

THE LOST LAUGH

#11



The forgotten feature films of
MONTY BANKS



Also featuring...



& lots more!

silent comedy • slapstick • music hall

The Lost Laugh #1 /



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Front cover: based on Russian artwork for
Monty Banks' ATTA BOY (1926)
Contents page based on artwork for PLAY SAFE (1927)

NEWS

Well, here we are again! Welcome, at long last, to issue #11 of THE LOST LAUGH.

I've been on a bit of a hiatus as work, other interests and projects have taken up my time. The time off has made me reflect on just how many exciting developments are happening right now in the world of classic film: rediscoveries of rare and lost films we never thought we'd see; DVD releases of many of those films, several made possible by the relatively new method of crowdfunding. There are new silent film festivals, TV channels, new books, and even a new biopic of Laurel & Hardy out to great acclaim. We really are spoiled. In fact, there's so much that I haven't been able to include it all in here. Apologies if I haven't included your own pet project. As ever, if you think I've missed something, have something to promote or would just like to write a review or article of your own, I'd love to hear from you: movienightmag@gmail.com

There will be more issues of THE LOST LAUGH in the future, and updates to the blog and website thelostliagh.com. Like this issue, they'll probably be a bit more sporadic than they have been, but somewhere down the line they'll appear!

Until then, all the best, and thanks for your continued interest!

Matt



Talking Pictures
TV

In the UK, independent channel Talking Pictures TV has ended an era of black and white films largely being shunned by television. Best of all, many of these have been comedy: Laurel and Hardy, Will Hay, George Formby and even obscure comics like Frank Randle and Walter Forde have all had their first TV screenings in years. Bravo! TPTV is available on Freeview channel 81, and the schedule can be found at www.talkingpicturestv.co.uk/schedule.

BATTLE OF THE CENTURY ON DVD?

The restored, almost-complete, version of BATTLE OF THE CENTURY has been doing the rounds of film festivals, and has just had a screening on ARTE TV. This has fuelled speculation that it will be soon released on DVD. The word is that Serge Bromberg's Lobster films are likely candidates, and that hopefully it will entail a set including other L & H silents. At least one other, DO DETECTIVES THINK, has also been screened on ARTE, giving a bit more credence to this. The existing prints are certainly due an upgrade—it would be especially nice to have original titlecards lacking from the Kirch Group prints. Fingers crossed!

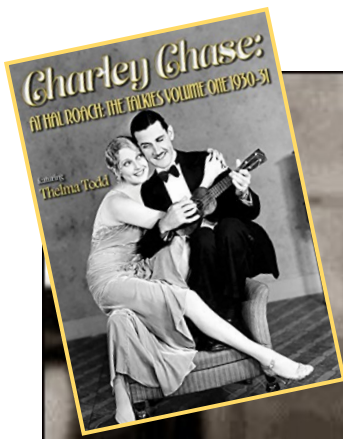


ALICE HOWELL IN THE SPOTLIGHT!

Alice Howell was one of the few women in the male-dominated realm of silent comedy permitted to be funny in her own right. Her image was quite unique; piled-up frizzy red hair and a permanently surprised expression made her look rather like a manic doll. Her scatty but carefree working girl was something of an ancestor to Lucille Ball. Happily, she's been given some overdue appreciation of late; Anthony Slide's book *She Could Be Chaplin!* is a slim but rewarding study of her life and work, while Alice also features in Steve Massa's wider-ranging *Slapstick Divas*. Something of a companion piece to his earlier *Lame Brains and Lunatics*, this is an in-depth look at the underappreciated women of early comedy.

Finally, there's more Alice on DVD! Silent film accompanist, historian and DVD producer Ben Model, who has produced some wonderful releases highlighting forgotten comics such as Marcel Perez, Monty Banks and Johnny Hines, now turns his attention to Alice. The Alice Howell Project, funded through Kickstarter, collates rare films from the Library of Congress, including *HOW STARS ARE MADE* (1916), *IN DUTCH* (1918), *A CONVICT'S HAPPY BRIDE* (1920), *HIS WOODEN LEGACY* (1920), *DISTILLED LOVE* (1920) and *UNDER A SPELL* (1925). More info here: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/silentfilm/the-alice-howell-dvd-project-6-rare-silent-comedie>





Charley Chase has gone from being an under-represented figure on home video releases to having much of his classic work out there in superior quality. Thanks to DVD releases from Kino, AllDay Entertainment and Milestone films, a majority of his existing silent work can now be widely seen. In recent years, even his late sound shorts for Columbia have been pulled from the vaults and released by Sony.

All this is extremely heartening, but the holy grail has always been his Hal Roach sound shorts. Picking up from where he left off in silent days, Chase kept on churning out little gems at Roach until 1936. The distinctive charm of the Roach films, with their stock company and background music, along with Chase's excellent performances and some great gags, made these a wonderful bunch of films. More's the pity that they've been so hard to see! There was a period when the films were aired semi-regularly on TCM in the USA, and it has been possible to cobble them together through a ragbag assortment of bootlegs from off-air recordings, VHS transfers and often ropey 16mm prints, but a legitimate and comprehensive release, in nice quality, has remained elusive.

No longer. Step forward Historian Richard M Roberts, and Kit Parker Films, who have achieved what no-one else has been able to in bringing some of Chase's sound shorts to DVD (it's the first in a planned series of volumes, which will hopefully work through all the other Chases). Simply by existing, this set would be automatically brilliant; that it presents the films in the best quality possible, with great extras and authoritative commentaries, makes it an absolute triumph.

Chase's earliest talkies are currently unavailable, so this set picks up with *THE REAL MCCOY*, his first release of 1930, and goes through to his last release of 1931. Within these parameters, you get some of his all time best, including *WHISPERING WHOOPEE*, *LOOSER THAN LOOSE*, *THE HASTY MARRIAGE* and, of course, *THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG*. Disc 1 covers 1930, and disc 2 1931. The chronological nature means that you get to see how Charley developed his approach to comedy during the early sound era. This was a transitional period for Chase, and while sound gave him no cause for alarm, it did give him pause for thought, and to try some new approaches and variations in character. As well as films in the vein of his silent farces like '*LOOSER THAN LOOSE*' and '*DOLLAR DIZZY*', several of the 1930 films are particularly offbeat and experimental in nature. *FIFTY MILLION HUSBANDS* is full of quirky bits of business and *GIRL SHOCK* is a particularly unusual comedy, with Charley bordering on Harpo Marx-style mania every time a girl touches him. Present also are his experiments at making mini musicals, *HIGH Cs* and its wonderful companion piece, *ROUGH SEAS*. Not all the experiments are entirely successful, but that said, practically everything Chase did is diverting and most watchable, especially for L & H buffs, who can enjoy seeing familiar Roach faces like James Finlayson and Charlie Hall in other roles.

Of course, the most famous supporting player to feature opposite Charley is the pip herself, Thelma Todd. Their partnership resulted in some absolutely charming comedies, of which *THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG* endures the most. This simple tale of Charley's attempts to turn off a blind date, then trying to undo his work when it turns out to be Thelma,

is elegantly told and full of great sight gags. As a fascinating extra, the Spanish phonetic version, LA SENORITA DE CHICAGO, is included. While it loses Thelma Todd, it gains an extra reel, including a song from Charley and some bridging scenes that actually make it flow much better than the English original.

While PIP is most definitely a highlight, some of the less vaunted shorts are just as delightful. LOOSER THAN LOOSE is a wonderfully gentle romantic comedy, where most of the humour is down entirely to the performances of the cast; HASTY MARRIAGE is full of great sight gags and slapstick in a tale of streetcar romance; ONE OF THE SMITHS has some terrific mechanical gags, and a much funnier update of L& H's upper berth sequence, as Charley tries to share his tiny berth with a large tuba! THE PANIC IS ON is full of black humour gags spoofing the depression, as well as a nice little cameo from Laughing Gravy.

Richard M Roberts provides detailed and entertaining commentaries for all the films, and it's clear that this is a labour of love. As he has said, it is hoped that other volumes in this series will follow; that just depends on how well this first volume sells. So what are you waiting for? Buy, buy, buy! I'm certain you won't regret it. It's hard not to like Charley Chase, and this set is a must-have if you have even the slightest interest in his work, or that of Laurel & Hardy and the Hal Roach studios. While the Chase talkies are generally looser than his impeccably constructed silents, there's a heckuva lot of talent in these films, and a heckuva lot of fun, too. And there's plenty more where that came from: Many of the films that the prolific Chase made in 1932 and beyond, such as YOUNG IRONSIDES, HIS SILENT RACKET, NURSE TO YOU, MANHATTAN MONKEY BUSINESS and POKER AT EIGHT, are as good as anything he ever did, so here's (greedily) hoping for more volumes soon!

MORE FROM THE SPROCKET VAULT: THELMA TODD & ZASU PITTS

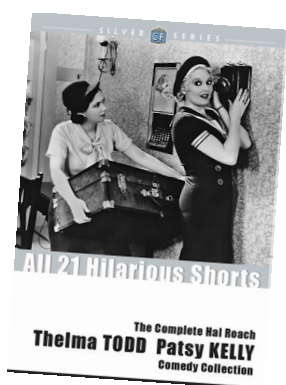
Also just released from The Sprocket Vault is the complete collection of Thelma Todd & ZaSu Pitts shorts. Another of Roach's attempts to promote female comedians (*see articles issues 4 & 5 for more details of the various film series*), this bunch of shorts are perhaps the most successful. The best of the films maintain a gentler, situational comedy which allows Thelma and ZaSu's personalities to shine, while still incorporating visual comedy in the classic Hal Roach style. Though they don't all work, even the lesser films are real charmers, and for fans of Laurel & Hardy, there are ample opportunities to enjoy the familiar supporting cast members doing their stuff. My pick of these shorts are the earliest, supervised directly by Hal Roach, and the later ones directed by Gus Meins; THE PAJAMA PARTY and ON THE LOOSE (1931) are real charmers, while 'ASLEEP IN THE FEET', 'MAIDS A LA MODE' and 'THE BARGAIN OF THE CENTURY' are among the best Hal Roach situation comedies, period. Some of the films (mainly those directed by George Marshall) are a bit more heavy-handed with their slapstick, but there are still some great fun films among them, like THE SOILERS, and all have something to enjoy. As with the Charley Chase set, picture quality is the best it can be, and the discs are embellished with wonderfully insightful and engaging commentaries from Richard M Roberts, Brent Walker Randy Skredtvedt and Rob Farr. Again, bravo to the Sprocket Vault for getting this set out. It's another must-have, especially for the low price of \$24.98!



But wait... there's more Thelma! When ZaSu Pitts left the Roach studios in 1933, Hal Roach decided to continue the popular series with stage comedienne Patsy Kelly. While still a comedy team roughly modelled after Laurel & Hardy, The Todd-Kelly duo had a different dynamic. Kelly's good-natured loudmouth persona was in stark contrast to ZaSu's shy, dithering bumbler, and a good indication of the more fast-talking, snappy direction that comedy was headed in as the 30s progressed. However, the chemistry between the pair was just as excellent. Now, another company, ClassicFlix, has put out a 3-disc set of all the series.

The Todd-Kelly films are generally slicker than the Todd-Pitts shorts, but their quality control also varied more. There are some really excellent little shorts among these, notably BACKS TO NATURE, SOUP AND FIISH, THREE CHUMPS AHEAD & SING SISTER SING. Best of all is BABES IN THE GOODS, featuring a hilarious turn from Arthur Housman (*more on this one in the Housman article on p 28!*)

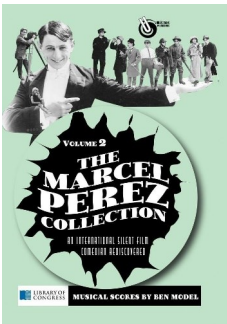
However, there are also quite a few clunkers in here, too. THE TIN MAN, HOT MONEY and TWIN TRIPLETS are almost devoid of laughs, and when the comedy level drops, Kelly can become a bit too abrasive. That said, there are more winners than flops among the 21 shorts, and again it's fantastic just to have them available. Picture quality is again excellent in this set, and as a bonus you also get the three shorts made by Roach to complete the series after Todd's untimely death. PAN HANDLERS and HILL TILLIES team Kelly with Pert Kelton, while AT SEA SHORE features her with Lyda Roberti. The set retails at \$29.98, but shop around and you may well find it cheaper.



MORE DVD NEWS...

Kino– Lorber have announced two of W.C.FIELDS' silent features: *RUNNING WILD*, (1927) and *IT'S THE OLD ARMY GAME* (1926), the latter featuring a role for Louise Brooks..

The films are available separately, for \$13.99 on DVD or \$19.99 on BluRay. A shame they couldn't have fit them on one disc, but great to have some of Fields' under-represented silent work out.

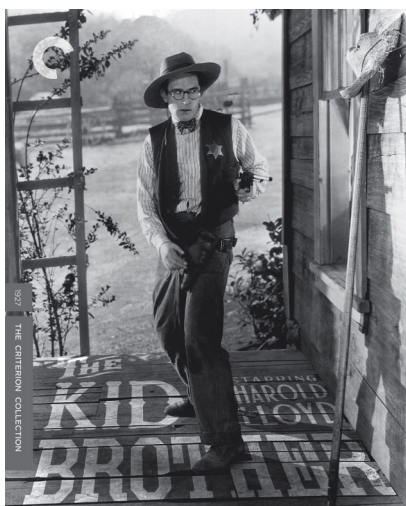


Marcel Perez was one of the most obscure silent clowns until a Kickstarter-funded DVD produced by Ben Model brought him back to the limelight a couple of years ago. Perez had some career parallels to Max Linder: he was also a pioneer European comic who subsequently came across to America to make films, but died tragically young. Perez has a much broader style than Linder, but can be very funny. Now he's back in another collection of rare shorts from the archives, again brought to us by Ben Model (who also accompanies the films on the disc). On volume two are : *THE SHORT-SIGHTED CYCLIST* (1907), *LEND ME YOUR WIFE* (1916), *SOME HERO* (1916), *A SCRAMBLED HONEYMOON* (1916), *OH! WHAT A DAY* (1918), *CHICKENS IN TURKEY* (1919), *PINCHED* (1921), *WILD* (1921), and a fragment from *FRIDAY THE 13TH* (1923). \$19.98, with more details at www.undercrankproductions.com

LOBSTER S KINGS OF COMEDY

This box set from Lobster Films has been out a couple of years but seemed to slip out under the radar. It features four discs, each highlighting a different star or studio. The Sennett studios are featured with a mixture of Keystones and prime 20s Billy Bevan films: *MABEL'S DRAMATIC CAREER*, *A FILM JOHNNIE*, *FAT-TY AND MABEL ADRIFT*, *BULL AND SAND*, *GALLOPING BUNGALOWS* and *SUPER-HOOPER-DYNE-LIZZIES*. Also from Sennett, there's a disc of some of the best Harry Langdon shorts: *PICKING PEACHES*, *ALL NIGHT LONG*, *FEET OF MUD*, *THE SEA SQUAWK*, *SATURDAY AFTERNOON*, *FIDDLESTICKS*. From the Roach studios, we get some early Harold Lloyd and Snub Pollard films; *SWING YOUR PARTNERS*, *ARE CROOKS DISHON-EST?*, *TWO GUN GUSSIE* and *JUST NEIGHBORS* star them together. Harold is solo for *GET OUT & GET UNDER* and *HAUNTED SPOOKS*, and Snub stars in the classic *IT'S A GIFT*, along with the rarely seen *WHAT A WHOPPER!* and *SHAKE 'EM UP*. Finally, there's a disc of the ever-overlooked Larry Semon in *THE HICK*, *THE SAWMILL*, *THE SHOW*, *THE STUNT MAN*, *OH!WHAT A MAN*, *DUMMIES* and *A SIMPLE SAP*. This is the disc I was most pleased to see in the set, as Semon's shorts are generally only available in pretty ropey quality. The selection of shorts veers more to his lesser later work, but there's still lots to enjoy in these underrated films, especially *OH! WHAT A MAN*, which contains some brilliant Keatonesque sight gags.

