

# THE LOST LAUGH



#14



ALSO FEATURING



HAROLD LLOYD



GEORGE ARLISS



REGINALD DENNY

AND  
LOTS  
MORE!

# MARIE PREVOST

Welcome to issue 14 of THE LOST LAUGH—the 10th anniversary issue, believe it or not!

Thanks so much to our contributors this time: to Robert M Fells for his terrific article on George Arliss' comedies, and for sharing rare photos from his collection; to Tony Belmont for his memories of Al Alt, and to David Crump for agreeing to a Q & A about his wonderful new Fred Karno biography. As always, please do get in touch with any comments or suggestions at [movienightmag \[AT\] gmail.com](mailto:movienightmag [AT] gmail.com)—it's always great to hear from you!



*Image: Marie Prevost in UP IN MABELS ROOM (1926)*

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Odds and ends of film rarities; this time, some obscure comedies from Monty Collins and Al St John, and an Australian silent comedy feature!

# THIS ISSUE'S YOUTUBE PLAYLIST

After the positive feedback from last issue's accompanying YouTube playlist, I've created one to go along with this issue. You'll find some of the key films discussed in this issue. [Click the link to access the playlist!](#)

## A NIGHT IN THE SHOW

With a new biography of Fred Karno out, here's the short Chaplin made based on Karno's old sketch MUMMING BIRDS.



## IT HAPPENED ONE DAY

The brand new Charley Chase DVD from the Sprocket Vault is a perfect excuse to showcase one of Charley's films. out, This 1934 film is an underrated little gem full of Charley's patented charm. (This is an old 16mm copy I uploaded before the DVD was out— if you want to see this and loads of other Chasers in great quality, buy the DVD!)

## CONDUCTOR 1492

Johnny Hines' breezy optimist made a slew of charming light comedies throughout the 1920s; this folksy tale is probably his best.



## SKINNER'S DRESS SUIT

The most sophisticated of the 'Light Comedians', Reginald Denny was a terrific comedian. This charming film, directed by his favourite collaborator Bill Seiter, is the epitome of the light comedy.



## THE DEVIL

George Arliss is best remembered as a dramatic actor, but Mr A also had a more light-hearted side to his career, as Robert Fells showcases in his great article this issue. Mr Fells has also restored Arliss' comic film THE DEVIL, and generously shared it on YouTube.

A trio of Marie Prevost videos next. Marie's scene from Sennett's **DOWN ON THE FARM** with James Finlayson is the highlight of the film. A few years later, **THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE** gave Prevost one of her best roles, in this deliciously sophisticated Lubitsch comedy. Finally, **GETTING GERTIE'S GARTER** mixes in a bit more slapstick and sight gags to make what is probably her funniest starring feature.



## THE MILLION DOLLAR DERBY (1926)

This charmingly daft little two-reeler is one of the few available efforts starring forgotten comic Al Alt.



Two of The Masquers Club's most delightfully offbeat efforts feature here. **THE GREAT JUNCTION HOTEL (1931)** puts Edward Everett Horton and Harry Gribbon through their comic paces, while **LOST IN LIMEHOUSE, OR LADY ESMERELDA'S PREDICAMENT (1933)** is a great example of the daffy genre spoofs that the series specialised in.

## THE KID STAKES

A real curio, this 1927 feature film is one of the few surviving Australian silent comedies. Based on the popular newspaper cartoon *Fatty Finn*, it's sort of Our Gang Down Under. Oh, and it features Goat Racing. What more could you want?

## DYNAMITE DOGGIE

One of Al St John's overlooked solo shorts, this one pits him against Pete the Pup... with explosive results!



# DVD NEWS & REVIEWS

## EDWARD EVERETT HORTON: SILENT COMEDIAN?

Edward Everett Horton is remembered today for his terrific comic roles in films like *TOP HAT*, *ARSENIC & OLD LACE* and *THE GANG'S ALL HERE*. Though we associate his prissy, flustered characters with musicals and sound comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, he actually had a decent career in silent films. As well as several feature films, he made a series of short comedies through 'Hollywood Productions' in 1927-28. This anonymous sounding company actually had a rather better pedigree than its name suggested: it was a producing venture headed by Harold Lloyd, utilising his technical staff and writers.

As a result, Horton was gifted a staff of seasoned comedy veterans. The result was a series of films not only much more polished than the average two-reeler series, but also much better preserved; as part of Lloyd's assets, the Horton shorts were treated to the same preservation as his own films. This means that all of them exist, in beautiful copies form the original negatives.

However, they have been kept locked away and rarely seen. Until now. The latest DVD release from Undercrank Productions highlights these forgotten gems, presenting all eight together for the first time. The results are a bit of a revelation.

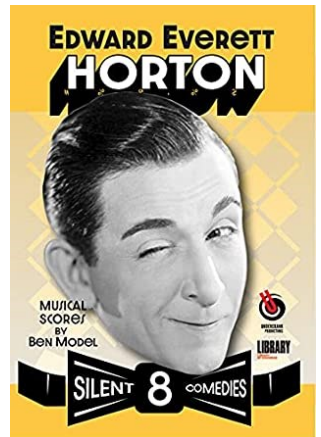
Horton is actually a very effective silent comedian, with his expressive face and his unique variations on a double take: the sickly grin when things begin to unravel, the faintly flustered panic. Like watching silent films of other performers like Laurel & Hardy or W.C.Fields, we have an extra advantage in that we know what that voice sounds like, and can add this knowledge to make the title cards and silent gesticulation even funnier.

For a performer generally dealing in character-based and verbal humour, Horton proves surprisingly spry at physical comedy too. His attempts to ride a mechanical horse in *HORSE SHY*, or to climb from a sinking rowing boat on to a yacht in *VACATION WAVES* are certainly (though perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised, considering that this is a man who was thrown out of college for climbing onto the roof of one of the faculty buildings!)

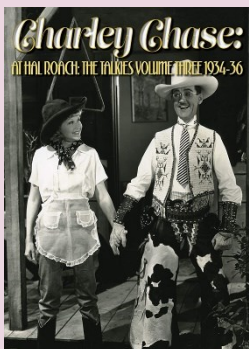
All the films in the set are amusing, though the balance between gags and character is sometimes not quite right. *SCRAMBLED WEDDINGS* has too much plot and too few gags, whereas *BEHIND THE COUNTER* goes the other way, and bogs down in generic scare comedy gags. However, every film has its moments, and when the team find the sweet spot between slapstick and situation, the films are glorious. *NO PUBLICITY* features Horton as a newspaper photographer detailed to snap a young heiress. However, her aunt will not allow reporters anywhere near the house. To gain access, Eddie impersonates a Feminist lecturer who is due to give a talk to the aunt and her friends. His scenes in drag and attempts at delivering a lecture are very funny, even without dialogue. The scene reaches a comic climax as he accidentally sets off an electric fan, which sets his skirts billowing and threatens to reveal his trousers underneath. Horton's attempts to keep his composure as he becomes increasingly aware of the problem are hilarious, and a masterclass in subtle comic reaction.

*HORSE SHY* is another good 'un, with milquetoast Horton being uneasily persuaded to join in a fox hunt. Best of all is *DAD'S CHOICE*, a comedy which can stand with the very best situation comedies of the late 20s.

As with all Undercrank Productions, the quality of this release is fabulous. A few isolated sections of decomposition aside, the prints look gorgeous, and Ben Model's musical accompaniment is perfectly pitched as always. There is also the bonus of a mini-documentary by Steve Massa, detailing Horton's forgotten career in silent comedies. A highly recommended set!



## MORE CHARLEY CHASE CLASSICS FROM THE SPROCKET VAULT



Continuing their noble quest to release the unfairly forgotten films from the Hal Roach archives., The Sprocket Vault have just released the next instalment in their wonderful series of Charley Chase release. This volume features fifteen shorts from 1934-36; though Chase's career at Roach was coming to an end, the films certainly don't reflect this. In fact, they include some of his best, most tightly plotted efforts. Films like *IT HAPPENED ONE DAY*, *POKER AT EIGHT* and *THE COUNT TAKES THE COUNT* are wonderful little comedies, almost structured like mini feature films. As well as these proto-screwball comedies, Charley indulges in some slapstick gagfests (*MANHATTAN MONKEY BUSINESS*), dabbles with surrealism (*LIFE HESITATES AT 40*) and gets to indulge his musical tendencies with plenty of songs along the way. Add to that the usual Roach charm and stock company, and this is a must-have. Although there are a couple of duds like *THE CRACKED ICEMAN*, generally this is a really strong set of shorts, and even Charley's weakest entries are always watchable.

As always, Richard Roberts' commentaries are excellent, shedding lots of light on the films, their casts and production. His detail surrounding Chase's aborted first feature *NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE/BANK NIGHT* is especially good. You also get the extra of *HUYE FALDAS!*, a Spanish language version of his strange 1930 talkie *GIRL SHOCK*.

With this release, almost of Charley's talkies are now available. Ten or twenty years ago, who would have thought that would ever happen? !Once again, I can't find enough superlatives to say about this set. Buy it, and buy one for all your friends!

PS. For more on Charley's films from this era, check out the article in Issue 9, free to download from [thelostlaugh.com](http://thelostlaugh.com)!

# BEVAN HEAVEN!



**With a successfully funded Kickstarter Campaign, Billy Bevan comes to BluRay!**

Walrus-moustached Billy Bevan is one of the most iconic faces of slapstick. However, while many of us know classic gags and routines featuring him, his complete films have often been elusive. Now Dave Glass and Dave Wyatt are remedying that with a new BluRay project. Successfully funded, the project should be ready in the New Year. Here's more from Dave Glass:

*From Lobster films, we've got **MUSCLEBOUND MUSIC** (1926) - an extremely rare complete print (35mm French) which contains a couple of scenes familiar to fans of Robert Youngson's 'Golden Age of Comedy'. **THE QUACK DOCTOR** (1920) is another rarity and a great example of one of the early 20s Sennetts that Billy made with Louise Fazenda. This one co-stars many of the Sennett favourites too including Ben Turpin. **NIP AND TUCK** (1923) - a real treat this one. It has a terrific chase with cops galore and Cameo the Wonder Dog! A few minutes worth were used in Youngson's 'Golden Age of Comedy', but other than that, it's not been available. This is the complete 35mm fine grain camera neg (from the Youngson collection!) - in other words, it looks spectacular. PLUS Lobster will be doing the restoration on this one themselves.*

*From EYE Filmuseum comes **CALLING HUBBY'S BLUFF** (1929), which also stars Dot Farley and Vernon Dent and is a very funny example of the late 20s situational style of comedy that Mack Sennett was producing then. Great stuff. However, we'd also heard that EYE had a real treasure tucked away. One of THE iconic Mack Sennett comedies is a film called **LIZZIES OF THE FIELD** (1924), which features so many scenes of mayhem that have been used time and time again in comedy compilations. Welllllll.... this film has only ever been available in the world as a 1 reel version.... until NOW! I'd heard that EYE had a TWO REEL version in their basement... and yes, Elif confirmed that was true. Yippee!!! And when I happened to tell fellow 'Lizzies' fan Serge about this, he said "Yippee!!!!" even louder! In fact, he got so excited, he's now arranged with Elif to borrow and re-scan the original nitrate print, and restore it, using the sparkling Blackhawk film materials, to create the ultimate version of this favourite classic.... for us to use.*

*Serge told me he'd also been chatting about Billy to fellow fan and film enthusiast Jon Mirsalis, so after a quick chat with Jon, he's kindly letting us use his super rare print of **FROM RAGS TO BRITCHES** (1925), which is another hilarious rare Bevan film co-starring Madeline Hurlock and Kewpie Morgan. Lobster have already made a 2K scan of this, so it just needs the restoration work.*

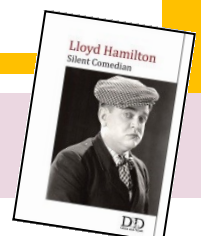
*If you're a Sennett / Bevan fan, you've probably heard of **WANDERING WILLIES** and **WHISPERING WHISKERS**, which both contain some of the most iconic Sennett scenes ever seen! Right, well hold on to your pants, because we've found.... **WANDERING WAISTLINES!** (1924) - And it's a real treat!! It's a similar gag packed slapstick fest, co-starring Sid Smith, Kalla Pasha and some of the most eye ball tickling stunts you'll ever see. (Even Brent Walker hasn't seen this one!) Thanks go to the Library of Congress for this print.*

*So those are the 7 main films in the collection. But there IS more! As you may know, I've been uploading the occasional rare silent comedy to my You Tube channel ('Reel Comedies') and there's one particular film I uploaded a few years ago, which has now gained more views than all of the other films combined. And what film is that Dave? Well Dave.... it's a Billy Bevan rarity called **ON PATROL** (1922) which contains so many classic comedy scenes. This "lost" film only exists in fragments, which have been found in various comedy clip compilations and those have been the main source for the restoration I produced. But it's in need of an upgrade. So fresh new scans of the various film elements will be made, to provide you with the best possible looking version of this "lost" film that we can.*

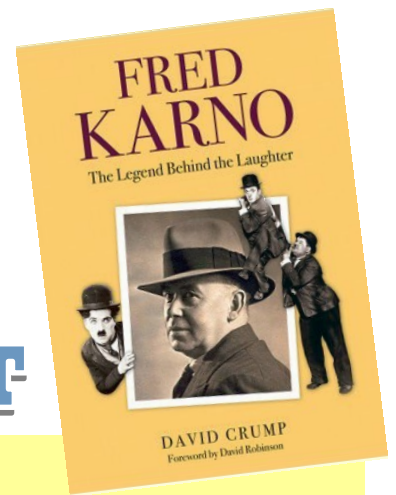
*And the other classic Bevan we've been asked to include is the restored version of **WALL STREET BLUES** (1924), which again doesn't exist in any archive that we know of, but features some unforgettable scenes. This will be an updated version containing newly scanned footage.*

Fantastic stuff! The set will also contain a booklet featuring a superb new essay by Brent Walker... and some extra treats! Definitely set to be one of the highlights of 2022's releases. If you missed the initial Kickstarter campaign, don't worry—the Blu ray will hopefully be available to order from Amazon, too.

If you missed out on D & D's first project, the Lloyd Hamilton Kickstarter, there's another chance to [snag a copy](#), as Ben Model has made arrangements to re-release the set through Undercrank Productions!



# THE GUV'NOR: FRED KARNNO IN THE SPOTLIGHT



**A remarkable new biography of Fred Karno is out now. Here's *The Lost Laugh's* review, followed by a Q & A with author David Crump...**

These days, Fred Karno is largely forgotten but for two things: as a footnote in the story of Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel, and for the phrase “Fred Karno’s Army”, used to refer to anything chaotic. David Crump’s new biography of the man presents a much more well-rounded view, challenging us to realise his wide-ranging achievements and influences on comedy. Performer, writer, trendsetter, comic rebel, talent scout, stubbornly self-made businessman and flamboyant promoter: all these sides of Karno have proved influential on the history of popular entertainment, and that’s without even mentioning the performers who learned directly from him.

Studies of Karno have largely been restricted to a handful of myths or anecdotes, with a particular focus on the Chaplin connection; two previous biographies from 1939 and 1971 served as memoir-cum-hagiography and salacious tabloid nonsense, respectively. *Fred Karno: The Legend Behind the Laughter* absolutely fills this gap, presenting a thorough and well-researched portrait of the man and his achievements, while adding vast amounts of new information and insight.

In the process of detailing Karno’s story, this book also acts as a socio-cultural history of entertainment; Karno’s career was a long one, and he kept right on trend for almost forty years. Along the way, entertainment shifted from Drury Lane pantomime and harlequinades, to music hall, variety, revue, and eventually the rise of cinema. For my part, I had never realised how much of a trendsetter Karno was, at the forefront of many changes. One forgets that he was a performer himself (and a formidable acrobat), as well as pioneering sketch comedy. Among his innovations detailed in the book are the incorporation of dialogue into sketches at a time when it was banned, timing of music to slapstick, “stage within a stage” settings, all-female comedy revues, and some truly elaborate special effects.... That’s before even getting started on the specific gags, plots and characters which were passed on into comic tradition, in silent film comedy and beyond.

While Karno has always been acknowledged as an important influence on comedy, the full extent of this has never really been documented, certainly not this thoroughly. I had also never realised quite how extensive his empire was; the details of the number of Karno productions touring simultaneously, across the globe, is quite simply mindboggling. One soon realises that Chaplin and (especially) Laurel are footnotes in Karno’s story, rather than the other way around. Rather than him being a cameo in their stories, they were just a tiny part of his comic empire, albeit the ones that are the best remembered today.

Karno’s later life dalliances with his famous protégées in Hollywood are also recorded, with lots of fresh insight (especially his brief stint working at Hal Roach studios), but Chaplin and Laurel by no means dominate the narrative. Just as important to the story are the many other Karno comics, less well-remembered today: Fred Kitchen, Billy Reeves, Harry Weldon, Syd Chaplin, Billy Ritchie, Billy Bennett, Will Hay, Tom Nelson, and many others. This is their story as well, and all are detailed in the course of the book, as well as many important behind-the-scenes figures. That many of these talents went on to careers in film comedy is no coincidence.



While a biography like this dealing with so many famous and charismatic performers is at risk of sidetracking into their multivarious life stories, it is entirely to the author’s credit that he manages to navigate these tangents, maintaining a strong thread and drawing the reader in to keep them engaged in the story. This is a masterclass in detailed, but accessible writing. As David Robinson writes in his foreword, “it is a lesson that scholarship need not be forbidding or exclusive”. There’s also an appropriate dash of humour in the writing that fits the subject nicely. Mr Crump has managed to simultaneously be a meticulous historian and a compelling storyteller, a difficult feat to achieve.

The early chapters in particular paint a wonderfully vivid picture of Karno’s early life, a poverty-stricken upbringing in Nottingham, from slums to circuses, music halls and boarding houses. You can practically smell the sawdust and the gaslight as you read these stories. Likewise, the descriptions of the Karno sketches and their performers’ comic technique pop off the page. There is a very strong sense of time, place and character at all times in the narrative, really bringing the story to life.

The author doesn’t shy away from the more difficult aspects of Karno’s life and character, either. Like practically all comic talents, there were some darker, more melancholic aspects to his charac-

ter, and he had his share of personal troubles. His decline in the 1920s makes particularly sad reading. However, his faults and failures are portrayed as accurately and fairly as possible, with meticulous research a hallmark of any claims made or debunked. Access to the Karno family's personal archive of letters and photos has added a real layer of authenticity to the book, putting paid to many falsehoods and letting Karno frequently speak in his own voice.

As a result, the man emerges as a flesh-and-blood character, not just a vague biographical sketch; you can almost reach out and touch him. This is particularly impressive given the long time since his passing, and the fact that his work was largely not preserved for posterity.



There is also a host of rare photos throughout the book, many previously unpublished. I did wish that they could have been printed a little larger, but I guess the mammoth length of the book (600 pages) may have precluded this

In conclusion, this is a must-read book for anyone interested in the history of comedy. Karno's story is one that really deserves to be told, and to be told with this amount of detail, respect, and humour. I came away with a real appreciation for Karno's innovative talents, and a large number of revelations about the inspiration for later comic films. It's a real eye-opener that hopefully should restore Karno's profile to its rightful place in comedy history.

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## Khronicling Khaos! A Q & A with Author David Crump

**Hi, Dave. First of all, why Fred Karno? What led you on this mission to research and write about him?**

I've always been a huge fan of comedy and as a writer of pantomimes, the history of panto routines and gags was something I'd become increasingly interested in. However, the Karno connection was pure co-incidence. One day in my office my secretary stumbled over some random boxes which had been left where they shouldn't and exclaimed "It's like Fred Karno's Army in here!". I had never heard the expression and asked her what it meant. She just said that it meant anything chaotic, but she had no idea why people said it. I googled Fred Karno and found very little information on the internet (this was about 12 years ago) except a brief biographical paragraph which said that he had been a circus acrobat, turned impresario who was responsible for discovering Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel. I was intrigued. I lodged in the back of my mind that this sounded like someone who I should know more about but didn't do anymore about it for a year or so. Then a theatre company I was working with were deciding on their next production and were considering both Mack and Mable (the story of Mack Sennett and Keystone) or Underneath the Arches (The Crazy Gang musical), some research demonstrated that Fred Karno's story was almost a pre-quel to both of these and that led ultimately to me writing a musical about Karno's life based on a 1971 biography. We staged that in Birmingham in 2010 and as a result I was introduced to some members of the Karno family, they gave me access to a treasure trove of archive material which demonstrated to me that much of what we thought about Karno was clearly untrue. I spent the next ten years writing this new biography which I hope corrects previous errors and sets the record straight for a man who was such an extraordinary influence on comedy, film and popular culture.

**Stan Laurel, Charlie Chaplin and many others referred to Karno as "the Guv'nor", and acknowledged the debt they owed him. What do you think were the comic skills they learned most from working in his troupe?**

Karno was an acrobat by background, and had begun in circuses where he would perform on the high wire, the parallel bars and on horseback, but in those small circuses the acrobats also had to perform as clowns. He later bought this physical purely visual comedy to the music hall on a scale and with a complexity which was innovative and set him apart from his contemporaries. His headquarters at The Fun Factory became the base for his companies and he had an Alex Ferguson approach to management – find young performers and train them up, that way you keep costs down and ensure that they perform in a consistent Karno style. Well over 2000 individual comics worked with Karno during his career and many young discoveries went on to enormous success. Will Hay, Billy Bennett, The Crazy Gang, Syd Walker, Frank Randal, Fred Kitchen, Max Miller, Sandy Powell and many more. Karno trained them all in visual comedy first and foremost (especially in the early days). When Karno companies crossed the channel to tour America they turned up performing this breakneck acrobatic visual comedy just as silent films were in their infancy and studios were looking for visual comics. Karno's comics were trained in pratfalls, custard pies, taking a punch, falling down stairs, etc etc. The Karno comics formed were quickly poached by the studios and formed a nucleus of comics which quickly became omnipotent in silent comedy: Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel are the most famous but there was also Charley Rogers, Eric Campbell, Albert Austin, Jimmy Aubrey, Billy Reeves, Billie Ritchie and many others.

