surely have been fresh in his mind at times when Hollywood seemed unwelcoming. Perhaps he really was considering the venture at one point.

Of course, it all remains speculation at this point. Both men had spectacular successes around the corner that would preclude any such collaboration if it had really been intended. Laurel had, by mid 1936, patched up his differences with Roach. The formation of Stan Laurel productions allowed him greater creative control (and pacified his ego), resulting in two of the very best L & H pictures, 'OUR RELATIONS' and 'WAY OUT WEST'. As for Lane, his then-current show, 'TWENTY TO ONE', proved so successful that he developed a sequel in which he played the same cockney character. 'ME AND MY GIRL' became the apotheosis of his life's work on stage, a long-running hit that begat the dance craze 'THE LAMBETH WALK' and is still revived to this day.

Like so many unfinished projects lost to time, we'll never know if this show was really going to happen, or what it would have been like. But it sure is an interesting thought.

STAN LAUREL With Lupino Lane in Coliseum Show?

LUPINO LANE, whose "Twenty to One" continues to draw packed houses at the Coliseum, tells me that he has a mutual arrangement with Stan Laurel for the British-born Hollywood screen comedian to appear in Lane's next Coliseum show.

The two comedians are old friends, having worked together on the English stage years ago.

F. S. J.



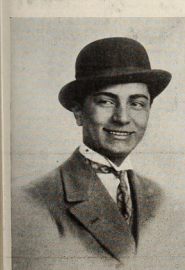
WHO WAS NICOL PARRE?

Here's another mystery. I came across the ad on the right while flicking through old editions of 'The Exhibitor's Review', an old film trade magazine available to browse through online at The Media Digital History Library. One of the joys of digitally leafing through these is the fact that little oddities like this turn up. I've certainly never heard of Nicol Parre before, and no reviews seem to exist of this film, which begs the question of if it ever found a release at all.



Announcing
and
Introducing
A new screen
COMEDIAN
NICOL PARRE
IN
"THE FARMER"
A One Reel Comedy
Produced by Himself Now
Ready for Release.

N. P. FILM CO.
introduces
THE CLEVER YOUNG
COMEDIAN
DOM FERRE



DOM FERRE
Nicol Parre Produces His Comedies and
is open to contract with any distributors
N. P. FILM CO.
412 Lake St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

A further search through the archives revealed only one more mention of Nicol Parre, not as star, but as producer for the 'N.P. Film Company' in another prominent ad in 'The Exhibitor's Review':

However, if we look a bit closer, I'd say the star they're now promoting, 'Dom Ferre', is actually the same guy. Probably a classic example of trying to make a one-man operation seem bigger than it actually is. There's a hint of desperation, too, in that blurb: "open to contract with *any* distributors". Certainly, the surnames are suspiciously similar. Both names sound French to me; was Nicol/Dom an ex-pat with previous experience in the French industry? Or was he of a French immigrant family in New York, trying his luck at films? We'll probably never know, and I doubt 'THE FARMER' was much more interesting than its title. Still, an interesting reminder that for all the clichéd stories of extras and studio janitors crashing the movies, it could actually be pretty hard to break in as an independent film maker or comedian. As a footnote to the story, the address above, 412 Lake Street, appears to be still standing on Google Street View. I wonder if there are any film cans buried in the back yard...?



SILENT LAUGHTER SATURDAY: A REPORT

A brand new event for silent comedy fans began last Autumn at London's Cinema Museum. Silent Laughter Saturday, presented by London's Kennington Bioscope group and curated by regular 'Lost Laugh' contributor David Wyatt, presented a great array of classic and rare comedy. Here's a run-down of what we saw...

The Cinema Museum was rammed! It was a great to see a full house for a programme showing off not just familiar favourites, but long forgotten ones, too. The eager members of the crowd were rewarded with some great films, and fantastic musical accompaniment from John Sweeney, Lillian Henley and Cyrus Gabrysch. Kicking things off in style was the Raymond Griffith-Betty Compson feature, 'PATHS TO PARADISE'. This wonderful film is ahead of its time, a proto-screwball comedy featuring Griffith and Compson as two rival cat burglars. Griffith is an overlooked fellow these days, but his acting style is purely his own; owing something to the silk-hatted suaveness of Max Linder, he has a quick-thinking, sly and mischievous slant to his character that makes him very funny and individual.. Constantly presenting himself under an array of pseudonyms, Griffith manages to bluff his way as a detective into the home where a priceless diamond necklace is being kept. Compson has also managed to find her way in, posing as a maid, and after several rival attempts, the pair eventually decide to team up. Things gather speed in some terrific night-time scenes inside the house, with dumbbell detective Edgar Kennedy guarding the safe. Griffith and Compson's attempts to get to the necklace are both suspenseful and very funny, with one especially wonderful gag sequence as a dog steals Kennedy's torch. Trying to wrestle it back, the spotlight is constantly turned on Griffith; whichever way he turns, somehow the light ends up following him. Eventually, an exhausted Griffith admits defeat and surrenders in the spotlight, but Kennedy is so embroiled in dealing with the dog that he doesn't notice. Griffith reconsiders and makes a swift getaway. This scene is a nifty variation on the routine most famously done by Chaplin in 'THE GOLD RUSH', where he constantly ends up with a gun pointing at him as two men fight over it.

After lots of twists and turns, Griffith and Compson finally outwit the detectives, and make off with the necklace. Up to now, this has been a very sophisticated drawing room-type comedy, so it's a surprise to see a brilliant chase sequence at the end, more the sort of thing associated with Lloyd or Keaton than with this kind of 'light' comedy. Even better, it's a terrific one, really climaxing the film effectively. Driving south toward the Mexican border, more and more cops join in the chase until there are literally hundreds following Griffith and Compson's car. Throw in some great visual gags (a hilariously efficient tyre change; Griffith refuelling the car on the move) and you have a tremendously satisfying topper to the film that went over gangbusters with the Kennington Crowd. Sadly, the ending proper is missing from the film. The film peters out just as the couple reach the Mexican border. In a moment of doubt, they wonder whether they should give themselves up. Apparently, the film originally ended with them high-tailing back through all the cops to return the necklace, footage now lost to us. Nevertheless, the existing film does end at a perfectly acceptable point, and the loss did not detract from its overall effect.



Betty Compson and Raymond Griffith, 'PATHS TO PARADISE'.

'PATHS TO PARADISE' was introduced by the great Kevin Brownlow, in a print from his own collection. He offered insight into Griffith's failure to stay in the top rank of comedians, recalling his stubborn nature and perfectionism in constructing his films. Additionally, his hoarse voice was barely above a whisper, something clearly out of line for talkies. But, we still have great films like 'PATHS TO PARADISE', 'HANDS UP' and 'THE NIGHT CLUB' to enjoy from his career.

Next up, L & H expert David Wyatt introduced some tasty rarities. While THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY has been the talk of the town, other discoveries continue. First up was a 'new' version of 'DUCK SOUP'. A pivotal film in the L & H story (their first recognisable team film, based on a sketch by Stan's father, and later remade into the



Bookends of the L & H partnership; in 'DUCK SOUP', and on stage in 'BIRDS OF A FEATHER' in 1953, as recalled by David Robinson.

mature L & H film 'ANOTHER FINE MESS'), it has always existed in poor quality.. Compared to the discoveries in 'BATTLE', today's version of DUCK SOUP (an original English copy from nitrate) featured only very small bits of new footage, but nonetheless managed to seem like a totally new film. The versions we've been accustomed to are incredibly choppy versions in dismal quality. Sourced from Belgium, the titles have been translated into French from the original English, then sloppily translated back into English, apparently by someone who speaks neither language. Thus, Stan's exclamation 'I've been robbed!' becomes the incredibly unwieldy, 'In effect, I have the feeling i have been disrobed!'. These sort of titles go a long way to killing the comedy, so it was great to have the much simpler English text. We also learned that one of these titles is the source of the seemingly random title: "Duck Soup, Hives! the whole house to ourselves!". Well, I guess it's still quite a random title.

The second improvement was the print quality, light years beyond anything we've seen before, and also far less mauled about. I've always thought DUCK SOUP far too full of frenetic slapstick, but this version's less edited, spliced shots offer fuller, more natural versions of the gags bringing the film closer to typical Hal Roach pacing. The biggest surprise is the existence of a much fuller version of the scene in which Madeline Hurlock asks 'Agnes' the maid (actually Stan in drag) to run her a bath and give her a massage.

Following this, DW introduced another great historian, David Robinson. Mr Robinson was one of the few to appreciate Laurel and Hardy's significance early on, capitalising on their visit to the UK in 1953-4 to gain an interview. The subsequent Sight and Sound article, 'The Lighter People' was the first real critical attention paid to L & H. David gave us some insight into the context of the time. L & H were forgotten by critics and writing about them was tantamount to "errant populism"; a number of Shakespeare references were deemed necessary to make the article seem more highbrow! He then recalled his visit to the theatre. Of the act, BIRDS OF A FEATHER, he claimed to remember almost nothing, except their beautifully timed entrance through two doors, continually missing each other through a set of saloon doors: "The audience went wild, which they obviously appreciated."