Overall, a fantastic and very reasonably priced set featuring lots of rare stuff unavailable elsewhere. As one would expect from Lobster, the films are in excellent quality. Be warned, several of them have foreign titles and no English subtitles available. While this is a bit of an oversight, I suspect it's a way to get these rare films out as cheaply as possible, which I'm not going to complain about. There's little in here that needs explaining verbally , anyway. A highly recommended set.



After their previous release of Harold Lloyd's *SPEEDY* three years ago, the Criterion collection hasn't issued any more of his films. That's changing in March this year with the release of *THE KID BROTHER*. Probably Lloyd's best film, it's certainly his best-photographed, and has lots to gain from being released on Blu-Ray in this new 4K restoration. Happily, it's also being released with its definitive 1989 score by Carl Davis. As with all Criterion releases, this set comes packed with extras. Some, such as a documentary about his home *Greenacres*, were previously released on the 2005 Lloyd box set, but there are also new essays, commentaries, a Dutch television interview with Lloyd from 1962 and two rare shorts. *OVER THE FENCE* (1917) and *THAT'S HIM* (1918) both date from the very early days of Lloyd's 'glass' character. RRP is \$39.96 for BluRay and \$29.96 for DVD. Oh, and isn't the cover beautiful?!

STAN & OLLIE

A few thoughts on the long awaited biopic ...



“Will it be in black and white?” asked one teenage boy to his parents as we all queued to see STAN AND OLLIE. Judging from overheard conversations, he was just one of many who were about to have their introduction to the boys. It’s lovely that there were potential new fans in the audience; I crossed my fingers and hoped that the film would be up to the challenge. Like many others, I had first greeted the news that a Laurel and Hardy biopic was to be made with some trepidation. Surely there would be lots of drama, lots of untruths and lots of scenes battling ex-wives. My fears eased a little as I heard more about the project, although I always feel a tiny bit peeved that these kind of films tend to focus on their stars’ fading years, rather than showing them in their prime. There’s more drama, more light and shade to be had that way, I guess

Sure enough, STAN AND OLLIE gets much pathos out of the boys’ waning years, but that pathos is genuine, and there’s a lot of warmth too. And, in the end, the decision to focus on later years makes sense as the tours *were* where their friendship really formed a special bond. It’s a bittersweet little film that really does come from a place of love and respect. Let’s get this straight, though; it is not a documentary. I can live with that. I don’t really care that they rolled tours that took place in 1947, 1952 and 1953 into one, that they might have swapped Morecambe for Worthing or added some small events that didn’t happen. Most of the attention to detail is astounding, and the essence of the boys’ situation is preserved, but this is storytelling, after all. Along the way, some of the supporting characters find themselves rather caricatured. The domineering and squabbling Ida Laurel and Lucille Hardy or the sleazily conning Bernard Delfont are slightly unfair portrayals, but are comically done and add a good dose of humour. I was glad that, as the film went on, the wives were allowed to become more three-dimensional in their relationships to the boys and each other.

I have more trouble with the portrayal of Hal Roach as a stereotypical Hollywood bully. While undoubtedly he held the boys’ contracts to his advantage, he wasn’t the villain he’s portrayed as. I suppose the point of the brief prologue is to set up how the boys got to their 50s situation, but it’s still rather unfair. The other bit that sticks out like a sore thumb is the infamous scene where the boys argue over Babe’s appearing without Stan in ZENOBIA. While I’m sure the team probably did have at least the odd, brief cross word in thirty years, the scene just doesn’t ring true. In fact, it plays exactly like what it is: a scripted attempt to make a moment of conflict and convenient soundbite for the trailer. Still, the fact that the worst fight the script writers could conjure involves no shouting and no bad language perhaps just goes to show how deep the two men’s friendship was. At least it’s over soon and quickly forgotten.

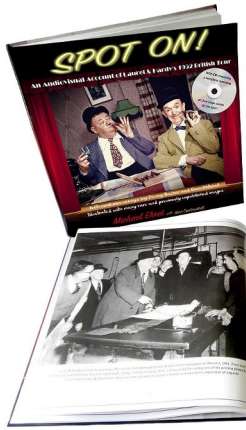
The fact that that the gentle love between Stan and Babe shines through in all of this is a credit to the performances. Steve Coogan and John C Reilly had a hell of a job to pull off such recognisable, loved characters, as well as their offstage personas. In my opinion, they do a terrific job on both counts. The makeup makes them real ringers for the real-life men, and they get the voices down very well indeed. There’s just the right mixture of regret and good humour in their acting, and Coogan does an excellent job of conveying Stan’s gentle air of English repression. As far as the onstage personas, Laurel’s abstract vagueness is always slightly harder to convey than Babe’s precise mannerisms. Coogan grasps the importance of Stan’s eyebrows, and generally gets his flailing movements right, if not *quite* 100%. A reprise of COUNTY HOSPITAL on-stage is a blast, and as the two do a double door routine in long shot, I really had to remind myself that I wasn’t watching the genuine article. It’s a new variation of an L & H routine, not an exact copy, but feels totally authentic.

It’s such attention to detail that really makes the film a joy. I particularly liked the little touches of 50s culture sprinkled through: the queen’s coronation, a skiffle band or a poster for ABBOTT & COSTELLO GO TO MARS, reminding us how far society had changed. The fact that Laurel and Hardy still made people laugh in the atomic age, so far from Model Ts and sunny California streets, reminds us why they are special, and still funny. If you asked me for a deep reason of why I *love* Laurel and Hardy beyond just laughing at them, I’d reply that their films, however unintentionally, speak deep truths about humanity, and the nature of friendship and love. The best compliment I can give STAN AND OLLIE is that it conveys much of the same.

ATOLL K ON DVD & BLURAY

Conveniently timed to coincide with the sudden interest in latter-day Laurel & Hardy the BFI have released the complete, restored version of ATOLL K in dual format on DVD & BluRay edition. Good to see some love for this underrated film, along with great extras: essays by L & H scholars, newsreel footage. There are some solo films as well, two from Babe making their first DVD appearances: MOTHER’S BABY BOY, from 1914, is one of the earliest ever Hardy films. SHOULD MEN WALK HOME (1927) is a terrifically funny film starring Mabel Normand.





SPOT ON!

THANKS TO MICHAEL EHRET FOR SHARING WITH US DETAILS OF HIS TWO TERRIFIC NEW LAUREL & HARDY BOOKS. THESE FANTASTIC NEW PROJECTS HIGHLIGHT THE DUO'S LATTER YEARS WITH RE-

SPOT ON! Is an Audiovisual Account of Laurel & Hardy's 1952 British Tour by Michael Ehret, with Nico Cartenstadt. It comes with a CD containing a complete recording of their sketch 'On The Spot' ... plus an additional unreleased recording!

All Laurel & Hardy Fans: Spot This!

- ☑ Filled with many previously unpublished full-page photographs, **Spot On!** recounts Laurel & Hardy's 1952 British stage tour step by step using original letters, dozens and dozens of never-before-seen photographs, press releases, and much, much more. Great care has been taken to use the finest, first generation photographs and the very best audio possible.
- ☑ Furthermore, this book reproduces, for the very first time, **all surviving script versions** of their 1952 stage sketch *On the Spot*, including extracts from Oliver Hardy's own copies. These allow the reader to discover the many changes Stan Laurel made in the course of the tour.
- ☑ The icing on the cake is the **world premiere** of the **only known audio recording** of Laurel & Hardy performing *On the Spot* live, illustrated with pictures showing the boys onstage and backstage! Needless to say that this book fills an important gap in Laurel & Hardy history.
- ☑ Featuring exclusive essays written by well-known Laurel & Hardy scholars and collectors **Glenn Mitchell, Danny Bacher** and **Nico Cartenstadt**.

Hardcover, full-colour book with over 160 glossy pages plus a CD containing a complete (and restored) recording of their sketch 'On the Spot' ... plus an additional unreleased recording! Available now from www.laurelandhardypublications.com



We are delighted and proud to announce that we are putting together a book to be titled *Stan Laurel at the Oceana – Twilight of a Comedy Legend* which we intend to become the definitive account of the end of Stan Laurel & Oliver Hardy's career and the ensuing years. Starting with the end of their last UK tour in 1954, it will focus on their retirement, primarily the final 7 years of Stan Laurel's life which he spent with his wife Ida at the Oceana Apartment Hotel in Santa Monica.

For the first time ever, we will paint as complete a picture as possible of Stan the man, the real person behind the famous grin. You will get to know him through a candid look into his daily life as he corresponds with friends and fans, battles various illnesses, receives honours and awards for his contributions to film comedy, and receives visitors in his seaside apartment to reminisce about the old days.

The book will have over 300 pages filled to the brim with little-known facts and new revelations, including insights into Stan's conflicted personality, accompanied by lots of rare and unpublished images. As a special bonus, it will come with a DVD containing rare audio and video (contents to be disclosed later). Follow Stan and Ollie as they are forced to cancel their final British tour ahead of schedule, and attempt a TV comeback after their surprise appearance on 'This Is Your Life' in December 1954. Read about the health issues which plagued both of them, Stan's devastation at Oliver's death in 1957, and his subsequent retirement from show business.

Filled to the brim with rare and unpublished images, letters, documents, trivia, insights into Stan's conflicted personality, visitor stories and much, much more, *Stan Laurel at the Oceana - Twilight of a Comedy Legend* will be the ultimate account of the final chapter in Laurel & Hardy's career.

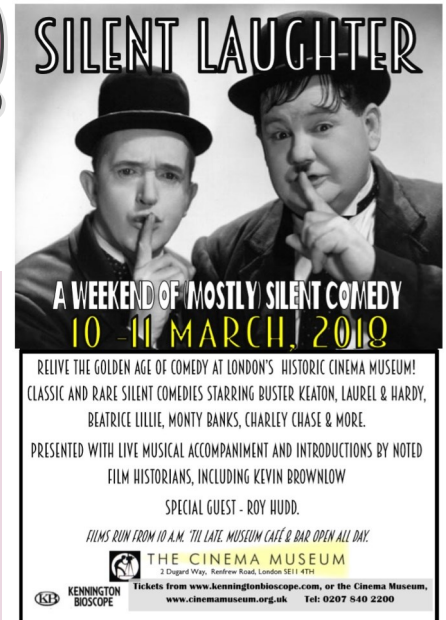
If you have any information or material which you believe would be useful for our upcoming book, and which you want to share with your fellow Laurel & Hardy fans, please let us know. We'd love to hear from you! Of course anyone who contributes will be duly credited and rewarded.

For more info about our project, please contact us at: info@stanlaurelattheoceana.com

SILENT LAUGHTER 2018

A REPORT

Silent Laughter is an annual festival of silent (and almost-silent) comedy films held at London's historic Cinema Museum. It's hosted by the Kennington Bioscope film group, in conjunction with historian Kevin Brownlow, and curated by David Wyatt Beginning as a one-day event in 2015, the event has successfully grown to a full weekend featuring a selection of rare and classic comedies seldom shown on the big screen. All films are accompanied by the cream of British silent film musicians, and given introductions by experts and historians, making this is an unmissable event if you love silent comedy (and why else would you be reading this if you weren't?). I was privileged to help select and screen some of the films at 2018's event; here's my rundown of what we saw...



The weekend kicked off with *THE NIGHT CLUB*, a vehicle for silk-hatted comedian Raymond Griffith. Griffith's first starring feature, the film is a wonderful vehicle for his understated, unique style. It launched his career in features with a high pedigree; produced and co-scripted by Cecil B DeMille, it was directed by his protégées Paul Iribe and Frank Urson and based on a play by DeMille's brother.

It's a farcical tale in which Griffith is stood up by his bride, renounces all women but has to undergo an arranged marriage to inherit a fortune. He genuinely falls in love with his arranged bride (Vera Reynolds), but she thinks he's only after her for the money. A despondent Griffith pays a bandit (Wallace Beery) to bump him off, but Vera finds out the truth and they are reconciled. Now Griff's only problem is to tell the bandit that no, thank you, he doesn't want to die anymore before he's done in...

It's a complicated story and even that summary doesn't take account of many of the tangents and subplots that arise. It's easy to see why it was a failure as a play. As a Griffith vehicle, it succeeds admirably though, as he wins through with a wonderfully understated performance that sells the far-fetched story, and shows his trademark skill in creating laughter with subtle gestures and facial expressions.

There are also great performances from Beery, William Austin and Louise Fazenda, not to mention some great suicide gags and lovely location shooting on the dusty paradise of Catalina Island.

Director Eddie Sutherland contended that Griffith's failing as a comic was that he tried to mix too many styles, but the inclusion of sight gags and slapstick makes films like *THE NIGHT CLUB* much more entertaining than many of the light comedies of the era.

Griffith's best films were to come, as he refined his suave, sly style; his best surviving films are probably 'PATHS TO PARADISE' and 'HANDS UP'. *THE NIGHT CLUB*, however, remains a fun and different comedy. By the way, if you're wondering where the night club of the title comes in... it doesn't. Kevin Brownlow explained in his introduction that this was a side effect of the studios' block booking system. Often films were sold to exhibitors before they were filmed or even written. Paramount had promised a film called 'THE NIGHT CLUB', so they delivered a film called 'THE

NIGHT CLUB', even though their new story had nothing at all to do with one!

Next it was on to a programme of British shorts. Now, these can be a mixed bag. There are some fantastic British silent comedies, but often they're a bit too polite and ponderous. Certainly, they're different to the American model of silent comedy. At times, they're rather offbeat, but sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. This programme had a higher batting average than many.