Karno taught them not only physical comedy but also how pathos could be mixed with comedy to create tension and release, leading to bigger laughs, Stan recalled that Karno would always say "Keep it wistful gentlemen" – and Chaplin took that to the silver screen.

As well as physical comedy skills and subtleties of pathos, Karno instilled in his troops a strong work ethic, formed in his circus days, which led him to be both a perfectionist and a control freak. It is no coincidence that both Chaplin and Laurel were hands on both on and off screen, in writing, directing, editing, etc. that attention to detail was very much a Karno trait. So it wasn't just the physical acrobatic comedy, the timing and subtleties of performance but it was also his approach to ensuring every aspect of a production was spot on.

**The list of performers Karno employed is like a Comedy 'Who's Who' list. Did he ever discuss his particular favourites? How did he view the meteoric rise of Chaplin?**

I've noted some of the names above, and although he was very proud of both Chaplin and Laurel's success, the comedian he claimed 'always did him the most credit' was Fred Kitchen. Kitchen was a huge star of the halls in his day, but never transferred to film so is now largely forgotten. His style was a significant influence on Chaplin, so much so that Kitchen said he didn't go into film because everyone would have assumed he was copying Chaplin when in fact the opposite was true.

When Chaplin first began making films he was just another one of Karno's comics who had defected, he had not stood out. After he became a global superstar everyone was quick to claim the credit. Karno did so to an extent but he gave Chaplin credit for his own abilities, and they stayed on reasonable personal terms. However, in later life Karno began to resent Chaplin's fame, feeling he'd achieved it largely off Karno's material and Chaplin did nothing to help Karno when he desperately needed it after his bankruptcy. The story that Chaplin funded a retirement business for Karno (an off licence in Poole) is untrue. Only Stan Laurel gave Karno any sort of support or help in later life.

Karno's career was boosted by Chaplin's fame – and his most popular music hall sketch 'Mumming Birds' which had first been performed in 1904 (four years before Chaplin joined Karno) was later publicised as 'the sketch that made Charlie Chaplin famous'. This helped keep the sketch running until well into the 1930s, supposedly the longest running music hall sketch of all time.

**Your research for the book must have led you to meet some interesting people and visit some interesting places. What were the highlights?**

Lunch with Richard Bann and the late Chuck McCann at the Culver City Hotel in L.A. was a great experience, to hear Chuck tell stories that Stan Laurel and told him directly, and Richard sharing his memories of Hal Roach was a privilege. Kate Guyonvarch of the Chaplin archive in Paris was amazingly helpful and I had a wonderful time rooting through archives over there. I've met so many people along the way and all have been lovely, helpful, interested and so generous in sharing their stories and information. Particularly Chaplin's biographer the legendary David Robinson who also wrote a lovely foreword for the book, and A.J. Marriot who is so knowledgeable about Chaplin and Stan's early careers and who has acted as a mentor to me throughout the experience. I've been in touch with literally hundreds of descendants of Karno comics, through my website, all of whom contacted me in search of information on their relatives, and most of whom told me as much as I told them, shared photographs and family anecdotes (although they couldn't ALL have worked with Charlie Chaplin!). Finally, meeting and becoming close friends with Karno's direct descendants has been amazing. His granddaughter Jo, great-granddaughter Louise and great-nephew Warren are now firm friends. I was lucky enough to meet Karno's two grandsons who lived in Palm Springs and had lived interesting lives of their own in and around Hollywood, back in 2010 – they were both in their 90s by then and are now sadly no longer with us – but they were a joy and their children are still in regular touch with me.

**Did you have any particular revelations about Karno or his work as a result of doing this deep dive into his life?**

Lots and lots. Firstly there are two previous biographies, one Karno pretty

## FRED KARNO'S ARMY

**We all know Chaplin and Laurel, but who were some of the more forgotten comics who worked for Karno..?**



Fred Kitchen was Karno's first big discovery, and remained one of his favourite comics. He co-wrote sketches with Karno and made the line "Meredith, We're In" (from THE BAILIFFS), famous. The shabby gentility of his characters like Mr Perkins, and splay-footed walk were influences acknowledged by Chaplin in creating his tramp.

**Billy Reeves was the originator of the drunk in MUMMING BIRDS. In the wake of 'Chaplinitis', he cashed on this, making a series of films for the Lubin company.**



The great school-master comedian **Will Hay** had a notable stint with Karno early in his career. In the late 1900s he appeared in two of Karno's sketch productions: **NOSEY KNOWS** and **MOON-STRUCK**.



Billed as 'Almost a Gentleman', **Billy Bennett** became a big star with his comic monologues. Early in his career, working with Karno was instrumental in nurturing his talent.





much wrote himself in 1939 – that is a sycophantic account of his career, which is full of holes and inaccuracies and says nothing about his personal life. Then in 1971 J.P. Gallagher wrote a biography which is a scandalised account of his personal life, recounted largely by friends of Karno's ex-wife, and largely fiction. Unfortunately every subsequent biography of Chaplin and Laurel repeats these errors and takes Gallagher's stories as fact. I have been able to fill in the blanks, correct many errors, chart his career accurately, whilst also casting significant doubt onto many of the claims made against Karno. He was no saint, but with access to his personal letters and business files it has been possible to paint a much more objective and balanced picture of this most complex character and I hope to a certain extent, repair his reputation. As well as this, and unlike the previous biographies I have tried to set the story in the context of social history at the time, for instance Karno's wife had an involvement in the Dr Crippen Case, Karno's company sailed across the Atlantic just a few weeks after the Titanic disaster, on the RMS Olympic (her sister ship) – how did that feel? I've dug up stories on how Stan Laurel avoided the draft in World War One and how a tiny mistake on Karno's contract may well have saved Chaplin's life. The challenge has been that everywhere I looked I found more interesting stories, everyone Karno worked with and employed could have been (and in some cases has been) the subject of a book of their own – avoiding going down too many side alleys was difficult. The book is big, over 600 pages, and yet I have spent the last three years editing down from more than double that.

**Karno's short-lived stint at the Hal Roach studios is quite infamous among comedy buffs. Were you able to find out any more about this, and why do you think he was unable to find a more permanent home there?**

Oh yes, and how wrong we all were. Karno wrote regularly back home from L.A. while he was there and those letters reveal for the first time what really happened at the Roach studios and why he came home with his tail between his legs after only a few months – it's a very interesting part of the book and I think will shed fresh light on that part of Karno's story and also on the history of Roach's studio.

**Things went less well for Karno in later years, after the failure of the Karsino. Did you find any evidence of how he felt about the downturn of his fortunes?**

Yes, he was a fairly regular letter writer and I have letters to his daughter in law Queenie (Fred Karno Junior's wife), Syd Chaplin, Con West (his first biographer) and others – they help to tell the personal story and reveal the impact of his fall from grace had on him personally and on his family. It really is a very sad story for someone who had brought so much laughter to so many people.

**What do you think is Karno's legacy to the world of entertainment?**

Where do I start? Imagine a world without Charlie Chaplin or Stan Laurel. How different would things have been in those early comedy films? Chaplin at least is seen as being hugely influential on the filmmakers and comedians that followed, and even today many many comedians still cite Laurel and Hardy as an influence. But Karno did much more than train and launch two of the most influential comedians of our time. He pioneered physical comedy in the music hall (bringing it from the circus), he pushed the boundaries of legislation which forbid speaking in the halls and effectively created sketch comedy as we know it today. He was hugely influential in establishing copyright around early film and its use of stage materials, he was a pioneer of musical accompaniment to his comedy and Chaplin credited Karno with teaching him that innovation – imagine film without a musical soundtrack? Finally his later comedians, like the Crazy Gang, were innovators in breaking the fourth wall and engaging directly with the audience – previously unheard of except amongst musicians. He even invented the idea of including a talent show in a professional show, still popular today – in a way we have Karno to thank for the X Factor and Britain's Got Talent. This may all sound far fetched, and it is an oversimplification, but I think the book will support these claims. When you take these things collectively, he was quite simply the biggest single influence on comedy and popular culture we have ever known – and yet most people have never heard of him!

*Fred Karno: The Legend Behind The Laughter* is out now from [Brewin Books](#), priced at £19.95. Go buy a copy!

David Crump's Karno website 'Khaotic' can be found at <https://www.khaotic.co.uk>

# SILENT

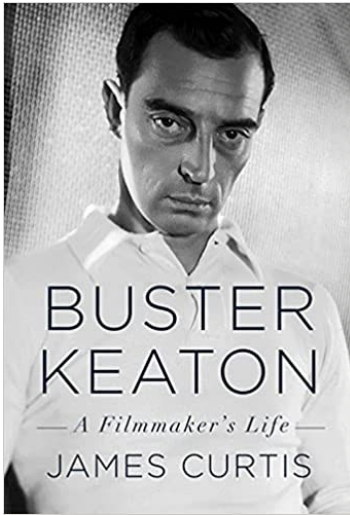


# LAUGHTER

**A WEEKEND CELEBRATION OF SILENT COMEDY  
APRIL 23RD-24TH 2022**

SILENT LAUGHTER WEEKEND IS BACK! JOIN US AT LONDON'S CINEMA MUSEUM FOR ANOTHER WEEKEND OF CLASSIC & RARE SILENT COMEDY ON THE BIG SCREEN, WITH LIVE MUSIC ACCOMPANIMENT & TALKS FROM SILENT COMEDY EXPERTS. FULL PROGRAMME WILL BE ANNOUNCED SHORTLY, CHECK [WWW.KENNINGTONBIOSCOPE.COM](http://WWW.KENNINGTONBIOSCOPE.COM) FOR UPDATES

# MORE NEW BOOKS



Due in February 2022 is a major new biography of Buster Keaton by James Curtis. Curtis' previous biography of W.C.Fields is definitive, so this promises to be a great read. Here's more from the blurb:

*From acclaimed cultural and film historian—a major biography, the first in more than two decades, of the legendary comedian and filmmaker who elevated physical comedy to the highest of arts and whose ingenious films remain as startling, innovative, modern—and irresistible—today as they were when they beguiled audiences almost a century ago.*

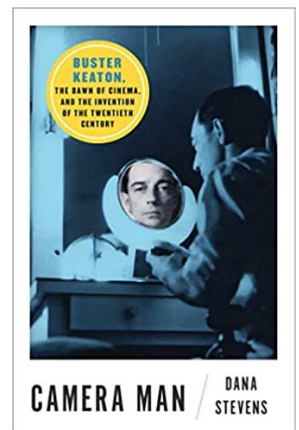
*"It is brilliant—I was totally absorbed, couldn't stop reading it and was very sorry when it ended."—Kevin Brownlow*

James Curtis, admired biographer of Preston Sturges ("definitive"—*Variety*), W. C. Fields ("by far the fullest, fairest and most touching account of his life we have yet had. Or are likely to have"—Richard Schickel, front page of *The New York Times Book Review*), and Spencer Tracy ("monumental; definitive"—*Kirkus Reviews*), gives us the richest, most comprehensive life to date of the legendary actor, stunt artist, screenwriter, director—

Another Keaton book is also on the way in the new year, by film critic Dana Stevens:

*"In this genre-defying work of cultural history, the chief film critic of Slate places comedy legend and acclaimed filmmaker Buster Keaton's unique creative genius in the context of his time.*

*In Camera Man, film critic Dana Stevens pulls the lens out from Keaton's life and work to look at concurrent developments in entertainment, journalism, law, technology, the political and social status of women, and the popular understanding of addiction. With erudition and sparkling humour, Stevens hopscoches among disciplines to bring us up to the present day, when Keaton's breathtaking (and sometimes life-threatening) stunts remain more popular than ever as they circulate on the internet in the form of viral gifs. Far more than a biography or a work of film history, Camera Man is a wide-ranging meditation on modernity that paints a complex portrait of a one-of-a-kind artist."*



While there have been many books about Buster Keaton, the same definitely can't be said for The Stern Brothers! Thomas Reeder's new book *TIME IS MONEY: THE CENTURY, RAINBOW & STERN BROTHERS COMEDIES OF JULIUS & ABE STERN* puts this right! The Sterns made many series of comedies in the 1920s including those starring Wanda Wiley & Al Alt, but their works remain obscure. Reeder's new book sheds new light on the unjustly overlooked films, and is available now. Here's more from the blurb:

*"Our comedies are not to be laughed at!"*

*A funny line, admittedly, but dead wrong. This quip, supposedly uttered by one of the Stern Brothers, is another example of the legend becoming "fact," and has defined – and tarnished – the lasting reputation of the brothers and their films.*

*In spite of budgetary constraints and a lack of star power, Julius and Abe Stern were responsible for nearly 900 silent comedy shorts over the fifteen year period 1914-29; films often just as good – if not better – than those of their primary competitors, Mack Sennett and Hal Roach. They were financially successful as well, the brothers retiring from filmmaking at the end of the silent era as millionaires.*

*But there is more to the story. Little known is the breadth and depth of the Sterns' relationship with their brother-in-law, Universal head Carl Laemmle, and the relationship's eventual downturn. Or Julius's humanitarian endeavors in the 1930s, sponsoring the emigration of numerous Jews from Hitler's Germany.*

*TIME IS MONEY! THE CENTURY, RAINBOW, AND STERN BROTHERS COMEDIES OF JULIUS AND ABE STERN finally reveals the intriguing – and true – story of the lives and careers of Julius and Abe Stern. Lavishly illustrated with more than 300 rare photos, TIME IS MONEY! details the making of the brothers' films, and delves into their previously undocumented, behind the scenes importance to Laemmle and the growth of Universal. "*

# THE RETURN OF



# THE DEMI-CLOWNS

The 'light comedies' of the silent era have always received scant attention compared to the more action-packed and eccentric comedies of the classic silent clowns. In reality, the sight gag, stunt and slapstick-centred comedies only made one part of the vast comedy output from Hollywood in the 1910s and 1920s. However, lacking the visually eccentric performers, iconic stunts and gags of the that we associate with the era, the lighter end of the comedy spectrum has often been overshadowed.

As well as gentle situational comedies based on stage farces, there were lightly comic romances and comedy dramas, or as the American Film Institute used to term them, 'melodramatic farces'. The indication is clear: that these were not true comedies, were somehow more respectable and with a more serious undertone. It's fair to say that there are many of these films that do seem too tame today. Consider *THE SAPHEAD*, for instance. It's essentially a drama with feather-light character humour sprinkled throughout, which just happens to star Buster Keaton. Despite the skill of Keaton's performance, and the gentle situational humour, there is barely a real laugh to be had in its glacially paced scenes, which often veer closer to melodrama. Though not without a little charm, it's fair to say that this film is the least loved and least revived of Keaton's features, the contrast between its sedateness and Keaton's own later comic tornadoes seen as indicative of the gulf between light comedy and 'classic' silent comedy.

For those of us who got hooked on silent comedies through Keaton, Lloyd or Laurel & Hardy, there's a tendency to compare the light comedies negatively, and think that they were all in the mould of *THE SAPHEAD*. In fact, there are some very sophisticated and charming light comedies that can still elicit belly laughs today. Especially as the 1920s advanced, an increased speed and liveliness entered the genre, and there is much to enjoy.

The truth is that the performers in light comedies were always going to be at a disadvantage when viewed from a distance. Compared to the memorable comic trademarks and makeup of the more clownish performers, there is certainly less to distinguish them. They were respectable, hair slicked and vaselined, chins close-shaved, suits impeccably tailored, eccentricities more subtle (but that isn't to say non-existent). Stan Laurel called them 'the straight comedians', and Lupino Lane offered further explanation "*a light comedian is really a leading man with a sense of humour*"<sup>1</sup>.

In *The Silent Clowns*, Walter Kerr devotes a chapter to these performers, who he calls 'The Demi-Clowns'. He posits that "*their films certainly cause nothing like laughter today*". Recent DVD releases have allowed us to challenge this view. While there are undoubtedly some of the light comedies that seem dull, some great examples have recently been made available for reappraisal. These films, with their often more subtle humour, really need to be seen in good quality prints with appropriate musical accompaniment, and recent releases from Undercrank Productions and Kino-Lorber have made this possible. Specifically, three performers who were scarcely more than a footnote to silent comedy fans have come back into the limelight: Douglas Maclean, Johnny Hines and Reginald Denny. We can now appreciate the specific comic talents that they brought to their films.

Douglas Maclean was a literal example of the "leading man with a sense of humour". He had gone from being Mary Pickford's hero in the war drama *JOHANNA ENLISTS* (1918) to being starred in the comedy drama *23 AND A HALF HOURS*

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1. 'How to Become a Comedian', Lupino Lane, (Frederick Warner, 1945).



(1919). This film began a run of profitable Maclean vehicles produced by Thomas H Ince into the mid-1920s, when the star started producing independently. Considering that Maclean was a prominent, popular figure for so long, these films remain unjustly obscure, though two were recently issued to DVD by Undercrank Productions.

Maclean's character is a man of the world, confident from the outset. As a Motion picture Weekly profile put it, "He is the embodiment of a popular young university man, a clean-cut athlete, a loyal friend, a devoted son, and husband who will be faithful through the years – of strong character and fine achievement in any walk of life, whatsoever".

He is a go-getter, aggressively so. Locked in a first floor room by his Uncle, he thinks nothing of setting fire to the room just so that the Fire Brigade will arrive with a ladder, or of setting the staff of a whole hotel on strike just so he can make a point to the man who had him fired.

There is always a ruthless sparkle in his eye, and little questioning the fact that he will succeed somehow, someway. Compare this to Harold Lloyd. What made Lloyd's go-getter work so well was his underlying vulnerability, something nowhere to be seen in Maclean's character. Lloyd's glasses marked him as a

step behind the other boys, bookish and a bit shy. Maclean is outgoing, with perfect teeth, a neat suit, a quick brain and an unholy amount of luck. He has little weakness, and therefore little need of our sympathy.

Accordingly, the emotional curve that marked the Lloyd films so effectively is not a major factor of Maclean's work. However, his brisk comic efficiency and constant opportunism can be very entertaining, and a good source of humour in their own right.

Maclean could be good with physical comedy, too. In BELL BOY THIRTEEN, there's a scene where a crook is trying to nab an envelope sticking out of Maclean's jacket pocket. Each time, he comes tantalisingly close, but Maclean always makes a movement at just precisely the wrong moment. It's a hard scene to play without looking contrived, but Maclean's movements are absolutely natural, and it plays effortlessly. In the same film, there's an enjoyable scene where he is trying to sneak out of an office without being seen. Each time he is caught, he thinks quick and makes it look as though he is actually just on an errand, before breezing back into the office.

Ultimately, the quality of his films stood with the pace and gags. To this end, some good comedy directors worked with Maclean, including William Seiter on BELL BOY THIRTEEN, Fred Newmeyer on SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE and James W Horne on THE YANKEE CONSUL. Among his biggest hits was THE HOTTENTOT, a comedy of mistaken identity in which he plays a chap with the same name as a famous jockey. After various mixups, Maclean ends up having to ride his horse in the race. For several years afterwards, this film was used by reviewers as a benchmark for Maclean's subsequent work. Sadly, this (along with many of his other films) is not easy to see today.

Maclean was certainly an inspiration to Harold Lloyd's feature length comedies, and in turn he absorbed something of Lloyd's more gag-packed style as the years went on. He even indulges in a spot of high-and-dizzy antics in both BELL BOY THIRTEEN and INTRODUCE ME.

Maclean continued turning out his films until the end of the silent era, and made one talkie before switching to work as a producer. Kevin Brownlow hoped to interview him for *The Parade's Gone By*, but found that the star had been sadly incapacitated by a stroke. He passed away in 1967.

Johnny Hines shared a good deal of common ground with Maclean. He too had been a legitimate actor and leading man before turning to comedy. He had more of a face for comedy though, with a Cheshire Cat grin that split his face from ear to ear. (to quote Motion Picture Weekly again: "Johnny Hines, 'tis surely outrageous - to harbour a smile so contagious!") His manner too, was indefatigable, though with a breeziness that makes him a bit more compelling and likeable than Maclean.

Hines had come up through leading man and lightly comic roles, notably opposite Marie Dressler in TILLIE WAKES UP. This work led to a series of TORCHY comedies for producer C.C. Burr, and a starring career in his own vehicles beginning with 1921's BURN 'EM UP BARNES.

BURN 'EM UP BARNES is something of a hodgepodge; it can't decide if it wants to be a society comedy, a romance or a dustbowl hobo tale, and at one point even veers close to aping THE KID, as Hines and his tramp friends rescue and adopt a toddler. Although there are plenty of amusing moments in the film, it feels too loose, too scattershot to succeed. This sort of thing was ok in a more slapstick realm, but light comedies needed tighter plotting.

As the Twenties went on, Hines began to learn these lessons, and his films settled into a happy formula. Often, they were family affairs, directed by his brother Charles.<sup>2</sup> Through the 1920s, the Hines brothers made a string of comedy dramas tinged with pathos. THE LIVE WIRE sees him as a lovelorn wire-walker in a circus, while THE EARLY BIRD features him

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2. A reporter from *Picture Play* in 1925 noted that the brothers really co-directed, saying that Johnny had a lot of creative input and "directs his director" - a phrase often used about Stan Laurel and Harold Lloyd

# A LAUGH RIOT!

No gamble! No doubt! Value proven by the record crowds on Broadway during blizzard weather. See what the critics say.

