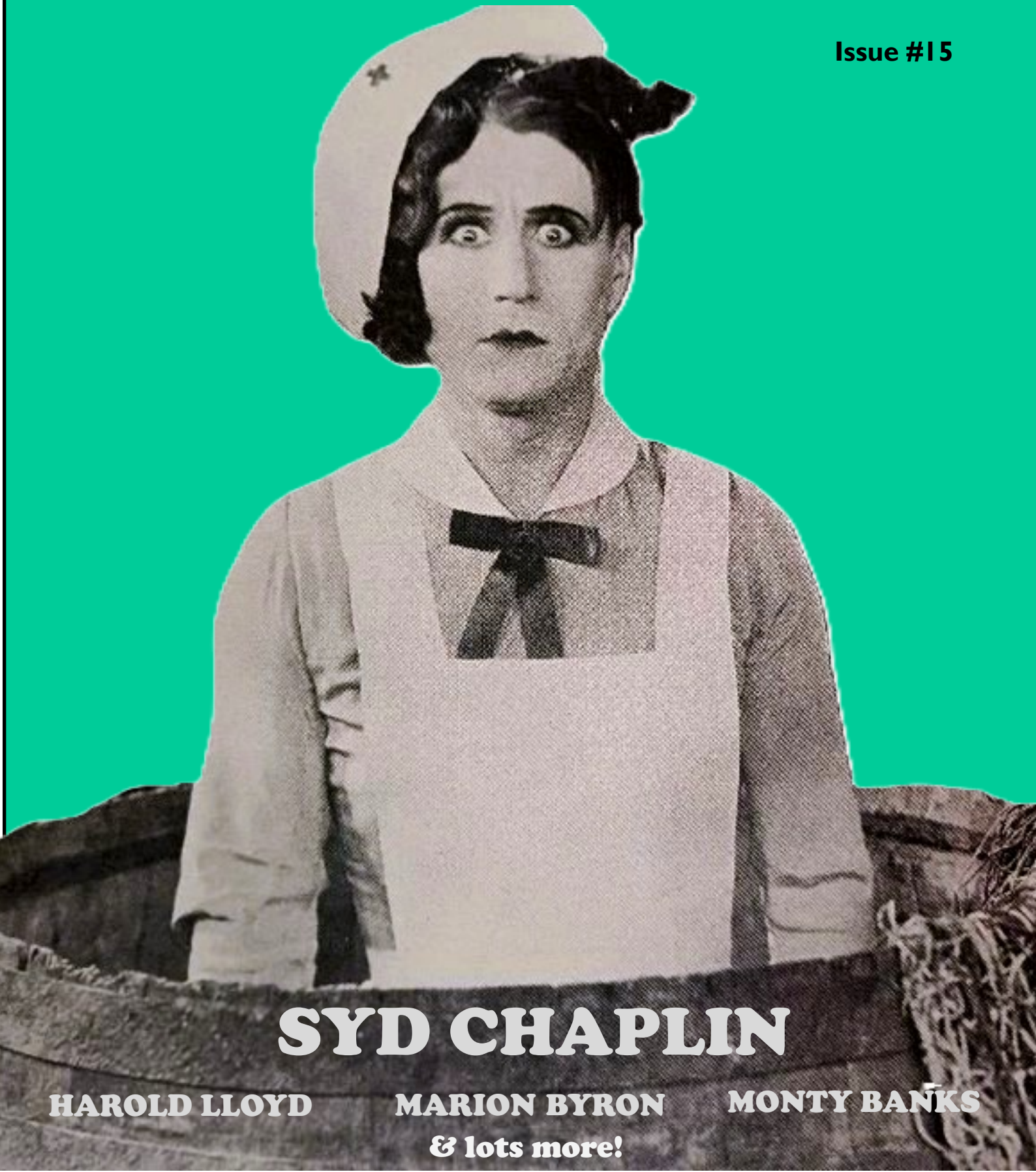
THE LOST LAUGH

Celebrating Great & Forgotten Film Comedy of the 1910s –30s

Issue #15



SYD CHAPLIN

HAROLD LLOYD MARION BYRON MONTY BANKS

& lots more!