'BOOKWORMS', made in 1920, is a charming little vehicle for Leslie How-





Director Adrian Brunel.

ard. Written by A.A. Milne (author of the Winnie-the-Pooh stories),

Brunel loved to play with the medium of film. – **CROSSING THE GREAT SAGRADA**. Anticipates the sublime silliness of Spike Milligan (especially sketches like 'First Irish Rocket to the Moon')

There was a chance to glimpse behind the scenes at the film industry (and film fandom) with **STARLINGS OF THE SCREEN**. This short chronicles the progress of a competition run by Picture Show magazine, whereby 3000 young ladies entered to be in with a chance of winning a film role; kind of 'THE X FACTOR' of its day! The 15 shortlisted provincial candidates are seen trying their hardest to act at a series of screen tests at Oswald Stoll's studios. Also on hand is comic actor Moore Marriott, later best known as one of Will Hay's sidekicks, who puts the girls through their paces in a series of short little sketches. This was a great little item: a fascinating time capsule, often (unintentionally) hilarious. There was also a touch of poignancy in the doomed ambitions of the film hopefuls, who simply didn't have 'it' and would soon return to obscurity. Nancy Baird of Glasgow, and Sheilagh Allen of Londonderry, whatever became of you?

So far, so good. The only one of these films to disappoint was **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST**. Starring Guy Newall & Ivy Duke, this too played with the medium of cinema, having a prologue breaking the fourth wall, in which Duke & Newall invite the public to join them in their dressing rooms preparing for the film. The story itself was the tale of Duke's perpetual discomfort caused by her woollen underwear; at the theatre, Newall is sat behind her, absentmindedly fiddles with a thread he sees dangling from the bottom of her chair and soon has unravelled her entire vest. It was a nice little idea for a throwaway gag, but stretching it out to almost half an hour was fairly infuriating! I could have seen Lloyd or Keaton doing a similar gag, but as a little aside, rather than building a whole film around it! Nevertheless, an interesting little item, and overall this programme showed that British films were often creative and playful.

After lunch, I was thrilled to be able to present an overview of **CHARLEY CHASE**. Chase is one of my absolute favourite silent (and sound) comedians and as he's often been a neglected figure, it's always a pleasure to show his films to new audiences. Most of the clips centred on the 1920s; with the increased focus on human comedy, this was Chase's decade. Playing an eternally embarrassed young man in front of the cameras, behind it he was an enormously inventive, prolific and consistent comedy craftsman.

An extract from **ALL WET** (1924) provided an early example of a classic Chase routine, escalating from simple, believable beginnings to peaks of absurdity. Charley is on his way to meet a train in his car; he helps another motorist out of a mud puddle, and in doing so becomes stuck himself. His attempts to free the car end in it being completely submerged, necessitating Charley's repairs of the car from underwater. **ALL WET** builds gags brilliantly, and is a fine example of the teamwork between Chase and its director, future Oscar-winner Leo McCarey (who once said "Everything I know, I learned from Charley Chase").

Chase and McCarey thrived off each other, developing a unique style of intricate storytelling. When Chase's films were expanded to two reels, they were able to use the extra space to construct beautifully elaborate farces, mini-masterpieces packed with gags, situations and great characters. To illustrate this, we saw large excerpts from **FLUTTERING HEARTS** and **THE WAY OF ALL PANTS**, the latter getting some of the biggest laughs of the weekend with its split-second timed multiple exchanges of trousers.

Two things struck me forcefully while selecting the clips:

- 1 – it's incredibly hard to take excerpts out of Chase's films, as they are so tightly and masterfully constructed.
- 2 – Chase really realised the value of his supporting casts. Perhaps it was background as a director, but he never seems egotistical about his own performances, always allowing others to shine; his films are true ensemble pieces. Oliver Hardy, Katherine Grant, Gale Henry, Thelma Todd, Tom Dugan, Vivian Oakland and Buddy the Dog are just some of the performers given great opportunities in the films we saw.

The closing scenes from **THE PIP FROM PITTSBURG** showcased Charley's illustrious career in talkies, and we finished off with the complete **MIGHTY LIKE A MOOSE**. The apotheosis of Charley's taking a simple idea to ridiculous extremes, as he and his wife both plastic surgery, fail to recognise each other and embark on an affair! This has rightly been recognised as a masterpiece, and has been added to the USA's National Film Registry along with other classics like **THE GENERAL** and **BIG BUSINESS**.

It was a real delight to hear the laughter at Chase's films, with several people in the audience commenting that it was their first time seeing them. Charley didn't live long enough to see his work being appreciated; if only he could have heard the response his films got in the Cinema Museum...

Also in the comedy of embarrassment mould was Monty Banks' 1927 feature **A PERFECT GENTLEMAN**. We saw it in a pristine 35mm copy from the BFI, albeit with Spanish intertitles. Chubby little



Italian Monty was, for my money, one of the hardest working silent comedians (*you can read more about him in the article on p15*). From 1926, Pathé had been promoting him as Harold Lloyd's successor, but had more or less given up on him by the time of *A PERFECT GENTLEMAN*. It's a shame, as this is a really excellent little comedy, mixing situation comedy with action and sight gags. You can read more about the details of the film in the Banks article, but the highlight is a sequence where Monty is constantly caught in compromising situations with Arthur Thalasso's wife, a running gag that has some brilliant variations. The funniest Banks film I've yet seen, it went over very well with the audience.

Nevertheless, however good performers like Banks or Raymond Griffith are, the following programme, **KEATON CLASSICS**, made it clear just why Buster Keaton has attained his mythical status in comparison to the more forgotten comics. Four authors – Kevin Brownlow, David Robinson, Polly Rose & David McLeod - presented their favourite sequences from Buster's features. Each sequence was, of course, magnificent, and it was a lovely idea to have personal introductions. Keaton means so many different things to so many people, after all. David Robinson praised the dramatic strength of *OUR HOSPITALITY*, reminding us that it was a stunning debut in feature directing (*THE SAPHEAD* was not directed by Keaton and *THREE AGES* planned as three shorts glued together, in case it didn't work out; ergo, *HOSPITALITY* was BK's first planned feature). He had picked the river scene that culminates in Buster's dramatic plunge across a waterfall to rescue Natalie Talmadge, a sequence that gives me the shivers every time I see it.

Kevin Brownlow's choice was the wonderfully action-packed Tong War sequence from *THE CAMERAMAN*, and David McLeod opted for the iconic cyclone climax of *STEAMBOAT BILL, JR.* Most fascinating of all was Polly Rose, a newcomer to writing about BK. An editor by trade, she was ideally placed to share discoveries about how Keaton achieved his visual effects walking into the cinema screen in *SHERLOCK, JR.* Through her research, she also shared discoveries about alternate versions of the scene, in which Buster seemed to enter the screen on a beam of light shone from his projector, before being spat back out into a tangle of film. Polly shared evidence of this version being previewed from at least three trade papers, and found clues in publicity stills that point to the action. A fascinating theory and who knows? Maybe one day one of those preview prints will turn up. Stranger things have happened!

I know Keaton's films so well by now that I sometimes take for granted how incredible they are. Seeing excerpts like this from different films reminded me just how diverse and special his films were, for not just his performances and gags, but also his storytelling, stunts and technical wizardry, not to mention that intangible quality that makes *him* so compelling.

How to follow four of Keaton's finest sequences? Step up to the plate, Beatrice Lillie! Miss Lillie made only 7 films in her long career, and 1926's *EXIT SMILING* is her sole silent. But her brief stay in Hollywood elicited devotion from the West Coast royalty; Chaplin described her as "my female counterpart", while Buster Keaton guarded her hotel room door, "lying there like Old Dog Tray". *EXIT SMILING* shows exactly why. One of the sadly few silent feature comedies to really show a female comedian to good advantage, it gives her opportunity for both great comic acting and genuine pathos. As Violet, Bea is a dogsbody with a travelling theatre company who longs to play the part of a vamp. She gets her chance to act not on the stage, but in real life, where she has to seduce a villain to save the man she loves. The scenes of her vamping the villain are simply brilliant, especially the moment where her pearl necklace disintegrates. If only she'd made more films!

EXIT SMILING was given an authoritative introduction by Michelle Facey, who gave lots of insight into Bea's career and appeal. Accompaniment was by the wonderful Meg Morley. The screening was, in fact, of Beatrice Lillie's personal 16mm copy of the film, and the personal connection of the evening didn't end there.

The last word must go to David Robinson, who shared his poignant story of attending a screening of the film with Beatrice Lillie in 1968.

"She was starting to forget things... She didn't seem like a star, she was just a little, worried old lady, who was always asking where her coat and purse were. It would be "Where's my coat?" then "Where's my purse?"

"So we went on and on, the coat, the purse, the coat, the purse... until the time came to go into the theatre.

"Where's my coat?" she said, again. I told her I'd carry it, but she just said "I must have my coat".



“We walked into the auditorium, and I was wondering what on earth was going to happen... then I noticed she was dragging the coat along behind her.

“Come along, Fido!” she said, and everyone roared with laughter. She came to life and kept doing these little bits of business.

“Throughout the film, I heard the sound of her laughter. Afterwards, I asked her what she thought of it.

“Oh, it was very good,” replied Beatrice Lillie, “and *she’s* so funny. And you know, she does things just like me!”

* * *

Day 2 dawned with the **LAME BRAINS & LUNATICS** programme, showcasing the more manic, knockabout end of the silent comedy spectrum. How better to wake up on a sleepy Sunday morning than with some fast-paced slapstick comedies? This was a programme curated by American expert Steve Massa (whose authoritative book the programme was named after). Thanks to the technical wizardry of David Glass, we were able to see filmed introductions by Mr Massa to each of the five shorts, full of details, and entertainingly presented. These were rare films; as far as we know, at least two or three of them are the only known copies. We had selected several of them after seeing them in the BFI. Watching them on a Steenbeck in a small, cold basement room isn’t often the best way to appreciate how good a comedy is, but in beautiful prints on the big screen and with expert musical accompaniment by John Sweeney, the films sprung to life.

First up was a rare Arbuckle short from the BFI, **LOVERS’ LUCK**. Typically rural knockabout from ‘The Prince of Whales’, this features Arbuckle at his usual violent odds with Al St John for the hand of Minta Durfee (Arbuckle’s real life wife). With extra support from Frank Hayes as a parson and Phyllis Allen as a harridan, this was an unsophisticated short, but enormous fun. There was an especially neat conclusion, as Parson Hayes finds himself on the wrong side of a jealous husband, and hides in a wardrobe; hiding from Minta’s parents, so does Arbuckle. Minta is also locked in there by her parents until she agrees to marry Al, but she and Roscoe are able to be married by the parson inside the wardrobe.

Also from the teens was **HIS BUSY DAY**. This starred Toto the clown, an eccentric character whose success in circuses did not translate to films. Hal Roach found this out to his cost; Toto hated film making, especially the whirl of the camera, and refused to be dunked in water. Eventually, he broke his contract to return to the circus.

On-screen, he is an odd creature to be sure; his slithery, amphibious movements inside oversized clothes and a bucket-shaped hat give him the appearance of a strange, giant newt. Saucer-shaped eyes and a slow blink anticipate a little of Langdon, but nothing else indicates any real kind of character. **HIS BUSY DAY**, as its title suggests, was a fairly generic little trifle, with parks, pretty girls, pies and a lack of continuity: Toto steals a pie, dresses as a woman to escape a policeman, gets a job as a newsreel cameraman for a bit, then gives it up after he angers the newsreel proprietor (Bud Jamison). Even allowing for some missing footage, this was clearly a fairly run-of-the-mill effort. Toto did have good timing however, as the highlight of the film showed: a scene where he hides from Bud Jamison behind a pivoting wooden sign, at one point attaching himself to it in the splits position! Ultimately, Toto’s biggest contribution to film comedy was in *leaving* films, thus opening the door for Roach to hire a young Stan Laurel as his replacement. The short was shown in a beautiful, albeit incomplete, print from the BFI; found under the title **TOTO CAMERAMAN**, we were able to identify the real title after viewing it last year. Someone may correct me, but I believe this is the only print around?

Next up was another European, Marcel Perez, the man of a thousand names: Robinet, Marcel Fabre, Tweedledum, Tweede-Dan and Tweedy were some of his pseudonyms over the years. Billed under the latter moniker in **SWEET DADDY** (1921), Perez was already a veteran of the screen; his European films dated back to 1906! Like Max Linder, he had come to the U.S. during WW1, making several series of independent comedies and also working as a director. **SWEET DADDY** was a simple tale of a henpecked husband who seizes his hour of freedom when sent out for the groceries, but it was full of some great gags, and snappily directed by Perez. Particularly there was a charming sequence in which he

gazes at a girl on a poster, who seems to come to life and flirt with

him. Perez’ career was sadly coming to an end; cancer cost him a leg in 1923, and while he continued as a director, the illness returned and took his life in 1928. Nevertheless, he was obviously a real talent, and it’s been mainly due to the efforts of Steve Massa and Ben Model that we’re able to see his films again: they’ve put together two vol-



A selection of ‘Lame Brains and Lunatics’: Toto, Marcel Perez, Al St John & Lige Conley.

umes of his surviving shorts on DVD.

The final two films were both Mermaid comedies, produced by Jack White, described by Steve as “silent comedy’s boy wonder!”. A fully-fledged producer by the age of 21, White specialised in fast and furious comedies full of stunts and sight gags. A typical example was DANGER! (1922), a magnificently elaborate gag fest starring Lige Conley. It’s hard to believe quite how much technical effort went into staging a little two-reeler like this, which contained chases, undercranked gags, wild stunts and animated trick gags, such as Conley’s eyebrows seeming to twirl around his forehead in surprise. No time to worry about characters in a film like this, but when it’s done so well, who cares? Even the borrowings were pulled off nicely, as in Conley appropriates Chaplin’s gag from THE ADVENTURER, where he utilises a lampshade as a disguise. Here, an extra twist was added, as Conley’s ‘lamp’ is next to the bed of the villain. The villain decides he wants to read, pulling Conley’s pyjama cord as the lightswitch, forcing him to continuously light matches to keep up the charade until he burns his fingers and the jig is up.

Similarly action packed was Al St John’s SKYBOUND (1926). Very much in the mould of the Roscoe Arbuckle shorts, this was full of slapstick grocery store gags, but Al’s performance was much more toned-down and almost Keatonesque. The second half had a rather arbitrary plane chase that was well filmed with trick shots, and had a great final gag as Al’s parachute blows him away down a very long, dusty road. This film came with an additional introduction from St John expert Annichen Skjaren in Norway, who shared entertaining tales about the film, and added that St John was in real life a wing walker capable of doing aerial stunts.

The more manic films like those that made up this programme are often shunned as being unsophisticated. Of course, they aren’t enduring classics, but you have to marvel at the sheer gusto and ingenuity that went into making them, and they can often be very funny indeed, especially when contextualised by experts such as Steve Massa and Annichen Skjaren. Many thanks to them for sharing their time with us, and to David Glass for coordinating the programme.

Next up was SEVEN YEARS BAD LUCK, perhaps Max Linder’s best feature. It’s now famous for having one of the best versions of *that* broken mirror routine, some 12 years before the Marx Brothers’ DUCK SOUP, but the whole film is most entertaining. David Robinson’s introduction paid a heartfelt tribute to Max’s daughter Maud Linder, who passed away last year. It was her zealous promotion of her father’s talents that has ensured he is still remembered today, almost 100 years after his death.