"After seeing 'The Yankee Consul' I consider Douglas MacLean as funny as Charlie Chaplin."—*Harriette Underhill, New York Tribune.*

"One of the funniest it has been our pleasure to see."—*F. Mordaunt Hall, The Times.*

"Douglas MacLean is ably filling the place left vacant by Douglas Fairbanks."—*E. F. Durling, New York Herald.*

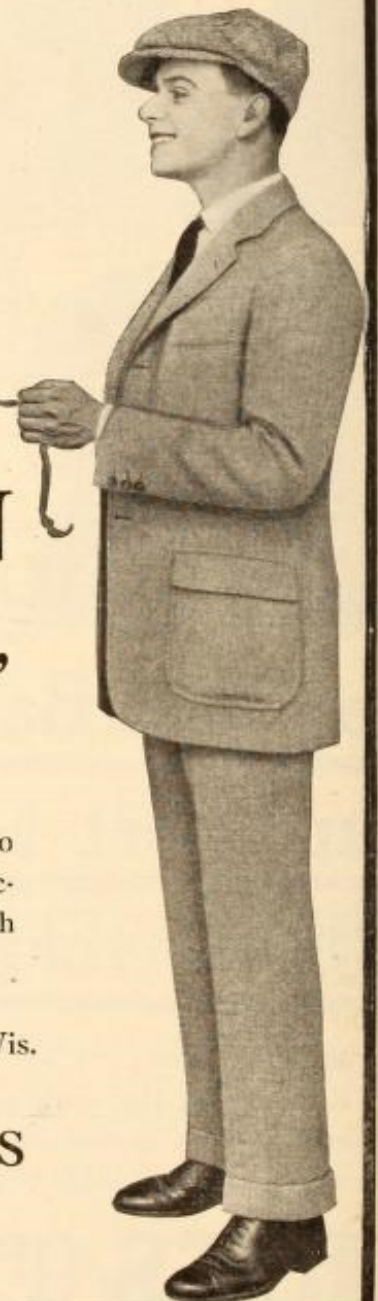
"'The Yankee Consul' is a triumph—honestly a whizz."—*Mabel McElliott, New York News.*

"The demand for clean humor is most amusingly embodied in 'The Yankee Consul.'"—*Sam Conly, New York Telegraph.*

"We like Douglas MacLean and we don't stand alone. The doors were stormed last night."—*New York Telegram and Mail.*



Photoplay suggested by the bubbling musical comedy of Henry Blossom Jr., and Alfred G. Robyn.



## DOUGLAS MACLEAN

in

## "THE YANKEE CONSUL"

*Smashed Thirteen Months' Record*

"Opened with Douglas MacLean in 'Yankee Consul' yesterday to record business for thirteen months. Undoubtedly the best picture he has made. More laughs registered on this one than with 'Hottentot'. Bring on more 'Yankee Consuls.'"

A. P. Desormeaux, Manager

Strand Theatre, Madison, Wis.

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trying to rally small milk businesses against a big takeover.

His most well-known film today, and probably his best, is *CONDUCTOR 1492*. It is a charming story of an Irish boy who comes over to America, works as a streetcar conductor and gets involved with a sinister plot to take over the railroad company. The film has a warm heart, in the interplay between Hines and his father (Dan Mason), and also an endearing daftness. A climax in a burning building is also surprisingly effective as pure drama. This pleasant film mixes comedy, pathos and story better than most of Hines' vehicles and remains an entertaining watch.

*THE CRACKERJACK*, released by Undercrank Productions a few years ago, is also a fun comedy. This time, Johnny is a pickle salesman who gets mixed up with a revolution when insurgents smuggle bullets inside a shipment of his pickles!

Hines cranked out his films throughout the Twenties, at a rate of three a year, so the standard wasn't always this high. As you'd expect on this schedule, things could be hit and miss, and it's fair to say that Storytelling was not Hines' forte. *THE SPEED SPOOK* is unsure whether it wants to be a romantic comedy, a tale of political intrigue, or a Jazz-age Headless Horseman tale about a driverless car haunting a town. It tries to be all three and the result feels clunkily bolted together. Nothing illustrates the contrivances better than a scene where Hines finds himself locked in a basement, with no exit. He looks around the room, and finds that there just happens to be a tank – a tank, for goodness' sake! – stored under a tarpaulin in the basement, which he drives out through the wall of the building!

You could argue that many of the gag set-ups in the features of Keaton and (especially) Lloyd were also contrived and unlikely, but their teams had a greater skill in setting up such contrivances, or at least making the gag pay-offs so good that you didn't care.

It's maybe best not to pay too much attention to the plots of Johnny Hines' comedies, but they are a fun way to spend an hour. He had better gag ideas than Maclean, too. There's a wonderful gag sequence in *CONDUCTOR 1492* of him trying to beat the queue to the bathroom in his lodging house. He manages to get locked out of his room without his towel, but finds a cloth covering, and disguises himself as a chair. This leads to a funny scene of a drunk (Al Cooke) sitting on the "chair", and being befuddled by the sight of four feet below him! Johnny eventually uses his chair guise to sneak to the front of the queue, slipping into the bathroom to the bafflement of the queuing tenants.

The Hines comedies meander through unlikely contrivances to get from A to B, but they sure have a helluva time along the way. Sprightly little vehicles, they have an irreverent charm of their own. His films continued their cheerful formula through the late 20s. Sadly, a lot of these, like *CHINATOWN CHARLIE*, *THE BROWN DERBY* and *STEPPING ALONG* are hard to see, but *THE WRIGHT IDEA* recently resurfaced and was reviewed in the last issue. It's an even more gag-packed comedy with some laugh out loud moments (and another very contrived plot) that show Hines kept his irreverent form right til the end of the decade. As sound came in, he was lost in the shuffle, and ended up in a handful of two-reelers at Educational, before being demoted to supporting roles. Notably, he can be seen as Walter Pigeon's assistant cameraman in the Clark Gable vehicle *TOO HOT TO HANDLE* (1938).

Certainly the best, and truest of the light comedians was Reginald Denny. Denny was an Englishman, and took a calmer, more reserved approach in contrast to the golly-gee American dreaming of Maclean and Hines.

Square jawed and dreamy eyed, he made a convincing romantic, but tinged his character with subtle humour. Denny underplayed almost as much as Keaton, and could do an awful lot with a frown or a quick, darting glance. He had a particularly subtle version of a double take, drawing back slightly and pausing with his whole body. Yet again, he had begun in serious parts, including Universal's *LEATHER PUSHERS* serial, in which he played a boxer.

His sporting, athletic and dashing persona fed into his comedies. He revisited his boxing skill in *ON YOUR TOES* and



Johnny Hines in a bit part in *TOO HOT TO HANDLE* (1938)

THE NIGHT BIRD, and was seen particularly often in control of speeding cars. THE RECKLESS AGE features an exciting car chase in pursuit of a train and he plays racing car drivers in SPORTING YOUTH, CALIFORNIA STRAIGHT AHEAD and FAST AND FURIOUS.

THE RECKLESS AGE is a good early template for the comedies which followed. Denny plays a troubleshooter for an insurance agency, who is tasked with seeing that nothing happens to upset an arranged marriage between an English Lord and an American girl that his company is underwriting. The trouble is, on the train ride out, he meets and falls in love with the girl who is supposed to be getting married. Denny's sense of loyalty has him conflicted between sweeping the girl off her feet and glumly doing his duty. His changes of emotion are particularly well-acted, and allow plenty of comic moments. One of the funniest moments in the film is a small one: the Lord seems to be leaving town, and Denny is jubilant before he suddenly realises that he needs to stop him so the wedding can go ahead. The dawning realisation across his face is one of the funniest moments in the picture.

THE RECKLESS AGE starts slowly, but becomes gradually more convoluted and absurd until it becomes very amusing. Fans of Charley Chase might well recognise that comic technique, and Chase undoubtedly learned quite a lot about story construction from Denny's films. In fact, he even took the setup for THE RECKLESS AGE and turned it into his own sound two-reeler, THE COUNT TAKES THE COUNT (1936).

OH DOCTOR! (1925), is another pleasantly amusing effort, with Denny playing a hypochondriac who stands to inherit a fortune, but is worried he will die first... taking a leaf out of Harold Lloyd's book, there is a terrific flagpole-climbing stunt climax to the film.

Denny was even more prolific than Johnny Hines, making four or five feature pictures a year! Naturally, the standard wasn't always high. CALIFORNIA STRAIGHT AHEAD (1925) is something of a let-down. Though the idea of Denny road-tripping across America in pursuit of a girl he has lost is a nice one, there's very little genuine comedy of the type he excelled at. The characters largely act impulsively rather than naturally, and broad sequences like a runaway trailer and an extended episode of circus animals on the loose are more Sennett than Denny.

It's made even worse by a cringe-inducing blackface part by Tom Robinson, playing Denny's Valet. When the humour is expected to come largely from title cards making bad jokes about fried chicken, you know there's a problem with the real comedy of the film.

For his part, Denny found that his ideas increasingly clashed with those of director Harry Pollard. He told Kevin Brownlow, "He was all for the broad comedy and I was for the lighter. We just couldn't agree."

Though he wasn't a comedy creator like Chaplin, Keaton, or Lloyd, Denny was far more than just a contract player. He had a definite idea of humour, and of the style he wanted for his films. As he explained to Brownlow, "Good hokum, I love - low comedy, pies in the face, pratfalls and things. But it's got to belong". He abhorred gags for gags' sake, and was in search of a more natural comedy style.

Things really gelled when he was partnered with director William Seiter, a gentle man with gentle ideas of comedy who proved an ideal collaborator. In many of the films, Denny is paired with Laura La Plante, a charming leady lady who was also adept at comedy. She also happened to be married to Seiter, increasing the relaxed, family feel of the Denny productions.

The Seiter-directed WHAT HAPPENED TO JONES? shows an immediate improvement over its predecessors, and is one of Denny's funniest vehicles. A farce rising to absurd proportions, most of the humour comes from situation and the reactions of the players, with just the right amount of action, sight gags and a peppering of slapstick.

Denny is Tom Jones, celebrating the eve of his wedding day to Lucille Bigbee (Marian Nixon). Her father has favoured silly-ass William Austin, and warns Tom that he had better come out good and not make any slip-ups, or the wedding will be off. Full of good intentions, Tom heads home for an early night, determined to avoid the Poker game that his neighbour is hosting. Peer-pressured into joining, he is persuaded when she sees that he has been dealt a perfect hand of cards. However, his luck ends there as cops raid the gambling den. Tom escapes down the fire escape with one of the other participants, Mr Goodly (Otis Harlan) in tow.

The mismatched pair hide in the neighbouring building, which turns out to be a ladies' Turkish bath! Covering themselves with towels, they hide in steam cabinets, which are turned to full power by the attendant. To escape the crushing heat, Denny undresses himself (his subtle humour is shown wonderfully in his facial expressions of discomfort and relief) inside the cabinet, but when the cops appear finds himself having to dash away in his underwear. Finding some ladies' clothes,





*Scenes from WHAT HAPPENED TO JONES?, with ZaSu Pitts and Otis Harlan.*

Tom and Goodly disguise themselves as mismatched ladies and make their way home, pursued by police and eventually escaping by commandeering a milk cart!

Entering Goodly's house in the early hours of the morning, they encounter the ditsy maid (ZaSu Pitts), who isn't quite as dumb as she looks: seeing an opportunity, she spends the rest of the film blackmailing them! Tom is now stuck in a stranger's house in his underwear. An escape plan comes when he finds a suit sent on to the house by a Bishop who is visiting later that day. Dressing as the clergyman, Tom is just about to escape the house when Mrs Goodly sees him and assumes him to be the visiting bishop; with the police prowling around the abandoned milk cart outside, he is forced to play along. This sets up a funny series of scenes of him struggling to keep up the façade, especially when a mutual acquaintance of the Bigbees and Goodlys arrives at the house. Tom learns that the police found his wallet at the Turkish baths, and that Mr Bigbee has called the wedding off, substituting Austin in his place. Tom, as the bishop, ultimately finds himself officiating at what was meant to be *his* wedding, and manages to steal Lucille from the altar; on their escape from the church they encounter the real bishop emerging from a taxi. Tom pushes him back in the cab, and an impromptu marriage takes place in the back seat.

A supremely ridiculous farce, *WHAT HAPPENED TO JONES?* is totally carried off by the grounded playing of Denny and a wonderful supporting cast. Short, stout Otis Harlan makes a wonderful foil, and the two have a terrific comic chemistry, particularly in the Turkish Bath sequence. Anyone who thinks that light comedies can't elicit belly laughs should take a good look at these scenes! ZaSu Pitts is also wonderful as the opportunistic maid; each time she catches Denny and Harlan in the middle of a suspicious act, she stares blankly, then shoots them a baleful glance before holding the. Running gags like these build wonderfully throughout the film and contribute to making it a terrific watch, as does Seiter's assured direction.

Also from 1926, *SKINNER'S DRESS SUIT* is justifiably celebrated as one of the best Denny-Seiter collaborations. In contrast to the whirlwind farce of *WHAT HAPPENED TO JONES?*, there isn't much action in the film, but it is a wonderfully slow-building situation comedy that boasts credibility and a real warmth.

Much of this comes from the relationship between Denny and co-star Laura La Plante. They are absolutely believable as a young married couple, awkwardly trying to climb the social ladder; not without their foibles, but very much in love.

Mr Skinner (Denny) is a mild-mannered clerk, well-intentioned but gauche and meek. His wife Honey (LaPlante) is proud of him but wants him to ask for a raise, so that they can keep up with their neighbours, who have just bought a new car. At the office, Skinner resolves to finally ask the boss, but doesn't start the day well by being late, and subsequently being (reluctantly) taught a new dance craze by his secretary! When he finally summons up the courage to ask, he picks the absolute worse moment, as the boss has just learned that a big contract has been lost and that savings will need to be made. A saving is made instantly when Skinner is let go.

Crushed, he returns home but cannot face letting Honey down with the news. When she asks him how it went, he tells her that he got his raise; Honey instantly begins a spending spree, including a new dress suit for her husband so that they can attend a party given by a prominent social family. The Skinners struggle to fit in at the party, until they take to the dancefloor doing the eccentric new dance that Denny has learned. Soon the whole party is joining in, and the result is a social triumph.

As the Skinners' social standing increases, Honey innocently continues spending her husband's 'raise' and Skinner starts to feel uncomfortable. On the day that they host a party, he has to dodge both bailiffs and a tailor that are chasing his unpaid debts. Fortunately, he bumps into a prominent businessman being courted by his old firm. Skinner manages to win a contract from him, leading his old Boss to invite him back, this time as a partner. Skinner finally has a real pay rise, covers up his little indiscretion, and Honey is prouder of him than ever.

The performances are wonderful throughout this lovely little film, and again there is just the right amount of visual comedy to enliven the situational humour. Highlights include Denny's reluctant joining in with the secretary's dance. His performance is utterly convincing and very funny as he gradually finds himself carried away in the moment before the boss walks in and catches him. His attempts to evade the tailor are also very amusing. The careful storytelling and direction develop the characters so that small moments of subtle facial reactions and understated gags can produce big laughs. However, a good print



and appropriate musical accompaniment are an absolute must to sell the film; my initial viewing of SKINNER'S DRESS SUIT some years ago was in a poor-quality copy with tinkly ragtime piano and I was left underwhelmed. Seen in the sparkling version on Kino's new DVD and with a wonderful new score, the film fairly shimmers.

Unfortunately, Seiter was moved on from Denny's films when La Plante was promoted to her own solo vehicles. However, Denny continued making quality films. 1927's FAST AND FURIOUS, based on his own story, is an amusing little tale of a speed demon who suffers an accident and develops a deadly fear of motor cars. From then on, he chooses to travel everywhere by Hansom cab, which causes much amusement in the middle of the big city. However, he is persuaded to pose as a racing driver when the real driver is delayed. When the real driver fails to show at all, Reginald is forced to face his fears and take the wheel, which he does with the aid of just a little Dutch courage!

Directed by Melville Brown, the film isn't quite as good as the Seiter films, but still very enjoyable. Denny became increasingly frustrated with being handed directors of a more broad kind, however. He didn't gel with Fred Newmeyer at all, and ended up taking over THAT'S MY BABY himself. Keaton graduate Eddie Cline was his director for THE NIGHT BIRD (1928), and turned out another entertaining film, although not one of Denny's best.

Reginald Denny's career hit a bump when sound came in—although his speaking voice was fine, his distinct English accent was at odds with what audiences expected. However, he managed to become one of Hollywood's best-loved character actors, appearing in everything from the BULLDOG DRUMMOND films and MR BLANDING BUILDS HIS DREAM HOUSE, right through to BATMAN in the 1960s<sup>1</sup>. In the wake of this, his silent work was forgotten (including by the star himself), but if the reception to Kino's recent DVD collection of three prime Reginald Denny vehicles is anything to go by, we'll be seeing more of him in future.

Silent Comedy came of age in the mid-20s and the popularity of the light comedies played a big part in helping the two-reel comics establishing themselves in feature films. From the light comedies, they learned a subtlety of storytelling and performance that helped take their comic art to a new level. While Harold Lloyd's work owed the biggest debt to the light comedians, Buster Keaton was certainly influenced too. BATTLING BUTLER, with its sedate manner, situational humour and boxing climax played straight, is essentially a light comedy that might have made a particularly good vehicle for Reginald Denny. Charley Chase's dapper character mixed light comedy farce with slapstick in a similar vein, and Walter Forde's dramatic climaxes to his features owe something to films like FAST AND FURIOUS.

In turn, the light comedians learned a thing or two about pacing and the benefit of effective visual comedy. The light comedies from the mid-20s onwards are generally much less stodgy and a much more entertaining watch than those which came earlier. By the end of the decade, there was much less of a stylistic gulf between the two schools of comedy, at least in the feature film arena.

It's terrific that the films of Johnny Hines, Douglas Maclean and, especially, Reginald Denny, have been receiving some overdue exposure in the last few years, and are once again being enjoyed. These 'demi-clowns' made some entertaining and hugely likeable films that are more than worthy of being revived.



## Writers: The Lost Laugh Needs You!

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# THE SILENT FILM COMEDIES OF GEORGE ARLISS

BY ROBERT M. FELS



When we think of memorable silent film comedians our thoughts go to Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, Langdon, and Arliss. Who? Well then, this is still one of the better kept secrets of film history and it's time we put a spotlight on it. In recent years, the comedies of Raymond Griffith, Reginald Denny, and Douglas McLean have returned to circulation after 90+ years absence from the screen, and of course they were never part of home video. And these rediscoveries have proven quite enjoyable. We also realized what we were missing all this time. My purpose here is to add George Arliss, actor, author, playwright, and filmmaker, to this wonderful list of rediscovered film comedians.

Having published six books on Mr. A (as I call him) since 2004, I am more or less regarded as his official biographer. Not that it was a chore. It was and still is a delightful journey of discovery. He was known as one of the great dramatic actors of his era and racked up popular and critical successes in all the media of his time from the stage, silent films, sound films, even radio. Mr. A was also known as an authentic gentleman and a most kind one at that. I tried to dig up "dirt" on the man but I couldn't even find unsubstantiated rumors.

An early experience in mass media occurred with broadcasting in 1922(!) and was not what we would expect of a fellow who spent 32 years of his life in the Victorian Era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Arliss devoted his first broadcast to denouncing censorship in films. This was before Will H. Hays was hired by the studios to be their moral watchdog.

## The Arliss Comedy Plays

Arliss was known primarily as a dramatic actor and in his early career he played in support of two pillars of theatre: Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske. But there was always a second string to the Arliss bow: his comedy plays and later films. George Arliss's roots in comedy were long and deep even before he made films. His first brush with comedy was as a playwright, not as an actor. He wrote a three-act farce called *THE WILD RABBIT* in 1898. I thought the title was takeoff on Ibsen's *THE WILD DUCK* but apparently there was no tie in. The plot involves a case of mistaken identity between a nobleman and his hairdresser. The latter is lavishly treated like, well, a nobleman by the ladies, while the former is bashed about as the tradesman he isn't.

Following an out-of-town tryout in Wolverhampton (UK) in January 1899, *THE WILD RABBIT* opened at the Criterion Theatre in London in July. One critic was not amused but admitted that "the simple minded playgoer roared with laughter." Mr. A's first effort at comedy closed after three weeks but not because of a lack of public support. It was a very hot summer and air-conditioning hadn't been invented yet. With temperatures in the 80s the last place the public wanted to spend two hours was in a stifling theatre.

In 1903 Mr. A wrote another comedy, *THERE AND BACK*, the plot of which sounds a lot like Laurel and Hardy's *SONS OF THE DESERT* made thirty years later in 1934. The Arliss story was a variation of a staple of French farce. Two wives want to get away for a holiday without their husbands so they make up a story about going to visit a sick friend. The husbands are a bit suspicious but accept the explanation. While the wives are away the husbands run into the friend who is fine and has not seen the wives lately. Like Ricky Ricardo would say, the wives have a lot of "s'plainin'" to do.

Mr. A did not appear in *THERE AND BACK* but his wife Florence did. The play was a hit on Broadway and Charles Evans, who played the lead as one of the husbands, would tour in it for many years. Arliss regarded Evans as his "good luck charm" and found parts for him later in his Hollywood films. But the theatre world was not finished with *THERE AND BACK*. It was adapted into a musical called *I LOVED A LASSIE* and went on to even greater popularity in the UK.

As an actor, Arliss managed to work his way up from playing in the provinces (i.e., the sticks) and arrived at the West End (the London equivalent of Broadway) by 1900. In 1901 he accepted an offer from Mrs. Patrick Campbell's troupe to play a season in America although he was limited to supporting roles. The tour was a success and when the Campbell troupe returned to Britain, Mr. A decided to stay on for a bit in the states. His stay lasted for over 20 years. Am-

bitious for a starring role, he would eventually find his vehicle in a new play by Hungarian playwright, Ferenc Molnar, called THE DEVIL. This was a dramatic comedy that had been a smash hit in Budapest. Perhaps because the title suggested a warm climate, the play had its American debut on the sultry evening of August 18, 1908, at the Belasco Theatre. This opening night was beating the traditional Broadway season by three weeks but there was a reason for this.

There was no reciprocal copyright law between the U.S. and Hungary at that time so anybody who could get their hands on a copy of the Molnar play could publicly produce it. And they did. Moving the opening night from September to August 18 seemed like a smart move until another DEVIL production followed. Playgoers were treated to two competing DEVILs that night and Broadway had never seen anything like it. The publicity helped both shows but the critics judged the Arliss version the better of the two. A New York Times reviewer proclaimed, "George Arliss at his best" and "Mr. Arliss's performance is developed in the vein of brilliant comedy...." among other praises.