Backstage, the young reporter was introduced to the comedians. Eyewitness accounts like these are becoming ever more rare, so these reminiscences were especially precious. He recalled them both as "incredibly kind, gracious people", who were both wrapped up in matching blue dressing gowns .

"They were both the opposite of their screen characters," he continued, **"Oliver was very serious, but Stanley talked and giggled all the time."** However, he did note one amusing similarity to the films:

"I know they got a great deal of happiness from their last marriages, but nonetheless the wives acted just like the wives in the films!"

Mr Robinson recalled them forever fussing and scurrying about until Oliver had finally had enough: **"Can't you see I'm talking to the gentleman?" he said grandly, which was a rather wonderful thing to have said to you as a 23 year old."**

After these precious recollections was a film that has been seen before, but only very occasionally. Stan Laurel's 'WHEN KNIGHTS WERE COLD' was later fondly recalled by its creator, but was frustratingly elusive for decades. Happily, it turned up a few years ago at the Library of Congress, or at least the second reel did. One of the first parodies of the kind he came to specialise in, 'WHEN KNIGHTS...' is a loose Robin Hood spoof that also references 'WHEN KNIGHTHOOD WAS IN FLOWER' (1922). Stan is Lord Helpus, a Slippery Knight, who sets out to rescue a Maid Marian type from the clutches of Prince John. It's easy to see why Laurel had such fondness for this film. It taps into a superb vein of pantomime silliness inherited



from the music hall tradition Stan loved so much. For instance, Laurel 'rides' a pantomime horse, actually a costume with fake legs dangling over the side. Stan does this superbly, giving the horse a character all of its own. There's one especially funny moment as he feeds it from a water trough, and the horse drains the whole thing. It was a great end to a programme shedding new light on several different eras of the L & H story.

We stayed mainly in the realms of short comedies for the next program, which was my chance to champion some of the comedians featured in these pages over the years. The four SILENT CONTENDERS I selected were great comedians all, at one time or another, tipped to be the next Chaplin, Keaton or Lloyd. That they didn't quite make it was down to a variety of factors (the studio system, time and place, personal demons, etc). Nevertheless, they turned out some work that I think is

quite, quite wonderful in its own right. First up, was a comedian who pre-dated even Chaplin. Max Linder, one of the first international comedians. He was French, and making films from the mid 1900s for Pathe. These little films, with their cardboard painted sets, are primitive in their look, but Linder's acting and directing are amazingly sophisticated for films over 100 years old. He played a suave yet often embarrassed boulevardier, a silk-hatted Romeo who got himself into farcical situations like fighting duels and hiding inside suits of armour. Chaplin was a fan, dedicating a photo to him "To the one and only Max- the professor". He could well have made it. But then, WW1 inter-

vened, just as Chaplinmania was striking. It was a fulcrum of Linder's career for two reasons. For one thing, it decimated the French film industry. Linder managed to get around this by going to America to make films. At a time when anything vaguely Chaplin-related was gold dust, an endorsement from the man himself was irresistible to the American studios. However, the war had

also had a more personal, and sinister, impact on Linder; called up and severely injured in conflict, his experiences affected him mentally and physically. He would never quite have the strength to capitalise on his opportunities, and eventually his demons won with his 1925 suicide. Before this tragedy, he did make a run of 3 superb feature films in the U.S.. 'Seven Years' Bad Luck', 'The Three Must-Get-There's' and 'Be My Wife', failed to win the audience they deserved, and Max never quite got his breakthrough to the big time. Despite this, they are really quite excellent. We showed a scene from SEVEN YEARS' BAD LUCK that is an antecedent of the famous 'mirror routine' in the Marx Brothers' 'DUCK SOUP'. A masterpiece of timing and comic reaction, It went over a treat with the audience

The other three 'contenders' were comics who flourished in short films, but never made it to features. Over time, feature films came to be seen as the acid test for greatness, but this wasn't always the case. In the beginning, all comedy films were short. When Mack Sennett made the feature length 'Tillie's Punctured Romance', they said it couldn't be done. When Chaplin made 'THE KID', publicity marvelled at the 6 reel picture "upon which the famous comedian has worked a whole year!" If only they'd known how long it would later take him to make 'CITY LIGHTS'. Of course, Chaplin's features were a great success; features became the norm. Shorts, over time, became the Cinderella. Today, the comics best remembered are the ones who took on the challenge of feature length films – carrying the fuller, more developed stories showed their skill, and these are indeed the films that endure the best.

However, there's been this image of the comics in shorts, with a view that anyone who couldn't make it in features was a lesser talent. That it was all just moustachioed men falling in water and flinging custard pies around... But shorts, in their own way, are a separate art form. Some things are just better in miniature. The three comedians we showed next have all been featured in this magazine before, and each one brought something special to the form: acrobatic Lupino Lane, reactionary comic and debonair Charley Chase. Lane's 'SWORD POINTS', featuring some beautiful pantomime scenes and stunts in a 'THREE MUSKETEERS' take-off, went over very well. It's hard to show a representative Hamilton film as so many are lost. We showed the very rare 'THE SIMP', which is an early one, not really his best but good to see anyway. Chase's magnificent 'LIMOUSINE LOVE', a gem of situation comedy with Charley innocently getting stuck with a naked lady in the back of his car on the way to his wedding, went down the best of the bunch. A wonderful film.

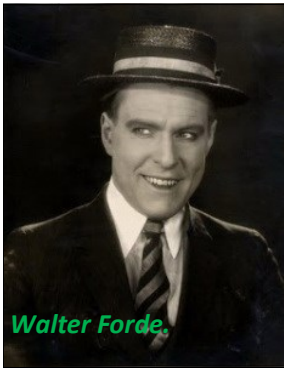
Next up was Kevin Brownlow, presenting some insights into the making of his masterful Keaton documentary, 'A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW'. Mr Brownlow had an amusing story about Buster's widow, Eleanor. After the filming was complete, she kept on telling Brownlow and David Gill other stories they wished they'd included; they decided that they should have made another documentary called 'What Eleanor forgot to tell us!' We also got to see the 'new' ending to Buster's 'MY WIFE'S RELATIONS', newly restored by Serge Bromberg of Lobster films,



Max Linder in his screen costume, and with Chaplin in Hollywood.



Three 'silent contenders': Lloyd Hamilton, Lupino Lane, and Charley Chase in 'LIMOUSINE LOVE'.



Finishing the day were two comedy features. 'YOU'D BE SURPRISED' was a real rarity, unseen in decades. In 190s Britain, comic Walter Forde was virtually the only native comedian making comedy features in the American style. This was his last effort, released in 1930. As the talkies beckoned, Forde made this film as a part-talkie: mainly silent with synchronised music and sound effects, but also with some full sound sequences.

In fact, the whole film centres around sound. Walter, as in real life, has been passionate about music since birth. This is shown in some flashbacks to him to him as a toddler, and then a small boy struggling to play an enormous piano. Moving forward to 1930, he is an aspiring songwriter, seen playing his latest song at a piano. However, he hasn't quite made it yet, and in a great camera 'reveal' gag, we see he is actually playing the piano in the back of a moving van. Writing songs might be his dream, but moving pianos pays the bills!

The next two reels of the film deal with his attempts to get his song heard by a publisher, including sound sequences... Unfortunately, the accompanying sound track had long since vanished. Normally, this wouldn't be too much of a loss, but the whole film centres around music, and some of the key comedy sequences involve various noises interrupting him as he tries to sing it! The day's organisers were suddenly thrown into a bit of a panic... how could the film be shown without sound when it was so explicitly designed for it?

The solution, with a herculean effort from all concerned, was to recreate a live soundtrack to match the original as closely as possible. This involved accompanist John Sweeney finding the original song music in the British library and transcribing it. Next, a vocalist was found to sing the song live. Sound effects - wind, thunder, aeroplanes, etc - were located to run at key points in the film. Best of all were the effects used in the film's funniest and most charming sequences. In the first, Forde attempts to sing the song at a piano in an Impresario's office. Gradually, various noises and interruptions overcome his efforts: a typist chewing gum, legions of typewriters, doors slamming, telephones, a clock being wound. As the sequence goes on these become more improbable - a tap dancer, for instance - culminating in the typist's chewing gum becoming stuck all over the keyboard and Walter's hands. All this was matched by some great live sound effects courtesy of Dave Wyatt and Susan Cygan, the highlight of which was Susan's tap dancing in time to the film!

"The only instrument he'll listen to is a telephone," concludes Walter glumly. This give him an idea... Fade in on Walter singing down the phone... Unfortunately, the box is disconnected and carried away on the back of a lorry, right across the town before he notices! Back to the old drawing board. Next up, Walter decides to sing the song outside the impresario's window. Unfortunately, at this moment, legions of buskers playing all kinds of improbable instruments arrive on the scene! Walter makes the best of it, and corrals them into joining in with his song. At the cinema museum, the live accompaniment now continued, not with just piano and vocal, but with an army of buskers! A gang of us grabbed musical instruments -trumpets, ukuleles, accordion, tambourine, and harmonica - and emulated the cacophony of the buskers. Then, a strange thing happened. We found ourselves, led by Cyrus' great accordion abilities, actually joining in with the rhythm and tune of the song, matching the action on-screen of the buskers.