There was an extra Linder-shaped bonus in the form of LES EFFETS DE PILULES or LOVE AND GOOD FELLOWSHIP PILLS. One of his French shorts, this was in a new restoration by Bob Geoghegan of the Archive Film Agency. Max is down in the dumps, and is prescribed the eponymous pills; they raise his spirits enormously. His wife also takes some, with even more vivid results: she’s soon launching herself at every man she meets in the street! Max is in hot pursuit, challenging each man to a duel. In the missing final sequence, all the men show up for the showdown but Max shares the pills around and all is forgotten. A great fun little short that shows how much more sophisticated Max was than his contemporaries.

Sophisticated was certainly not a word that applied to WE’RE IN THE NAVY NOW (1926). A vehicle for the team of gruff Wallace Beery and shrimp Raymond Hatton, this was a standard service comedy, basically a series of all-too-familiar blackout gags involving hammocks, scrubbing floors, peeling potatoes, etc etc. Still, perhaps audiences hadn’t seen it all a million times before in 1926. The Beery-Hatton team were very popular, making four such service pictures that also took them through the army, air force and fire service. In fact, the commercial success of their teaming possibly inspired the Laurel & Hardy pairing. Certainly, the opening scenes in which boxer Beery is knocked cold and wakes up in the ring hours later were influential on the opening scenes of L & H’s BATTLE OF THE CENTURY. L & H, of course, made the situation much funnier by making the *smaller* member of the team the boxer, and added in Hardy’s exasperated camera looks to make something timeless. There was one superb gag in the original sequence though: Beery has landed on a chair when he is knocked out; when he finally comes round hours later, we see that he has been sat on a very crumpled Billy Bletcher the entire time!

Kevin Brownlow’s introduction admitted the failings of the film, and he recalled that he had offered director Eddie Sutherland the chance to view the film in later years. Sutherland repeatedly declined... ‘nuff said!

Next up was the return of Monty Banks, in a talkie! SO YOU WON’T TALK (1935) is a rare sound starring vehicle for Banks, and is a wonderfully creative idea for a silent comedian: he spends most of the film unable to speak. This give him lots of opportunity for communicating in pantomime and sight gags. The reason is another one of those improbable inheritance plots –if he can go thirty days



without talking, he will inherit a fortune—but the story is well told. A strong cast, including wonderfully dopey Claude Dampier, and snappy direction from William Beaudine, helped get lots of laughs from this film. If only more silent clowns had got to make a talkie like this.

From talkies full of silence to silent filled with noise... it was time for some **NOISY SILENTS!** Hosted by masterful silent accompanist Neil Brand, this programme presented some of the silent shorts whose gags relied on noise. As well as Neil's accompaniment, there was an orchestra of cacophony providing live sound effects ranging from kazoos and trumpets to ukuleles, squeakers, drums, car horns, pots and pans! A special shout out must also go to cellist Emily, who stepped in at the last moment and did a fantastic job. Her cello was an integral sound for Harry Langdon's wonderful **FIDDLESTICKS**, a tale of Harry's attempts to make a living at busking. Lupino Lane's **SUMMER SAPS**, a tale of a holiday from hell in a noisy boarding house, and Our Gang's **NOISY NOISES** offered a similar range of noisy frustration gags.

We finished off in fine style with some audience participation for Laurel & Hardy's **YOU'RE DARN TOOTIN'**, in which the pants-ripping finale was replicated through the ripping of newspapers placed under each chair in the auditorium. This programme was great fun, and a real variation on the usual silent film accompaniment. No kazoos were hurt during the screening of these films.

And just like that, it was time for the final show of the weekend. It was a fine finish, with a very special guest. Roy Hudd, one of the last links to the music hall and variety tradition, presented his favourite visual comedy clips, in conversation with Glenn Mitchell. This was a real treat; Roy was a fantastic, funny storyteller, and had real enthusiasm and knowledge for the old comedians. Among the highlights were clips from Tati's **MON ONCLE**, Lupino Lane's **JOYLAND**, and Roy's own semi-silent film **THE MALADJUSTED BUSKER**. Finally, we concluded with a full showing of the complete **BATTLE OF THE CENTURY**. I've written about this film before, but it was as marvellous tonight as the first time I saw the 'new' footage; simply one of the iconic silent comedy scenes, now once again "as nature intended".

As the lights came up for the final time, I felt incredibly lucky and grateful: lucky that films like 'BATTLE' still exist, against the odds; luckier still that we are able to see them, especially with terrifically talented musicians and with informative introduction. Most of all, I felt lucky to be able to share all this with other likeminded people in a warm and happy atmosphere. There's a danger that watching old films in darkened rooms, sometimes alone, can become a very solitary hobby, but the chance to enjoy it as a shared experience, especially with the lovely folks at the Kennington Bioscope, is something else entirely.

Huge thanks to all the KB folk, especially to David Wyatt, who curated the event magnificently, and of course to Kevin Brownlow. Thanks too, to all the musicians and speakers. The Silent laughter events are something very special; here's to the next one! Speaking of which, put April 27th-28th in your diaries, and check www.kenningtonbioscope.com for details of tickets!



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The forgotten feature films of MONTY BANKS



We're often told how few of the silent comedians could make it out of short comedies and into feature films. Monty Banks not only made it to longer films, but stayed in them. Yet, his films never seem to be revived. Well, with one notable exception, anyway... It's time to take another look at the unfairly neglected feature comedies of this talented comedian and director...



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If Monty Banks is remembered today at all, it is chiefly for being Gracie Fields' director and husband. However, being "Mr Gracie Fields" effectively subsumed Banks' own prior identity as a successful silent comedian. On the rare occasions his silent film work is mentioned, it is generally condensed down to one scene: a stunt-filled runaway train sequence, with Monty hanging off a boxcar by a loose plank. This excerpt from *PLAY SAFE* appeared in Robert Youngson's *DAYS OF THRILLS AND LAUGHTER* and was later reissued as *CHASING CHOO-CHOO'S*. It's the only widely seen bit from all of Banks' films (even the rest of *PLAY SAFE* remains obscure), despite the fact he made many other stunt-packed comedy sequences equally worthy of revival. And so, Monty Banks speeds through collective memory, a blurred little fellow clinging to his speeding freight train. "We remember the film," wrote Walter Kerr, "yet we do not quite remember the man".

The fact that Banks is often forgotten is especially unfair, as he was one of the few comics beyond "the big three" of Chaplin, Keaton & Lloyd to graduate from two-reelers to features successfully. In fact, he spent much of the 20s making full length comedies. His initial success came by learning from the model defined by Keaton, Lloyd and their gagmen – having a solid story premise building to a climax combining sight gags, action and thrills. Although they were clearly derived from trying to replicate this model, Monty's own silent features were hardly cheap, thoughtless knockoffs. Far from it, they remain high quality, and belie the notion that none of the second-string comics could sustain a career in full-length comedies.

To put things in perspective, Banks made nine features. That's more than Langdon managed and almost as many as Keaton & Lloyd. Unlike those comedians, Banks may have lacked the special ingredient that made his films as timeless, but he was nevertheless a very capable comic. Particularly adroit at high-speed, high-risk, comic thrill sequences, he could also handle situation comedy with aplomb, and came to develop his own particular style. However, while he managed to carve more of a niche for himself in the industry than many silent clowns, it was by no means easy. Monty Banks' feature films were the culmination of years' hard graft; his story is full of setbacks, after which he continually bounced back and reinvented himself. He was, perhaps, one of the hardest working, most resilient men in all of silent comedy.



Born in 1898 in Cesena, Italy as Mario Bianchi, he spoke virtually no English on arriving in the states in 1914. Originally hoping to be a dancer, instead Bianchi found himself drawn to comedy films. He later claimed that his linguistic limitations got him his break: inability to understand the director resulted in him ad-libbing his own funny business, which turned out to be funnier than the planned gags.

From these inauspicious beginnings, he spent the late teens as one of the legions of shuffling, toothbrush-moustached Chaplin derivatives employed in Hollywood. Flitting between independent companies (one possibly apocryphal story tells of him filming comedies in the daytime, and laying pavements as a sideline after filming was done) he gradually carved a niche for himself. Among his more notable appearances are a WW1 spoof, *THE GEEZER OF BERLIN*, as well as in some of Roscoe Arbuckle's Comique shorts. Buster Keaton's war service left a vacancy for a supporting comic in the series, and young Mario filled it in films like *LOVE* (1918) and *A DESERT HERO* (1919). After Buster's return, he still appeared briefly in 'THE GARAGE' as the chap being chased by Luke the dog. As well as the experience, the work with Arbuckle had a more lasting legacy: his screen name. It was Roscoe who gave Bianchi his new identity, reportedly saying "you're always playing mountebanks, why don't you call yourself Monty Banks?"

Like Keaton, independent production gave him his break to starring shorts. Starting with *A RARE BIRD* (1920), he pro-

duced films for Grand-Asher. During the course of these films (documented fully in the recent book '*Monty Banks: the short comedies*') he began to reinvent his character. Shabby tramp clothes were out; dapper suits and an impeccably tailored moustache were in. Taking his cue from Lloyd rather than Chaplin, Monty now played an amiable, everyday kind of fellow. His small size and chubbiness marked him a little out of step with the romantic ideals he held, but he remained an optimist in the face of embarrassment and disaster. The title of one of his films, *KEEP SMILING*, just about sums his persona up. If his character wasn't as firmly delineated as Lloyd's or Keaton's, he was nevertheless very likeable and a proficient comedy performer.

Banks' surviving shorts like *WEDDING BELLS* and *PAY OR MOVE* reveal a fertile comic mind and are full of great gags. A typical example: Monty is a florist, who has absent-mindedly played "She loves me not" with half the flowers in his shop, leaving a giant pile of petals on the floor. *ALMOST LATE* features a terrific sequence of Monty rushing to work on his bicycle, shaving, eating breakfast and reading his newspaper all while speeding along the road. It's a wonderful milking of a gag situation, with a great pay-off: Monty has been in such a rush, he has left the coat hanger in his jacket. As he passes a lorry carrying a ladder, he is hooked on it and whisked away on his bike, to be delivered outside the shop where he works.

The series of shorts flourished, but were always somewhat



Despite his Chaplinesque appearance here, Banks modelled RACING LUCK much more closely after Lloyd's work.

on the fringes of the silent comedy scene. Distribution on the states-rights market gave them a more ephemeral quality, and established Banks as something of an outsider (an image he would struggle to shake). Moreover, it has made the films more obscure to this day; it's difficult to research many of them as the states-rights markets were barely covered in the trade press. Even exact titles of some of the films remain uncertain.

Nevertheless, the shorts were successful enough for Banks to persuade Grand-Asher to finance a feature film. Banks was clearly a savvy fellow; as well as his comic ability, he was able to promote himself effectively. The arc of his career, from minor companies to negotiating his own outfit and into features and beyond, suggests he also talked a good game (there are

several adverts in the trade papers featuring him talking himself up and promoting his latest releases). This is quite a contrast from the inarticulate young immigrant of a few years before! The development of his comic style over the years also shows that he had his finger on the pulse of what was popular in screen comedy. On the verge of making features, he had seen the success of the Keaton & Lloyd films mixing sight gags, thrills and speed with a compelling story arc. Now it was his turn.

Camera (Nov 17, 1923) reported on Banks' plans , quoting his director Herman Raymaker: *"We've got a corking story" [...]* *"Its first, middle and last names are - speed! At that, a title hasn't been chosen. We're trying to get something that will be adequate, and express the vim and dash of the story properly."*

That title turned out to be RACING LUCK. Whether it was vim-ful and dashing enough is hard to say now, as the film has not been screened in many years, although copies do exist in Belgian and Russian archives. Synopses and reviews make it clear that the film was definitely modelled after the Keaton & Lloyd It's not surprising as writers Jean Havez and Lex Neal were both Keaton & Lloyd collaborators; like other comics Banks was aware that a good chunk of the Keaton-Lloyd feature formula lay not just with the stars, but with their team of gagmen, men like Ted Wilde, Havez and Clyde Bruckman. However, he also put a lot of himself into the film, and RACING LUCK had a distinct splash of autobiography. Drawing on his experiences coming to the US, it features him as an Italian immigrant planning on being a dancer. The autobiographical element even extends to naming his character Mario Bianchi. Our hero gets confused with a racing driver, and ends up having to drive an experimental new car in a race.

If the racing car element was somewhat more fanciful, it was also a pet subject of Banks'. He had a passion for fast cars, which would lead him to many future altercations with the traffic police; the film trade papers reported charges against Banks of reckless driving and speeding at regular intervals throughout the decade!

With the finished film in hand, Banks and Grand-Asher now had to find a distributor. Banks set up camp at the Hotel Astor, taking out a series of full-page ads in the trades inviting distributors to come and see him. Eventually, he struck a deal with Associated Exhibitors to release the feature. Reviews were excellent, with one exhibitor quoted as saying *"They liked it more than SAFETY LAST here."*

This was good enough for Associated-Exhibitors, who commissioned more of the same...and got it. The follow up to RACING LUCK would be a calculated attempt to repeat a successful formula. This time, speedboats were substituted for racing cars in a similar race to the finish line. Begun under the title 'HOT WATER', the new would ironically have to be changed when Lloyd released his own film of that name; subsequently it became known as 'WATER SHY' before settling on the more generic 'KEEP SMILING'.



Cartoon publicity for 'ATTA BOY'

To help guarantee success, an extra helping hand was on the writing staff. Former sportswriter Clyde Bruckman had worked on some of Banks' shorts as a titlewriter. Since that time he had become one of the industry's gold-dust gagmen after working with Keaton. Like Havez, Bruckman had worked on all of Keaton's features (THE THREE AGES, OUR HOSPITALITY, SHERLOCK JR, THE NAVIGATOR and SEVEN CHANCES) and was perhaps his closest collaborator. Lloyd would soon purloin him for FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, but other stars like Banks also came calling at Bruckman's door, keen to get a piece of the magic. Other comedy experts on the KEEP SMILING team included co-directors Albert Austin, one of Chaplin's longest serving associates, and Sennett veteran Gil Pratt.

Like its predecessor, KEEP SMILING is extant but rarely seen. Certainly on paper, it has lots going for it. Monty plays a young man whose fear of water has led him to invent a life-saving device. After using it to save Anne Cornwall from drowning, he is given a letter of introduction to an investor, who turns out to be her father. The letter is accidentally swapped with another one introducing a captain of a new speedboat. Before he knows it, the water-shy Monty finds himself driving the boat in a river race! This brought the film to a rousing climax, with 'Moving Picture World' commenting: "The various things that happen to the boat are utterly improbable, but cleverly worked out and keep the laughs coming".