## The Dramatic Comedy Films

### THE DEVIL

Mr. GEORGE ARLISS  
in  
THE DEVIL  
From his Famous Stage Success

"All the world his playground, human hearts his toys."

He twists the souls, breaks the faith, and wounds the hearts of men, women, wives, husbands and sweethearts. Yet he wins you by his suavity, charms you with his brainy words, and lures you by his plans.

The Sensation of Two Continents

Mr. Arliss' screen debut in a mighty drama—a magnificent production, a triumph of the photoplay art.

Utah Theatre  
Playing Indefinite Period

*A newspaper advertisement for Mr A's first film, THE DEVIL: "the sensation of two continents!" (Author's collection)*

Fast forward 12 years and THE DEVIL is pressed into service again to become Mr. A's very first film in 1921. Although he had evolved into a fine dramatic actor, it seemed that no role of his could completely escape the one-liner or the sarcastic deadpan reply. According to information in the AFI Catalogue, the film version of THE DEVIL was photographed at studios in Ft. Lee, NJ during the day while Arliss returned to the city to star in his latest hit play, THE GREEN GODDESS by William Archer, in the evening. The October 30, 1920 issue of *Moving Picture World* confirmed that filming had been underway for a month. The conclusion of filming was announced in the November 11, 1920 *Wid's Daily* and the November 13, 1920 *Moving Picture World*. The sets included "a magnificent old-world ballroom" and "a reproduction of the Paris Art Salon." Sculptor Frederick E. Triebel, a member of the Royal Academy, provided his artwork for free, according to *Moving Picture World*.

Editing and titling was finished by December 1920. George Arliss sat in on the assembling of the picture, as stated in a November 20, 1920 *Motion Picture News* brief. Mr. A had reportedly bonded with director James Young, the ex-husband of Clara Kimble Young, and they shared a ride to the studio each morning. Arliss also earned praise from cinematographer Harry A. Fischbeck, who was quoted in a February 5, 1921 *Motion Picture News* item, stating that the first-time film star "realized fully the importance of good photography and acted upon every suggestion. He made a camera-man feel like a most important personage." Fischbeck also noted the difficulty of the shoot, specifically the constraints of shooting many interior scenes on "a four-walls-and-ceiling set."

There were of course newspaper and magazine interviews regarding his film debut. Mr. A was well aware of the snobbery by actors from "the legitimate stage" who condescended to appear in movies. They liked the money but often took the opportunity of saying they had not seen their films and never would. Helen Hayes enjoyed a successful film career in the early 1930s, even winning an Academy Award. But she later admitted not having seen her films until they turned up on late night television decades later. This attitude was rather typical. An interviewer confronted Arliss with this mindset in the runup to the THE DEVIL's premiere in January 1921. Asked "Do you take the screen seriously?" The actor deadpanned, "I do now that I'm on it." The interviewer admitted to bursting out laughing at this reply.

THE DEVIL premiered at the Mark Strand Theatre on January 16, 1921, in New York City. The AFI Catalogue states that the film was a critical and commercial success, according to items in the February 5, 1921,



*Above: A bit of publicity for the release of THE DEVIL, and a colourised still of Arliss in costume to promote the centennial reconstruction of this once-lost film. Both images from the author's collection.*

February 12, 1921, and the February 16, 1921 *Motion Picture News*. The film set a record for Pathé, the distributor, for the “highest bookings in advance of release.” After successful pre-release runs at the Strand theaters in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Albany, NY; Shea’s Hippodrome in Buffalo, NY; and the Rialto Theatre in Lawrence, MA, the Mastbaum circuit of Pennsylvania and Gordon circuit of New England signed on to release the film. By that point the only question that filmmakers had for Mr. A was when could he be available to make his next film.

The comedy in the film, as in the play before it, generated from the fact that the audience knows that the kind philanthropist Dr. Muller is the Devil incarnate while the other characters are in ignorance. Viewers find themselves being pulled into the plot as a sort of “partner” with the devil as he lays his traps for the unsuspecting young lovers. In the play, Arliss spoke directly to the audience about his next steps to ensnare the innocents into eternal damnation. On the screen, Arliss communicates his schemes by writing in a gigantic diary that the viewer reads.

There are many sly touches throughout. For example, at a reception a group of important businessmen are only too eager to meet Dr. Muller. He plants seeds of jealousy in the characters’ minds by “assuring” them that their beloved could never be unfaithful – a thought that never occurred to the person until Muller brought it up! He manipulates them ever so subtly to arouse their jealousy, their anger, and perhaps violence.

Muller hosts a masquerade party at his mansion that shows every sign of turning into an orgy before the evening is over. There are indications of a censor’s scissors being used during some shots as scantily clad dancers seem to be enjoying themselves. It has been said that an unknown Frederic March is one of the partygoers but I found that impossible to determine.

The supporting cast performs well with future star Edmund Lowe as the artist/lover who can’t decide between his model or his best friend’s fiancé. Two up and coming actresses, Sylvia Breamer and Lucy Cotton, play these roles, respectively. Lucy’s aunt is played by Florence Arliss, George’s wife of 22 years then, who is billed simply as “Mrs. Arliss.” The opening credits do not acknowledge the Molnar play and the plot elements could be regarded as common story elements. The story is credited to Edmund Goulding who would become a major director within the next few years.

The fact that THE DEVIL exists at all today is a story in itself. A sole surviving 35mm print was found in the wilds of Saskatchewan, Canada, a number of years ago by Larry Smith, who is a Nitrate Film Specialist with the Library of Congress. Larry acquired this print and generously donated it to the LOC and then posted a video of it on Youtube. Eventually, I downloaded it and arranged to give it a 4k scan. Then a retired professional film editor, Lewis Schoenbrun, volunteered to further enhance the image quality. On January 16 of this year, we held an online “re-premiere” of THE DEVIL on the anniversary of its Centennial. Responses from friends have all been positive as Mr. A proves to be the master of droll humor in his very first film. I would very much like to screen this film before an audience.

## DISRAELI

Now that the actor-playwright was “movie box office” he found himself with several offers for a second film. He preferred dealing with individuals rather than a big corporation, an experience he learned the hard way. In 1916, Arliss signed an agreement with director-producer Herbert Brenon to make what would have been his first film. But Brenon became seriously ill and the executives of Brenon’s company stepped in and cancelled the Arliss contract. Mr. A felt, not unreasonably, that he had been badly treated and sued the Brenon company in New York State court for breach of contract. He won his lawsuit at trial but lost on appeal. Brenon returned to good health but Arliss realized that the man did not have full authority to make contracts and chalked up the bad episode to a learning experience.

Selecting a second film after *THE DEVIL*’s success must have seemed like a no-brainer. By 1921, Mr. Arliss had long since established his stardom with one play that managed to run five years. The success of *DISRAELI* – called “the play with the funny name” - made the names of Disraeli and Arliss almost synonymous. The play was commissioned especially for Mr. A and was written by a well-known British playwright of the day, circa 1910, Louis Napoleon Parker. *DISRAELI* became Arliss’s most resounding hit up to that time and was all the more remarkable because of the esoteric story it told. The plot involved the great British prime minister’s effort to purchase the Suez Canal for Britain in 1874. Sounds exciting, doesn’t it? Well, not really. But by the sheer power of the Arliss wit, deadpan expressions, and his unique way with words, he starred in this play for five consecutive seasons, from 1911 to 1915, first on Broadway, then by traveling to every town and hamlet in the U.S. even if it was only for one performance. Arliss returned to Broadway with it for a 1917 revival.

Now in 1921, the play was everybody’s choice for the second Arliss film. This apparent “epilogue” for the play turned out to be more of a prologue. Mr. A would later film it for the talking screen in 1929 where he was honored with the Academy Award for Best Actor. The competition were no pushovers with Ronald Colman, Maurice Chevalier, Wallace Beery, and opera singer Lawrence Tibbett also nominated. Mr. A even faced competition from an unlikely source - himself. In a quirk of the Academy rules at that time, Mr. A was nominated for two films but won for only one, *DISRAELI*. Nobody ever repeated that slight-of-hand again.

I’ve held screenings of the ‘29 *DISRAELI* with college audiences and I can tell you that Arliss held them in the palm of his hand. When he was being dramatic, they were impressed. When he was being funny, they laughed. Perhaps it should not be surprising that when Arliss performed a one-hour radio broadcast of *DISRAELI* in 1938, over 50 million people worldwide listened in. After a successful theater career for over 40 years (he made his debut in 1887), the 1929 *DISRAELI* spearheaded a series of Arliss “biopics” on the screen with *ALEXANDER HAMILTON* (1931), *VOLTAIRE* (1933), *THE HOUSE OF ROTHSCHILD* (1934), *THE IRON DUKE* (1934), and *CARDINAL RICHELIEU* (1935). And he gave Bette Davis her first big break in films by casting her in his drama, *THE MAN WHO PLAYED GOD* (1932). She continued to publicly thank him right up to the end of her life.

Returning to 1921, early reports that *DISRAELI* would be Mr. A’s next film were confirmed in the May 2, 1921 issue of *Wid’s Daily*, and that Henry Kolker, a well known actor himself, would be directing. Once again, the cinematographer was Harry A. Fischbeck. The May 6, 1921 *Variety* and May 7, 1921 *Moving Picture World* noted that Arliss would henceforth release his films through United Artists. The deal was brokered between the studio and Arliss’s producers, Distinctive Productions, Inc., a company that was specifically founded to produce Arliss films. Clearly, Mr. A was avoiding corporate bigwigs in the studios that had marred his dealings with Herbert Brenon.

The May 13, 1921 *Wid’s Daily* noted that the picture would be shot at the Whitman Bennett studio in Yonkers, NY, and that outdoor location filming was done at the sumptuous 1,000-acre estate of George D. Pratt in Glen Cove, Long Island, NY, according to the June 11, 1921 *Wid’s Daily* and June 18, 1921 *Moving Picture World*. It was also noted that through the efforts of George Arliss, Pratt allowed his residence to be filmed in association with the Society for the Relief of Devastated France, which secured famous homes for movie productions to raise funds.

The silent version of *DISRAELI* used some key members of the 1911 Broadway cast including Florence Arliss as Lady Beaconsfield, Disraeli’s wife, and Margaret Dale as Mrs. Travers, the spy working for Russia. The film premiered at the Mark Strand Theatre in New York City (as did *THE DEVIL* some nine months earlier) on August 28, 1921, according to the August 27, 1921 *Motion Picture News*. A general release date of September 3, 1921 was cited in the December 10, 1921 *Exhibitors Trade Review*. Critical reception was positive, with George Arliss receiving consistent praise for his performance, as noted in the September 3, 1921 *Exhibitors Trade Review*. Ticket sales reportedly broke a box-office record at the Mark Strand Theatre in Albany, NY, where only \$40 was spent on promotions, including simple window displays and “a specially prepared letter” sent to 5,000 Albany residents.

The historical Benjamin Disraeli was also a successful novelist whose writings were brimming with wit. Many of his *bon mots* were used in the play and film versions while others were invented but were in his distinctive style. Arliss himself was noted for his unique style of delivery and made excellent use of his early experiences as a fledgling playwright. Back in 1910 the first out-of-town tryouts of *DISRAELI* were dogged by the lack of a powerful climax. Dozens of writers had been called in to create more punch for the finale but nothing worked. Finally, “somebody” – Arliss always denied that the person was himself – came up with a line for *DISRAELI* that brought the curtain down to thunderous applause. Of course, the line was pure comedy and was repeated in every incarnation of the play thereafter.

Judging the silent DISRAELI today is not possible. It is apparently a “lost” film although the Library of Congress states that a print is held in the Russian state film archive, *Gosfilmofond*. This writer contacted the archive with an inquiry and was promptly told that it held no material on DISRAELI. There is word that the Belgian *Cinémathèque royale de Belgique* film archive holds the first four reels of the film (out of seven) but reportedly the material is too fragile to be copied. The George Eastman Museum in Rochester, NY, once held a complete print that it screened at the institution’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1947. Today it reports that only a few fragments remain totaling about one reel.

However, by reading the play script, watching the 1929 film, and listening to the 1938 radio broadcast, we can get a good idea of the silent film’s impact. Among the cast, an unknown Reginald Denny played the nominal hero, Lord Deeford. Within a few years Denny would be starring in a successful series of comedies for Universal, the most memorable of which is *SKINNER’S DRESS SUIT* (1926). The popular screen actress Louise Huff played the ingenue role of Lady Clarissa, and shortly after retired from the screen. A few years ago, this writer published a photo reconstruction of the 1921 DISRAELI using stills that I had collected over many years. The photos followed the play script fairly well so I was pleased with the way the book turned out. More recently, I returned to the silent DISRAELI in the form of a graphic novel that I also felt turned out reasonably well. Members of Kindle Unlimited can read both books digitally for free.

## The Comedies

### THE RULING PASSION (1922)

The first outright comedy film made by Mr. A was *THE RULING PASSION* in 1922. The director was Harmon Weight, who must have worked well with Arliss because they made two more silent films together, the drama *THE MAN WHO PLAYED GOD* (1922) and his final silent, the comedy *\$20 A WEEK* (1924). The cinematographer once again was Harry A. Fischbeck. The plot was based on a short story, “Idle Hands,” recently published in the *Saturday Evening Post* by Earl Derr Biggers, a well-known author of the time. Biggers would become more famous over the next few years when he began his series of “Charlie Chan” novels that were later made into a successful and long-running film series.

*THE RULING PASSION* marked Mr. A’s third film but was the first he had not previously performed on the stage. Arliss plays John Alden, a wealthy automobile manufacturer in this modern dress comedy, who is forced into retirement by his doctor. Bored with being retired, he decides to invest in a gas station using an assumed name and partners with a young man named Bill Merrick. The two are swindled by the seller of the gas station and they strike back by engaging in a price war with the crook who runs a competing gas station. Alden’s wife and daughter know nothing of his secret life until his daughter, Angie, pulls into her father’s gas station. She also meets Bill Merrick and a romance blossoms. Angie agrees to keep her father’s secret under the circumstances.

Alden’s ruse is eventually discovered by his wife but all ends well when the crooked seller begs to buy back his old gas station at a much higher price than what Alden and Merrick paid for it. Merrick goes to see Angie’s father having no idea that he is his partner. Alden feels invigorated by the little adventure and his doctor agrees that he can return to his work.

George Arliss recalled in his memoirs that some location filming was done where an unplanned comedy scene took place. A “make believe” gas station was built there and during a lunch break a driver pulled in thinking the set was a real gas station. He ordered several gallons from the property man who happened to be standing by and he went through the motions of filling up the gas tank. The property man refused payment telling the driver that since it was John D. Rockefeller’s “birthday” all gasoline was free that day. The man drove off oblivious to the prank.

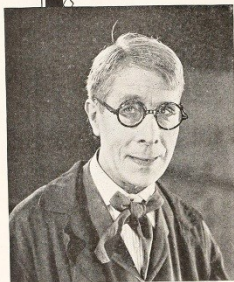
*THE RULING PASSION* premiered in New York City on January 22, 1922. Among the cast, the role of Angie Alden was played by Doris Kenyon, a popular screen actress who was married to film star Milton Sills. Almost a decade later, Kenyon would play Arliss’s wife, Betsy Hamilton, in the film, *ALEXANDER HAMILTON* (1931) and *Madame de Pompadour* in his *VOLTAIRE* (1933). The reviews of *PASSION* were uniformly positive and many critics said they enjoyed Mr. A’s refreshing change of pace in a situation comedy.

Unfortunately, *THE RULING PASSION* is another “lost” film although unsubstantiated claims have been made of its existence. The film did so well that Arliss later decided to remake it in sound in 1931 as *THE MILLIONAIRE* where it again was well-received. Similar to his silent films, the talkie version became his third film of the sound era and his first comedy of that time.



(Author’s collection)

# Another ARLISS! Achievement!



## George Arliss

is known for his work as the greatest character on the stage and screen to-day. And when he acts he picks

### Great Casts

Taylor Holmes, Edith Roberts and Ronald Colman

give comedy, charm and love interest to this delightful story, prepared for the screen by the cleverest writer of them all—

Forrest Halsey

# George in "\$20 a

WITH TAYLOR  
EDITH  
RONALD

DISTINCTIVE PICTURES CORPORATION  
presents  
GEORGE ARLISS in \$20 a WEEK  
with TAYLOR HOLMES, EDITH ROBERTS  
and RONALD COLMAN  
Directed by HARMON WEIGHT from  
an adaptation by  
FORREST HALSEY of  
EDGAR FRANKLIN'S "THE ADOPTED FATHER"

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**ASSOCIATED EXHIBITORS**

Put  
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in your theatre and you'll put many times that in your bank! Here's a picture, says the Motion Picture News, that's "O. K. for the best houses in the land at any time."

\$20 a Week

is entertaining, amusing and highly exciting.

THAT'S THE STUFF FOR  
YOUR AUDIENCES!



# Arliss in "\$20 a Week"

HOLMES  
ROBERTS  
COLMAN



Exciting!  
Entertaining!  
xcruciating!

PATHE EXCHANGE  
Physical Distributors

(Author's collection)

## \$20 DOLLARS A WEEK (1924)

Mr. A's movie box office appeal continued to grow after *PASSION*, and he felt it was time to turn to a drama. A story about a concert pianist who goes deaf left little room for humor. But *THE MAN WHO PLAYED GOD* (1922) succeeded as an inspirational story that Arliss remade to equal acclaim ten years later in 1932 for the sound screen. Alas, the silent film version is a "lost" film now.

By 1923 Arliss had been appearing in only one play for the previous three seasons, *THE GREEN GODDESS*. As he prepared to take it to his native London for a run that lasted a full year, he made a film version in the states. He played the wily Rajah of Rukh who toys with his three British visitors who had the bad luck to crash land their plane in his tiny kingdom. Eventually, his guests, two men and a woman, realize the Rajah intends to execute them in revenge for the execution of his three brothers in England. Arliss has many deliciously ironic lines that arouses laughter from audiences but he ultimately shoots one of the male "guests," tortures the other, and tries to abduct the woman. Therefore, I will resist the temptation to classify *THE GREEN GODDESS* as a dramatic comedy despite its large comedy content.

Before he left for London, Mr. A arranged to film another comedy called *\$20 A WEEK*, sometimes listed as *TWENTY DOLLARS A WEEK*. This was based on a short story by Edgar Franklin called "The Adopted Father." Arliss plays another wealthy businessman, John Reeves, who bets his son, Chester, that they should both find jobs paying \$20 a week to see which of them could live on that amount and no more. The role of Chester was played by Ronald Colman shortly before he achieved film stardom in his own right. Colman played the High Priest in the original cast of *THE GREEN GODDESS* when the play opened late in 1920. Years later in 1947 Colman played the Arliss role of the Rajah in a radio version of *GODDESS* where he recalled his part in the original play.

The March 9, 1924 *Film Daily* and March 22, 1924 *Exhibitors Trade Review* reported that Henry M. Hobart of Distinctive Pictures had recently signed an agreement with the Selznick Distributing Corporation for a series of features starring Arliss. The first of these was *\$20 A WEEK* scheduled for release in April. We know that Mr. A opened in London in *THE GREEN GODDESS* in September 1923. This suggests that *\$20 A WEEK* must have been filmed at some point during the summer of 1923. The July 1924 *Motion Picture* magazine noted that while Arliss began work on the film in the U.S., his final scenes had to be completed in England due to his play commitment.

The film was directed by Harmon Weight and the cinematographer was Harry A. Fischbeck. It premiered in New York at the Mark Strand Theatre during the week of June 9, 1924, according to *Film Daily*. The reviews were mixed although Mr. A's facility with comedy was duly noted by the critics. The June 21, 1924 *Moving Picture*

*World* complained that the plot relied too heavily on coincidence and improbable characters. A positive review in the May 4, 1924 *Film Daily* noted a close thematic resemblance between *\$20 A WEEK* and *THE RULING PASSION*.

Indeed, both stories had the Arliss character hiding his identity and, in *WEEK*, he disguises himself by wearing glasses and a wig. The Reeves character takes a job as a bookkeeper in a steel plant run by William Hart who, with his sister Muriel, inherited the business from their father. But neither takes an interest in the company and they just live off the income. Reeves learns that the business manager is secretly arranging a takeover of the plant to cut the Harts out of ownership. When Muriel decides to adopt a small boy, her brother William “adopts” Reeves as their “new father.” Chester visits the company and he and Muriel fall in love. Reeves manages to thwart the takeover scheme, save the business, and becomes a partner with the Harts.

Happily, *\$20 A WEEK* survives and has been restored by the Library of Congress and presented at film conferences in recent years. The distribution deal with Selznick quickly came to an end when Lewis J. Selznick, owner of the company, filed for bankruptcy. His son, David O. Selznick, later became a successful film executive and produced many top films such as *GONE WITH THE WIND* (1939). Despite its convoluted plot, Arliss liked the premise of *\$20 A WEEK* and would rework the vehicle nine years later with much better results. Retitled *THE WORKING MAN* (1933), the sound version co-starred Bette Davis as the sister and is considered one of the very best of the Arliss films.

When George Arliss returned from his London engagement in late 1924 he quickly became involved with another new play, *OLD ENGLISH* by John Galsworthy, that occupied him for the next three seasons. He made no further silent films but Hollywood would soon be transitioning to sound films. In July 1928, Mr. A signed a three-film agreement with Warner Bros. to make talkies. He ultimately made ten films for the studio at a substantial increase in compensation each year during that time.

In recent years, a few Arliss sound films have received official studio releases on DVD and in at least one case, in the streaming format. However, this writer is yearning for a video release of the three surviving Arliss silent films. These are the 35mm prints of *THE DEVIL* and *\$20 A WEEK* at the Library of Congress, and the restored version of *THE GREEN GODDESS* at the UCLA Film Archive.