I absolutely loved joining in with this (despite my limited musical skill!), and it was more amazing still that the harmonica I picked happened to be in the right key! I now have an even greater respect for the amazing skills of the accompanists on the day, John Sweeney, Cyrus Gabrysch and Lillian Henley. Never have I seen a silent film benefit more from its accompaniment than 'YOU'D BE SURPRISED', and it was a privilege to be a very small part of that.

The rest of the film took a bit of a detour, as the young songwriter is mistaken for a convict and handcuffed to a murderer making his escape. Nevertheless, it remained light and entertaining, if not up to his best standards. This turned out to be Walter Forde's last starring film. By all accounts a very shy man, possibly he tired of being in the lime-light. Certainly, 'YOU'D BE SURPRISED' shows a real flair for direction, and he already had two dramatic pictures to his credit. Many of the later films he made are well-known and loved, but his own certainly need more appreciation and screening.

But now, we had come to the end of the day. A more well-known film, Harold Lloyd's 'GIRL SHY', rounded things off in style. Lloyd's films really are made for a live audience, and this, with its incredible final chase sequence, is certainly no exception.

All in all, it had been a wonderful day of funny films, many of them new discoveries given a fresh audience. Thanks to organiser David Wyatt and all at the Kennington Bioscope, The Cinema Museum, and the talented musicians and guest historians who made the day into something really special. And if you missed it, don't panic! It was such a success that the event has expanded to become a 2-day Silent laughter Weekend! Read on for more details...



THAT chase, from 'GIRL SHY' (1924)

SILENT



LAUGHTER

A WEEKEND CELEBRATION OF SILENT COMEDY

Did you miss Silent Laughter Saturday? Fear not, it was such a success that it's being repeated, but with twice as much comedy!

With the same combination of classic comedies, overlooked gems, rare footage, live accompaniment and introductions by film historians, Silent Laughter will return to London's Cinema Museum on October 22-23rd, 2016.

Utilising rare films from collectors and the BFI, the program for the Silent Laughter Weekend is still being finalised. Provisionally, however, the following can be confirmed:

- Classic comedies featuring Chaplin, Lloyd, Laurel & Hardy, et al. Titles to be confirmed.
- L & H rarities, showing for the first time in the UK!
- A great silent comedy featuring the intriguing pairing of Broadway star Eddie Cantor and 'It girl' Clara Bow
- One of the great Harry Langdon's best feature films, 'TRAMP, TRAMP, TRAMP'. Langdon is so often mentioned in passing when reading about silent comedy, but his films seem to be very rarely shown these days and he's beginning to lose his standing. Here's a chance to put that right and appreciate everything great about 'The Little Elf'.
- Some brilliant short comedies featuring the overlooked female comedians of the silent era, provisionally including Laura La Plante, Martha Sleeper and Dorothy Devore, plus more to be announced!
- Rare comedy shorts and clips from local hero Lupino Lane, including the long-lost film version of 'ME AND MY GIRL', released as 'THE LAMBETH WALK'.
- Some of the best work produced by comedy pioneer Mack Sennett, featuring comedians such as Billy Bevan and Ben Turpin.
- Rare comedies from Europe's film industry, including rare work by French comedian, and Chaplin's hero, Max Linder. England's very own silent comedian Walter Forde will also make an appearance in his first feature-length film, 'WAIT AND SEE'. It's hoped, by combining different sources, to show this film complete for the first time in more than 80 years.
- All silent films will have live accompaniment by some of the finest pianists around. There will be introductions to many of the films by film historians and silent comedy experts.



There's still lots more to be added to the program, with full details planned to be announced in early September. You'll be able to find them online at www.silentlaughter.org and www.kenningtonbioscope.com. Updates will also be posted on The Lost Laugh blog, www.thelostlaugh.com

Chasing Charley Through the Years



PART 3:

SCREWBALLS & STOOGES 1934-1940

In the final part of our article tracing the comedic approaches of Charley Chase's career, we look at the last 6 years of his film career, featuring some of his most underrated films...

Charley Chase's film career maintained such a high standard, and he turned out so many films, that often the many variations on his comic technique have been overlooked. Over the course of this series of articles, we've seen how his films fall into distinct phases of comic creativity. From his early days making Keystone parodies and light comedies, through to his manic slapstick work as director, the polished bedroom farce and risqué comedy of his late 20s films, his mini-musicals, romantic comedies with Thelma Todd and the zany experimentation of his mid-30s films, he was always pushing the envelope and looking for new variations on his character. In the third and final part of this article, we look at the last seven years of Chase's film career, to his untimely death in 1940.

In part two we left Charley in 1933, where it seemed as though he was finally beginning to run out of steam. Many of his best collaborators, such as James Parrott and Thelma Todd had been removed from his series, and he was having personal problems. The Chase films of that year had been extremely spotty, and his first two efforts of 1934 continued this trend, both being squandered opportunities. 'THE CRACKED ICEMAN' gives him the great opportunity to be a kindergarten teacher for the OUR GANG kids. Despite some good moments, it turns out to be only mildly amusing. Meanwhile, for anyone who contends that Chase's sound shorts are well below his silent masterpieces, 'FOUR PARTS' is maybe the best evidence to support their argument. Having Charley play quadruplets is a brilliant idea that should feed right into one of his intricate farces of mistaken identity and just-missed encounters. All that really happens, though, is that leading lady Betty Mack bumps into each Chase brother and thinks she's going mad. There is none of the quick paced action or clever sight gags that make his earlier work so brilliant, although a musical number featuring four Chases harmonising and playing different musical instruments is at least some compensation!

Happily, this sloppy start was followed by a sudden upturn in creativity. His next film, 'ANOTHER WILD IDEA' ushers in a new period of vitality in his films. It's another example of Chase returning to a favourite theme, that of the worm turning. Originating in his silent 'THE FRAIDY CAT', he also mixes in the sci-fi theme of 1932's 'NOW WE'LL TELL ONE', which featured a scientific invention causing him to undergo personality changes. This film seemed gimmicky and arbitrary in its sudden changes of character, and was also let down by poor back projection for its key gag sequences. Conversely, ANOTHER WILD IDEA wins out by rooting the gag purely in Charley's persona. Charley is dating Betty Mack again, but her inventor father (Frank Austin) disapproves. He decides to put her off by testing his new invention, a ray gun that causes its target to lose all their inhibitions, on the shy Mr Chase. Soon enough, Charley is flirting with women, pushing people into fountains and pelting belligerent cop Tiny Sandford with fruit. The slapstick of these situations is enlivened by loads of great Chase touches, such as a greengrocer carefully tallying Charley's bill as he aims his fruity missiles! Finally, Charley is hauled off to court; feeling guilty, the father reveals all about his experiment. To prove it, he turns it on people in the courtroom, including the jury, who suddenly turn into a barbershop choir! The charge is dismissed, Charley and Betty reconcile, and the film closes with them singing the delightfully off the wall 'Lunatic's love song':

Did you ever bathe in ink?

Can a floating kidney sink?



Does a cross-eyed baboon think,
I love you?
Are your eyeballs made of glass,
And do horseflies live on grass?
You're a nifty little lass – I love you!

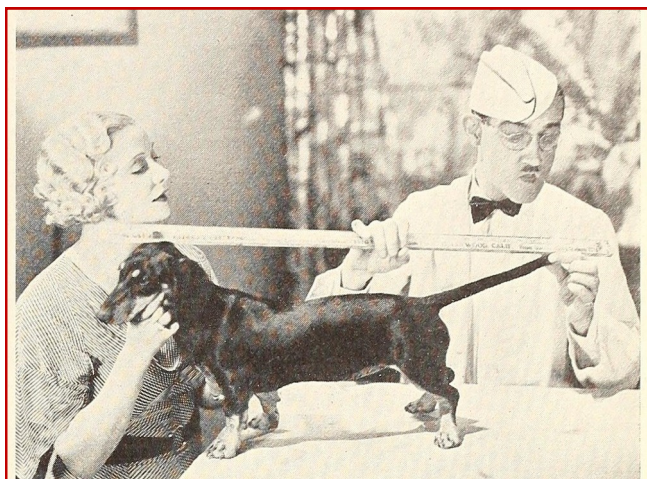
'ANOTHER WILD IDEA' is packed with gags and incident in its short running time, but still finds space for two songs. It became a prototype for the sort of short that Charley would crank out with almost frightening speed and consistency over the next two years. The films he made over 1934-6 are nearly all mini-masterpieces, packing a feature film's worth of plot, character and even musical numbers into a whirlwind two reels. Perhaps Charley was trying to prove that he had the story skills to make a feature film, or maybe he was resigned to remaining in shorts, but determined to make his films almost like mini-features. In any case, these sophisticated, tightly plotted films remain the most undervalued of all Chase's work, and hold up very well.