THE LOST LAUGH: ISSUE 15

This issue's Video Playlist

Here we feature some select gems talked about in this issue. You can find the whole playlist (or at least, the films that are on YouTube), here

US (1927)

Kicking things off, here's a sample of the wonderful new Charley Chase DVD/BluRay set from The Sprocket Vault. There's a full review on the next page. Spoiler alert: It's brilliant, and you should buy it.
"Us" (1927) Restored Charley Chase Comedy Short -- one of his best!

CHARLEY'S AUNT (1925) AND THE BETTER 'OLE (1926)

Two feature films showcase our cover star in his two most famous roles. *Charley's Aunt* allows Syd to do his party piece drag act, while *The Better 'Ole* presents him in a rather more masculine idiom, as the gruff WW1 Tommy "Old Bill". Finally, there's one of his most glorious scenes with his brother Charlie, the classic lunch wagon routine from 1918's *A Dog's Life*.
Charley's Aunt (1925, Syd Chaplin, Comedy, Romance)
The Better 'Ole (1926) SYD CHAPLIN
Charlie Chaplin and his brother Sydney in a scene from A Dog's Life (1918) - YouTube

LONESOME LUKE, MESSENGER (1917)

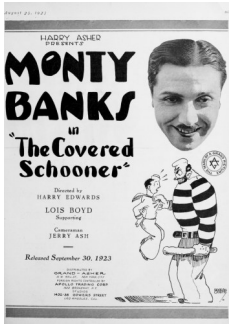
Harold's Lloyd early success as 'Lonesome Luke' was later eclipsed by his more famous work with his 'glass' character. A new book by Steve Massa aims to shine a light on this overlooked period. *Lonesome Luke, Messenger* is one of the few surviving examples of the Luke films that is easy to see.

'Lonesome Luke, Messenger' 1917 Harold Lloyd Full Movie Short Film Silent Film Full HD - YouTube

THE COVERED SCHOONER (1923) & SOME MONTY BANKS RARITIES

As we celebrate the short films of Monty Banks, here's one of his wildest gagfests, *The Covered Schooner*: THE COVERED SCHOONER Monty Banks comique

An 80s TV series from Czechoslovakia, *Abeceda Humoru*, featured an episode full of *very* rare Monty clips from this period, including *Squirrel Food, Peaceful Alley* and some unidentified examples. A great sampler of Banks' gagging abilities. ABECEDA HUMORU | Komik a jeho svět: Monty Banks



HOT LIGHTNING (1926)

Jerry Drew, aka Clem Beauchamp, was Educational's attempt to present a more sophoisticated, silk-hatted comedian in the line of Raymond Griffith or Charley Chase. Few of his films circulatre today, but here's the wild sight gag comedy *Hot Lightning*, an early example.
Bill SpragueCollection: Hot Lightning : Jack White , Mermaid Comedies : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive

FLAMING ROMANCE (1926)

Here's Al St John in a rarity, courtesy of "Joseph Blough". Look out for Jerry Drew/Clem Beauchamp too!
Flaming Romance (1926) (Reel#2 only)

A PAIR OF TIGHTS (1929)

Petite Marion Byron is best remembered today as leading lady to Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill, Jr,* but *A Pair of Tights* was the *other* classic silent comedy she appeared in. Throw in Anita Garvin, Edgar Kennedy, Spec O'Donnell, a pesky cop and some wayward ice creams, and all the ingredients are there for a wonderful Hal Roach comedy.

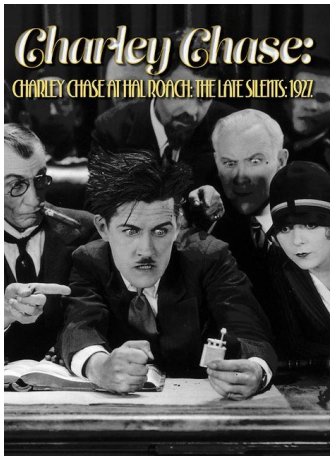
A PAIR OF TIGHTS (1928) Anita Garvin, Marion Byron & Edgar Kennedy | Comedy | Short |Vintage Cinema - YouTube

A HOLLYWOOD THEME SONG (1930)

A TV cutdown of this hilarious Sennett talkie—a spoof of early musicals—with Harry Gribbon. A Hollywood Theme Song (1930)

DVD & BLU-RAY NEWS

A CHARLEY CHASE BONANZA!