While not as well-received as its predecessor, KEEP SMILING proved popular enough with audiences to affirm Monty's success in features. Now, with car and boat chases ticked off the list, Banks and his storywriters turned their formula to trains. *The Exhibitors Herald* reported on Aug 29, 1925 that Banks had begun working on his next story, PLAY SAFE, assisted by Malcolm Stuart Boylan. Joseph Henabery was assigned to direct by November, with Charles Gerard and Virginia Lee Corbin joining the cast as villain and leading lady respectively. Henabery

is now best known for appearing as Abraham Lincoln in D.W. Griffith's 'THE BIRTH OF A NATION', but had been forging a career as a director throughout the 1920s. Corbin was a former child star, and just 15 when 'PLAY SAFE' was made. Gerard is best remembered today for his future role as Lord Plumtree in Laurel & Hardy's 'ANOTHER FINE MESS'.

The resulting film is Banks' most famous, thanks to its hugely exciting runaway train stunt sequence, which remains the only sizeable chunk of Monty Banks film that many people have seen. Much more rarely viewed is the rest of the film which builds up to the sequence.

In its complete form, PLAY SAFE is the tale of a runaway factory heiress (Corbin) who is escaping a forced marriage to her crooked trustee (Charles Gerard). Monty is one of the workers at the factory who offers her shelter when she is hiding from some thugs in a rainstorm. When Gerard finds out they are falling in love, he plans to frame Monty as the leader of a kidnapping plot, aided by henchman Bud Jamison. Virginia isn't fooled, so the villains change their plan to a real kidnap, trapping her in a box car on a runaway train. Meanwhile, Monty escapes the clutches of Jamison, and commandeers a horse and cart to give chase, with the thugs hot on his heels. Realising the wagon is full of fruit, he dispatches the villains by releasing banana peels all over the road. Just as the cart crashes into a fence, Monty makes a leap to the horse's back; falling off, he is entangled in the horse's reins and is forced to run along behind until he can free himself. Next, he gets a lift from a racing car driver, who speeds alongside the train as Monty attempts to make a grab for the box car. Of course, he ends up trapped between the two, clinging to the side of the train with his feet still in the back seat of the



Some of Banks' stunt scenes. Atop a ladder in ATTA BOY, and that train scene from PLAY SAFE

car. As another train comes speeding towards them, the car driver bails, leaving Monty clinging to the abandoned car; he manages to climb aboard just before the train passes. The villains spot him and give chase along the train's roof, but are knocked into a river by a water spout. Monty manages to duck and remain on the train, swinging down into Virginia's box car using a rope. The two attempt to climb back up on top to escape, but Monty slips and ends up hanging from the rope as the train passes above a cliff edge. His attempts to climb are further hindered by a mailbag a chicken he picks up on the way, and his fraying rope!

Things get worse as he attempts to uncouple the caboose, but manages to get on the wrong part of the train, which runs alongside the caboose on a parallel track. Monty tries to use a plank as a bridge between the two boxcars, but slips and ends up dangling over the precipice as the train speeds along. After a hair-raising sequence, he manages to climb aboard. He and Virginia are thrown safely into a pile of hay as the rest of the train crashes over the cliff edge.

Worthy to stand beside many of Lloyd and Keaton's thrill sequences, this is a rousing finale to the film with some great moving camerawork, mixed alongside use of models and doubling from stuntman Harvey Parry. While we now regard this as a classic sequence, amazingly enough, *PLAY SAFE* sat in the can for almost a year before release. The film was previewed at Hollywood's Melrose theatre and New York's Bunny Theatre in February, 1926, and then... disappeared before it could be released. The reason was not through any fault with the picture, however. Before it could be given a release, Associated Exhibitors folded and was merged into Pathé. 'PLAY SAFE' was one of the films lost in the shuffle.

For Banks, this was potentially a crisis. Fortunately, he was able to persuade Pathé to take on his contract. This actually proved to be a beneficial move, as Pathé could offer greater distribution and prominent advertising. Still smarting from their loss of Harold Lloyd to Paramount, the company directly promoted Banks as Lloyd's successor.

Accordingly, they went great guns on promoting their new star as, "Monty Banks, the grandson of laughter!" His first release was not *PLAY SAFE*, still languishing on the shelf, but a newly filmed feature. *Film Daily* reported that Banks had reached an arrangement to film on the Hal Roach lot during the studios' annual summer closedown. So, in June of 1926, Banks, his crew and director Edward H Griffith, moved in to film a reporter story, *ATTA BOY*.

Monty Milde is a lowly copyboy, who dreams of promotion to fully-fledged reporter. Tricked into believing he has been promoted, he sets out to get an interview, and becomes embroiled in the story of a millionaire's kidnapped child. Tracking the kidnapers to a nightclub, Monty disguises himself as a waiter. His cover is soon blown, but he manages to find the kidnapped child. Escaping down a ladder balanced on a car, Monty is left stranded atop the ladder when the driverless car moves off. After a wild ride through the streets, the child is rescued and Monty gains his promotion.

The closing sequence is excellent, but the funniest part of *ATTA BOY* is a much more low-key gag sequence. Monty has innocently come into possession of a bottle of bootleg liquor, and detective Fred Kelsey (who else?) is on his trail. Monty nonchalantly tries to rid himself of the bottle in an escalating series of gags where somehow, the bottle always seems to find its way back to him. The scene is testament to Banks' skill at milking an idea for as many laughs as possible.

Released on October 24, 1926 amidst a high-octane publicity campaign, *ATTA BOY* was perhaps Banks' most successful film on its original release. No doubt to keep the momentum of their new star, the already-completed *PLAY SAFE* was finally allowed release in cinemas, less than three months after its predecessor. Despite the reputation it has subsequently gained, the film was not especially well-received by the critics. Despite the skill of the gags and the thrill of the train sequence, reviews weren't overenthusiastic. One exhibitor's review was "If you want to play safe, stay away from this."

Perhaps it was this subdued response to his stunt-filled train ride, or maybe just osmosis from being at the Roach studios, but Banks' next film would mark a distinct change of pace. *HORSE SHOES* is a much more situational comedy of embarrass-



Top: a publicity shot for ATTA BOY.

Above: Banks during filming of 'HORSE SHOES', with writer Charles Horan (middle) and supervising producer Arthur MacArthur. They're sat in front of the Hal Roach Studios, which the Banks company hired for the filming.



Above: Monty and Jean Arthur are mistaken for a married couple in HORSE SHOES.

WHO'S THAT LADY?



Two of Monty's features, HORSE SHOES & FLYING LUCK, are noted today for the presence of Jean Arthur as the leading lady. Miss Arthur was later to become an A-list star in films like MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON, but she had spent the 20s toiling in poverty row Westerns and the odd comedy. She can be seen in a bit part in Keaton's SEVEN CHANCES, but her roles with Monty are her largest parts in comedies. He is said to have picked her personally, and she earned \$700 for each picture. As the talkies came in, Monty's star waned in the US, but Jean's was on the rise. After stealing THE SATURDAY NIGHT KID from under Clara Bow's nose, she was headed for the stardom we know today.



ment than his previous efforts, akin to the films Charley Chase was making. In fact, Chase would years later condense the central situation into one of his own two-reelers, the masterful IT HAPPENED ONE DAY (1934).

Clyde Bruckman was back on the unit, this time in the director's chair and fresh from co-directing Keaton's THE GENERAL. Like that film and PLAY SAFE, trains would play a large role in the new effort, albeit less dramatically. HORSE SHOES introduces us to Monty, a flustered junior lawyer with a superstition for good-luck horseshoes. He has two ambitions: to make a success of being a lawyer, and to marry the boss's daughter (a young Jean Arthur). Coincidentally, he bumps into her on the street after he has just been knocked over by a car. Their meeting is a lovely little scene, with Jean standing in front of an angel statue; from Monty's viewpoint, the wings seem to belong to her. She helps him up and finds they are bound for the station to catch the same train. Bumping into a newly married couple on his way there, Monty accidentally picks up a 'just married' sign, which attaches itself to his back. The passengers on the train assume that Monty and Jean are married, and a comedy of errors results. At night time, Monty tries to get to his bunk, but finds it is above Jean's, leading to lots of embarrassment as he tries to get to bed under the nosy gaze of the other passengers. There's a particularly fun gag as Monty spots Jean's arm protruding from her booth, seeming to wave in a "come here" motion (actually, she's applying lotion to her arm). As he approaches, the arm changes to a "go away" gesture, before beckoning him forward again, leaving him completely confused as to her intentions.

Eventually, Monty ends up helping out Jean and her father by defending them in court; the hearing descends into a free-for-all, but Monty triumphs, winning the case and marriage to Jean, this time for real!

Buster Keaton fans may recognise much of the train section of the plot; Bruckman, ever a recycler of material, lifted the sequence wholesale for Keaton's Columbia short PARDON MY BERTH MARKS in 1940, right down to gags and even camera setups. HORSE SHOES moves quickly with snappy gag sequences such as these, and Banks is well-suited to the more situational comedy. Again, reviews were mainly positive, but for all his efforts, it wasn't *quite* successful enough to be a breakthrough effort giving him the prominence he deserved. One suspects his films were simply lost in the sheer glut of great comedy product flooding the market in the mid- late 1920s. Films like HORSE



SHOES or ATTA BOY, which still stand up well today, couldn't get the credit they deserved amongst all the competition from Keaton, Lloyd et al. It's perhaps indicative of how many great comedies were being made at the time that something the quality of 'PLAY SAFE' could be denounced as 'pretty poor' by *Photoplay*.

What could Banks do to get noticed? Ever savvy, he took inspiration from the news headlines. As he looked for inspiration in the Spring of 1927, the eyes of the world were on the sky. The race to fly across the Atlantic was on, with national pride (not to mention the \$125,000 Orteig prize) at stake. Aviation caught the public imagination as never before, dominating the news and inevitably filtering through to popular entertainment.

Aeroplanes had been providing increasingly frequent thrills in films for several years by the time the aviation boom reached its peak. Aerial stunt work in movies was becoming a reliable source of income for pilots. Some, such as the French pilot Charles Nungesser, even starred in their own films. The use of aeroplanes in silent films would reach its glamorous zenith with Clara Bow's *WINGS*, filmed in early 1927 at a budget of \$2million. For Banks, aviation was a perfect subject for his next comedy. He announced that his next picture would be "a flying comedy entitled 'AN ACE IN THE HOLE'" in April 1927.

The timing couldn't have been better. As spring cleared fog over the Atlantic, the race was on for transatlantic glory, and the hopefuls were busy preparing and beginning their attempts. By the time outside contender Charles Lindbergh (nicknamed 'The Flying Fool' by a sceptical *New York Times*) completed his successful flight on 21 May, excitement was at fever pitch. Banks and his distributors at Pathé must have been rubbing their hands with glee as filming went ahead during all of this. To further capitalise on Lindbergh's fame, the film's title changed to *THE FLYING FOOL* in early June, but by the time production wrapped in the summer, it had been retitled *FLYING LUCK*. Clearly Banks hoped to hark back to his early success of *RACING LUCK* (in fact, he even used the same director, Herman C Raymaker).

FLYING LUCK presents Monty as a keen amateur pilot who idolises Lindbergh. He joins the flying corps, but soon gets on the wrong side of sergeant Kewpie Morgan, especially when the two of them vie for the hand of Jean Arthur, the colonel's daughter. Banks is predictably ill-suited to military life, but redeems himself in a match of air polo.

The aerial sequences are well-filmed, but the novelty value of aviation doesn't quite cover for the fact that the love-triangle plot and military 'fish out of water' sequences are fairly standard comedy, compared to Banks' previous efforts. *FLYING LUCK* is an enjoyable and charming little comedy, but in a year when it was up against *THE GENERAL* and *THE KID BROTHER*, couldn't help but pale in comparison. Perhaps the lack of Clyde Bruckman was partly responsible; Banks was able to entice him back for his next effort, *A PERFECT GENTLEMAN*, shot in late 1927.

Happily, this turned out to be a real return to form. Banks, Bruckman and Horan returned to the more situational style of *HORSE SHOES*, peppering it with fast-moving, original sequences of great visual gags. While it can't compete with the suspenseful climax of *PLAY SAFE*, *A PERFECT GENTLEMAN* is for my money, the funniest comedy he made. It might even be the best of the Monty Banks features.

Like *HORSE SHOES*, this film is very much in Charley Chase's white collar idiom. Monty is a bank teller engaged to the boss's daughter (Ruth Hiatt), unaware that his colleague is planning to abscond with money to South America to help fund a revolution. Things start going badly when Monty is knocked out en route to his wedding; his chauffeur Syd Crossley attempts to revive him with brandy, but Monty accidentally consumes the whole bottle. Sozzled at the wedding, Monty become mischevious and spends half of it trying to play practical jokes on the guests, ending up with him kicking



his prospective mother-in-law in the rear! The wedding cancelled, Monty discovers he has been framed for the theft. The villain persuades him to leave for South America, hiding the money in a compartment in Monty bag so that he will unwittingly smuggle it on-board the ship.

Things come to a head on the high seas as the villains try to reclaim the money, while Monty tries to convince Ruth and her father, also on board, of his innocence. A further complication is added in the form of burly purser Arthur Thalasso, who keeps finding Monty in embarrassing situations with his own wife! The combination of these three elements produce some brilliant, precision-timed comedy sequences full of original gags. Best of all is a scene where Monty finds himself with the purser's comatose, seasick wife. As he tries to support her, somehow her dress unfastens, and Monty's panicked attempts to fix it only makes things worse. He somehow manages to swap all her clothes around, leaving her in an entirely different outfit. It's a gag that plays better than it reads, but Monty's rising panic and the clever way he performs the routine make it an outstanding moment.

After a hair-raising ride on the ship's anchor, Monty manages to win the money back and reunite with Ruth. On film there were happy endings, but in real life trouble was looming for Banks. A PERFECT GENTLEMAN was as good a film as he, or anyone else, could have made, but by the time it was released in January 1928, he had already been dropped by Pathé.



His films were always popular, but he never had quite broken through to the extent Pathé hoped. Certainly, he was no match for the earnings they'd been gaining from Harold Lloyd. The company wasn't doing too well in the late 20s, and with the additional uncertainty of sound film on the horizon, Banks was let go. This was catastrophic news for him, and meant he was facing bankruptcy. Rather than face the proceedings, he fled to Britain, where an offer had come in to make a film from the newly formed British International Pictures.



The arrangement was mutually beneficial. The new company got the benefit of Banks' Hollywood experience; in return, he got "big fish in little pond" star treatment and some much-needed cash. Also moonlighting from Hollywood with him was another Lloyd collaborator. Tim Whelan had been a writer for Lloyd on WHY WORRY, GIRL SHY and THE FRESHMAN, as well as some other gentle comedies like Bea Lillie's EXIT SMILING and Mary Pickford's MY BEST GIRL.