IT HAPPENED ONE DAY was perhaps the most tightly plotted talkie Chase ever made. It's a whirlwind of situation comedy, in which every foot of film counts. Yet, somehow, it never seems rushed. Charley is on his way to work on the first day of his new job, but constantly annoys a tetchy man (Oscar Apfel). He arrives at the office, arrogantly predicting great things for himself as he meets his co-workers. They humour him, playfully predicting that he'll even marry the boss's daughter. The boss arrives; of course, it's the man whom he's been annoying all morning. To get rid of Charley, Apfel sends him out to the Long Beach office, masking it as a promotion. En route, he unknowingly meets Apfel's daughter (Betty Mack), also bound for Long Beach. Posting a letter for Betty, Charley manages to get his hand stuck in the postbox; trying to free himself with an iron bar, he accidentally knocks a fire alarm. Panicking that this is a penitentiary offence, Charley fails to notice that his cigar has started a fire in a waste bin nearby. As a result, when the fire brigade arrive, they do have a genuine fire to put out after all. Furthermore, the blast from their hose knocks Charley's hand free from the letter box. Soaked, he runs to board the train just in time and finds Betty. An obliging groom in the honeymoon suite lends Charley his suit, and soon everyone on board is convinced that he and Betty are married. Meanwhile, back at the office, Apfel gets wind that Betty is headed for Long Beach. Fearing that she will bump into walking disaster area Charley, he sends a telegram recalling his new employee as soon as he arrives. Betty tags along, and when Apfel sees them together he assumes they are married. Grumbling, he writes Charley a cheque and makes him his partner; his colleagues look on amazed as Charley's predictions have all come true in one day!

'IT HAPPENED ONE DAY' is a tour-de-force, in which every detail dovetails beautifully, and there is still time for a variety of running gags and even a comic song. While not one of his funniest shorts, it must rank among the best in terms of storytelling and comic construction.

Speaking of comic construction, Charley soon evolved an effective formula for his mini feature films. They usually had a domestic setting, in which the scene would be set with an opening song; the scenes following would unfold a tightly plotted farcical story, the loose ends wrapped up and often concluding with a reprise of the opening song.

FATE'S FATHEAD is a great little film following this formula. Charley is happily married to Dorothy Appleby, their domestic bliss shown through the song 'How about another cup of coffee?'. On his way to work, Charley manages, through a series of amusing misunderstandings, to appear as though he is stalking another woman (Dorothy Granger). Of course, she turns out to be a friend of Mrs Chase, who doesn't believe a word of it, but agrees they should test Charley to prove a point. So, the friend hits mercilessly on the terrified Charley, chasing him around the house. However, when he gets wind of the plan, he plays along and reverses the roles, adopting a dramatic Barrymore sort of voice and chasing her around the house while reciting romantic monologues! By this point, the Chases' fearsome, man-hating maid has come



Charley with Betty Mack in 'I'LL TAKE VANILLA', and 'IT HAPPENED ONE DAY' (both 1934). History doesn't record the dog's measurements...

home and begins chasing Charley with a rifle! All is explained and the film ends happily, with a reprise of the opening song duet.

'THE CHASES OF PIMPLE STREET' is a great little comedy that likewise opens with a song of domestic bliss, and features another woman intruding and causing a threat to the relationship. This time it's Mrs Chase's obnoxious sister (Ruthelma Stevens), who constantly jams up the bathroom, has a ferocious Pekinese which attacks Charley and knocks over his brandy, and refuses to get a job. Charley is always trying to marry her off and sees another opportunity when he has to entertain an out-of-town client. However, the obnoxious sister and a series of gag sequences lead to Charley ultimately losing his job. 'PIMPLE STREET' is slightly less well constructed than 'FATE'S FATHEAD', running out of steam with its down-beat ending, but it contains many terrific gag sequences, and a great supporting cast.



Charley with regular leading lady Betty Mack. The still is from 'LUNCHEON AT TWELVE', colourised to advertise Chase's 1934-35 season of films.

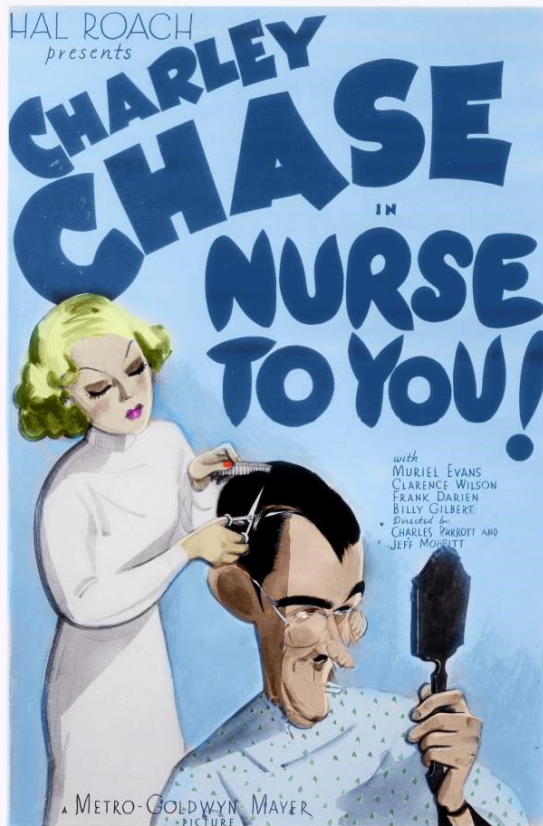
What's great about Chase's films from his whole career, is that he always realised the strength of the women in his films, allowing them to be much more than romantic interest, and to develop 3-dimensional characters of their own. This strength is especially shown in these domestic comedies, both 'FATE'S FATHEAD' and 'THE CHASES OF PIMPLE STREET' relying on some great actresses to help make them a success. These and other films really portray convincing married couples, and allow Chase's screen wives to be independent thinkers, sometimes schemers and often witty, but always convincing. An excellent foil for Charley in these domestic comedies was Constance Bergen, who was bright and sparky, ideal to portray the wife with a mind of her own, showing obvious affection for Charley, but wise to his schemes and foibles.

'POKER AT EIGHT' is pretty much a screwball comedy duet between Charley and Constance. The short begins much like Laurel and Hardy's 'BLOTTO'; Charley, under house arrest, receives a phone call from a pal inviting him to a poker game. Through gritted teeth, he announces that he's "decided to stay home with the little woman", and launches into the song "I'm in the doghouse", which sets the scene for the film. The following day, the action shifts to the golf course, where Charley is goofing round with friend Tom Dugan, trying to hypnotise him. Tom is hit by a stray golf ball at this moment, unbeknown to Charley, who believes he really does possess hypnotic powers. Emboldened by this, he 'hypnotises' Constance to be 'a good sport, one of the fellows', so she will let him go to the poker game. Constance decides to play along, dressing up in a low cut gown and swigging from a hipflask as she pretends to head out for a night of her own. The pair attempt to spy on each other, rousing the suspicions of policeman Harry Bernard and a befuddled taxi driver, before heading to a night club. Constance acts deliberately difficult under her 'spell', causing no end of embarrassment for Charley. Eventually, hypnotist Herman Bing is summoned to bring her out of her spell, but Constance hypnotises *him*. Charley runs away in panic from the influence of his wife's new-found power.

Chase had again found a great new comic formula to adapt his character too. As always though, he still threw in variations and curveballs to the series. His old penchant for more out-and-out gag comedies resurfaced, for instance; the hillbilly comedy 'SOUTHERN EXPOSURE', or the amusing 'MANHATTAN MONKEY BUSINESS', in which Charley finds himself forced to be a waiter when he loses his money at the Ritz-Carlton.

More ambitiously, he could still make big stylistic diversions and be incredibly inventive. 'OKAY TOOTS!' is Chase's precursor to 'FREAKY FRIDAY!' In it, he dreams that he and wife Carol Tevis swap bodies, and discovers the pain of being a housewife! 'LIFE HESITATES AT 40' is a bizarrely existential film in which Charley has strange spells where everything around him seems to stop and he hears other people's inner thoughts. Through clever use of freeze frames and voiceovers, we are able to experience this through his eyes and see the trouble it gets him into. If not one of his funniest, it's certainly one of his most interesting, and extraordinarily avant-garde for a mainstream comedy two reeler made in 1935.