The Sprocket Vault's masterful series of Hal Roach reissues continues with their best yet;* Charley Chase at Hal Roach: The Late Silents—1927 *brings back some of Chase's very best comedies from obscurity.

There's a – quite possibly apochryphal – legend that Charley Chase buried a boxcar full of his old film prints and personal memorabilia somewhere in the San Jacinto desert. That rumour may never be verified, but this latest DVD/BluRay collection from The Sprocket Vault gets us close in spirit to unveiling such a Chase treasure trove. The films here have been largely unseen for decades; some were considered lost, others locked away in archives, or withheld due to copyright restrictions. When The Sprocket Vault began their series of Chase DVDs a few years ago with his talkie shorts, this already seemed like an unlikely and amazing bonus; when they moved on to his uber-rare (and hilarious) 1929 films, I thought I'd seen everything. But *this* set is the culmination of everything that Richard M Roberts and Kit Parker have been working towards in the series so far. It's yet another release I never thought I'd see, and it presents some of the greatest silent short comedies ever made, rescued from the void. Quite simply, this is one of the most important silent comedy DVD/Blu Ray releases ever.

Why? Well, it represents the biggest release of "new" (ie. largely unseen) Chase films in years, and they capture him at the peak of his powers. 1927 was maybe Charley's annus mirabilis. He made many of his best films, and was Roach's biggest star. A reminder of his status is that both Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy appear as supporting actors to *him* in that year's *Now I'll Tell One*, the remaining footage of which is included here. Within a year, the Laurel & Hardy team would supplant him as the big news from Culver City, and Chase would forever play second, or third, fiddle to them.

However, the work presented here is compelling evidence – perhaps the most compelling yet? – for Chase's status in the top echelon of silent film comedians. There's a dazzling array of comedy techniques on display – from farce (*Assistant Wives, A One Mama Man*) to topical humour (*Us),* and adroitly handled slapstick and sight gags (*The Way of All Pants, Are Brunettes Safe?).*

A couple of the films have been seen before, but scattered across a variety of releases, often in poor quality. They look much improved here, courtesy of the restorations by Paul Gierucki at CineMuseum, and it's great to have films like *Forgotten Sweeties* and *There Ain't No Santa Claus* available as part of a cohesive Chase collection. The most familiar film here is *Fluttering Hearts*, which is so good that I'm sure no-one would begrudge owning another copy. After that, almost everything is new to Chase fans. And what joys there are to experience. I don't want to give everything away in this review, but here are a few samplers:

Are Brunettes Safe is a wonderful comedy featuring Chase standing in for his doppleganger, who turns out to be a dangerous bandit. There's some terrific physical comedy here as he has to incorporate the villain's distinctive limp into his impersonation. This climaxes in another one of his fantastic eccentric dances, with Polly Moran. *A One Mama Man* has great performances from both Gale Henry and Vernon Dent (rarely spotted at Roach) to add to the fun. This film was remade by Chase as the talkie *Skip The Maloo!* In 1931, but this version is much superior.

Assistant Wives is one of his best farces – another ridiculous premise, made believable by Chase's perfect characterization and storytelling. A terrific cast here, too: Anita Garvin, Noah Young, Eugene Pallette and Edna Marian all add to the fun as Charley has to hire a stand-in wife when the boss invites himself to dinner. Some beautiful, original gags as well; Charley trying to carry three bowls of soup backwards up a fire escape is a particular highlight.

The jewels in the crown are the long-unseen, complete versions of two films sampled in Robert Youngson's comedy compilations. A brief section of the Lindbergh-baiting *Us* was seen in *Four Clowns.* Alongside the other Chase excerpts showcased there, I'd always been a little underwhelmed by this one, but the whole film is an absolute delight. While there are quite a few silent comedies featuring aerobatic finales, *Us* is a winner by virtue of relying on Chase's character to provide the comedy. A nervous would-be flyer afraid to leave the ground, he presents himself as an aviator to impress Margaret Quimby, then has to constantly find new excuses to weasel out of actually going up in an aeroplane. This makes for some really funny sequences, and the film looks beautiful too.