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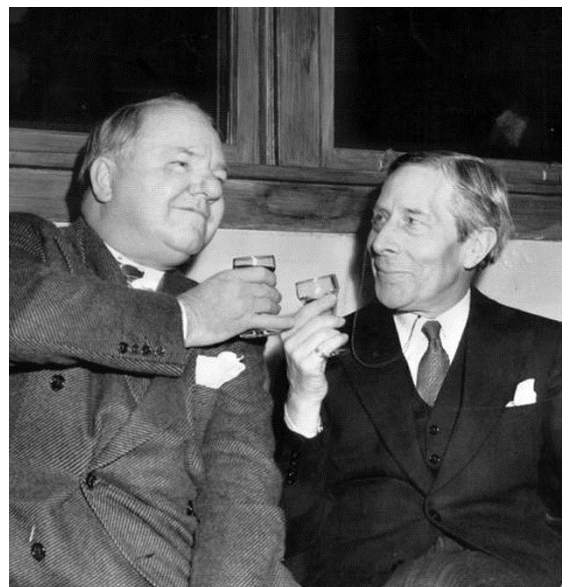
“\$20. A WEEK” SELZNICK A DISTINCTIVE PICTURE

(Author's collection)





*To finish off with, here are three more rare photos which the author has kindly shared with us, featuring Mr A alongside silent comedians. Above, he meets Reginald Denny, and to the left we also see Harold Lloyd, along with Cecil B De Mille and a very young Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. Finally, we see him with W.C. Fields below.*





# BLYTH SPIRIT

## HAROLD LLOYD'S ADVENTURES IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND

*The Northern English town of Blyth is a windswept outpost on the bleakly beautiful Northumberland coast. In the 1930s, this was an area of collieries, harbours, factory chimneys and endless terraced houses. With the North Sea permanently the colour of cold tea, and Easterly wind and rains battering the smoky shore without mercy, Blyth was about as far removed from Sunny California as you can get. Nevertheless for just a few days in 1932, it glimmered in the spotlight as a very famous visitor arrived from Hollywood: Harold Lloyd. This is the story of the unlikely visit of a Hollywood Hero to a small mining town in the depths of winter, 1932...*

The early 1930s saw high profile visits to Great Britain from Charlie Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy. These triumphant homecomings have been well documented, but Harold Lloyd's visit has been scarcely mentioned.

As the year drew to a close, Lloyd's status was about to wane, but he was still a huge star. After filming wrapped for *MOVIE CRAZY*, he sailed with his family for Europe. This was partly a publicity trip for his new film, and partly a pleasure trip to see the usual sights: London, Paris, etc. But Lloyd's itinerary had an unusual quirk: he hoped to trace his ancestors in the Blyth area.

Though we think of his image as a dyed-in-the-wool American boy, there were not so many generations separating Lloyd from his ancestral family in the UK. He was descended from a family named Fraser; originally from Scotland, they had moved across the border to Northumberland and settled for a while. Lloyd's grandfather James Fraser set sail for America from Blyth in the 1850s.

Lloyd was intrigued by the obscure corner of Northern England from where his ancestors had travelled from. By early October, reports were filtering through that he might make a visit to the Northumberland coast in search for any surviving relatives, or simply to see the places his family came from.

The rumours caused quite a stir around the town. A short hop down the coast, Tynemouth and South Shields had recently basked in the glory of *their* local boy made good, Stan Laurel; Blyth and Ashington weren't going to miss their chance to share in a bit of Hollywood glamour<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, as local newspapers are wont to do, the Blyth News & Ashington Post went to town on the story, printing a steady stream of updates, letters and opinions. The incongruity of a major Hollywood star visiting a town like Blyth is shown nowhere better than in the newspaper's front pages, where updates on Harold are comically nestled between such headlines as "Dog Society's Inaugural Outing", "Church Social activities", "New Sanitary Inspector" and, I kid you not, "Wilful damage to Leeks!"<sup>2</sup>

The edition dated October 6<sup>th</sup> carried the following report:

### EXCITEMENT AHEAD.

One point that is agitating Blyth over the expected visit of Harold Lloyd, minus his familiar goggles, when he comes in search of his long-lost relatives, is whether the Mayor shall accord him a civic welcome and entertain the screen star at a luncheon, or whether the famous comedian, reputed to have quite a few dollars of his own, should set a new fashion in handing out the invitations to a "splash" of his own!

The writer had to admit that he had little solid facts to go on,

It is whispered that there is a sharp division among the members of the Borough Council over this. Exactly how many local relatives Harold will find is quite uncertain.

Photos of his supposed ancestors are being dug up, and it is claimed that even below the bewhiskered countenance of a former Fraser can be traced the same facial outline that Harold himself possesses.

1. Blyth actually had its own connection to Laurel: his father 'A.J.' Jefferson built and ran the town's Theatre Royal in 1900.
2. You'll be pleased to know that the leek vandals were apprehended!



Above: scenes from Harold's visit to Ashington Colliery, preserved in a Paramount Newsreel.

concluding his report by saying *"For the present then, all is excitement and uncertainty"*.

Things went on in a similar vein for several weeks, with no little outrage when a report filtered through that Lloyd was actually returning to America. However, he was still planning his visit and finally a date was set for early December.

The sense of excitement is palpable through the newspaper reports. Not missing a trick, the local Theatre Royal began showing non-stop matinees of Lloyd's *WELCOME DANGER*, with *MOVIE CRAZY* booked to follow. Meanwhile, plans for a civic reception were laid on, and a visit organised to nearby Ashington Colliery.

Lloyd finally arrived in the area on Tuesday, December 6th. At Newcastle's Central station, he was met off the train by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Blyth, as well as the local representative from Paramount. The party had breakfast at the Station Hotel, and then took a car on to Blyth, so Harold could get down to the business of genealogy.

His first port of call was to visit 'Sea View', the house where his grandfather lived. Then, it was on to St Cuthbert's churchyard, where other Fraser family members were buried. Next on his whistle stop tour, Harold was whisked away to nearby Ashington. He had apparently been keen to see a working coal mine, and was given a full tour by the Colliery Manager, Mr Hindson. He was also greeted by a crowd of miners who had been waiting several hours to meet him, since the end of their night shift.

Lloyd and his party descended into the pit workings, and covered more than two miles underground. A *Blyth News* reporter accompanied them, and observed Lloyd *"hewing himself a piece of coal in the underground workings [...] which he did with the charming grin characteristic of his screen performances"*. Always an animal lover, Lloyd was especially interested in the pit ponies, and the newest was named 'Harold' in his honour.

Newsreel cameras from British Pathé were on hand as the party emerged from the pit. Harold's boyish enthusiasm for learning about new things was fully on show as beamed for the cameras holding his newly extracted lump of coal, *"This coal we got out of the very depths of the mine... and I can assure you that I'll put that in our archives, and treasure it always"*.

Not captured on the existing film is a moment where Lloyd *"apologised to manager for Mr Hindson for having induced him to take part in the dialogue. "I'm sorry for making a picture actor out of you" he said, "but then, you have made me into a miner!"*

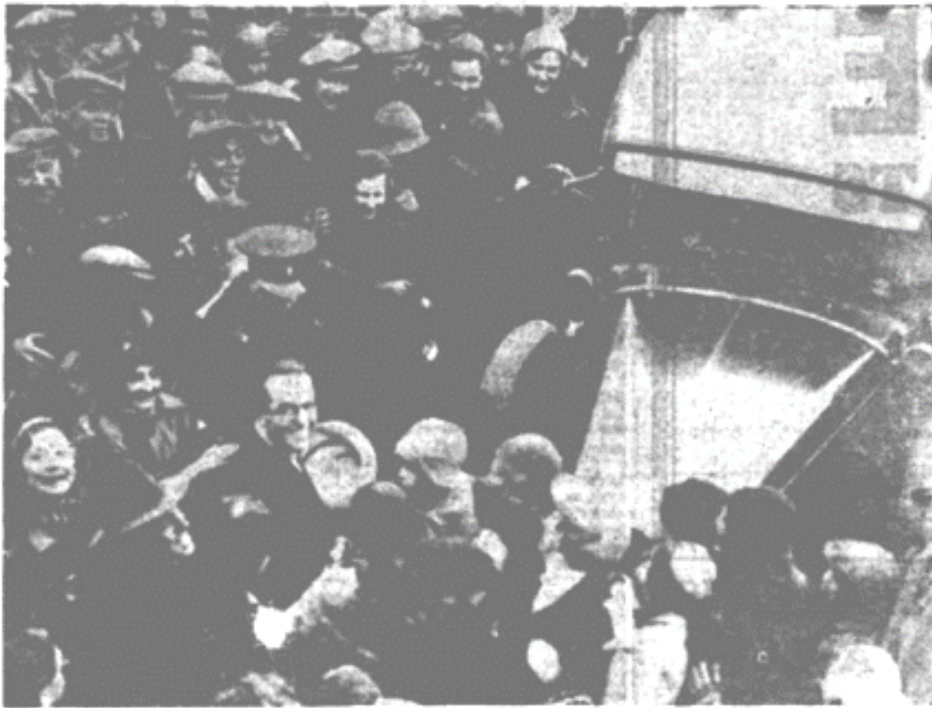
Cleaned up from his adventure, Harold headed back into Blyth for a civic reception. Though not on the scale of the masses greeting Laurel & Hardy, there was certainly an enthusiastic local welcome awaiting him in the town. Despite the bitter weather, large crowds were waiting to greet the star as his car pulled up outside Blyth's public library. A photo captioned *"Mobbed by Girls!"* shows the hectic scene of fans trying to grab a glimpse of Lloyd, and again *Blyth News* painted a vivid picture:

*As soon as his car stopped, the crowd gave "Three Cheers for Harold", and the star responded with what he called "a real American Whoopie!", which sent the crowds into roars of laughter.*

*The crowds besieged his car, and women were to the fore in trying to get a glimpse of the famous film star. One old lady pushed his head through the open window of his car and remarked, "Hinny, he looks just like he is on the pictures!"*

Indeed, Harold looked more like this screen character than usual; the photos and newsreels show him wearing his familiar horn-rimmed glasses, which he did not need to wear in real life. Perhaps he didn't want to disappoint the film fans, or risk

## MOBBED BY GIRLS



Excited girls mobbed and tried to kiss Harold Lloyd, as he attempted to get to his car from the Blyth Council Chambers; and it was some time before it could proceed to Washington, ancestral home of the famous American.

## Sensational News

**THEATRE ROYAL, Blyth.**

**HAROLD LLOYD**

KING OF COMEDIANS,

will VISIT BLYTH on Dec. 5th or 6th

To commemorate his visit we are running

**DAILY MATINEES of**

**"WELCOME DANGER"**

(Matinees only) commencing

**MONDAY NEXT December 5th**



Harold is mobbed as he leaves the Blyth council chambers; The Theatre Royal (seen above in the 1920s) was quick to capitalise on his visit.

not being recognised!

Inside the reception, Harold was also presented with photographs of some potential living relatives to see if he could spot a resemblance, and several of them came down to meet him. We can only wonder what went on at this meeting, with no doubt some of the locals anxiously grasping at straws to claim a connection to a famous star! Afterwards, Lloyd was reticent to confirm any definite relations. Asked if he had found any new cousins, his response was only "No, I cannot say that I have". Nevertheless, he was upbeat about the visit. To a standing ovation, he told the assembled crowd that he was very proud that his family had come from Blyth:

*I have certainly had a very great thrill in coming here today and in planting my feet on the ground and in the home that my ancestors emanated from. I want to assure you that when I return to America I will closely treasure the memory of this visit.*

Summing up the visit, Blyth News was equally positive:

*Harold, genial with everybody, full of good humour and wearing a never-ending smile, contented himself with leaving a good impression behind him.*

After being whisked away from the reception, Harold still had one more port of call on his North-east history trail: the small town of Washington, ancestral home of George Washington's family. Thereafter, his European visit returned to a more conventional itinerary of sightseeing, fancy restaurants and publicity, before he returned to Hollywood for Christmas.

Now that the party was over, the writer had a distinctly deflated air as normality returned. The final mention of Harold Lloyd's visit to Blyth concludes reflectively:

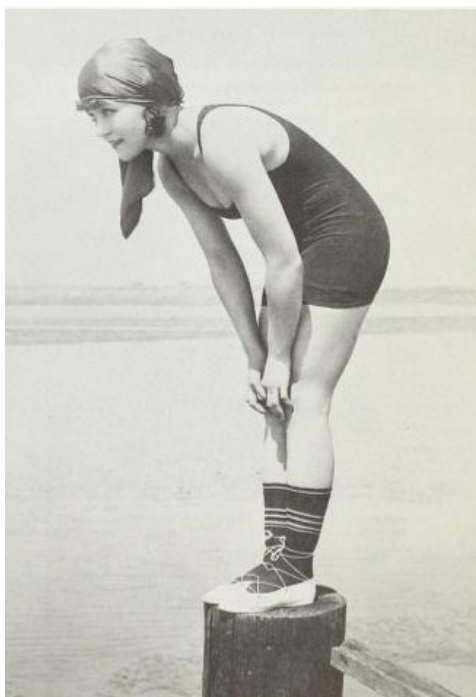
*And now, all is quiet and serene on the Northern front. The last exciting chapter of a long-drawn out story is ended. Now, Hollywood – and more pictures.*

On the 'Northern Front', life returned to the clatter of machines, the whistles of steamboats and the bustle of church social activities. This brief chapter in the town's history has been largely forgotten, but somewhere on those Northern streets, one of the greatest American film comedians once, briefly, wandered up and down.

A black and white portrait of Marie Prevost, a classic Hollywood actress. She has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a light-colored, textured fur collar. She is looking slightly to her left with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting near her chin. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

**SHE WAS A  
WINNER!**

REVISITING THE COMEDY CAREER OF  
**MARIE PREVOST**



**A triptych of Marie's career at Mack Sennett's Fun Factory!**

Before Clara Bow had “It”, there was Marie Prevost. In a string of now-forgotten comedies, Marie revelled in playing sexy, empowered women who cast off the shawl of Edwardian decorum to breeze their way through the 1920s. In these films, the good humour and liberation of the flapper era absolutely pops off the screen when she shimmies across the sets.

Sadly, Marie's exuberance and talent has been almost forgotten in the wake of her decline and fall. If she is mentioned at all today, it is as a footnote, a cautionary tale. She died alone, an alcoholic, not even 40 years old. This would be tragic enough, but the myth machine subsequently went into overdrive thanks to Kenneth Anger's dreadful book *Hollywood Babylon*. With his pathological aversion to facts and research, Anger produced a ghoulish account of Marie's last years and untimely death in the late 1930s. Songwriter Nick Lowe in turn based a song on Anger's article: 'Mary Provost' not only did Marie the indignity of misspelling her name, but gave her the ignominious epitaph, "She was the winner, who became the doggy's dinner". This catchy sound-bite has, unfortunately, stuck.

Of course it's tragic that anyone should die so young, especially in unhappy circumstances. However, it is equally tragic that society's morbid fascination with scandal and gossip has allowed Marie's sad end to overshadow her talent. It's time the focus was moved to her flair for comedy, a field in which she really was a winner.

For Marie was a wonderful comedienne. Each of her performances was full of life, and she could do a heck of a lot with a smile, a wink, or a sly, sideways glance. Most importantly, she never seems to be taking anything too seriously in her films, and a wry humour always bubbles just below the surface. No less an artist than Ernst Lubitsch picked her as one of the best actresses in America, and she was certainly versatile. After all, how many performers can you name who could equally meet the requirements of Lubitsch, Mack Sennett and F Scott Fitzgerald? Over her twenty year screen career, Marie proved equally adept at comic leading lady, flapper roles, sophisticated farces and literary drama.

Prevost was born in Sarnia, Canada in 1896. (At the height of her fame in the 1920s, she wryly remarked that "Sarnia doesn't seem too proud of that fact"). Around the turn of the century, her family moved across the border to Denver, and ultimately to Los Angeles. The teenage Marie had no particular aspirations to be in pictures, but on a visit to the Sennett studios, was offered some extra work and subsequently talent-spotted. She later recalled the fateful day for Motion Picture World: "I asked for Mr. Sennett and was ushered in right away. He looked very stern as I walked into his office. I was ready to cry. Suddenly, he smiled. 'I want your signature today. Sign right here.' I suddenly realized the paper he pushed in front of me was a contract. I was to be one of his Sennett Bathing Beauties. Best of all I was to be paid \$15 a week. I signed without reading a word. Fifteen dollars was a lot of money."

As well as her natural good looks, Marie had the asset of being a very keen swimmer, which made her ideal as one of Sennett's Bathing Beauties. Alongside Phyllis Haver, Gloria Swanson and Mary Thurman, she became prominent as one of the main comic leading ladies at the Sennett studio, not to mention in eye-catching publicity photos. It's difficult to pinpoint Marie's early roles with Sennett, thanks to the poor survival rate of many of the films. The frenetic nature of surviving entries also makes it quite hard to pinpoint individual actresses. However, it seems that she began around 1916, with *A SCOUNDREL'S TOLL* being one of her earliest cited appearances.

By 1918, Prevost was taking on more prominent roles. She later recalled Sennett's maxim that "comedy is made of pretty girls and homely men in predicaments"<sup>1</sup>. Gurning Charlie Murray and the miasmic Ben Turpin certainly counted as homely types, and Marie's 'pretty girl' often served as the protagonist for their comedies: a source of temptation for wayward husbands, or inciting comic rivalries between the male leads.

1. Interview with James Frederic Smith, *Photoplay*, July 1922

In *THE DENTIST*, she visits Charlie Murray's dental surgery, but his wife quickly becomes suspicious when she catches them there together. *SLEUTHS* was a vehicle for the erstwhile team of Turpin & Heinie Conklin; Marie played their stenographer, who is ultimately more competent than either of them and catches the gang of crooks herself. A sequel, *HIDE & SEEK, DETECTIVES*, was also made with the same cast.

*LOVE'S FALSE FACES* puts Marie centre stage as a boarding house keeper with a lazy husband (James Finlayson) and an admirer (Chester Conklin). Finlayson and Conklin's rivalry escalates when Marie suddenly inherits a fortune.

The roles came more prominent as Marie's star rose in 1918 and 1919, and soon she was given roles in Sennett's early feature attempts. *YANKEE DOO-DLE IN BERLIN* (1919) is a WWI comedy, which was unfortunately timed, as the war ended while it was being filmed. The main star is female impersonator Bothwell Browne, with Marie billed third, and not having that much to do. The whole film is something of a disappointment.

Much better was *DOWN ON THE FARM* (1920). Although Marie's role is only for one scene with James Finlayson, it's undoubtedly the funniest part of the picture. Fin is in typical villainous mode, arriving to demand payment of rent. Marie is struggling to remove a pie from the oven as he arrives; having nothing to hold the hot dish with, she kneels down and uses the bottom of her dress as makeshift oven gloves. As Fin enters, she suddenly realises that she cannot stand up to put the pie on the table without lifting her dress and exposing herself to him.

Her darting glances as the realisation hits, and her attempts to manoeuvre the pie as it burns a hole through a dress, are hilariously well-played. Fin then attempts to force his attentions on Marie, leading to an amusing chase through the house. "My big strong husband will fix you!" yells Marie; just in time a banging at the door heralds Hubby's return. Fin barricades the door and cowers before the husband finally breaks through: he is scrawny little Ben Turpin! Fin doubles over with laughter, but Turpin does indeed throw him out of the house.

*A SMALL TOWN IDOL* (1921) survives in a cut down version only. The story of Ben Turpin's trip to Hollywood, it features Marie as movie star Marcelle Mansfield. She has a wonderful entrance scene, sashaying across a studio floor, backlit, in an elaborate beaded costume, nonchalantly walking a lion behind her.<sup>2</sup>

*CALL A COP* was a short, but gave Marie one of her biggest roles at Sennett. In a change from her usual homely co-stars, she was paired with George O' Hara in a romantic comedy. Shortly afterwards, Marie was sought out by Universal. With much fanfare, the studio put her in a string of Flapper-exploitation comedy dramas. Considering she had usually been part of ensemble star casts at Sennett, it was a big leg-up to suddenly gain a starring feature contract, with her name over the title.

Marie's films for Universal were forerunners of the kind of frothy, lively films that Clara Bow would soon make. Unfortunately, most of them are now lost. Her first for Universal, *MOONLIGHT FOLLIES*, set the tone. Marie played a high-spirited girl whose father demands she settle down and marries; she sets out on the challenge of winning over a woman-hating millionaire. *Moving Picture World* noted that while the story was "the thinnest possible for a five reel picture, it allows Miss Prevost to show off her beauty [...], magnetism and a surprising amount of acting ability". Exhibitors Herald concurred, its review concluding that "Marie Prevost's stardom is assured". As well as the positive reviews, the making of *MOONLIGHT FOLLIES* also brought Marie some extra publicity when her swimming skill helped her save director King Baggot from drowning on location.

The next film, *DON'T GET PERSONAL*, featured Marie as chorus girl Patricia Parker, who heads to the country to get away from hectic city life, but soon ends up embroiled in trying to save a man from the village vamp. At Universal, 'Boy Wonder' Irving Thalberg took a particular interest in Marie's career. He was keen to establish her as a more sophisticated star, and publicity sought to distance her from her roughhouse past at Sennett. Symbolically, she burned her bathing suit in public at Coney Island.

Moving again to Warners, Marie was given chances to try her hand at increasingly sophisticated dramas, culminating in the prestigious adaptation of F Scott Fitzgerald's



2. This scene is a bit of a precursor to Mabel Normand's similar scene in *THE EXTRA GIRL*. (1923)



*Bathing suits gave way to books as Universal attempted to cultivate a more sophisticated image for Marie in the early 20s...*

novel *THE BEAUTIFUL & DAMNED*. Though Fitzgerald himself loathed the bastardization of his novel into a movie, it was a smash success. Marie's co-star in the film was her real-life love interest, Kenneth Harlan. Warners were keen that they should be married on set, but the publicity backfired when it emerged that Marie was already secretly married! Though she and husband Sonny Gerke had gone their separate years ago, there had never been a divorce, as Marie didn't want her mother to know about the marriage. The *Los Angeles Mirror* had got hold of the story, generating a heap of negative publicity.

Warners were livid, and the scandal certainly damaged Prevost's status at the studio. Nevertheless, she continued in high profile roles, the next being in *BRASS*. This was the first of several roles opposite Monte Blue, a serious romantic drama of a young couple's marriage problems, based on a novel by Charles Gilmore Norris.