Chase's drive to create such outstanding films, along with his alcoholism, were having a severe impact on his health by this time. He collapsed again in late 1935, and had months off work. But when he returned to the Roach studios, his resolved to make great films seemed greater than ever. 'NURSE TO YOU', his first film after his illness, tackles his problems in a remarkably head-on way. Charley is a confirmed penny-pincher, fussily living a white-collar life. We are introduced to his parsimonious nature in a great salvo of opening gags showing his journey to work: he coasts his car



downhill, and then meets up with a friend to share the cost of a morning paper, the pair also tricking a bootblack into giving their shoes a free shine. Arriving at the office, he is berated by his Scrooge of a boss Clarence Wilson for being 10 seconds late. Later, on his lunch break, he heads to get his medical insurance. Unfortunately, Dr Billy Gilbert confuses his records with an elderly patient, and tells Charley he has but six months to live. Charley walks out in a daze, into the middle of the road and is humiliatingly berated, once again, by a traffic cop. With the doctor's words echoing in his head, Charley unleashes a verbal tirade of his own ("I know, I know, you're grouchy because you stand on your feet all day and they ache... I bet you never get a headache though do you?"). He receives applause from a crowd of passers-by, and invigorated by his *carpe diem* spirit, goes on to deal with a bunch of other pests, skip the office and buy himself a garish new suit. When he tearfully tells Mrs Chase of his plight, she doesn't believe a word of it, and clears up the mistake. Back to his terrified old self, Charley rushes to the office, expecting to be fired. However, Wilson is instead delighted to see him, telling him that, now he's finally shown some backbone, he can have the promotion he deserves.

Based on the standard old 'worm-turning' plot again, NURSE TO YOU is given more edge by the dramatic edge of a man looking death in the eye. This is only made more real when one considers his recent experiences, giving the film a dark and visceral edge to it. What could be depressing is made endearing and hilarious through carefully drawn characters and a

whole host of humorous touches. Mrs Chase's response to his new suit, for instance: "Do you like it?" "Yes, it's funny!"

Even better is the turn from Dr Billy Gilbert, who systematically throws out the contents of Charley's lunchbox, telling him how each item could be the end of him. He throws them all into the bin, except a banana, which he puts into his desk drawer for later. As a result of scenes like these, 'NURSE TO YOU' is full of humour and humanity, and is one of the very best shorts Charley ever made.

Though few of his following films would be quite as great, there were still gems to be had. THE COUNT TAKES THE COUNT is likewise an overlooked classic, featuring great sight gag scenes of Charley handcuffed to detective Kewpie Morgan. At one point, Morgan sleepwalks to a drugstore, with Charley in his nightshirt. The drugstore owner asks Charley if he can get him anything. "Get me some pants," requests Charley, then, after a short pause, "...and a banana split."

1936: MIDDLE-AGED INTERLUDE

At the close of the 1935-36 season, Hal Roach decided to stop production of short comedies. Chase was given chance to make his own feature, and used the opportunity to move his comedy into a new realm again. In 'BANK NIGHT', he would allow his hair to show its natural grey, as he moved from the young, modern husband of his 'mini-features' into a more middle-aged family man role. He had used several variations on the family man version of his character during the late silent years (see part 1), and it's interesting that he only now returned to it. 'BANK NIGHT' even revisited a short from these years directly, taking its cinema-going scenes from Chase's classic silent 'MOVIE NIGHT'. Charley, wife Rosina Lawrence and their daughter (Our Gang's Darla Hood) rush to make it to their local cinema, where the Bank Night raffle will be drawn. Darla is asked to draw the number, which turns out to be Charley's. The family are jubilant, but the crowd are convinced it is a frame up, and the rest of the film dealt with the consequence they face from the local people. We'll never know what most of those are now though, as the film never was released. Although *Film Daily* called it a "satisfactory family trade comedy with plenty of action and gags", not everyone was as keen. Apparently, cinemas got wind of this send up of their own Bank Night promotions and didn't like it one bit. The film, retitled 'NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE' was pulled from release and re-edited to a two-reeler,. It's ok, but as you would expect, seems abrupt and clumsy without most of the footage need to set scenes up.

After 15 years, Charley's days at Roach were numbered. There was to be a supporting appearance to Patsy Kelly, a clear demotion, in 'KELLY THE SECOND'. There was one last two-reeler, ON THE WRONG TREK, which seems to have soaked up the sour tone of the whole BANK NIGHT affair despite being enlivened briefly by a cameo from Laurel & Hardy. The L & H scene has made this a widely-seen Chase film, but it's certainly no way to begin your appreciation of him. After these last efforts, Hal Roach, more interested in pretentious dramas and society comedies than Chase's talents, let him go. Chase was adrift, but happily his career wasn't over yet. In 1937 he began work at Columbia studios...

1937-1940 COLUMBIA

The slap-happy world of Columbia is notably more charmless than the cosy, jazz-soundtracked idyll of Hal Roach. Gone are the most endearing support actors and the backing music. It was the minor touches that took time that made Roach such a creative, special environment; sure there were profits to be made, but the Roach films that feel truly formulaic are rare indeed. Columbia's system, however, thrived on formula. Of course, the Columbia shorts department was a valid haven for many performers, and lots of great little shorts were turned out. But for performers like Chase, Keaton and Langdon, who were special clowns indeed, we can but compare them negatively to the charm and class of their best work, which required much greater 'breathing space' for their performances. Columbia shorts overlord Jules White had an oft-quoted maxim: "Keep 'em moving so fast that if they're not funny, no one will notice or get bored." While this philosophy was totally at odds with the meticulous comic method of Keaton or Langdon, Chase fared much better. After all, he had demonstrated with his meticulously plotted farces and mini feature films like 'IT HAPPENED ONE DAY', that he could keep up an action-packed, lightning pace for two reels. Accordingly, he hones in on his farcical elements for most of the Columbia shorts, resulting in an idiom not too far removed from his own. He was also fortunate in being given his own head to write scripts and assist with direction, as well as being placed under the auspices of much less bombastic producer Hugh McCollum. As a result, he was able to continue turning out some great shorts long after most of his contemporaries had ceased; the charm of Roach may have gone, but Charley's comic technique was as sharp as ever. If anything, the high-pressure schedule seems to have focused him; 'One-take Charley' had no problem meeting deadlines.

Curiously, Chase abandoned the direction he had been heading in his last couple of Roach films. He started dying his hair jet black and returned to more youthful plots, but his illnesses still made him look older than his years. The many scenes of characters calling him "Charley, my boy" in the Columbia films seemed rather odd, to say the least. In keeping with this attempted time reversal, the plots of the films most resemble his silent Pathé farces; this not only suited the fast-moving style of Columbia, but also required minimal sets, usually bedrooms, hotel lobbies and drawing rooms, in line with the stricter budgets. His first couple of shorts, 'THE GRAND HOOTER' and 'FROM BAD TO WORSE' both especially fall into this category. Chase's own personal theory was that comic ideas had a life of around 7 years before audiences had no doubt also aware that his "7 year remembrance period" was now up for these films, and he could start reworking them again for a fresh audience. In fact, one of the very first of these films, 'THE WRONG MISS WRIGHT' has Charley revisiting, scene for scene, his silent classic 'CRAZY LIKE A FOX'. Stuck in an arranged marriage to a girl he hasn't seen, he falls in love with another girl en route to the wedding, unaware that they are one and the same. Determined to "squeeze out of the marriage to the lemon", he presents himself as crazy to alienate the unknown girls' parents. Of course, when he realises the truth, he has to attempt to reverse all his work, appearing even crazier in the process! The Columbia remake is arguably the funnier film of the two, as sound adds a greater potential to the material.

'THE AWFUL GOOF' also revisits the past, albeit less successfully, the early scenes of his silent classic 'LIMOUSINE LOVE' mined for early scenes, before we return to less exciting bedroom farce scenes. 'MANY SCRAPPY RETURNS' is a remake of Chase's 1930 short 'FAST WORK'.

One of Chase's most celebrated comedies for Columbia, 'THE HECKLER' revisited one of his old variations in character, the obnoxious practical joker ('THE FIGHT PEST', 'SONS OF THE DESERT'). This tale of a hilariously awful baseball spectator, and the team's attempts to silence him, was actually a remake of a 1932 Matt McHugh short called 'THE LOUDMOUTH', but Chase once again showed his versatility by making it seem uniquely his own.

With so many old comedy hands on board at Columbia, and the rush to create new ideas, it's no surprise that many of the ideas conjured up not just Chase's own past, but those of other comedians. The plot of Raymond Griffith's 'THE NIGHT CLUB', with Charley paying a hitman to kill him, but then reconsidering, is reused in 'TIME OUT FOR TROUBLE'. Familiar gags and sequences from silent comedies also pop



Charley in a publicity shot for Columbia and, inset, in a candid shot at the Masquers Club with Rudy Vallee and Hugh Herbert, 1938

up. There are occasional, lacklustre diversions into Harold Lloyd's skyscraper climbing, for instance. More specifically, the ancient gag of the comedian holding a character underwater but proclaiming "He's alright, I've got him by the hand" is used to end 'HIS BRIDAL FRIGHT'. Directed by Harry Edwards, one of Harry Langdon's directors, this short also uses a great gag from Langdon's 'HIS MARRIAGE WOW', featuring Harry chasing an object stuck in a car tyre, stabbing at it with a penknife until the tyre bursts. Harry/Charley then nonchalantly hands the driver their carjack. In the worst instances, like 'THE NIGHTSHIRT BANDIT' or 'THE MIND NEEDER', Charley simply ended up with recycled, cartoonish stories ill-fitting for his realistic character.