ADAM'S APPLE picks up on the transition shown by 'A PERFECT GENTLEMAN' to a more farcical style influenced by Charley Chase; with the more refined Whelan replacing the gag-happy Bruckman, it was a more gentle comedy with less outlandish sight gags and more focus on situation. Monty and his bride (Gillian Dean) plan a wonderful honeymoon in Europe. Unfortunately for Monty, Gillian's crabby mother-in-law is tagging along too, with her pet dog, cat and parrot! Monty spends most of the sea voyage trying to get some time alone with his new wife, but only succeeds in innocently getting tangled up with jealous Colin Kenny's wife. When Gillian is kidnapped, Monty sets off to rescue her, culminating in him hanging off the side of a building in a Lloyd-type scene before the couple are reunited. Banks' performance is excellent and understated, a series of frustrations and embarrassments. In terms of comedy, 'ADAM'S APPLE' is a bit below his American releases; the gags not coming quite as fast and having a bit too much British politeness about them. It still remains an enjoyable effort, if not up to the standards of the gag-filled 'A PERFECT GENTLEMAN'.

From top: terrific Russian posters for HORSE SHOES and A PERFECT GENTLEMAN; With adversary Arthur Thalasso in A PERFECT GENTLEMAN; looking dapper offscreen.

British audiences were impressed though, and B.I.P. were delighted. Monty would stay with them as actor and director well into the next decade. Keen to use their new star, they gave him two new projects. The first was off-screen, directing Danish comedy team Pat & Patachon in 'COCKTAILS', a story of two pickpockets who accidentally get mixed up in cocaine smuggling. Then, he was back to acting in 'WEEKEND WIVES'. This is a real change of step for Banks, that goes fully down the bedroom farce route hinted at in his last couple of films. It's also more of an ensemble film in which he is just one of four main characters (on some posters he was fourth billed). Coming off the success of ADAM'S APPLE, this seems a curious demotion at first. However, the film was actually a fairly prestigious Anglo-French production, shot on location in Deauville, and a chance for the ever-adaptable Banks to try his hand at something new. One suspects that BIP also wanted to capitalise on their new star by putting him into any film they had going. Amidst the story of a rowing husband and wife who both take trips to Deauville with other partners, Banks plays a womanising playboy off to Deauville, who ends up picking up the wife. He gets a couple of good sight gags in, including accidentally being carted off on a luggage trolley, but this just isn't that kind of film, on the whole. While Banks copes very well with the different performance style (the highlight being his panic when he thinks the husband is about to murder him), WEEKEND WIVES is just too sedate, moving at a glacial pace. Variety amusingly noted, with a little exaggeration, on its US release, "Every foot of film exposed [...] seems to have gotten by the cutting room. Reels are devoted to close-ups of bacon and eggs, dresses, conversations and trunk-packing. Too bad the director didn't give as much thought to the story as the irrelevant details."

If nothing else, WEEKEND WIVES shows Banks' skill at adapting to different mediums. A more direct follow up to ADAM'S APPLE in his usual style was planned. The planned 'A COMPULSORY HUSBAND' was to be based on a play, but would feature sight gags and a big thrill finish in his best style. However, before it could be finished, BIP went over to sound, and the film was restarted as a talkie. For Monty Banks, the silent era had been quite the wild ride. From ignominious bit parts as a gauche young immigrant, he had worked incredibly hard to build and maintain his career in feature films. While he was never quite capable of achieving a place in the comedy A-list, he fashioned films that are skilfully made and with many original gags. His features deserve to be seen more widely so we can appreciate his efforts.

MONTY BANKS: THE SILENT FEATURE FILMS

RACING LUCK

Directed by Herman Raymaker, written by Jean Havez & Lex Neal. Starring Monty Banks, with Helen Ferguson, Martha Franklin, D.J Mitsoras, Francis McDonald & William Blaisdell. Produced by Monty Banks Enterprises, released by Associated Exhibitors, 11 May 1924.

KEEP SMILING

Directed by Gil Pratt & Albert Austin, written by Clyde Bruckman. Starring Monty Banks, with Anne Cornwall, Robert Edeson, Stanhope Wheatcroft, Glen Cavender & Syd Crossley. Produced by Monty Banks Enterprises, released by Associated Exhibitors, 6 September 1925

PLAY SAFE

Directed by Joseph Henabery. Written by Charles C Horan. Starring Monty Banks. With Virginia Lee Corbin, Charles Gerard, Bud Jamison. Filmed in Autumn 1925, released in January 1927. Produced by Monty Banks Enterprises, and released by Pathé. *Available on DVD (abridged as CHASING CHOO CHOOS) on Kino's SLAPSTICK ENCYCLOPEDIA.*

ATTA BOY!

Directed by Edward H Griffith. Written by Charles Horan, Alfred Goulding & Harold Christie. Starring Monty Banks, with Virginia Bradford, Ernest Wood, Fred Kelsey & Mary Carr. Produced by Monty Banks Enterprises, and released by Pathé, October 10, 1926

HORSE SHOES

Directed by Clyde Bruckman. Starring Monty Banks. With Jean Arthur, John Elliott, Ernie Barrows. Produced by Monty Banks Enterprises, and released by Pathé, May 1927.

FLYING LUCK

Directed by Herman Raymaker. Written by Charles C Horan (and, uncredited, Monty Banks). Starring Monty Banks. With Jean Arthur, Kewpie Morgan. Produced by Monty Banks Enterprises, and released by Pathé, September 1927. *Available on DVD from Undercrank productions.*

A PERFECT GENTLEMAN

Directed by Clyde Bruckman. Written by Charles Horan, with Monty Banks & Clyde Bruckman. Starring Monty Banks. With Ruth Etting, Syd Crossley, Kewpie Morgan. Produced by Monty Banks Enterprises, and released by Pathé, Jan 8, 1928. *Available on DVD (abridged) from Grapevine*

ADAM'S APPLE

Directed by Tim Whelan. Written by Rex Taylor & Tim Whelan. Starring Monty Banks, with Gillian Dean, Lena Halliday, Judy Kelly, Colin Kenny & Hal Gordon. A British International Picture. Released 3 September, 1928

WEEKEND WIVES

Directed by Harry Lachman. Written by Victor Kendall & Rex Taylor. Starring Estelle Brody, Monty Banks, Jameson Thomas and George Gee. A British International Picture. Released May 25, 1929.

The article below, originally published in *Picture-Play* in September 1927, was written during the shooting of *A PERFECT GENTLEMAN*, sums up Banks' story and appeal rather nicely (though you may wish to take some of the anecdotes with a grain of salt or three!)

Smilin' Through with Monty Banks

Since Monty came to this country from Italy, he has been battered about in slapstick comedies until it's a wonder there's anything left of him, but he has never lost his happy smile and is now at last realizing his dream of producing feature-length comedies of his own.

By Katherine Lipke

THREE times the villain knocked the short, round-faced fellow from the top of the steamer to the deck below. A canvas, stretched out for that purpose, made him bounce back twice, only to be hit again. At last, like the man who went under water three times and came up twice, he sank weakly to rest on the lower deck, bruised and beaten. Lying with his hands coyly snuggled under his head, he murmured softly, "Armand, I am dying," in an excellent *Camille* impersonation.

Just Monty Banks, enjoying his chosen work of a screen comedian—Monty, who never lets anything dampen his spirits or down his enthusiasm, who has for years been dreaming of the time when he would be able to produce his own feature-length comedies, and who has at last realized that dream.

When the Italian comedian was given Harold Lloyd's place on the Pathé roster, following the latter's affiliation with Paramount, he was at last able to branch out from two-reel comedies and develop his fun ideas into longer productions. Four pictures have been made by him since then—"Attaboy," "Play Safe," "Horse Shoes," and "A Perfect Gentleman." It was while he was making the last-named production that I sat by and watched him let himself be battered for the sake of a few laughs.

Part of the story of "A Perfect Gentleman" concerns itself with Monty aboard a steamer bound for South America. He has in his possession an oversized wallet which, unfortunately, belongs to some one else. An assortment of villains are on his trail.

Monty worked three days and three nights making that sequence. On the first afternoon, he climbed aboard the steamer by clinging to a hawser. Even the camera man turned sick as Monty swung across the restless ocean hanging to the rope. He hit the side of the boat with a thud and then proceeded to climb up the rope until he reached the deck.

That was on the first day. In the evening, the aforementioned fight was staged. Over and over, the scene



Among Monty's first feature-length comedies was "Play Safe," in which he did anything but that, as can be seen from this picture with Virginia Lee Corbin.

was taken. The comedian kept shouting to the man on the top deck to hit him harder.

"What's the matter with you up there?" he yelled. "Didn't you have any dinner? Are you weak or something? Hit me—don't pet me! This is a fight, not a love feast."

There is something indomitable about Monty. He is always laughing, but it is never careless, placid laughter. It is, instead, the working of an incessant dynamo which chooses to express its power in cheerfulness and smiling persistence rather than in dominating, obvious strength.

His real name is Mario Bianchi. The son of a musical family in Italy, he decided, after the war, to come to this country. He spoke several languages, but English was not one of them. His money wasn't too abundant. There was just enough to buy a one-way ticket to America. Unfortunately, he neglected to state which America he wanted, and was sent to South America. The trip from there to New York was spent in the ship's galley peeling thousands of potatoes.

In New York he changed his name to Monty Banks, taken from the French word *montz-bank*. He danced for a time in a small café in the Bowery. But at the first opportunity, he came West, determined to get into pictures.

A bit uncertain of his English, terrifically eager to succeed, willing to do anything asked of him, he was great game for directors and producers. In one picture, he was called upon to play something like seventeen parts. There was just one other character in the film.

For a while, he was a stunt man. In one picture, a boy and girl went buggy riding, so much in love with each other that

they didn't notice where the horse was taking them. Horse and buggy were to go over a cliff, with the occupants jumping out at the last moment. But Monty was the horse, and no one thought to tell him about the trip over the cliff!

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Smilin' Through with Monty Banks

Continued from page 74

Unable to see where he was going, and intent on being the very best horse that man can be, he kept plugging along in the direction indicated by the reins and finally walked over the cliff. When he was picked up at the bottom, most of his bones were broken. He lay in the hospital many months.

When he was making pictures for one of the Warners years ago, the company used to act before the camera in the morning and then go out and lay sidewalks outside the studio during the noon hour. No one thought anything about it—quite the proper thing for an actor to do.

But those days are all over now. To-day Monty Banks stands at the threshold of a promising future. Not only has he graduated from two-reel comedies into those of feature length but, with Arthur McArthur, he is independently making his own pictures, using his own ideas in his own way.

There is always a well-worked-out plan behind each of his pictures. In the first place, plot is paramount. Monty insists that there be a good dramatic story ready before he will start to work. He usually does the characterization of an eager, well-

meaning little fellow, anxious to please, who often overreaches himself, is often dumped in the dirt, but always comes up smiling with the fifth ace hidden in his hand.

At present writing, he is hard at work on a story dealing with navy life. After that, comes a comedy laid in Europe.

Monty is unmarried, and declares that there is no one in immediate prospect of becoming Mrs. Monty Banks. But you never can tell—Cupid works fast in filmdom.

I have known Monty Banks for well over a year and have often watched him work. And I like him. I admire that indomitable quality in him which makes him laugh in the face of trouble and enjoy best the joke which is on himself.

There is no morbid undercurrent in Monty's philosophy. Picture him not as a sad soul, cursed with the misfortune of a funny face. Not at all! His round, beaming face, his trim little mustache, his smiling eyes and mouth are not a mask to hide a secret sorrow. They are banners cheerfully proclaiming the genuinely happy nature of the comedian.



How did Monty fare in the Sound era? Find out about his starring films and work as a director in the next issue!

RETURN TO BUGGLESKELLY!

The Will Hay Appreciation Society was founded in 2009 with the aim of keeping Will Hay's legacy alive for future generations of fans. The society has held an annual 'Will Hay Day' event since 2014 and this year organisers Tom Marshall and Steve Godwin set out to mark 80 years since Hay's most well known film 'Oh, Mr. Porter!' went on general release, credited by The Times as being "a comic masterpiece of British cinema.

After months of fundraising, the society's crowd-funded 'Buggleskelly' railway bench was unveiled on Sunday 14th October by famed railway enthusiast Pete Waterman OBE, at the film's location in Cliddesden, Hampshire. The bench cost £2000 and was funded entirely by donations. Other special guests included descendants of the film's stars, including the granddaughters of Moore Marriott and Will Hay, and Graham Moffatt's three children.

You can find out more about the Will Hay Appreciation Society and donate to the appeal at www.buggleskelly.co.uk. Spare

funds are being used to restore Will Hay's grave.

To join the society (it's free!), find them on Facebook at facebook.com/WillHayComicActor. It's fantastic to see them doing such a good job of keeping Will's memory alive!

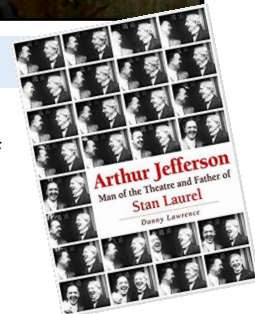


What became of the Jeffersons?



With a new book shedding light on Stan Laurel's family, we focus on his brother Ted...

In 1957, Stan Laurel recounted his family history to Art B. Friedman. His sole comment on his three siblings was that, "I had two brothers, and a sister. Both the brothers are gone." This brief summary long served as the bulk of our information about Stan's brothers Gordon and Teddy. It was known that Stan took Teddy with him to America at some point, giving him work as a chauffeur. He'd also been spotted playing support to Stan in at least one of his solo films. Also known was Teddy's tragic death in 1933, bizarrely enough in a dentist's chair.



Gordon's life seemed to be even more anonymous, following in his father's footsteps as a theatre manager. Like Teddy, he also died relatively young, in 1938. Recently though, several discoveries have been made about both brothers, and some of the wonderful online archives have made more possible. A couple of years ago, I stumbled across some fascinating stories about Gordon's later life. As his career as a theatre manager crumbled, he sadly turned to a life of fraud, and was imprisoned in 1930. I toyed with turning the discovery into an article, but I was beaten to it by author Danny Lawrence. He's done *far* better than I would have done, and has written a terrific full-length biography of Stan's father, A.J. Jefferson, which also covers in magnificent detail the fortunes of the entire Jefferson family. As a social historian, Mr Lawrence does an excellent job of putting Stan's childhood into context of the Victorian & Edwardian times when he grew up. In doing so he not only fills a gap in the Stan Laurel story but also gives a greater understanding to how and why his personality developed the way it did. The book is also a fascinating parable of changing times and how a locally famous old theatre trooper like A.J. could feel the business moving on without him as his son became a success in the brave new world of pictures.

As well as Stan's childhood and his relationship with his family, the sad stories of Gordon & Teddy are also covered in the book. However, while the fortunes and misfortunes of Stan, A.J. and Gordon left a trail of newspaper clippings, Teddy's life left far fewer traces before his unfortunate end. His time in the States is quite fascinating to me; what did he get up to all that time? He was there for 14 years after all, and after Stan was famous he was living on the fringes of Hollywood royalty. Recently, film fans have started spotting him in previously unnoticed parts, and discoveries keep continuing. Here's a bit more on what we know of Teddy, including what I believe are some new little discoveries.