In studio publicity, much was made of the fact that Marie was now making "important" pictures based on novels. However, a 1922 interviewer from *Photoplay* found that she was not at all serious, wanting "to do comedy, like *Connie Talmadge*, only more so—if you know what I mean"

Prevost's last two roles had been her most prominent and sophisticated to date, catching the eye of the brilliant director Ernst Lubitsch. Lubitsch handpicked her to be featured in his next three films, saying "she is a good actress. She has life and animation and emotion. But she's got humour, too. No actress is good in a heavy role unless she also has a sense of humour"<sup>3</sup>.

The next few years brought the peak of Marie's career in a series of well-polished comedies.

Lubitsch's *THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE* (1924) is a classic silent farce of two couples and their indiscretions. Franz and Charlotte (Monte Blue and Florence Vidor) are blissfully married, but the marriage of Charlotte's old friend Mizzi to Professor Stock (Adolphe Menjou) is in stark contrast.

The first scene between Prevost and Menjou is an absolute masterpiece of simmering comic frustration. The tense atmosphere between the two is absolutely perceptible, but at the same time very funny, and with wonderful timing.

On her way to visit Charlotte, who she has not seen for years, Marie ends up sharing a taxi with Franz, and mistakenly believes he is flirting with her. Meanwhile, Stock sees her with him and is delighted that he now has a reason to get a

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3. 'When Lubitsch Directs'; *Motion Picture Classic* magazine, February 1924. I've removed the dreadfully patronising approximation of Lubitsch's accent that the original article quoted in!





**WARNER BROS.**  
Classics of the Screen

**KISS  
ME  
AGAIN**



AN **ERNST LUBITSCH** PRODUCTION

Marie & Monte Blue were memorably paired in several films, peaking with two Lubitsch comedies, **THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE** (top) and **KISS ME AGAIN**.



Scenes from the peak of Marie's career in the mid-20s; *UP IN MABEL'S ROOM* was one of her biggest hits.

divorce. To this end, he engages hapless detective Harry Myers to follow Franz, but Myers soon finds himself tangled up in the case more than he would like... Things are complicated even further by Franz' business partner Gustav (Creighton Hale), who secretly loves Charlotte.

The performances of all the actors are absolutely wonderful, and Lubitsch's direction brings out the best in them. As the capricious, sexually charged Mizzi, Marie makes a daunting vamp. Despite her tantrums and disgraceful behaviour toward her friends, she somehow makes the character sympathetic.

Lubitsch was impressed with Prevost. He retained Marie for his next two films. *THREE WOMEN* (1925) was a dramatic film, with Marie as 'the other woman'. *KISS ME AGAIN* as a return to Lubitsch's more familiar comic ground, and also featured Clara Bow, a star who would soon surpass Prevost. Marie played LouLou, a married woman who develops a crush on a handsome musician. She asks her husband (Monte Blue) for a divorce; this is the last thing he wants but calls her bluff and, through clever manoeuvring, makes her change her mind.

Motion Picture Magazine's review was impressive: *Not much of a story, but director Lubitsch, Marie Prevost, Monte Blue and Clara Bow make this one of the greatest comedies ever produced. You must not miss this!*"

Sadly, modern audiences have no option but to miss the film; no copies are currently known to exist.

Marie had very much enjoyed working with Lubitsch; "To work even one scene under his direction is not only an education, but a revelation,"<sup>4</sup> she said. The three films she made with the director had raised Prevost to the peak of her career, but the beginning of 1926 brought trouble. Said to be still livid about the 'Bigamy' incident, Warners dropped both Prevost and Harlan, beginning a strain on their marriage.

Though Prevost soon found a new contract to star in comedies for Cecil B De Mille's PDC company, worse was to come. In February, her mother Hughina Prevost was killed in an auto accident. Marie had always been very close to her mother, and the death absolutely shattered her. The joint strains of bereavement, marriage trouble and career worries began to tell over the next few years. Existing interviews with Marie reveal a somewhat shy, self-deprecating person, rather in the shadow of her mother, and one senses the fact that she didn't have the tough exterior needed for stardom. Certainly, her coping strategies were inadequate to deal with her current stresses; before long she was self-medicating with alcohol and developed binge-eating problems.

Nevertheless, despite the dark clouds hovering over her personal life, Marie's excellent work continued, and the run of PDC films solidify her reputation as an excellent comic actor. If not as sophisticated as the Lubitsch films, the string of comedies that resulted are lots of fun, bubbly and fast-paced. Essentially they match the raciness of the Lubitsch faces with the fast action of her Sennett days, in a carefree world of engagements, Parisian romances, misunderstandings, old flames and teasing vamps. They should certainly be revived more often and seen in decent quality prints once again.

First of the PDC films was *UP IN MABEL'S ROOM*. Director Christie had previously had successes with adapting stage farces such as *CHARLEY'S AUNT* to the screen, and now turned his attention to the popular play by Wilson Collison and Otto Harbach.<sup>5</sup>

4. 'When Lubitsch Directs'; Motion Picture Classic magazine, February 1924

5. Christie had actually been at the wheel of the car in the accident that killed Marie's mother. Working with him must have caused mixed emotions for her, to say the least.

Marie plays Mabel, a vamp given to indulging whims and mood swings; a warmer and more sympathetic variation on her character in the Lubitsch films. While abroad in Paris, she has undergone a speedy holiday marriage to Garry Ainsworth (Harrison Ford), but has divorced him equally quickly, when she finds him in possession of some racy lingerie. Of course, it turns out that this was a present for her, but Mabel never gave him a chance to explain. Realising her mistake when she sees that the slip is embroidered "To Mabel from Garry", she sets her heart on getting him back.

Garry, wounded by the experience, has kept his marriage a secret from his friends, and resisted all other romances. At a party, mutual friends result in Garry and Mabel both being present. Despite his reticence, she vamps him, and tells him that she will remarry him one day, "unless some other woman gets there first". Desperate to resist Mabel, Garry makes sure another woman does get there first: he proposes to Phyllis (Phyllis Haver), who has been chasing him for a while.

Mabel isn't so easily deterred, and that evening she arrives at his flat, threatening to show Phyllis the slip. Garry decides he must retrieve the garment: cue lots of sneaking around in bedrooms and corridors! Mabel receives a wire telling her that the divorce wasn't final; the pair are still married. They reconcile, and Garry asks her what happened to the slip.. Coyly, Mabel indicates that she is wearing it as the pair embrace for the fadeout.

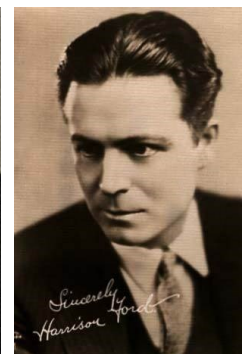
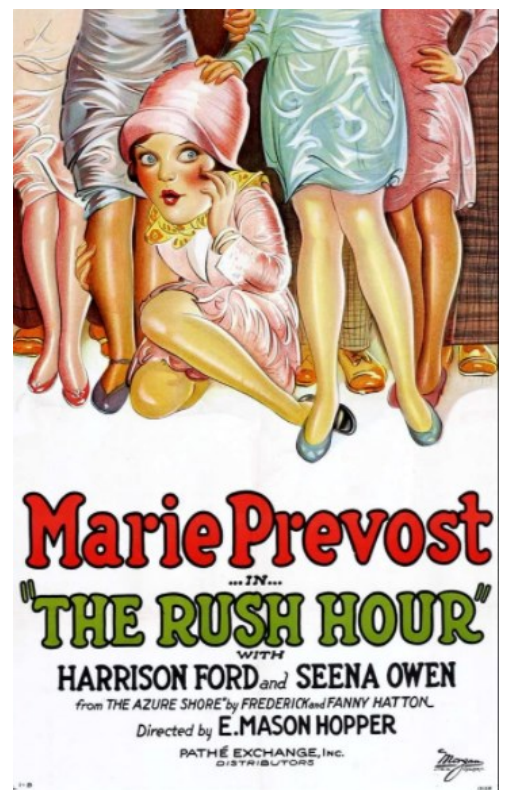
UP IN MABEL'S ROOM was a success, and provided a template for Marie's comedies for PDC. Soon, the series settled in to a pleasant formula. Using her characters in THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE and UP IN MABEL'S ROOM as a basis, Marie portrayed a series of vamps, fickle brides and ex-wives. She had a real skill at bringing these characters to life. On paper, they are temperamental, capricious types who think nothing of getting divorces or wrecking marriages to satisfy their whims. Yet somehow, with her playful qualities and a sparkle in her eye, she made them likeable. As Photoplay put it, she portrayed "gay insolence and pouting sulkiness [in] her sophisticated heroines". Marie Prevost's characters are all powerful, liberated woman who turn the tables on the normally male-led romances. Her great saucer eyes vividly convey her shifting emotions, from lust, to pouting, to a devilish delight in making the male characters at her mercy!

Marie isn't afraid to take a tumble in these films either, and there is no shortage of action, in contrast to many tediously paced farces of the time. Her films also benefitted from a fine stock company – nervous, fumbling Harrison Ford was often the victim of her vamping, while henpecked husband Harry Myers looked on and prissy Franklin Pangborn got caught in the mess. They were all great foils for Marie, perfect at being exasperated and emasculated by her forceful personality.

With regular supporting comics, fast moving scenes and a sprinkling of some good sight gags, the feel of these films is not unlike the Hal Roach Comedies of the time, and they remain very watchable, even if some of the contemporary taboos of bedroom farce now seem a bit mild.

GETTING GERTIE'S GARTER is the best of the surviving examples. Based on another play by Wilson Collison, it has a similar setup to UP IN MABEL'S ROOM. Marie plays Gertie Darling, newly engaged to the prissy Algy (Franklin Pangborn). However, she has a bit of a secret – a valuable jewelled garter that was given to her as a gift by her previous fiancée Ken Walrick (Charles Ray), with both of their photographs inlaid. On her return to New York, Gertie wants to give it back to Ken, but has to keep it hidden from Algy first.

Ken, however, doesn't want it back. He bought the garter thinking it was a rather less racy bracelet; furthermore, he's now engaged himself, and doesn't need a garter with his face on messing things up! Eventually he agrees to take it back to dispose of it, but the pair's attempts to meet up and make the hand-over are constantly thwarted. The attempts of the two ex-flames to keep the garter hidden from their increasingly suspicious other halves works up to a fine frantic tempo, culminating in a weekend party at a country house. Ken



From top: Marie in *GETTING GERTIE'S GARTER*, her best comedy; a poster for 1928's *THE RUSH HOUR*; two of Prevost's regular comic foils, Franklin Pangborn and Harrison Ford.

manages to lose his trousers and hides inside a Grandfather clock. Subsequently, the garter gets lost in a hay loft; in the search, Marie falls in a tub of water and has to remove her dress. At this moment, all the characters start to converge on the barn, all convinced that something is going on... The last two reels of the film are a fast-moving free-for-all, full of action and silly sight gags. The supporting characters come in to their own as well as they punctuate the action, with Harry Myers and his wife constantly bickering and valet William Orlamond giggling inappropriately through the whole situation. Well-directed and acted by all concerned, **GETTING GERTIE'S GARTER** is one of the most successful mixtures of light comedy and farce with sight gags and just the right amount of slapstick. If Hal Roach had made comic features in 1927, they might well have looked like this.



*Reunited with Sennett colleague Ford Sterling in the Vitaphone throwback **KEYSTONE HOTEL** (1935)*

Though none of the other existing features are quite this good, they remain amusing. Prevoist is back to playing the ex-wife in **THE GIRL IN THE PULLMAN**. Her ex-husband, a doctor, (Harrison Ford) has just become re-engaged to Katherine McGuire as Marie arrives back in town.

Much to his discomfort (and the suspicion of his new mother-in-law), they keep bumping into each other everywhere. Keen to get away, Harrison and Katherine get away on a Pullman train for California, planning to be married at the other end. However, Marie gets a letter telling her that their divorce isn't yet finalised, and so sets off in pursuit on the Pullman to save Harrison from a bigamous marriage. She insists that lawyer Harry Myers joins her, but Myers isn't too crazy about the idea of getting away with another woman as his own wife is incredibly jealous. Nevertheless, he finds himself coerced into posing as Marie's bride so that they can get a cabin aboard the train. The constant switching of cabins, punctuated by Myers' attempts to escape, the increasingly drunken antics of a bootlegger in the next cabin and the constant interruptions of knowing porter Heinie Conklin, create lots of fast-paced situational humour. Ultimately, the car that the party are travelling in becomes detached from the train and runs away in an exciting climax, but all ends happily.

**THE RUSH HOUR** is less frantically funny than the other features, but does benefit from a variety of locations on board ship and around the Californian coast (standing in for the French Riviera) that make a pleasant change from the usual lounges, drawing rooms and bedrooms of the Prevoist farces.

**A BLONDE FOR A NIGHT** returned to the indoor settings with a vengeance, but is a lot of fun. Marie and Harrison Ford are newly married, but trouble soon enters in the form of Harrison's old Bachelor friend T Roy Barnes. Barnes' reminiscences about Harrison's predilection for blondes soon rub up the Brunette Marie the wrong way and the couple row furiously. With the help of her costume designer friend Franklin Pangborn, Marie decides to test her husband's fidelity; she adopts a blonde wig and hires the suite next to her husband's room in order to vamp him. Her performance is full of life and laughter, as she revels in the deception. Pangborn is excellent as always, too, his frustration rising as he gets rather too caught up in the situation, culminating him hiding under Marie's bed in a pair of borrowed silk pyjamas!

Unfortunately, the coming of sound was to be a death knell to these kind of fast-moving farces, and the Great Depression would put the boot in on such bubbly, carefree tales of upper-class fun, for a few years at least. Marie's career wasn't quite over yet, though.



After a serious role in **THE RACKET**, her next comic part was opposite Douglas Maclean in **DIVORCE MADE EASY** (1929) This part-sound, part-silent picture enabled her to sing on, but was clearly a bit of a demotion. Over the next few years, Prevoist slipped from being the centre of attention to having the role of the heroine's friend, then to smaller roles until she became pretty much anonymous. One of her last notable roles brought her full circle to the Sennett days. The 1935 short **KEYSTONE HOTEL** was a pastiche of the early comedies, featuring Marie alongside veterans like Ford Sterling, Ben Turpin and Hank Mann.

Sadly, this return to the carefree old days of Sennett was just a one-shot deal, and her decline continued as before. I have absolutely no wish to linger on her sad final years here, but it truly is a shame that Hollywood couldn't find a place for Marie Prevoist, and even more so that she was not able to find a happy outcome to her life. 39 years old was far too young to die.

Let's hope that Marie's legacy of laughter may one day be better remembered. It's not impossible. Consider Roscoe Arbuckle, for instance: for a long time largely remembered for scandals and tragedy, he has now been recognised as a true comedy pioneer, with many of his films released to DVD and enjoyed again. For Roscoe, the comedy has begun to overshadow the tragedy again. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the same could happen for Marie Prevoist?



# AL WHO?

## THE FORGOTTEN CAREER OF AL ALT

*In the last issue, we looked at the career of forgotten comedienne Wanda Wiley . Now we throw the light on one of her co-stars and sometime leading man, the obscure comic Al Alt...*

There are underappreciated silent comedians, and then there are truly forgotten ones. Al Alt definitely belongs to the latter group.

Alexander Alt, to give him his full name, was one of the many, many jobbing comics in the 1920s. He worked for independent companies like Reelcraft, Century and RayArt, as well as making a handful of films for Educational Pictures. Very few of his comedies seem to survive today, and even fewer circulate.

Alt was part of a vaudeville team with Helen Howell. Working together in Vaudeville, the pair made a series of several states-rights two-reelers for their own 'Union Film Company', finding States-rights distribution through Reelcraft in 1920. The series began with MARKED WOMEN, with other entries including YOU CAN'T TELL, IN 24 HOURS and LIQUORISH LIPS. The shorts were variously directed by Al Martin and Bobbie Burns, the latter of whom also took parts in the pictures.

When the series fizzled out, Al went on to appear in some of the Hall Room Boys comedies. This series about a pair of dapper down-and-outs had a revolving door policy on comics; as well as Al, Jimmie Adams, Neeley Edwards, Sid Smith, Harry McCoy, George Williams, Zip Monberg and others all took turns playing 'Percy & Ferdie'; two penniless college drop outs. Al replaced the similar-looking Sid Smith in the series in 1923. The famously penny-pinching Producer Harry Cohen persuaded Al to briefly change his surname to Smith, so that exhibitors wouldn't know any difference!

The dapper but embarrassed young character of Ferdie stuck with Al after he moved on from the Hall Room Boys films to Century Comedies. In fact, he became a bit like Century's version of Charley Chase: a pleasant young boyfriend or husband getting himself into awkward situations. As well as starring in his own comedies - sometimes teamed with Harry McCoy - he appeared as leading lady to Wanda Wiley in films like QUEEN OF ACES, and with the Century Follies girls in films like DANCING DAISIES.

Sadly, most of Century's comedies are now missing, so we can't see most of the comedies that Al made. Synopses and stills make them look quite interesting; like Wanda Wiley's shorts, Al's films largely mixed situation comedy with stunts and thrills.

HELPFUL AL is a typical example, in which Al innocently acquires a lost toddler in the back of his car. He does his best to reunite the youngster with her parents, but she keeps managing to escape and get into hair-raising situations, including being sent aloft with a bunch of helium balloons, and teetering on the edge of a cliff.

In PAGING A WIFE, Al & Hilliard Karr are caught speeding. Al pretends to be a doctor rushing to attend a sick mother and child, but when the traffic cop insists on accompanying them, they are forced to try and find a "patient"...

EAT & RUN starred Alt & Harry McCoy in charge of a bicycle-propelled lunch wagon, and also featured Max Davidson. Based on surviving stills, it looks like a lot of fun!

Al continued turning out these zippy little comedies at Century until early 1927. He made one last film with Wanda Wiley, THANKS FOR THE BOAT RIDE, before the two of them both left the company.

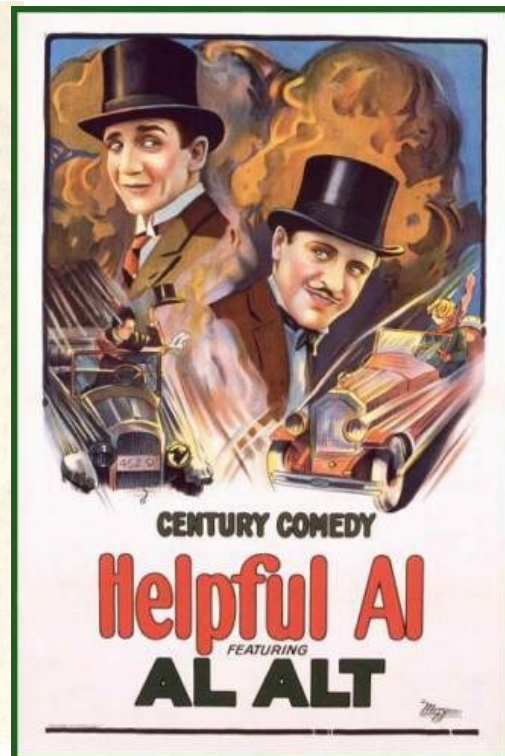
Next, Al moved over to RayArt, making films directed by (and sometimes co-starring) the diminutive comic Bobby Ray. At least one of these survives: THE MILLION DOLLAR DERBY (1926), This zany comedy features the delightfully ridiculous plot of Al having to wear a silly hat for 6 months in order to get an inheritance!



A FEW OF THE SIDE-SPLITTING SCENES IN "EAT AND RUN"



Al. Alt, Harry McCoy, Max Davidson and Bessie Welsh in their current Century



As well as short comedies, the Alt-Ray partnership extended to one feature film, REILLY OF THE RAINBOW DIVISION. Featuring Al and Creighton Hale as buddies who enlist, this WWI comedy was rather reminiscent of a short that Hale had recently made with Mabel Normand, ONE HOUR MARRIED. Al & Creighton are sent overseas on the eve of their dual wedding, but their fiancées aren't so easily deterred... Disguising themselves in uniform, they stow away with the soldiers; the reunited quartet ultimately foil a group of enemy spies.

Alt & Ray apparently tried to jump on the bandwagon of comics like Monty Banks & Syd Chaplin making films in Britain - *Variety's* London correspondent of Nov 15th 1928 reports them on holiday in London and trying to raise interest in a feature. They had no luck, but Al's adventures in independent films had extended to one other starring feature. Made without Ray, DEVIL DOGS was another WWI comedy featuring the one-time team of Alt & Stuart Holmes. It was an extremely low-budget affair, and received an utterly coruscating review from *Film Daily*:

*Touted as a war comedy, it is vulgar and impossible. [...] The offering is so cheap and tawdry that it barely merits space for reviewing, but just to complete the records, it is being covered herewith".*

Ouch. Despite this, the reviewer singled out Al as the only merit in the film, noting that "Al Alt has potential". Luckily for Al, someone at Educational pictures thought so, Soon after, he was signed to the studio's Cameo comedies unit. Educational was on a high at the time, with many talented comedy creators on the staff, and these were Al's most prestigious films since the Century films.

The Cameos were efficient one reelers that milked simple situations for gags. Al's CONTENTED WIVES was a typical example; like Wallace Lupino's cameo short THE LOST LAUGH, it featured a simple domestic setting where all the household utensils cause problems for the comic. In CONTENTED WIVES, Al struggles manfully with folding tables and kitchen appliances while trying to prepare breakfast for his wife. RUBBING IT IN follows his attempts to dress for a theatre show, only to find that the show is over by the time he arrives,

LUCKY BREAKS was slightly more elaborate. Al played a sailor on shore leave who has all sorts of troubles with his belongings on the train ride home. *Film Daily* praised the short: "His bundles become unwieldy and almost animated. The way that Al retrieves them, apologises to passengers and registers confusion and embarrassment is a joy to behold"

Al's work in the Cameo comedies was well received, and he was promoted to a starring role in a two-reel mermaid comedy. TOP SPEED centred around the rivalry between . It was, however, to be his only starring two-reeler for Educational.