The Way of All Pants was, for many years, thought to only exist in the cut-down excerpt featured in *The Further Perils of Laurel & Hardy*. Even in that truncated format, it was an absolute barnstormer of a comedy, but happily the full version was rediscovered a few years ago. The extra space of the full version really sets up the characters, and provides plenty of wonderful new gags (not forgetting the witty original intertitles). While losing trousers for comedy purposes can seem like a hackneyed idea, Chase's absolutely mastery of how to provide variations on a running gag, expertly paced, make this one of the best of all his films, and among the top tier of Hal Roach comedies.

The Way of All Pants is also a great example of how Chase's silent films have such perfect rhythm, not just the way they are directed and edited, but in Chase's own pitch-perfect timing and body control. I was really struck by this when watching all the shorts on this set.

This set ranks along with All Day Entertainment's *Harry Langdon: Lost & Found* set, Lobster's Charley Bowers collection, Dave Glass' Monty Banks restorations and Undercrank's Edward Everett Horton set as a major, game-changing showcase for a silent comedy talent. And, if the films themselves weren't enough, you get great musical scores from Dr Andrew Simpson, and information-packed commentaries from Richard M Roberts, which really put the films into their historical context. Massive thanks and congratulations to everyone involved in making this release happen. It puts Chase at the forefront of the silent comedians, where he belongs. Now, what are you waiting for? Go buy it!

RESCUING ROSCOE

Insights into a new DVD/BluRay project from Steve Massa and Crystal Kui

For over twenty years, Roscoe Arbuckle made enormous contributions to screen comedy, in front of and behind the camera. This is a man who not only mentored Buster Keaton, but also gave valuable help to both Charlie and Syd Chaplin in their early careers, as well as many other comedians like Charley Chase and Al St John. Later, he was instrumental in directing films for St John, Lloyd Hamilton, Lupino Lane and many others. As a performer, he inspired a wave of 'jolly fat man' performers: Babe Hardy, Hughie Mack, Walter Hiers, 'The Ton of Fun', and more.

Yet for all that, Arbuckle often seems slightly taken for granted. His image is so sewn up with Keystone slapstick that his broader achievements in gentle situation comedy, farce and feature length comedies and as a director, are overlooked. A wonderful new Kickstarter project featuring rare Arbuckle films from his entire career aims to set that straight. Successfully funded very quickly, the set is now in production. If you missed out on the Kickstarter, don't worry! Ben Model's Undercrank Productions will be making the two-disc set available for general release in the future.

It's hard to believe that it's now twenty years since the definitive DVD set, ' The Forgotten Films of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle'. This was the first set to really illuminate Roscoe's wider achievements, and set a high bar. In the years since then, crowdfunding projects, access to Archives and digital technology have advanced, and the time is ripe to showcase some of the previously unseen and newly restored Arbuckle gems out there. Among the highlights culled from Archives and private collections around the world are Arbuckle's first Keystone, films with Mabel Normand, rarely seen Arbuckle feature *Crazy to Marry,* plus Al St John shorts, and loads more! Overall, it's a terrific sampler of silent comedy gold from one of the genre's finest talents.

Behind this great project are silent comedy expert and author of 'Rediscovering Roscoe', Steve Massa, and producer Crystal Kui. Steve and Crystal very kindly offered to talk us through the new release, and some of the highlights it features.

This new release features a wealth of restored and reconstructed films, sourced from a range of archives and private collections. What are some of the logistical challenges in pulling all these disparate sources together?

Crystal Kui: In this Arbuckle release will be 11 shorts plus a feature sourced from seven different archives and two private collectors. Logistically, it will be quite a challenge to keep track of the shipping, scanning and restoration on all these films. We're very fortunate that all of the participating archives were keen to provide access to their prints and are supportive of our efforts to share these treasures with the public. Thanks to Steve's enthusiasm and deep knowledge of the films, we have been able to work with the archives on our side. After we draw up contracts with the participating archives, the next step is to coordinate the shipping or scanning of the film prints. A few archives have facilities on site to scan and restore the films, while for others we are able to ship the prints either to the Library of Congress for scanning on the east coast or to USC on the west coast. We have a team of digital restorers and color graders who are archive conscious and work diligently to bring the end result as close as possible to the original viewing experience. Not all films are complete, but we work with the best surviving or only surviving copies. My favorite aspect of working on this project is doing the research to reconstruct the missing parts or titles, finding out whether there was tinting and how it was used, and comparing foreign versions or reissues to the original domestic releases

.Were there any particular technical challenges involved in working with such rare and precious film elements?