Certainly, he set out to follow in his big brother Stan's footsteps. He, too, spent his adolescence on the stage: by March 1912, *The Stage* reports him in the cast of 'The Arcadians' at the Falkirk Grand, a short distance away from his home in Glasgow. He spent the rest of the decade in touring shows and on July 22nd 1920, *The Stage* included the following proud, and slightly verbose, notice from A.J.:

"EDWARD 'TEDDY' JEFFERSON (Son o' Arthur, 'o' that ilk")

En route to New York to join his brother Stanley, now playing the Orpheum Circuit, on the termination of which engagement he has signed for a lengthy period to produce and star in Pictures, Los Angeles.

A.J. takes this opportunity of expressing his deeply appreciative thanks to W.L. Dobell, Esq and Miss Madge Merryweather for the splendid training of "Teddy", a twelve months' continuous engagement, and their kindly interested (sic) in his advancement, which will prove the master key to whatever position he may eventually prove worthy of.

VIVE LA COMEDIE ANGLAISE!"

Was Teddy's travel at Stan's suggestion? At this point, he had made a deal to star in films produced by G.M. Anderson, and his future seemed rosy. However, when Ted arrived in the U.S., Stan was still fulfilling Vaudeville commitments, and he would have had to fend for himself. He did so by finding picture work of his own: recently, he has been spotted in the Lloyd Hamilton comedy APRIL FOOL, filmed in December 1920. This is very probably his first appearance, made before he ever appeared with Stan. (As a sidenote, the film was directed by Stan's future Roach colleague Charley Chase, meaning Ted probably met him quite a while before Stan).

What is especially interesting is this clipping from *Camera!*, dated December 25, 1920.:

Ted Laurel, a son of M. A. Laurel, manager-director of the Metropole Theatre in Glasgow, Scotland, has been engaged by Loyd "Ham" Hamilton to play a character part in his latest comedy, "April Fool," now in the course of production.



L-R: Ted with Stan in *THE LUCKY DOG*; in *THE EGG*; with Lloyd Hamilton in *APRIL FOOL*. Below: on location for Monty Banks' *SQUIRREL FOOD* (Ted at the back)

It's the first time I've seen any reference to Ted billing himself as "Ted Laurel". Presumably it was to capitalise on his relationship to Stan, even though Stan himself had only been using it a couple of years at this point and was hardly well-known. The only other reference to 'Ted Laurel' appears in a clipping from *Camera!* the following week, stating that he would be "joining the cast of a film starring his brother Stanley."

That film was *THE LUCKY DOG*, filmed in January 1921. Teddy plays a butler in the film, and his resemblance to Stan is striking: the same long chin, nose and slightly bent ears. He was, however, somewhat taller than Stan. *THE LUCKY DOG* turned out not to be quite the golden dawn that the Jefferson/Laurels hoped for, however. Andersen initially struggled to find a buyer for the series, leaving the brothers in need of other ways to pay their bills. Ironically, experienced film actor turned to Stan returned to vaudeville, while it was Ted who found work in front of the camera, with Monty Banks' comedy company. Eagle-eyed fans have spotted him in a production still from *SQUIRREL FOOD*, and after just viewing another of the Banks shorts, *FRESH AIR*, at the BFI, I can confirm that Ted appears in it as a butler. These shorts are quite scarce, but it's probable that Ted appears in at least another couple, made before he returned to Stan's films.



Stan resumed production for G.M. Andersen in late 1921, and Ted is confirmed in *THE WEAK-END PARTY*, *THE EGG* and *MIXED NUTS*. In the first two, he again played a butler, which was proving to be his standard role. Hereafter, he seems to vanish from films. Perhaps his heart wasn't really in it (or he was tired of always being a butler..) but what did he do during the mid-20s? We know that Stan later gave him work as his chauffeur, but it was some years before he was successful enough to have a driver. Perhaps Ted found gagman work, or appeared as an extra. One sighting,, in the Laurel-directed *STARVATION BLUES*, is definitely *not* Ted, in my opinion. But I wouldn't be at all surprised if he turns up in the background of some Hal Roach films, somewhere. Sadly, Edward Everett Jefferson will probably always be a bit of an enigma, mainly noted for his untimely end. If only he'd lived long enough to tell us some stories about young Stan...

THE SAD TALE OF GORDON JEFFERSON

Gordon was Stan's eldest brother, and followed his father into the theatre management business. He was initially successful, but had to give up his theatres to work in munitions during WW1. Like many others whose lives were shaken up by the hostilities, he never could regain his footing. Succumbing to debts and the bottle, he turned to petty crime and became the black sheep of the family. After a series of frauds in Lancashire, he was sent to prison in 1930 (see clipping at right).



Is it just coincidence that Stan legally changed his name from Jefferson to Laurel shortly afterwards? Could it be possible that he wanted to distance himself from any potential scandal? Maybe it's too far-fetched to call it a parallel, but there's certainly a dramatic irony in Stan and Ollie's burning the memory of their troublesome twins in *OUR RELATIONS*. "Everyone has a black sheep in their closet," indeed... Sadly, there would be no turnaround for Gordon. He died penniless in a Salvation Army Hospital in Manchester in 1938.

Writers and biographers love to play on the drama of Stan's marriages, but the trials of his immediate family must have given him as much pain. To lose two brothers, not to mention his own baby son, in the space of eight years, can only have been crushing. The fact that he was able to make people laugh and create brilliant comedy during these years (Laurel & Hardy's peak years, at that!) speaks volumes about his talent and personality.

For the full story of Stan's brothers, his sister Olga and his parents, Danny Lawrence's book is an essential read. *Arthur Jefferson: Man of the theatre & father of Stan Laurel*, is published by Brewin books and retails at £16.95.

MAN WHO WENT WRONG

Former Glasgow Theatre Manager's Frauds

A HARD WORKER

Special to "People's Journal."

Without any apparent cause, George Gordon Jefferson (45), son of an actor and theatre proprietor, embarked on a series of petty frauds, resulting in his being charged at Preston Sessions with obtaining 5s by false pretences at St Helena. Jefferson pleaded guilty, and asked that 77 other charges of a similar nature committed in various towns in the last four years, and involving sums amounting to £78 8s 9d should be taken into consideration.

The method adopted by Jefferson to obtain money was to pretend that he was authorised to canvas for advertisements, and to receive payment for them.

It was stated by Detective-Sergeant Maddocks that Jefferson was the son of a well-known proprietor of a circuit of theatres in the Tyneside area. He had been manager of a London west-end theatre, and later was in charge of the Coliseum Theatre, Glasgow. When war broke out he had to resign from this position to work at munitions.

He afterwards became a traveller, but he was discharged for defalcations, although not prosecuted. At Bishop Auckland, in 1923, he was sentenced to four months' hard labour for false pretences.



THE LIFE & LIVER OF ARTHUR HOUSMAN



Of the many successful supporting actors in classic films, the ones we best remember are those who found a niche or speciality. Arthur Housman found his place as the perennial souse, propped up against the bar room table, his lugubrious face sagging like a hammock left out in the rain as he tried to focus on the goings on around him. Of course, there were many people playing drunks in films, but Housman took a different approach that set him apart from most. He didn't try to act *like* a drunk; he acted like someone who'd had a few too many, but was still trying to appear sober and dignified. This small but significant difference made his character a lot more a human, and also a lot funnier.

His film appearances with Laurel & Hardy – most notably in 'SCRAM!' and 'OUR RELATIONS' – are what secured him a place as a beloved character actor, but look a bit deeper into 1930s comedy and you see him popping up everywhere, in other films at the Hal Roach studios, and further afield with stars such as Harold Lloyd and The Marx Brothers.

Of course, like most supporting actors, the 'type' with which he came synonymous was just one part of a long and storied career. Born on October 10th 1890, Arthur Housman was born and raised in the Harlem area of New York City. Growing up, he was far from a keen student, later remembering, *"When my mother wanted me to go to college, I went out and found a position, so I could get out of more education"*. This was a temporary fix, and he soon drifted to the stage; he later claimed to have found his way to show business "via the stars", being persuaded after reading a horoscope stating that anyone with his birthday was destined to be a great actor. *"I foolishly believed the stars,"* said Housman, *"and here I am"*.

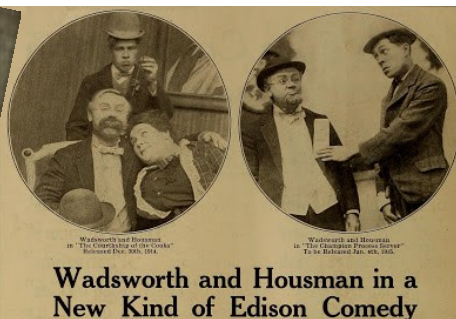
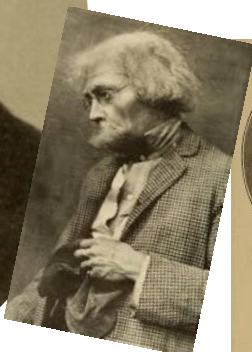
Living in New York, there were plenty of theatres to find his way into. During the late 1900s, he played in musical comedy, as well as half of a vaudeville pantomime double act. By 1912 he had found his way to film work with the Edison company, where he found parts as a juvenile comic. He can be seen in surviving entries like MR TOOT'S TOOTH, and it's a shock to see him so young and fresh-faced, without his later moustache, or the air of crumpled dignity that would become his hallmark. He was fond of experimenting with make-up too, as highlighted in a *Motography* portrait. With these skills, he appeared in a variety of roles, including a tough Irish heavy in 'HOW A HORSESHOE UPSET A HAPPY FAMILY'.

He even made some sound films at Edison! It's surprising to think that, of all the silent clowns, Housman was perhaps the first to make a sound film, well before any of his contemporaries. The Edison sound novelty films featured a live recording, and are both spectacularly awkward and immensely fascinating. Two surviving examples, both from 1911, feature Housman. JACK'S JOKE is a crosstalk act, while THE EDISON MINSTRELS does what it says on the tin: the Edison cast, in costume, deliver minstrel jokes and sing. Housman is the master of ceremony, looking thoroughly bored by the whole situation. The short item wraps up with the ensemble singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. Amusingly, a print of this made for the UK market (recently screened at the British Silent Film Festival) has this last item overdubbed with 'God Save The King', with fantastically asynchronous results!

In a 1914 interview with *Motion Picture Magazine*, Housman described his preference of film work over stage:

"I like it much better than stage work, for it is, in a way, easier. There's no night work and it's more interesting [...] On the stage you play the same part for a whole season, and sometimes more, when in the movies you have a new part handed you every week, and sometimes two."

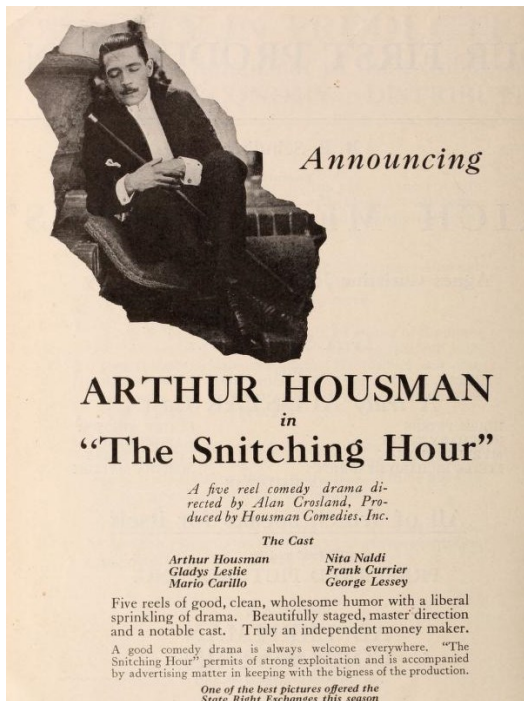
Another interviewer, from the film periodical *Motography* in 1915, found Housman *"one of the quietest of the Edison players, and it is as difficult getting him to talk about himself as it is to open the proverbial oyster with a pearl cargo"*. They also noted that he was *"joked by his fellow Edison players for his modesty and the funereal seriousness of his face"*.



Despite his deadpan nature, Housman's enthusiasm and versatility

Early portraits of Arthur Housman, L-R: A formal portrait; showing off his makeup skills, and with William Wadsworth as 'Waddy & Artie'

Wadsworth and Housman in 'The Champagne Princess' (1911)
Wadsworth and Housman in 'The Champagne Princess' (1911)



helped him do well at Edison. He rose from small parts to starring in a series of films about 'Joey' a rustic 'boob' character, and later was co-starred with burly comic William Wadsworth as 'Artie and Waddy' in a series of films, including 'IN HIGH LIFE', 'A CANINE RIVAL' and 'ON THE LAZY LINE'

By 1916, Housman was freelancing and beginning to appear in supporting roles in features. In the early 1920s, he also had another crack at appearing as a starring comic. 'THE SNITCHING HOUR' was billed as the first of the 'Housman Comedies', a series of independent features. No copy of 'THE SNITCHING HOUR' appears to exist, but stills and advertisements show Housman in a very recognisable guise as the top-hatted playboy who has had a few too many. Is this the first instance of him portraying what became his future bread-and-butter work? The second of the Housman comedies, 'MAN WANTED', is held by the BFI, albeit in a version titled 'MALE WANTED'.

'MAN WANTED' sees Housman playing a character somewhere between Max Linder and Raymond Griffith; he's a suave silk-hatted playboy who is cut off from his inheritance and dumped by his fiancée. Forced to go into the real world to seek a job, he answers the eponymous advert at a girls' college, where he is constantly on the run from the homely (and superannuated!) students.

A portent of roles to come: a soused Housman in his first starring feature.

Visiting a carnival that rolls into town, he becomes hypnotised into believing he is The King of Sheba, setting up some funny scenes as he struts around with a blanket as makeshift cape, commanding one and all to bow before him. Returning to the girls' college, he sets about making it his own personal harem! When he finally comes to, he extricates himself from the clutches of his new devotees, and ultimately redeems himself by rescuing his kidnapped fiancée.

The company ran into legal difficulties shortly after the release (they were also trying to re-release some Chaplin shorts), and Housman returned to freelance supporting parts. One of his most high-profile roles in the mid-20s was in Gloria Swanson's MANHANDLED. He would appear opposite many other notable stars, including with Clara Bow in 'ROUGH HOUSE ROSIE', in which he portrayed a hard-boiled fight manager, with W.C Fields in 'TWO FLAMING YOUTHS' and in Roland West's 'THE BAT'.

These feature films were interspersed with some starring shorts for Fox, a couple of which circulate today. THE NON-STOP BRIDE is a mildly amusing story of Housman's trials and tribulations with his car while on his honeymoon. Others in the series included EASY PAYMENTS and JUST A HUSBAND.

With his years on stage and experience in character parts (not to mention the fact that he'd already made sound films!) the end of the silent era presented no worries for Housman. He continued in a variety of roles, including an unusual role as a murderous gangster in OFFICER O'BRIEN (1930).