In reviewing LUCKY BREAKS, Raymond Ganly had noted that "This Al Alt person has swooped across the short comedy horizon and it looks as though he is going to make 'em all sit up and take notice before very long."



Sadly for Al, it was really too late in the game for anyone to take notice of a new silent comedian, and he was lost in the shuffle of the talkie revolution. Though he made a couple of cheap indie two reelers in the East (RELATIONS and THE PEST) his starring career was fading out. He returned to Educational for a few bit parts in films like TWO BLACK CROWS IN AFRICA, but then moved behind the scenes. Initially working as an editor, he worked up to be assistant director on a number of films and kept busy into the 1950s and 60s.

He lived on until 1992, and in his old age got to know Tony Belmont, of the National Comedy Hall of Fame. Tony recalls:

*I met Al Alt in 1989. I found him to be delightful and extremely knowledgeable in the field of movies and comedy. I asked him from his point of view why he never made it to the top? His answer was interesting: it was money! He said they were always on a shoe-string budget, and when you are working with pennies, you get what you paid for.*

*He went on to say although he felt some of the people he worked with had great talent the scripts, production equipment, and over budgets left a lot to be desired. He tried for many years to get investors but it just wasn't in the cards. He enjoyed making comedies but always felt they could have been better with more money for props, talent, etc*

*A short time later a package arrived at my home. When I opened it, I was stunned! It contained one of the best scrapbooks of that era. With great pictures, news clips, and stories. I decided that although the focus of the National Comedy Hall of Fame Museum is on the nationally know great comedians throughout American history I would make an exception and find a place for Al Alt.*



While Al Alt is unlikely to ever be rediscovered as a master comedian, he's another one of the silent comedy terracotta army who added to the richness of the era and is worth a second look. Perhaps if more of his films turn up, we'll be able to judge him a bit more fairly.



Top: Harold Goodwin, Al & Babe London in TOP SPEED (1929)

Above: Al as a hapless sailor in LUCKY BREAKS (1929)

Right: Al & Bobby Ray on the set of their independent RayArt series. Photo from Al Alt's scrapbook, courtesy of Tony Belmont.

# They Laughed To Win!

## THE WACKY WORLD OF THE MASQUERS CLUB COMEDIES

Some of the most unusual comedy shorts to emerge in the 1930s were produced by The Masquers Club of Hollywood. Founded in 1925, the Masquers was an idiosyncratic Actors' club seeking to maintain the spirit of the old theatre and pantomime. As they put it, "to talk of footlights instead of klieg lights". Rather like the British 'Water Rats' society of music hall and Variety stars, the club proudly hailed the old traditions of the Harlequinade, electing a new 'harlequin' as leader and spokesperson each year.

It was a fun and irreverent organisation, which took pride in its annual "Revels" – shows where the performers would put on skits and burlesques. Harry Langdon, Roscoe Arbuckle, Laurel & Hardy, Charley Chase and Buster Keaton were just some of the famous comedians among the many actors, directors and gagmen in the Masquers' ranks. With so much cinematic talent making up the membership, it was perhaps inevitable that some filmed product would result.

As early as April 1930, *Variety* carried a report that the club had "made a proposition to Warners to record its annual Revel. The idea is to split up the various skits, etc, into talking shorts."

Nothing came of the idea, but early the following year, the club organised its first filmed effort, as a charity effort for the NVA week.

The resulting film was *THE STOLEN JOOLS*, which drew on not only Masquers members, but stars from many major Hollywood studios, who waived loan-out fees. This fun, oddball little short is well-known among old film fans thanks to its impressive all-star cast: Norma Shearer, Buster Keaton, Wallace Beery, Edward G Robinson, the Our Gang kids, Wheeler & Woolsey, El Brendel and Polly Moran were just some of the many stars appearing. In particular, the presence of Laurel & Hardy in the film has led to it being widely distributed on budget compilations.

While the charitable purpose of the film is undoubted, it's possible that the Masquers also used *THE STOLEN JOOLS* as a sort of pilot for making films of their own. *THE STOLEN JOOLS* was released in Easter Week, 1931, and at the beginning of May the Masquers announced that they would be making a series of two-reel comedies for release through RKO/Pathé.

The reasons for this Busman's holiday were not purely artistic. As the depression bit, the club was on rather dire financial straits, needing to bankroll its new clubhouse. Making the series of comedies was a novel solution to the problem – putting the 'fun' in 'fundraising'!

The series debuted with *STOUT HANDS & WILLING HEARTS*, released in June of 1931. "Just like the old timers". Screenland put it, the film "spoofs the melodrama of *Little Nell* and all the etceteras". *Motion Picture Herald* described the etceteras in more detail: *Keystone Cops*, the villain, the gal and a mortgage".

There was much publicity given to the return of the *Keystone Kops*; in one photograph fellow *Keystone* veteran Roscoe Arbuckle was photographed with them. He didn't appear in the film, but may have possibly contributed some gags.

The next film proved to be an anomaly in the series in that it was almost entirely a star vehicle, rather than an ensemble piece. *OH! OH! CLEOPATRA* stars Wheeler & Woolsey in a historical spoof. For years the surviving print of this film was thought destroyed, with only the audio survived. It's now thought that the print may still exist, but only the audio has surfaced for public consumption. It preserves the flavour, and allows us to sample Wheeler & Woolsey's verbal humour, if not the wacky visuals which surely accompanied it.

The short begins at a Masquers Club banquet, where among the guests are Max Davidson and Jimmy Finlayson (Finlayson may be heard speaking a quick line of dialogue in the surviving audio). A Professor Swinestein appears at the banquet, telling

Tuesday, June 2, 1931 VARIETY 19

**THE OLD FIGHTIN' COCK**

Presents something NEW  
in comedies

6

**MASQUERS COMEDIES**

Produced by Masquers Club of Hollywood

100 HOLLYWOOD HEADLINERS  
IN EVERY CAST

The First Release  
**STOUT HEARTS AND WILLING HANDS**  
Story by Al Austin and Walter Weema • Directed by Bryan Fox

FRANK FAY	LEW CODY
LAURA LA PLANTE	ALEC B. FRANCIS
MARY CARR	TOM MOORE
OWEN MOORE	MATT MOORE
MAURICE BLACK	GEORGIE HARRIS
EDDIE QUILAN	MATTHEW BETZ
FORD STERLING	MAC SWAIN
CHESTER CONKLIN	CLYDE COOK
HANK MANN	JAMES FINLAYSON
BOBBY VERNON	BENNY RUBIN
BRYANT WASHBURN	RICHARD TUCKER

AND THE ORIGINAL KEYSTONE KOPS

**RKO PATHÉ**





Two of the earliest Masquers films starred established comics: Wheeler & Woolsey appeared in *OH! OH! CLEOPATRA*, while Edward Everett Horton is grilled by Hank Mann & Tom Dugan in *THE GREAT JUNCTION HOTEL*.

of his invention – a pill that, when swallowed, takes the consumer back to any period of history that they like. Ever the romantic, Bert Wheeler expresses a desire to woo Cleopatra, and soon the pair are whisked back in time, with Wheeler as Mark Anthony and Woolsey as Julius Caesar. As you'd imagine, this is basically an excuse for some historical crosstalk acts:

*Wheeler: "To hail with Caesar!"*

*Woolsey: "To Hail with you, too"*

Soon, they are faced with a cage of lions:

*Wheeler: Daniel survived and came out of the Lion's den.*

*Woolsey: Well, don't forget, there's a big difference between the Lions now, and the Lions **den!**"*

The whole film is full of these kind of puns and jazz age non sequiturs, and the climax was a wild comic chariot race, singled out by Motion Picture Times as "a Wow!" Sadly, this element doesn't translate to the aural-only experience, but if the visual elements are as much fun as the soundtrack of the film is, it must be a riot. Hopefully it will resurface in full, one day.

The next film was *THE GREAT JUNCTION HOTEL*, also focusing on a star comedian, Edward Everett Horton. Horton plays a nervous bridegroom on his honeymoon, whose new wife (Patsy Ruth Miller) disappears during the night. He is given the third degree by some incompetent detectives who think he has murdered her, but it transpires that Patsy has only been sleepwalking.

Horton is excellent (as always), but is also ably supported by other comics. Harry Gribbon has an very funny part as an underworked house detective. His patented just-about-to-boil mania is seen wonderfully in his attempts to catch a keyhole snooper while hindered by his enormously squeaky shoes. Fellow silent comics Hank Mann and Tom Dugan also have good roles as bungling detectives trying to cross-examine Horton. With amusing running gags, plenty of off-beat humour and a great comic cast doing their thing, this is a fun little short.

The first films in the series had been successful, and on October 16, 1931, the Masquers held a banquet to celebrate their financial success, where they burned their Mortgage papers. Now that the pressure to make financially successful films was somewhat off, the films became even more offbeat, and the series took a slightly different tack. Rather than starring the established comic players within their ranks, they began to be more ensemble pieces, often featuring dramatic actors playing broad, satirical versions of their usual roles. Presumably this was considered more of a novelty, and also gave the serious actors chance to let their hair down and have some fun! The films also settled into genre spoofs, particularly of old time melodramas – the spoofing of the old ways sometimes continues to a consciously vintage silent film feel, with several of the shorts having organ soundtracks and intertitles to help tell the story. Another tradition was established, giving the films two titles, spoofing the floridly titled stage shows of old. In keeping with the theatrical traditions, each short began with a 'Masque', or Harlequin in traditional costume, thanking the players for giving their time free of charge.

First among the spoofs was *THE WIDE OPEN SPACES*. Featuring perpetually hard-boiled Ned Sparks opposite Dorothy Sebastian, this short thoroughly skewers the Western Genre. This is a world in which Duels for honour are conducted by playing checkers, people are shot for singing flat, and characters deliver hammy soliloquys to the audience at any given opportunity.

Again, a bunch of familiar faces from the silent era pop up: Mack Swain as a barman, Clyde Cook among the barflies and Walter Hiers as a banjo player who sends everyone ducking for cover when the sound of his string breaking is mistaken for gunfire.

The short has plenty of amusing moments, but is a bit slow and patchy, a criticism that might be levelled at several of the films.

RULE 'EM & WEEP takes aim at the Ruritanian romances that Hollywood was so fond of at the time, with Glenn Tryon as a hapless monarch and Sam Hardy as his villainous usurper. It features what soon became a Masquers trademark – mismatched sound effects, such as the sound of steam locomotives matched to galloping horses.

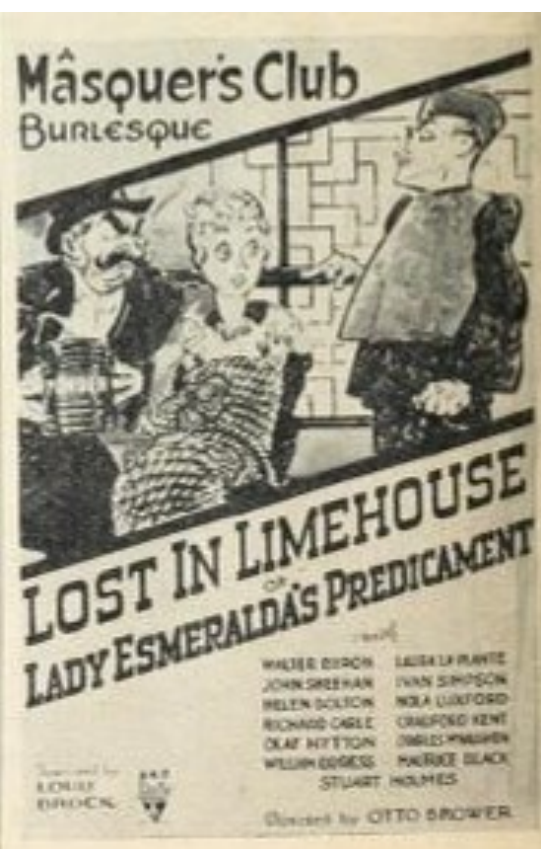
Perhaps the archetypal Masquers spoof is THE BRIDE'S BE-REAVEMENT, or THE SNAKE IN THE GRASS. This time, the target is old time stage melodrama. In the opening title sequence, the Masque even exhorts the audience to cheer the hero,

and boo the villain, in the spirit of the old stage plays. The villain, Sir Mortimer De Lacy is played by Alan Mowbray. He has designs on , and plots to send her husband (Charles Ray) to rack and ruin by exposing him to drink and gambling. There is much in the way of moustache twirling, exaggerated sound effects and many a dramatic entrance. Ray's hero is a devastating parody of the virtuous and insipid leading man, and Mowbray's villain chews the scenery superbly.

The material itself isn't that funny, but the deadpan treatment makes it amusing. Perhaps the funniest moment comes when a despondent Ray puts an enormous revolver to his temple. After a pause, another character enquires "What are you going to do...?" in a completely emotionless delivery.

Nearly all of the entries in the series followed a similar pattern of comically flat acting, hammy dialogue and hiss-able villains. In truth, the formula is sometimes in danger of wearing a little thin. In some films, like THE MOONSHINER'S DAUGHTER, there isn't really much additional humour beyond the deliberately bad acting, and twenty minutes is a long time to stretch that out for comedy. The danger is that, when there aren't enough gags in place, the films are barely less tedious than the serious films they are spoofing. Additionally when the same old stereotype spoofs are constantly repeated, they are at risk of becoming clichés themselves. These problems resulted in some misfires, but there were several gems. The best shorts in the series had more incidental comedy moments added along the way, with funny dialogue, liberal sight gags and playful use of the film format itself.

A good example is TWO LIPS & JULEPS, or SOUTHERN LOVE & NORTHERN EXPOSURE, set in the civil war. There are some playful visual jokes, like hundreds of soldiers appearing out of a tiny tent, and a funny running gag of all the Southern characters adding 'Y'all' into their dialogue at any given moment (sometimes two or three times in a line!).



As THE SNAKE IN THE GRASS, Alan Mowbray is in full tache-twirling mode!

There is also an amusing scene where a spy is given his orders, only to respond with "But General, that would be *snooping!*"

LOST IN LIMEHOUSE, or LADY ESMERALDA'S PREDICAMENT, is even better. This tale of Lady Esmeralda's abduction to a Limehouse cellar and rescue by a poor working class boy is a pitch-perfect spoof of Victorian Melodramas, managing to skewer Dickensian Christmases, The British class system and the clichés of Eastern Opium Den villainy all in one.

There are loads of funny cartoon gags interspersed with the usual hammy scenes, making a much more satisfying film on the whole. As drama unfolds in the parlour of a Victorian house, we can hear the sound of female voices singing Christmas carols outside. There are cutaways to the carol singers throughout the scene (all of them men, incidentally!) with the snow falling around them. At each cutaway the snow builds higher until they are buried up to their necks!

There are also numerous comic asides throughout the film; at one point the Villian pauses in the middle of a dramatic scene to refresh himself, remarking "Ooh, that's a lovely cup of tea" before launching back into full-throttle villainy. Such little moments are peppered right through the short, making it one of the most amusing of the series.

What's interesting is that this film was directed by Otto Brower, who was decidedly not a comedy specialist, but is better than many of the films directed by comedy veterans like Al Ray. Go figure!

Perhaps the best of all the films was THRU THIN & THICKET, or WHO'S ZOO IN AFRICA, a spoof of both Tarzan and the 'Darkest Africa' travelogue pictures in vogue. Where some of the other films seemed a bit slow and light on actual gags, this short positively fizzes with surreal invention, sight gags and whimsy. It's director certainly was a comedy specialist: Mark Sandrich had made some of the best silent comedies at Educational Pictures, and would soon be helming the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films.

This entry dispenses with the hammy acting, and is an out-and-out surreal gag-fest. The cast, too, is more based around comedy veterans who rarely got a starring role, and is all the better for it. James Finlayson plays Professor Backwash, who is leading an expedition into the Jungle (in an open-topped bus!) in search of Tarzan. Eddie Borden plays Scoop Skinner, a reporter on Finlayson's trail. Borden is present in several of the Masquers films, but has his moment of glory in this short. Always an under-utilised performer, he is actually very good here, and seems to have been something of a 'comedian's comedian' who always bubbled under the surface.

When Backwash and Skinner discover that Tarzan is actually the beautiful Tarkana (Dorothy Granger), they are soon trying to outdo each other to woo her.

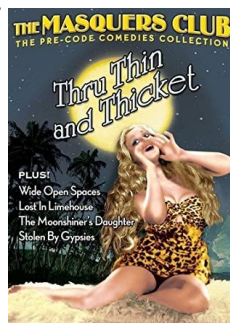
Although the 'darkest Africa' stereotypes of the film are obviously dated, they are being gayed for comedic purposes, and most of the laughter actually comes from the rich assortment of other visual and verbal gags. For instance: Dorothy Granger is dubbed with a decidedly masculine Tarzan yell, and wrestles a lion! A Medicine Man's bootleg gin enables the characters (and us) to hear each other's inner thoughts, to comic effect; smoke rises from Borden and Granger as they kiss passionately, and Finlayson's telescope goes limp as he watches. Perhaps the funniest scene is a routine of Finlayson shaving; he drops his shaving brush and gropes around for it on the floor. He picks up what feels like the brush, only to find it is actually a Lion's tail he is shaving with! His reactions as he gradually becomes aware of his error are classic Fin. This oddball little film is a real curio, and remains funny to this day.

Taken as a whole, the Masquers films are definitely a mixed bag. Often, the idea is better than the execution, and the central idea is stretched a bit too far. Nevertheless, there are some real gems among them, and they are a refreshing attempt to do something different from the usual situation and slapstick comedy that dominated 1930s two-reelers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the best films had comedy performers at the centre – shorts like THE GREAT JUNCTION HOTEL and THRU THIN AND THICKET work much better overall than the ones starring dramatic actors.

Though the series didn't continue beyond a second season, the spirit of the Masquers Club Comedies was revived for the oddball 1940 feature THE VILLAIN STILL PURSUED HER. This revamp of stage play THE DRUNKARD features similarly wooden acting, and Alan Mowbray reprising a very similar role to that. Thanks to the presence of Buster Keaton in the cast, it has been fairly widely seen, much more so than the original Masquers Club comedies.

A few of the original shorts have been released on DVD, and more recently a few additional ones have turned up on YouTube. As for the Masquers Club itself, it managed to survive a lean period and has seen something of a renaissance in recent years. It maintains an active website with lots of great history information, and has even uploaded some of the films to its YouTube Channel. It's good that these strange and silly little comedies haven't completely fallen through the cracks of film history.

*Five of the Masquers Comedies are available on this DVD from Alpha Video. Included are THRU THIN & THICKET, THE WIDE OPEN SPACES, LOST IN LIMEHOUSE, THE MOONSHINER'S DAUGHTER and STOLEN BY GYPSIES. Print quality isn't the best, but is acceptable enough.*

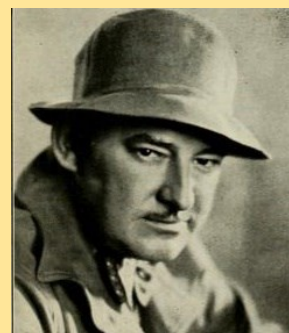


## Masquers Anonymous

As well as the well-known faces moonlighting in the Masquers comedies, there were some interesting folk at work behind the scenes too...



**Edward Earle** was a dramatic actor from the teens until the 1960s, but comedy fans know him best as Buster Keaton's rival in SPITE MARRIAGE. As head of the Masquers Entertainment Committee, he played a big role in getting the series made, acting as associate producer and script editor.



**Walter Weems** is credited with stories and scripts for the Masquers films. Originally a Blackface comic, he made a few Vitaphone films before moving behind the scenes as a gagman, including at Hal Roach. He worked well with Charley Chase, co-writing some songs and co-directed SOMETHING SIMPLE. (1934)



**Eddie Borden** was something of a 'comedian's comedian'. A popular vaudeville and Broadway comic, he frequently acted as MC for the Masquers' Revels, and contributed gags to their films. The Masquers comedies gave him chance to shine, but his roles elsewhere were usually small. He's best remembered today as the foppish nobleman who Laurel & Hardy try to rob in THE BOHEMIAN GIRL.

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EDDIE QULLAN	MATTHEW BETZ
FORD STERLING	MAC SWAIN
CHESTER CONKLIN	CLYDE COOK
HANK MANN	JAMES FINLAYSON
BOBBY VERNON	BENNY RUBIN
BRYANT WASHBURN	RICHARD TUCKER
AND ORIGINAL KEYSTONE KOPS	



Dorothy Granger as 'Tarkana' in THRU THIN & THICKET, or WHO'S ZOO IN AFRICA. (1933)

# THE MASQUERS CLUB COMEDIES 1931-1933

All films were produced by Edward Earle, under supervision of Lou Brock. They were released by RKO Pathé.

## **STOUT HANDS AND WILLING HEARTS** (June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1931)

Directed by Bryan Foy. Written by Albert Austin & Walter Weems.

With Frank Fay, Lew Cody, Laura La Plante, Mary Carr, James Finlayson, Eddie Quillan, Clyde Cook, Ford Sterling, Mack Swain, Chester Conklin, Tom Moore, Matt Moore, Owen Moore.

## **OH! OH! CLEOPATRA!** (August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1931)

Directed by Joseph Santley. Written by Joseph Santley, Lew Lipton & Eddie Welch.

With Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey, Dorothy Burgess, Tyler Brooke, Claude Gillingwater, James Finlayson, Max Davidson, Crauford Kent, Montague Hamilton, William Farnum.

## **THE GREAT JUNCTION HOTEL** (October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1931)

Directed by William Beaudine. Written by Lew Lipton & Ralph Ceder.

With Edward Everett Horton, Patsy Ruth Miller, Harry Gribbon, Hank Mann, Tommy Dugan, Lionel Belmore, Maurice Black, Richard Carle. Richard Carlyle as The Masque.

## **THE WIDE OPEN SPACES** (December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1931)

Directed by Arthur Rosson. Written by Edward Earle & Walter Weems.