There were some great fresh ideas in the Columbia series too, though. For instance, 'THE BIG SQUIRT' is a terrific little short that has Charley as a 'daring drugstore desperado' who nonchalantly throws sundaes together while nose-deep in detective books. He eventually tracks down a real-life criminal after going undercover as a blind busker. 'RATTLING ROMEO' takes Charley to the road in his new car, which promptly falls to bits in a great series of gags. This feels very much like one of his Roach films, and is made more so by the presence of old friend and co-star Harry Bernard in a small role. This wasn't the only time an old Roach hand turned up, either. Frequent foil Del Henderson has a role in 'THE CHUMP TAKES A BUMP', and bulldog-faced Fred Kelsey turs up in 'MANY SCRAPPY RETURNS'.

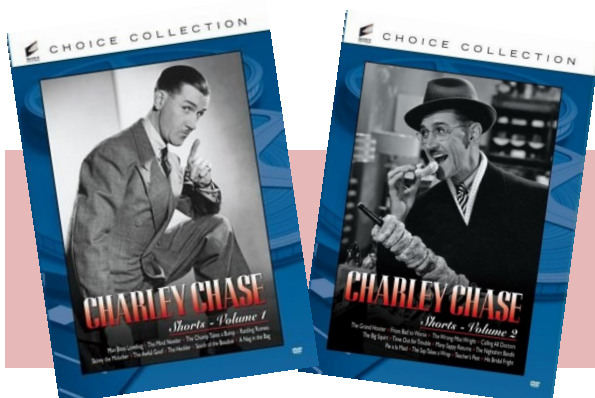
While never as recognisable as the Roach faces, the Columbia stock company were no slouches either. Silent comedy faces Vernon Dent and Bud Jamison were always impeccable, and John T Murray was a great foil for Charley, noticeably as an escaped lunatic in 'MANY SCRAPPY RETURNS' and as his kleptomaniac valet in 'SKINNY THE MOOCHER'. Ann Doran was his most frequent leading lady, up there with the sparky Roach heroines like Muriel Evans and Constance Bergen. She recalled Chase very fondly, claiming that he taught her the ropes of film work. True to form, he provided lots of different roles for her, from shrewish wife to strong-willed paramour to devoted girlfriend.

Charley worked very hard to keep up with his Columbia schedule, even writing and directing shorts for Andy Clyde and the Three Stooges as well as his own films. Inevitably his health problems, and his drinking, were catching up with him again. Tragically, his brother Jimmy Parrott passed away in 1939 due to problems rising from his own substance abuse. Charley never recovered from the shock.

Despite his problems, he worked harder than ever. 'HIS BRIDAL FRIGHT' was his last film, but was full of playful gags and a new plot that was vintage Chase: Charley collects stamps, and so answers personal marriage ads from around the world to get the stamps. On his wedding day, all the global brides turn up and pursue him! Charley, given some joy by the birth of his new grandson, actually looks far healthier in this film than he had in years, but his heart had been weakened too many times by illness, stress and alcohol. In June 1940, he suffered a heart attack and died, aged just 46. It was tragically early for such a talented man who left such good memories with all who knew him. Today, through his films, he still leaves good memories with those of us who never did meet him. Over the three parts of this article, I hope I've shone a light on some of the overlooked films of Charley's career, and on the versatility and boundless creativity of the man. There's something for everyone in his diverse range of films, and we can only hope that word of his talents continues to spread.



Scenes from Chase's Columbia series: THE HECKLER, SKINNY THE MOOCHER AND 'HIS BRIDAL FRIGHT'.



Charley Chase's films, especially his talkies, have long been chronically under-represented on DVD. While his Hal Roach films are still hard to find, all of his Columbia films have recently been released over 2 DVDs. The prints are sparkling, and they are priced very reasonably indeed. You can pick these up at all major online e retailers.

LETTING IN THE SUNSHINE!

EXPLORING BRITISH COMEDIES OF THE 1930S

The 1930s were the decade when comedy film-making really took off in Britain. With a plethora of radio, music hall and Variety stars ready to adapt to talking pictures with gusto, the field was a rich one. Despite these riches, the first decade of sound comedies have remained neglected for many years. Like the American silent comedies, history books have reduced the field to a few well-remembered names: George Formby, Will Hay, Gracie Fields. TV showings of these comedies have been virtually non-existent for years. Apart from the aforementioned names, DVD releases have also been scarce. In writing, British comedies of the 1930s have scarcely merited more than a paragraph or page. John Fisher's 'FUNNY WAY TO BE A HERO' is a magnificent book, albeit centred on performers' stage and radio achievements rather than films. Leslie Halliwell's 'DOUBLE TAKE AND FADE AWAY' offered a chapter summarising British film comedy in the 30s, providing a fascinating window of illumination into many obscure names. It was all too brief, though. The sole full-length book on the subject, 'A CHORUS OF RASPBERRIES' emerged some 25 years later. It contains lots of great information in it, but is rather on the academic side.

These snatches of information, along with tantalising clips, usually in eye-watering quality, made me hunger for more over the years. Where were these films? Why had they fallen into such obscurity? Common excuses were essentially along the lines of "They were all terrible 'quota quickies'", "There's nothing worth seeing apart from the Will Hay films, anyway" or "Lots of them are lost."

Well, thanks to Network DVD's astonishing catalogue of DVDs in 'The British Film' series, now we can judge for ourselves. Available for the first time, in sparkling new prints, are a legion of comedies and musicals that have been barely seen, let alone appraised, since their first release. Once big stars like Stanley Lupino, Gene Gerrard, Leslie Fuller and Tom Walls now find themselves elevated from obscurity to suddenly having their work very well represented on DVD. Will Hay might have been the greatest of the 30s comedians, but many of these other performers certainly hold their own nicely.

One thing I found really refreshing about these DVDs was my lack of preconceptions when viewing the films. Unlike the well-recorded canons of Chaplin, Keaton, L & H, etc, I mostly had no idea which films would be good or bad, or who might pop up in them. Below you'll find a snapshot of reviews for some of the stars resurrected by these DVDs. It's certainly not a comprehensive study, but a snapshot of what I think are some of the most interesting or funny releases so far. My thoughts might change as I continue to see more; only through continuing to work through all these releases will illuminate how the performers compare and who was the most consistent. If you've stumbled across any highlights, do please get in touch and share a few thoughts with us! Before we get starting, here are a few general thoughts and busted myths based on what I've seen so far...

1) **Not all 30s British comedies are cheap!** There are some lavish musical comedies here, as well as nice photography and expensive gag set ups. Sure, there are some cheapjack outings too, but so far they haven't been too frequent. Truthfully, it depends which comedian you're watching: there was very much a schism between working class and middle/upper class comedy in the 30s. The earthy Leslie Fuller or Ernie Lotinga were tossed into unpretentious, quickly filmed vehicles, but more respectable were Stanley Lupino, Gene Gerrard and Jack Hulbert. These comics came from musical comedy on the stage and so had more lavishly mounted films with big song and dance numbers.

2) **On the whole, these films aren't as creaky as might be feared.** Slow early talkies were slow early talkies everywhere, but experienced directors like Walter Forde, Monty Banks and Lupino Lane soon got the hang of things. There are some slickly directed films amongst this bunch. There are also some slow moving ones - stage plays typically had minimal adaptation for the screen - but few have yet been a real chore to sit through.

3) One of the unexpected treats is the delightful tendency for Lane, Banks and Forde (comedians in their own right) to slip in front of the cameras for Hitchcock-style cameos.

4) The more films made from this time period you see, the more you begin to appreciate the 'stock company' of supporting actors and comics: roly-poly Hal Gordon, forever harassed Robertson Hare, cocksure little Hal Walters, for instance. Oh, and if you see a policeman, it's almost certainly Syd Crossley. The familiarity of these actors, as they hopped between studios in the relatively small British film community, almost recalls the Hal Roach repertory players.

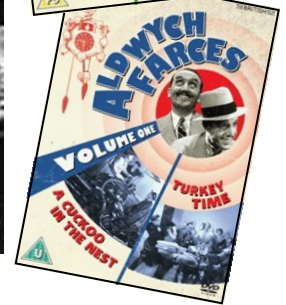
5) Sure enough, few films have yet matched up to the high standard of the better known Will Hay or George Formby films, but most have been a good deal better than I imagined, and many I would go back and enjoy again. So far, I've found the Stanley Lupino vehicles the most consistent, original and entertaining.

Read on to find out about some of the best stars and their films...



Tom Walls and Ralph Lynn, the nucleus of the Aldwych Farces.

(left) Bald, timid Robertson Hare was also a regular face, and other players such as Gordon Harker made appearances.