Other notable early sound films include two shorts co-starred with Edgar Kennedy. HELP: MAN WANTED features the pair working as a pair of comedy burglars, Housman playing ersatz-Laurel to Kennedy's long suffering Hardy type role; it's a bit of a waste of both their talents. Much better is NEXT DOOR NEIGHBORS, a prototype for Kennedy's future 'Average Man' film series. Edgar is trying to write a song on his piano, but neighbour Housman has a terrible hangover and just wants peace and quiet. The film ends up in an escalating tit-for-tat sequence straight out of the Hal Roach studios.

Speaking of Hal Roach, Housman made his first appearance there soon after, in Laurel and Hardy's 'SCRAM!' (1932). In many ways this is his key-note role, as the top-hatted souse, hapless but with a kind heart, who invites vagrants Stan & Babe to stay with him. Unfortunately, in his drunken state, he leads them to the wrong house. In fact, it's the house of the judge who has just ordered them to leave town...

One of the team's most underrated shorts, 'SCRAM!' showcases Housman's skills beautifully, as well as the wonderful rapport he has with the team. He fits in perfectly to their scenes of inept house-breaking, wandering in and out of doors, falling down and falling asleep at all the wrong moments.

In a 1957 letter to a fan, Laurel recalled, "Arthur was really a character, frankly I never saw him sober, he could'nt [sic] help being good in those parts he played, many times we would have to hold him up in a scene so he would'nt [sic] fall down! Funny, but a bit pitiful at times. Strange as it may seem, years ago before this, he was quite handsome & used to play romantic leads."

He would go on to be semi-regular with L & H, appearing most prominently in 'THE FIXER UPPERS' and 'OUR RELATIONS'. other



Roach series used him too, the 1934-1935 season being especially busy for him. With Charley Chase he appeared in 'SOMETHING SIMPLE' as a drunken hotel guest prone to falling out of his window. In 'THE CHASES OF PIMPLE STREET' we catch a glimpse of him playing a sober character (initially, at least!) as an out-of-town business client Charley is trying to set up with his obnoxious sister-in-law. He also had some prominent roles with Thelma Todd and Patsy Kelly, in 'DONE IN OIL' and 'TREASURE BLUES'. The latter is an especially good role for him, as a diver helping the girls find their uncle's treasure. Best of all, though, was his role in 'BABES IN THE GOODS'. Thelma and Patsy are demonstrating appliances in a shop window front, under strict orders to continue doing so as long as they have an audience

These Hal Roach appearances were his best opportunities for big roles. He still found work at lots of other studios, in shorts and features (including the Three Stooges' PUNCH DRUNKS), but by the mid-1930s, he had become so synonymous with the image of a drunk that most of his appearances were brief, often silent, gag appearances calling for a quick drunk reaction shot. In Harold Lloyd's 'MOVIE CRAZY' (1932), he is a restaurant customer baffled by the rabbit Harold has dropped on his plate; in The Marx Brothers' GO WEST (1940), he is a deadpan foil for Groucho's saloon bar one-liners. One more appearance with Laurel and Hardy, in 'THE FLYING DEUCES', was of similar brevity. Housman's great skill at comedy drunk roles undoubtedly secured a niche that kept him in work; paradoxically, he was so instantly recognisable in this role that he only needed to appear in a brief shot to make an impact, and so probably lost out on larger roles. Immortality as a drunk came at a cost.

The real-life alcohol problems that Stan Laurel recalled were taking their toll on his health, too. Among his last roles were 'BILLY THE KID' and 'ESCORT GIRL', both in 1941. The latter is a fine example of the kind of comic impact Housman could make in a short appearance. As 'Al', he's a drunk regular at a dodgy escort joint, who wants to dance with . While a very funny bit, his drunk romantic here is a role tinged with a bit of poignancy. He looks older than his 52 years; his health was failing, and he passed away the following year, of pneumonia. His last appearance, from beyond the grave, was almost a decade later... thanks to producer Jules White's policy of reusing old footage, his appearances in the Three Stooges' short 'PUNCH DRUNKS' were recycled and placed side by side with newly shot footage to create the 'new' release,

Arthur Housman's skill in adding humanity to what could have been one-dimensional roles ensure that he is remembered fondly today, even if for only one facet of a long and varied career. Let's raise a glass to film comedy's favourite drunkard!

From top to bottom: with Clark Gable in CALL OF THE WILD (1935); one of several appearances with Edgar Kennedy, this time in GRIDIRON FLASH (1934); featured prominently on a lobby card for

SCREENING NOTES

BUYING A GUN (1929)

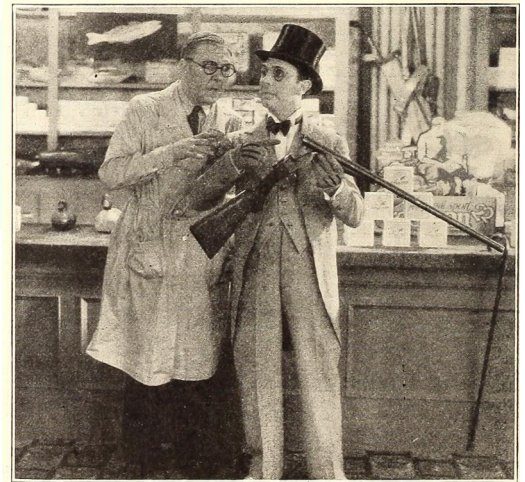
An Educational Picture. Released July 14, 1929. Directed by Henry W George (Lupino Lane).

Starring Lupino Lane, with Wallace Lupino, Charline Burt, George Burton.

Although Lupino Lane had found success as a silent comedian through his visual, acrobatic style, his extensive stage training had left him no stranger to verbal material. For this, his second sound short, he drew directly on those experiences. Always an astute historian of comedy gags and routines, Lane based 'BUYING A GUN' on an English stage sketch by G.P. Hartley, which he must have seen during his music hall days.

"It took the sound film to fully realize Lupino Lane's talents!" crowed the Educational publicity department, "and now you have them 100%!". Critics and exhibitors weren't so sure. "The action that characterised the Lupino Lane comedies is almost totally absent," lamented Film Daily's reviewer.

Indeed, 'BUYING A GUN' is an excellent example of the distressing lurch from the fluid silent medium to static sound film. Practically all the action takes place on one set, with only a couple of camera set ups. As far as plot goes, the film does what it says on the tin: Lane attempts to buy a rifle for a shooting holiday from long-suffering shopkeeper Wallace Lupino, with a lot of talking along the way. To be fair though, while my expectations were low, it's certainly not all bad. Although the physical business is certainly much more limited than we're used to from Lane, he still manages to slip in some choice bits, including a priceless attempt to enter through a revolving door and (of course!) his standing-up-from-the-splits bit. Best of all is his inept handling of the guns; a fine piece of physical prop comedy made great by Wallace's panicked attempts to control him! Of course, the rifles always end up pointing towards him, no matter where he turns. Inevitably, this leads to the payoff, as a blast from one of the rifles destroys the entire shop.



Top: Lane with brother Wallace in 'BUYING A GUN'. The film is a reversion to the upper class character Lane played in his early Hollywood years (above).

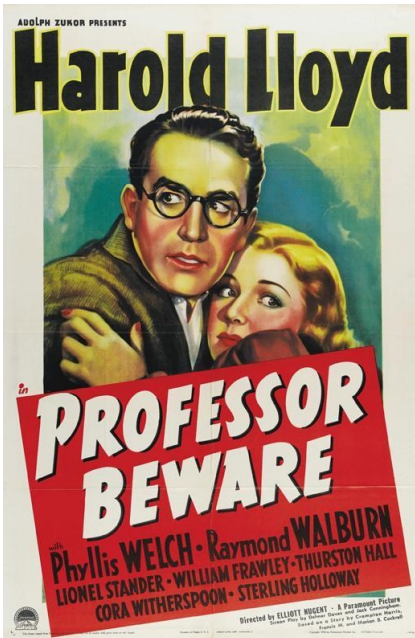
The principal asset saving the film from mediocrity is the always-excellent chemistry between Lane and Wallace. Their split-second timing is as meticulous as ever, and they are able to add zest to scenes that would otherwise be tedious with their facial expressions, reactions and little bits of business. Wallace has always been in the shadow of his brother, but it's fair to say that he was the secret weapon in the Lupino Lane comedies. Often, the double-handed nature of their acts is such that really, we should consider them a comedy team.

Both
Barre's
Loaded
With
Merriment



Lane's character here is an unexpected return to the consciously English persona of his early Educational films like 'FOOLS' LUCK'. In fact, he's in full-on Bertie Wooster mode, speaking with an affected fruity accent and maintaining an enjoyably vacuous goofiness throughout. A running joke is his punctuating the dialogue by raising his hat and saying "It's been a nice day" to shop assistant Charline Burton for no reason in particular (Miss Burton herself seems to be there for no reason in particular except, presumably, to add some glamour!). *Motion Picture News'* comment that "the humour may be too English for American audiences" was probably accurate; Lane never again played quite such a hoity-toity character.

BUYING A GUN may not represent the best of Lupino Lane's films, but it certainly isn't any worse than the early sound films by many other comedians. The performances by Lane and Wallace are engaging, and enough to make one regret that Lane only made four sound shorts. A rare curio worth seeing once, at least!



PROFESSOR BEWARE (1938)

A Paramount Picture, produced by Harold Lloyd.

Starring HAROLD LLOYD, with Phyllis Welch, Raymond Walburn, Lionel Stander, William Frawley, Thurston Hall, Cora Witherspoon and Sterling Holloway.

Directed by Elliot Nugent. Screenplay by Delmer Davies, with adaptation by Jack Cunningham and Clyde Bruckman

Released June 29, 1938. 93 minutes.

Harold Lloyd's career in talkies was, on paper at least, perhaps the most successful of his contemporaries. Like his All-American home life, his sound career was neat, tidy and organised: with mechanical regularity, he turned one feature out every two years between 1930 and 1938. He managed to maintain independent production, largely on his own terms and learned lessons of sound film technique relatively quickly. The resulting films hold up pretty well, albeit not in the same bracket as his silent classics.

However, they never quite get their due, and are often glossed over. Perhaps the lack of drama and backstory surrounding them is partly responsible. Unlike Keaton or Langdon, there is none of the struggling artist tale in Lloyd's sound work, no need to search for hidden treasures that glitter against the odds of cheap production or personal problems. Although Lloyd worked hard to make successful sound films, his relaxed schedule and great wealth made his films increasingly hobby-like, the luxuries of a rich man. Again, like Keaton or Langdon, his sound work is easy to see and, some would say, easily forgotten.

Of course, there's always an exception to the rule, and in Lloyd's case, that's PROFESSOR BEWARE. The last of his run of 1930s talkies, this is the one obscure film among them. Stung by indifference from reviewers and the public, Lloyd himself brushed it under the carpet, and it wasn't included in the otherwise comprehensive DVD box set of his feature films. Even the Kevin Brownlow—David Gill documentary "THE THIRD GENIUS" contains only the briefest snippet of the film.

In its years hidden away, its been hard for the film to have a reappraisal, but actually it's rather good, with an unusual story well-suited to Lloyd's comedy. Lloyd is a professor of Egyptology who has been researching the story of a pharaoh Nefertis, whose doomed romance with a mysterious woman led him to be buried alive. When the professor meets actress Phyllis Welch and innocently gets into trouble with the police, his life begins to have uncanny parallels with the story. Gradually, he becomes convinced that he is the victim of a curse and takes off on a race across the continent to flee the woman who he fears will bring him death, and to reach an expedition to Egypt departing from New York before the police catch up with him.

'PROFESSOR BEWARE' is, essentially, a road trip through dustbowl America, as Lloyd encounters cars, trains, romance and hobos (Raymond Walburn & Lionel Stander have two juicy supporting roles). The format lends itself well to episodic gag sequences: highlights include a ride atop a train rooftop as a tunnel approaches, and a gag where Lloyd hides his car inside a large tent to hide from police, the tent seeming to drive itself away down the road. Best of all is a sequence reworked from his previous film THE MILKY WAY. In that film, Harold found himself hiding a colt in the back of a taxi; this time, he finds himself with a stolen chicken in his jacket as he hops a ride with the sheriff.

This version actually works better in my opinion. Compared to the original, the sequence benefits from a greater tension in Harold's attempts to go undetected: discov-





Shooting the chicken scene on location for PROFESSOR BEWARE. Director Elliott Nugent sat in the chair; Lionel Stander provides the poultry!

ery will mean not just embarrassment, but arrest. Lloyd's attempts to pass himself off as a ventriloquist and bird impersonator are hilarious, and a great example of what he's learned about mixing sound and visual comedy.

Another facet of the film that shows how Lloyd In fact, his previous four films had all featured strong, unsentimental female characters who are often comic in their own right, a far cry from the devoted heroines of his silents . Lloyd was way ahead of Keaton and Chaplin in this regard, and it suggests he paid close attention to the developments in screwball comedy in the 30s. As far as his own character goes, his professor of Egyptology is an attractive updating of the boy from GIRL SHY or THE KID BROTHER to a new decade. It's a role just right for him; a little stuffy and uncomfortable, but amiable and likeable. I could actually imagine Cary Grant in the part and in fact, most people at the time would probably have rather seen Grant in the role than Lloyd.

While Lloyd has effectively modernised parts of his presentation, the best sequence of all is in his time-honoured style. The climax is a gag-filled chase as Lloyd tries to get a mob to pursue him so he can storm a yacht, and then cause a giant battle on board. This is fast-paced, full of fun little gags, and I'm reminded of the climax to Keaton's SPITE MARRIAGE. There's actually quite a parallel between the two films, both being their star's attempts to adapt to a brave new world (big studio production in Keaton's case, audience tastes in Lloyd's). Both films were their swansongs of dominating their own productions, and both are much better than their middling reputations would suggest.

Had he not previously been at such stratospheric heights, a film like PROFESSOR BEWARE would hardly seem like a fall. It's not perfect, of course. The continuity is sometimes a little rough, and it could benefit from being shortened by a reel or two, but PROFESSOR BEWARE is a warm, kooky little film with lots to recommend it. One can only wonder how it might have benefited from one comedy consultant Lloyd hoped to employ: Charley Chase! Chase was not just a brilliant gag man but also an expert at tight comedy construction, and it seems fair to assume he might have helped the film further. Imagine if Leo McCarey had directed; what a dream team he, Lloyd and Chase would have made! Alas, Charley's ill health meant it was not to be.

So, why did PROFESSOR BEWARE flop? Much of the problem was that 1938 was a poor time for star comedies. As William K Everson noted, other than this film, Laurel & Hardy's BLOCK HEADS was the only other real mainstream film to feature the silent comics, and even that was billed as their farewell. To contemporary audiences, Lloyd was simply passé.

Regardless of its reception at the time, this is certainly a better film than its utter (undeserved) obscurity would suggest. As Lloyd's talkies go, I'd probably rank it third, a notch or two below MOVIE CRAZY and THE MILKY WAY. Hopefully, one day its rightful place in his canon of work will be restored.

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WALTER FORDE

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COMIC



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THE SOUND YEARS



ROSCOE ARBUCKLE:
THE COMIQUE FILMS

"WHEN WE MADE
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& DREAMED
THEM"

- BUSTER KEATON

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