With Ned Sparks, Dorothy Sebastian, Antonio Moreno, William Farnum, George Chandler, Clyde Cook, Walter Hiers, Mack Swain, Claude Gillingwater, George Cooper, Frank McHugh, Matthew Betz. Richard Carlyle as The Masque.

## **RULE 'EM & WEEP (aka RULE 'EM & LEAVE 'EM)** (May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1932)

Directed by Harry Sweet. Written by Edward Earle & Walter Weems.

With Glenn Tryon, Sam Hardy, James Gleason, William Austin, Eddie Kane, Syd Saylor, Russell Simpson, Maurice Black, Luis Alberni. Richard Carlyle as The Masque.

## **IRON MINNIE, or THE RAILROAD MAN'S DAUGHTER** (July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1932)

*Alternate title: THE ENGINEER'S DAUGHTER, or IRON MINNIE'S REVENGE.*

Directed by Robert F. Hill. Written by Edward Earle & Walter Weems.

With May Robson, Marjorie Peterson, Montague Love, Mack Swain, Clyde Cook, James Finlayson.

## **TWO LIPS & JULEPS, or SOUTHERN LOVE & NORTHERN EXPOSURE** (September 9th, 1932)

Directed by Edward Sloman. Written by Edward Earle & Walter Weems.

With Conway Tearle, Helene Millard, Edmund Breese, John Sheehan, Robert Frazer, Alan Mowbray, Florence Roberts, Tom Wilson, Earle Foxe, Russell Simpson, Max Davidson. Dell Henderson as The Masque.

## **THE BRIDE'S BEREAVEMENT, or THE SNAKE IN THE GRASS** (November 28th, 1932)

Directed by Robert F. Hill. Written by Walter Weems & Edward Earle.

With Charles Ray, Alan Mowbray, Aileen Pringle, Jed Prouty, Stanley Fields, Montague Love, Kathleen Clifford, Max Davidson, Tyler Brooke, Syd Saylor.

## **THRU THIN & THICKET, or WHO'S ZOO IN AFRICA** (February 1st, 1933)

Directed by Mark Sandrich. Written by Ben Holmes & Walter Weems.

With Dorothy Granger, Eddie Borden, James Finlayson, Grayce Hampton, Crauford Kent, Max Davison, Russell Simpson, and Del Henderson as The Masque.

## **LOST IN LIMEHOUSE, or LADY ESMERELDA'S PREDICAMENT** (April 7th, 1933)

Directed by Otto Brower. Written by Edward Earle & Walter Weems.

With Laura La Plante, Walter Byron, John Sheehan, Olaf Hytte, Clyde Cook, William Burgess, Stuart Holmes, Richard Carle, and Del Henderson as The Masque.

## **THE MOONSHINER'S DAUGHTER, or ABROAD IN OLD KENTUCKY** (May 19th, 1933)

Directed by Albert Ray. Written by Edward Earle & Walter Weems.

With Ruseell Hopton, Mary Carr, Lucille Brown, Russell Simpson, Eddie Borden. Del Henderson as The Masque.

## **STOLEN BY GYPSIES, or BEER & BICYCLES** (July 14th, 1933)

Directed by Albert Ray. Written by Walter Weems.

With Charles Ray, Barbara Sheldon, Sam Hardy, Maurice Black, Eddie Borden, June Brewster. Del Henderson as The Masque.

# The Keystone Cops Return

Masquers Bring Them Back in "Meller Mellerdrama"

by JOHN W. BOYLE, A. S. C.

IT IS NOT often, I'm sorry to say, that a cinematographer laughs so much on a set that he has difficulty in doing his work. The ordinary run of comedies thus far has not reached that point of perfection. As a matter of fact, comedies, generally speaking, are very serious things.

But, I have just finished photographing one that would make even the ex-King of Spain laugh if he saw it while on his way out of the country with a troop of Republican anti-Monarchists at his heels. And, did it bring back old memories of those golden days that have gone—those days of the distant past when sound tracks and super-speed film were not even thought of! I'll say it did!

When I walked onto the set the first day I could hardly believe my eyes. There I saw Ford Sterling, Chester Conklin, Mack Swain, Jimmy Finlayson, Hank Mann and Clyde Cook—the Keystone Cops—all in their old-time uniforms, trick mustaches and everything. It was like a flashback to the days when comedy was not comedy unless there was a flock of pies straying through the air in the general direction of someone's head; the days when the seat of a comedian's pants was intended for just one thing—a spot on which to plant the toe of a boot.

And, would you believe it, the name of the picture is "Stout Hearts and Willing Hands"; a picture that is a comedy, but is packed with the old "mellerdramer" as you never saw before. This picture is one of a series which the Masquers, Hollywood's "Lamb's Club", is making with which to raise funds to build a new club house. It is typical of the members of this wonderful organization to go out and work for the funds rather than to try to raise them by other methods. All talent in the series is volunteer. The first story was written by Al Austin and Walter Weems, and was directed by Bryan Foy. Two outside "willing hearts," Laura LaPlante and Mary Carr, add their bit to the members of the club in making the cast complete—and there are more stars in the cast than there are in the heavens.

Working with this group was a real joy. First the story was so funny. Then, the "asides" of the actors, in true old-fashioned style, were uproariously funny. At times, too funny for those of us who were trying to put it on the film.

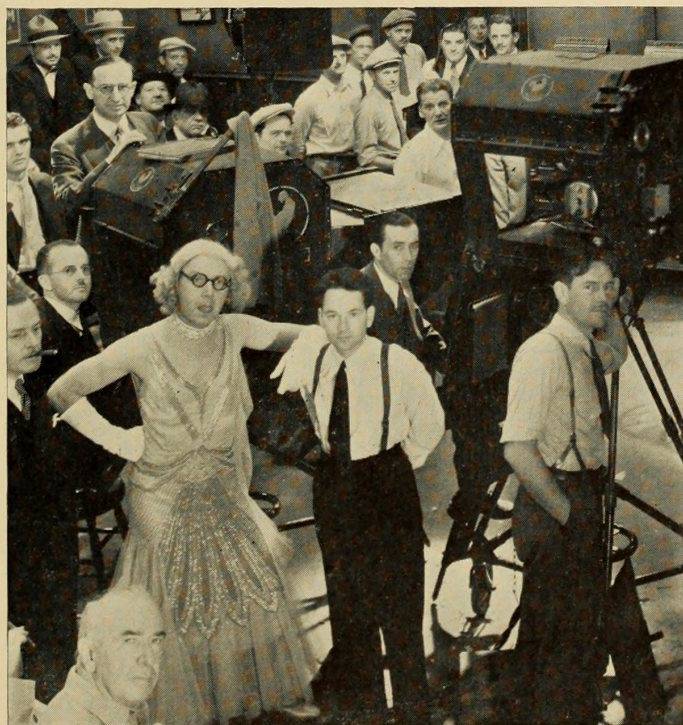
I don't know which struck me the more forcibly, the all-around sportsmanship of Director Foy, or the general esprit-de-corps. Judging

from my experience, working for the Masquers, in the mind of a member, is like giving your all on a football team for old Harvard. Not a grumble although there were hours of waiting. Not a yip of disapproval if someone had funnier lines than the other. Not an expression of anything like jealousy if someone got more footage than the other. I'm telling you it was a joy to work with such a crowd. I can't understand how they went through their act without breaking down. There were Alec Francis and Mary Carr, the old folks with the mortgage, and Laura LaPlante, the "little Nell." Lew Cody, the villain holding the mortgage. Frank Fay as the "True-Blue Harold," an open-chested hero, if ever there was one.

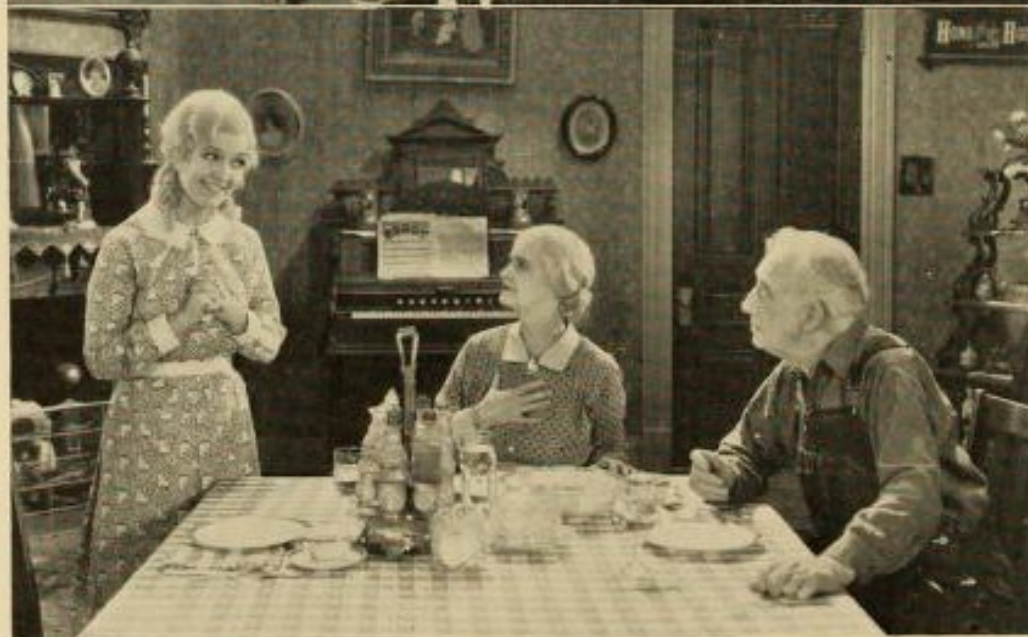
Of course, there was the saloon with the three Moore boys as the bartenders. And if you don't know them, they put their names on their chests. You'll die when you see the hero ask for a glass of buttermilk to calm his nerves for a big play on the roulette table. And then, there is the sawmill where the circular saw threatens death to the hero, and of course, all ends happy with the villain out of the way.

But the kick to me was the return of the famous Keystone Cops, who jump to the alarm in the same fashion they did years ago in the old-time pictures. And how they jump! Even the Admiral of the United States Navy is called in—and he has an English accent. That's enough. You'll know why we laughed when you see it.

A remarkable group are the members of this Masquers club. They are an outstanding example of what cooperation will do in the picture industry. They need a new clubhouse. Times are hard. But they take advantage of these slow times when many of them are not working and put in their spare time in doing something that will bring them the house they want. That's using the head for more than a hat-rack. And—the way they plunged into the work a real joy to watch. A nice crowd to photograph, too, for none was trying to have better lighting or nicer closeups than the other. There was no star who frowned upon a bit player who seemed to be getting a bigger "break" than usual. All you had to do was make the best picture you could, and never think about the feelings of any player. You can shoot pictures when all you have to think of is the picture. But that's the way of the Masquers. Cooperation seems to be their watchword.



Mr. Boyle at the camera during the shooting of Masquers' picture. Franklin Pangborn is the "lady" in the foreground.



Top, the three Moore brothers in "Stout Hearts and Willing Hands." Center, the Keystone Cops doing a "come-back." Bottom, Laura LaPlante, Mary Carr and Alec Francis in one of those heart-rending scenes.

# SCREENING NOTES

## THE KID STAKES (1927)

Starring Robin 'Pop' Ordell, with Charles Roberts, Ray Salmon, Frank Boyd, Tal Ordell, Syd Nicholls.

Directed by Tal Ordell. Released June 9th, 1927.



Child star 'Pop' Ordell poses in costume with 'Fatty Finn' cartoonist Syd Nicholls; at right, the original Fatty Finn.



You don't see too many Australian silent comedies. Several familiar comedians - Snub Pollard, Billy Bevan, Clyde Cook, Daphne Pollard - were Aussies, but they only made films after moving to the USA. At the time that American silent comedy was maturing, the Australian film industry was in the doldrums (partly because of the dominance of US film), but a few comedies were turned out.

One surviving example is *THE KID STAKES*, a charming kid comedy from 1927. Following the adventures of a bunch of street larrikins from Woollamoolloo and their pet goat, this freewheeling little film has the flavour of Hal Roach's *OUR GANG* films.

Like the *Gang*, it's an ensemble piece, but the bunch of characters aren't a Roach rip-off. Actually, they are inspired by the *Sunday News* comic strip 'Fatty Finn', and cartoonist Syd Nicholls makes a cameo in the opening scene. 'Fatty' is the lead character, a bit reminiscent of Jackie Cooper's goodhearted little tough guy (he even looks a little like Cooper). With logic reminiscent of A.A. Milne, a title tells us that "they called him Fatty because he was not fat". He's played by Robin 'Pop' Ordell, the son of director Tal Ordell. (Tal was a well known character actor who turned to directing for this lone film - he plays the comic radio announcer in one scene of *THE KID STAKES*.)

Apparently, goat-chariot racing was a big thing in 1920s

Australia! Fatty's gang are planning to enter their pet goat, Hector, in a big race, but their rival Bruiser lets Hector loose. He finds his way to a garden full of rare flowers, and after eating his fill is impounded by the owner. With the help of a pair of eloping lovers, and the hindrance of a bumbling policeman, they recapture Hector and make it in time to win the race.

Like the *OUR GANG* films, *THE KID STAKES* is often more charming than outright funny, but very watchable. It's always fascinating to see silents made outside the standard American locations we're used to seeing, and there's a real slice-of-life quality to the old scenes of Sydney, the backyard games and dialect titles - not to mention the bizarre spectacle of the goat race! The bumbling policeman and goat provide some good laughs too.

On the downside, the direction is a bit clunky here and there, and there are too many titles. Old kid comedies always contain a few moments that make the more wary modern viewer wince - kids swimming naked in a stranger's backyard pool? Or writing their names in blood? Ick. "The past is a different country", after all.

Overall though, this is a fun watch that throws a light on another forgotten side of silent comedy. It's certainly a pleasant way to do some armchair travelling to a distant time and place.





## DYNAMITE DOGGIE (1925)

Starring Al St John, with Doris Deane, George Davis & Pete the Pup.

Directed by Grover Jones (& Roscoe Arbuckle). Released by Educational Pictures, March 22nd, 1925

When you think of the name Al St John, the instant thoughts are of the manic gremlin playing Roscoe Arbuckle's rival, or the be-whiskered Cowboy sidekick 'Fuzzy' who appeared in dozens of Westerns. These images are from the bookends of his life in films, but the middle section of Al's career is more overlooked.

In the 1920s and early 30s, he played a rather different role in a large number of short comedies. In contrast to his more familiar, rustic guises, the Al St John of the 1920s generally appeared as a clean-shaven, smart young man in a series of romantic situation comedies. His performance style was also much different. In contrast from his scenery chewing performances opposite Arbuckle, he now essayed a much calmer, slightly bewildered style.

In fact, Al definitely picked up a few tips from old colleague Buster Keaton, and frequently underplays in a very Keatonesque, deadpan style.

After a series of Fox comedies, Al spent several years at Educational. His relationship with his uncle Roscoe Arbuckle continued in the series; as 'William Goodrich', Arbuckle directed several entries in the series, including HIS FIRST CAR and CURSES! Although director's credit for DYNAMITE DOGGIE goes to Grover Jones, Arbuckle unquestionably worked on the film. His touch is all over the film, from big slapstick gags to some more subtle touches—we'll come to those in a bit.

Also in the cast is Doris Deane, who was actually Arbuckle's second wife, so this is something of a family affair all around. In DYNAMITE DOGGIE, Al and Doris are in love, but her father (George Davis) disapproves; even more of a problem is his dog—Pete the Pup—who has taken a violent dislike to Al, and is forever chasing him from the house.

Al attempts to elope with Doris on a ladder, leading to some elaborately staged visual gags. At one point, Al flies through window and lands on table, sending his rival flying out of the window and into a cactus patch.

Thwarted by Pete's arrival once again, Al decides to bribe the hound with some meat from the butchers. In one of those beautifully improbable silent comedy plot twists, he happens to come across two bomb-throwing anarchists on his way, and accidentally comes in possession of their miniature time bomb. This gives him a sadistic idea to get rid of his canine tormentor for good. He sets the time-bomb to 3 o'clock, then hides it in the package of meat and feeds it to Pete!

However, Al's plan backfires; the meat bribe works rather too well, and Pete is suddenly his new best friend, following him everywhere! As time ticks nearer to 3 o'clock, Al becomes ever more desperate to shake Pete from his trail, leading to a wild chase through the streets. Along the way he gets to show off some of the trick bicycle riding that was his specialty before entering films.

In the slightly off-colour finish, Al boards a boat to elope with Doris. Pete jumps on board, but is soon sea sick. We see him emptying the contents of his stomach over the edge of the boat, and shortly afterwards there is a huge underwater explosion! A shoal of fish are blown clear out of the water, showering Al & Doris as the film fades.

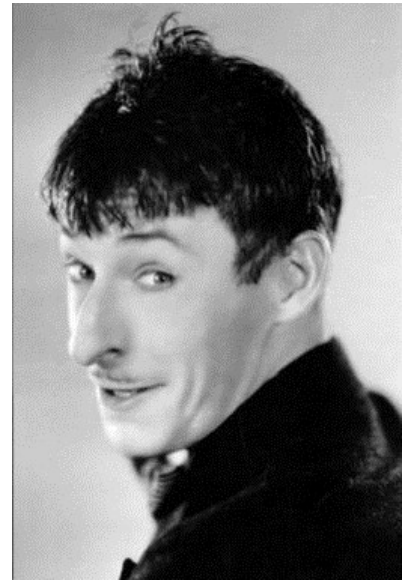
DYNAMITE DOGGIE isn't a sophisticated film, but it sure is a lot of fun. This is a cartoon world brought to life, where pianos fall from the sky, and anarchists lurk on every corner. Arbuckle's touch is all over it—he always had a bit of a fondness for slightly off-colour plots and gags, and Pete the Pup takes a part that might have once been taken by Arbuckle's own dog, Luke. Most interesting are some scenes that point directly to his uncredited involvement directing Buster Keaton's SHERLOCK, JR. There has always been speculation over what Arbuckle might have directed, but here we see two scenes almost identical to the ones in SHERLOCK. The famous tracking shot of Buster 'shadowing' his man is repeated, but with Pete trailing Al; a shot of the two coy lovers sat on the sofa awkwardly edging their hands toward each other while staring blankly ahead is also very familiar. Fascinating stuff.

The print I saw of DYNAMITE DOGGIE, courtesy of Andy Galaxy's excellent YouTube Channel, is slightly incomplete. Even so, it's very enjoyable and makes one want to see more of Al's 1920s comedies.

## THREE TOUGH ONIONS (1928)

Starring Monty Collins, with Estelle Bradley, Robert Graves, Catherine Parrish and Bobby Burns.

Directed by Jules White. Released by Educational Pictures, May 10th, 1928.



Educational's Cameo comedies provided a good training ground for many comics. These slick, efficiently made one-reelers often allowed supporting comics to test the waters for starring careers, and also let young directors learn their craft. Monty Collins is best remembered today as a supporting actor in the sound era at Columbia, where he appeared alongside the Three Stooges, Buster Keaton and many others. But Monty did make a handful of starring shorts in the Cameo series—where he was directed by his future Columbia boss, Jules White.

THREE TOUGH ONIONS is one of their early collaborations, and is a typical White directed Cameo—a simple domestic setup, with comedy of frustration and plenty of slapstick. The mood is set by the wry opening title: *“Some say marriage is a gamble. It's not—gamblers sometimes win”*.

The eponymous onions refer to Monty's new bride Estelle Bradley, her brother Robert Graves and mother Catherine Parrish. As the minister pronounces Monty and Estelle man and wife, he turns to kiss her, only to receive a punch in the mouth. *“That's just to let you know who's boss!”* says Estelle.

Poor Monty's fate is set. Brother, a horribly jaunty tough guy in an odious suit, tells him *“You're in luck—We're going to move in with you!”*. So begins a comedy of frustration as Monty must deal with them shoving him around, getting in his way and generally causing him a miserable time. Some scenes are funnier than others: a dinner scene borrowed from Keaton's MY WIFE'S RELATIONS is pretty flat, but much better is a sequence in which brother decides to practice juggling—with the best China cups! Monty confiscates the plates, but then manages to break them himself. The scene has an amusing pay off half a reel later, when Monty again finds brother juggling with two cups. The camera pans down, revealing an enormous pile of broken china at his feet!

After his mother-in-law takes his bed, Monty is forced to try and sleep on the kitchen table. Even the dog has it in for him, pulling the tablecloth from under him and sending him crashing to the floor. Seeing Brother happily asleep on the sofa is too much for Monty, and the worm turns. Estelle, bizarrely won over by the threat of domestic violence, swoons, and all ends happily: another heart-warming Jules White moral to the story!

Harry Langdon later wryly called White's style the “Oh-Ouch-Ow Comedies”, and he was right on the money. In sound, White seemed to think that slapstick was funnier when the performer cried out “Ouch!” as loudly as possible, often accompanied by dissonant, crashing sound effects. Personally, I find exactly the opposite—violent slapstick is much more amusing in the unreal world of silents, where we disassociate it from genuine pain. So, while some of

White's later effects come across as sadistic and bombastic, his silents are actually pretty good, and this is a decent example. Collins is very good at handling the comedy of frustration, and makes the most of the opportunities he is given. He certainly impressed White in these films; the director always made a space for Collins as he climbed the ladder of opportunity, and several times tried to make him a star. It's certainly nice to see Collins take the spotlight; although THREE TOUGH ONIONS isn't his best short (that would be 1927's IT'S ME), it is an amusing way to spend ten minutes. It's available as a bonus feature on Grapevine Video's DVD of OPEN ALL NIGHT, starring Viola Dana and Raymond Griffith.



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*Thanks once again to this issue's contributors: Robert M Fells, David Crump and Tony Belmont. A respectful tip of the bowler also goes to the following sources, which were a great help in writing this issue's articles:*

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*The Masquers Club Website also helped with background information on the organisation. In addition, time spent browsing The [Silent Comedy Mafia](http://Silent Comedy Mafia) boards and [Nitrateville](http://Nitrateville) is always informative, not to mention watching The Silent Comedy Watch Party!*

Don't forget that you can download previous issues from [The Lost Laugh Website](http://The Lost Laugh Website) !



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