ALDWYCH FARCES, VOLS 1 & 2

The Aldwych Farces were a long-running series of comic plays written by playwright Ben Travers, and staged at the Aldwych theatre by Tom Walls. Beginning in 1930, they were some of the earliest comedy successes and continued to be filmed through to the mid-30s, becoming a much-loved series. Most of the films nucleated around three comic actors. Tom Walls usually played a devious reprobate, well-to-do but sly and planning some kind of scheme. Ideal foils were provided by monocled silly-ass Ralph Lynn, and bald, timid, bird-like Robertson Hare, who inevitably found himself mixed up in the middle of things, wailing "Oh Calamity!" In addition, many other regulars added to the fun: French Yvonne Arnaud, old harridan Mary Brough, or the superb, dithering Claude Hulbert.

Unlike some of the surprisingly dynamic comedies in the British Film series, the Aldwych Farces wear their heart on their sleeve as stage adaptations. Tom Walls directed the films, and has been accused of directing the actors in a stage play and then pointing the camera at them. Some of the films certainly do suffer from this, and there are some rather long scenes that need a bit more pep, closer to the stodgy, theatrical style we tend to associate with 30s films. However, this is certainly not true of all of them, and in a way this is part of their charm. In any case, the Aldwych films mostly survive their limitations to remain pleasant and entertaining examples of a bygone form of entertainment. The scripts contain many funny lines, wordplay and situations, and the performers have honed wonderful timing through their years of association. Their stock company of intrinsically British types are masterfully played, and the ensemble comedy points the way to Ealing Studios' later comedies.

Thematically, this is very much the frothy pre-war world familiar to readers of P G Wodehouse; a world of country houses, suspicious wives and relatives. There's nothing controversial and lots that is stereotypical, but it's all in good fun. Even better, the films come two to the volume (one later effort, 'STORMY WEATHER' was also released singly a few years ago). So far, they are a mixture of some better known and lesser efforts. Hopefully, the most celebrated efforts 'THARK' and 'TONS OF MONEY' will also come along on future DVDs.

Volume 1 features 'A CUCKOO IN THE NEST' and 'TURKEY TIME'. 'CUCKOO..' centres around Ralph Lynn accidentally being forced to spend the night at a country inn with an old flame (Yvonne Arnaud) after they both miss their train, hire a car together and become stuck in the rain. To satisfy the suspicious, god-fearing harridan of a landlady (Mary Brough) they pose as a married couple. Unfortunately, Lynn's wife has witnessed them going off together and followed, in tow with her dreadful mother and alcoholic old fruit of a father (Tom Walls). Naturally, Yvonne's husband also turns up on the scene, leading to lots of awkward moments for Ralph. Lynn carries much of the comedy scenes, sneaking in and out to avoid the landlady, struggling to bed down on the floor, retrieving a dog in the rain, or rehearsing his excuses. However, it's Tom Walls' drunken old reprobate who provides the best laughs, forever searching for a drink or a pretty girl before being beckoned by his wife's call. As a director, Walls lives up to his reputation, though. 'A CUCKOO IN THE NEST' moves with the viscosity of treacle. With a bit more pep, it could have been a classic, but just misses the mark despite some funny moments.

'TURKEY TIME' boasts much better direction, including the interesting idea of giving each character a little vignette to introduce themselves in the opening credit sequence. It takes place at Christmas, with Walls and Lynn joined by Robertson Hare in the main nucleus of characters. Walls is a pugnacious chap, whose fights land him in bother, especially with his fiancé when he defends the honour of a showgirl on the pier. Lynn is a jolly chap who tags along with Walls, and has fallen in love with the showgirl. Their antics to help her out constantly land henpecked Robertson Hare in trouble with *his* wife. This one is lots of fun.

Volume 2 contains two of the best farces. 'A CUP OF KINDNESS' benefits from the additional presence of Claude Hulbert, who I always find irresistible. It's a modern day Romeo and Juliet story in suburbia: neighbours, the pompous Walls and uptight Hare constantly do battle, while Ralph Lynn and Dorothy Hyson are their star-crossed offspring. Lynn and Hulbert are both hopeless at holding down jobs but get mixed up in some dodgy shares that threaten to throw the family into disgrace. Things get a bit slow toward the end, but there are many funny sequences, including a dotty fantasy sequence that sends the whole cast back to the Stone Age.

DIRTY WORK stands slightly apart from the other farces in that Tom Walls doesn't appear, though he still directs. In his place is the superb comic character Gordon Harker, who brings his rough-edged posh cockney ("Oh yerrrrrrs") to the table. Harker is the doorman at Cecil Parker's jewellery store, where Ralph Lynn and Robertson Hare also work. Thieves are targeting the store; Lynn and Harker attempt to set a trap for them, roping the reluctant Hare in to pose as a burglar. Meanwhile, the thieves have plans of their own to frame the trio for the robbery...

This one starts slowly, with lots of talk-heavy scenes in the jewellery store, but gets going at a good clip once the plans are hatched. The comic break-in scenes are excellent and this turns into maybe the funniest of all the films on the two discs. The highlight is undoubtedly Robertson Hare's horror at being forced to shave his moustache and try on wigs to disguise himself as the burglar!

The Aldwych Farces are undeniably dated, and sometimes just a bit too polite. But, they offer plenty of smiles and even the odd belly laugh, and point a clear way to the later character ensembles of Ealing and the Boulting Brothers. As an influential part of British comedy cinemas, they're more than worth revisiting.

STANLEY LUPINO: THE LOVE RACE, & OTHER FILMS...

A gamut of Stanley Lupino films have made their appearance for the first time. To me, these are really the gems of this DVD series.

Lupino is a terrific performer, who also took a big hand in the writing of his scripts and musical numbers; indeed, the majority of his films are based on his own musical plays. Lupino's persona is that of a little cockney playboy, often an aspiring songwriter; usually, he's down on his uppers. He's a small fellow, and a little peculiar looking, but he has a whole lot of nerve, and relies on this, as well as his energy, quick wit and acidic sense of humour to pull him through. A typical Lupino put-down, delivered with a sickly mock-earnest grin:

DOORMAN: Your face makes me tired.

LUPINO: And *yours* gives me insomnia!

And another:

MAN IN BRIGHT SUIT: Be careful! You nearly spoiled my suit!

LUPINO: *Impossible!*

Typically his films are one, some or all out of the following formulae: quirky variations on farces ('THE LOVE RACE' 'HONEYMOON FOR THREE', 'YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU'), moonstruck quests for a girl in a crowd ('YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU', 'CHEER UP', 'FACING THE MUSIC') or a similar dogged mission to sell an invention, song or play ('HAPPY', 'CHEER UP'). All feature some great musical numbers, including comic songs like 'STEAK & KIDNEY PUDDING, I ADORE YOU', and creative dance routines. These reach their zenith in 'OVER SHE GOES': a perfectly synchronised 3-man song-and-dance routine, 'SIDE BY SIDE', filmed with a continuous 360 degree camera pan.

Lupino was cousin to Lupino Lane, who directed his first two films. 'LOVE LIES', his debut, remains elusive, but 'THE LOVE RACE' is a good early effort, obviously stage-based in its country house settings, but with a zip to it that transcends a typical 1931 stage adaptation. Based on his play, it features Stanley as Reggie Powley, best buddy to Jack Hobbs, even though their families are fierce rivals. He's also engaged to Hobbs' sister Ida. Unfortunately he's had a baggage mix up and up turns Rita Payne with his case. The contents of the bags get mixed, and Reggie's fiancé arrives just in time to see his pyjamas fall out of her bag. Hobbs gets flustered and passes her off as his *sister*. Confused yet? Well, 'THE LOVE RACE' takes delight in piling on complications. Adding to the confusion, Hobbs' mother has remarried silly ass Ferdinand Fish (Wallace Lupino, here billed as Wallace Arthur—was he just one Lupino too many?). He arrives unbeknown to the mother, and makes himself at home in his new house. Lupino and Hobbs think he's nuts, and humour him. There's a terrific scene of Stanley repeatedly conning Wallace out of his drink by manipulating a swivelling table. Each time his lips find the glass empty, he mutters "Well, well, well, dear, dear dear...", rising in incredulity each time. It's a great example of music hall pantomime, executed by some of its finest exponents. Complications keep on piling up in 'THE LOVE RACE', until a climactic race scene, in which the sharp eyed will spot a Lupino Lane cameo.

Stanley Lupino was also involved in one of the best and most unusual of all these films. 'YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU' features Thelma Todd moonlighting from Hal Roach. Unlike some of the doomed transatlan-





tic ventures made by US stars (looking at you, 'ATOLL K' and 'THE INVADER'), this is another happy instance where everything worked out just dandy, thank you very much. Made as a loan out during a promotional trip taken by Roach, Todd and Charley Chase, it has an unusual set of ingredients. One of a series of English films by B.I.P. featuring Hollywood stars in an attempt to bring prestige to the industry, it features lots of resources thrown at it. Directed by slapstick comedian Monty Banks, Todd's Hollywood glamour is contrasted by Stanley Lupino's English musical comedy and pantomime heritage. To top it all off, the last ingredient in this cinematic hodgepodge is a screenplay by Frank Launder, based on Shakespeare's 'THE TAMING OF THE SHREW'! Such a contrived confection should be dreadful, but there's so much talent in here that everything comes off beautifully. The per-

formances are pitch-perfect by all concerned, and the script zings with one-liners and comebacks. Stanley Lupino's usual moon-struck lover, small but determined to get his way and laugh in the face of bad luck, is made for this film; having seen Thelma, he is determined to win her over, even when he finds out she's a holy terror. He hatches a plan to "treat her mean", with lots of comic contrivances along the way, before everything turns out happily. The whole film is a barely believable piece of fluff, but it is packed with such energy, humour and movement that it carries off its unlikely ingredients with aplomb.

Similar in tone, and very nearly is good is 'FACING THE MUSIC', which sees Lupino again in dogged pursuit, this time to the beautiful secretary to a temperamental opera singer. Once more, it's Lupino's energy that really carries the film through some great visual comedy and dance routines.

Lupino is one of the most under-rated English film comedians, and undoubtedly offers the most rewards of any performer yet rehabilitated by Network's 'The British Film' series. In fact, he's filed for reference for a future article...

CAPTAIN BILL (1935)

Directed by RALPH CEDER. Starring LESLIE FULLER, with Georgie Harris and Hal Gordon.

In the 30s class schism in comedy, rubber-faced Leslie Fuller found himself firmly on the working class side. He found his fame in concert parties, especially in the seaside town of Margate where he subsequently made his home. His usual character, Bill, is well-meaning, if a bit gauche and clumsy, occasionally prone to gruffness and ready for a fight. In fact, he gives the impression of being an everyday Cockney bloke of the time; the type who might spend his holidays at Margate, for instance. Perhaps no other performer better reflected his audience, and in holding up the mirror to them, Fuller won huge stardom. He was even described as "Elstree Studio's answer to Clark Gable!". That's certainly pushing it, but there is certainly something charming and realistic about him, and while 'Bill' seems a fairly effortless characterization, I suspect he actually took much greater skill to play.

Much the same homespun, effortlessness went into his film career: Fuller churned out films in seemingly less time than it takes some people to digest meals. 'Captain Bill' was one of three comedies he made in 1935. Inevitably, it shows. It is the only Fuller film I've yet seen, although I reckon it's fairly typical of his vehicles.

As the title suggests, Bill is plonked into a boat setting, running a barge on the Thames. Again, it's something any of his audience could relate to – in his own way Fuller was as regionally minded as any of the Northern performers like Frank Randle. He has an inept crew of cabin boy Georgie Harris (a regular sidekick) and droopy old sad-sack D.J. Williams. In a way, the trio are a ragged foreshadow of the films soon to be made teaming Will Hay with Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt. Although far less amusing, they certainly have their moments.

The first scenes are strung together with little consequence; few of them seem to take much responsibility for forwarding the plot. It's more like a day in the life of Captain Bill, detailing the crew's slapstick misadventures on board the ship, Fuller's rivalry with fellow captain Hal Gordon, a fire on the barge, and a musical interlude. These scenes are all rather claustrophobic, taking place on the small barge with the camera struggling to take it all in. However, the location shooting adds quite a bit of charm to these seemingly off the cuff scenes. There's something of a silent comedy feel here, especially in a good scene with the crew's frantic efforts to bail out their sinking barge. Director Ralph Ceder was actually a Hal Roach veteran, who directed Snub Pollard, Charley Chase, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (though only in separate films). Accordingly, the work-based slapstick routines here recall Laurel's solo films like 'The Noon Whistle', 'Oranges and Lemons' or 'Save the Ship'. Incidentally, the film is produced by Joe Rock, who had also produced solo films with Laurel.

The second half of the film involves Bill blagging a job as a yacht captain, and gets bogged down in a plot about gun-runners. Of



course, all ends happily, but 'Captain Bill' never really lives up to its potential. With a less rushed production, stronger direction and some background music, it could have been a winner. As it is, whilst not without charm or humour, it doesn't really inspire me to seek out more of Leslie Fuller's films.

BRITISH COMEDIES OF THE 1930s, vol 2

'OH! WHAT A DUCHESS!' (1933) is a bit of an oddity, albeit one boasting an interesting pedigree. George Lacy, the star, was the most celebrated pantomime dame of the era. The film was originally trumpeted as an adaptation of Fred Karno's famous 'show-within-a-show' sketch 'Mumming Birds', which was Charlie Chaplin's breakthrough stage role. Enlisted to direct was silent comedian Lupino Lane, who had made his own version of 'Mumming Birds' as the great silent short 'ONLY ME'.

However, little of the sketch is left in the finished product, beyond a vague resemblance in a sequence in which Lacy accidentally wrecks a show taking place on stage. If something of a let down for the Karno enthusiast, 'OH! WHAT A DUCHESS!' actually stands up pretty well on its own. Lacy is incompetent lacky to a lousy theatre troupe, but dreams of becoming an actor. The troupe are invited to dinner by a butler at one of the audiences, who really has his eye on one of the actresses. With his employers, the Duke and Duchess of Stonehenge, away, the butler declares open house, but a visiting American film producer demands to see the house, leading to Lacy impersonating the duchess.



Some reviewers of the time, perhaps expecting something more in the Mother Goose idiom, complained that "Lacy is given not much to do". In fact, this is a fine film, rich in the music hall tradition, and snappily directed by Lane. The slapstick of the stage-wrecking scenes is done well, if not terribly original. Performances in the film are good, too, especially that of Lacy. He is excellent both as his bumbling, enthusiastic character, and in drag as the 'duchess'. It's easy to see why his dames were considered the best; as director Lane himself observed in his book, 'HOW TO BE A COMEDIAN', "this type of comedy looks fairly easy, but there is more to it than you would think. [...] The stance of the female species is totally different to the male".

Lacy is a master of this. He is able to remain convincingly feminine with just the right degree of eccentricity to be funny, but not grotesque. As with many music-hall based films, the momentum is lost as he replicates (presumably) a stage sketch, an eccentric song and dance version of 'The Pipes of Pan'. It's funny stuff though, if unnecessary to the plot, and this film as a whole is great fun. On the basis of the evidence here, it's curious that Lacy made no more films after this one. Lane always had the ambition of making a film version of a pantomime, and he could have fitted right in. Nevertheless, Lacy's career can hardly be said to have fizzled out. He went on playing Mother Goose on stage for another 50 years after completing this film, making his last performance in Southsea at the age of 80.



'IT'S A BET!' finds itself surprisingly topical; the setup is uncannily similar to recent TV series 'THE HUNT'. If you haven't seen that show, it involves several members of the public going on the lam for a month to see if they can evade capture by the police and MI5 in our world of constant surveillance. Remove the modern CCTV technology, add in dapper stage star Gene Gerrard, and you essentially have this film. Gerrard looks rather like Harold Lloyd did when he removed his glasses, and that's actually a pretty good analogy: he's good looking, charming and likeable as a performer, but doesn't really have any particular feature to make him stand out. Our star is a journalist who bets a friend he can go into hiding for a month and not be found by anyone. Things are complicated when his car is stolen and used in a robbery, with a result that the manhunt for him becomes a national race. It's a good story that has more excitement than the usual kind of bland light comedies made by stars like Gerrard. The story also aids the pace of the film, which moves along smoothly. It also provides opportunity for lots of nice location work, including nice scenes of St Leonard's Pier. The finished result is a film with a sunny atmosphere and a feeling of constant motion. It lacks any standout comic set pieces, but remains engaging all the way through as an amiable time-passer.



Gerrard has had several of his other films released, including 'BROTHER ALFRED'. Based on a play by P.G. Wodehouse, this starts off slowly and creakily, but picks up steam as Gerrard drunkenly assaults a prince and finds himself a wanted man. Posing as his brother from Mexico, he has to keep up an elaborate farcical deception to avoid the suspicious police, yet simultaneously reappear as his old self to collect an inheritance. This is one of those farces that is totally unbelievable, but it moves fast, if leaving little lasting impression. Certainly, Gene Gerrard's films are worth seeing, if not up to the heights of hilarity achieved by some of the other stars

The films released by Network, for the most part, belie the notion that British comedies of the 1930s are all stodgy, hoary old relics. Most seem fresh and entertaining, if undeniably dated, and are helped immeasurably by pristine new transfers from original elements.

As part of the comic heritage of Great Britain, it's high time they were seen again.

That's all for now, folks! Many thanks to those who have contributed, especially to Ian Craine for his fantastic Marjorie Beebe article. Please do feel free to contribute articles, thoughts etc, and don't forget that updates will be posted at www.thelostlaugh.com. Bye for now!

In the next issue...



HARRY LANGDON



LAUREL & HARDY



ARTHUR HOUSMAN

Plus, special tie-in articles celebrating the stars and films featured at SILENT LAUGHTER WEEKEND, and reviews of the event!

"WHEN WE MADE PICTURES, WE ATE, SLEPT & DREAMED THEM"

- BUSTER KEATON

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