CK: Several films in our release are sourced from foreign release prints including *Crazy to Marry* (1921) with Russian titles, *The Sea Nymphs (1914)* with Danish titles, and *Fatty and the Broadway Stars* with Norwegian titles. Instead of simply translating the titles into English, we tried to source scripts and censorship records in an attempt to reconstruct the titles as they were written originally in English. This requires a lot of close scrutiny and comparison. In studying the scripts, we also learned that *Crazy to Marry* had three tinting colors: yellow, blue and amber, which are detailed by reel, and will be recreated digitally by our graders Chris Crouse and Graham Brown, using original tinting samples from the early 1920s. Our regular collaborator, Jesse Pierce, an expert at recreating the intertitles, will design titles that faithfully match the original style of a Paramount feature, Keystone Comedy or Triangle release, for example.

Steve, this set comes on the heels of your book, 'Rediscovering Roscoe'. Championing Arbuckle is clearly a passion project for you. What is it about him and his comedy style that speaks to you?

Steve Massa: I grew up hooked on silent comedy, and although I got a steady diet of Chaplin, Keaton, and Laurel & Hardy there was almost no Arbuckle to be seen. This was probably due to left over stigma from the scandal. My first real look at Roscoe was thanks to film historian William K. Everson. In a 1983 all-Arbuckle evening at New York's Collective for Living Cinema, Professor Everson showed *The Waiter's Ball (1916),* his feature *Leap Year* (made in 1921), and the comeback sound short *Buzzin' Around (1933).* Seeing the comedian from his first full flowering to his last hurrah was an eye opening experience and inspired me to try and get as much of his work seen as possible. Since then I've taken every opportunity I could to present his films – at places like The Museum of Modern Art and Library of Congress, on DVD, and in print.

The fact that Arbuckle made feature films is often overlooked. 'Crazy to Marry' shows him mixing polite comedy plots with slapstick. Where do you think his comedy style might have headed in the 20s, if fate had not intervened?

SM: Mabel Normand and Roscoe were the first stars of slapstick shorts to move into feature films. Their type of comedy shorts, while loved by audiences, didn't get much respect in the film industry itself, where they were often treated like poor step-children. To be taken seriously they had to appear in more serious fare and be "legitimized" as feature stars. Roscoe's first feature was the dramatic western *The Round Up* (1920). The films that immediately followed, such as *The Life of the Party* (1920) and *Brewster's Millions* (1921), were polite drawing room comedies based on popular stories, novels or plays, and were very plot heavy.

Unfortunately we don't have access to all of his features, but by the time of *Crazy to Marry* and *Leap Year* he moved to farce comedy – which was better suited to his talents and gave him more situations to react to and opportunity to work in more helpings of slapstick. At the time of his banishment from the screen, Paramount had very similar properties lined up for his next projects, so it seems likely that he would have stayed in that style.

It's great to see Arbuckle's directorial career represented as well. What led you to choose the particular films featured here? ('Dynamite Doggie', 'Home Cured', 'Never Again', 'Stupid But Brave', 'Honeymoon Trio')

SM: The particular directorial films chosen for the set were picked for their excellence as well as their rarity and unavailability. In all of them Roscoe uses a very restrained and low-key approach that has the slapstick growing logically out of the situations. He gets very natural performances from the actors, with wonderful close-ups and reaction shots. His early sound short *Honeymoon Trio (1931)* will be a surprise to many people. It's Roscoe's "road film" – a black comic version of *Detour (1946)* and *The Hitch-Hiker (1953),* as Al St John and Dorothy Grainger head off on their honeymoon motor trip with Al's former rival Walter Catlett in tow. Powerless to thwart or

***Crazy to Marry,* with Bull Montana.**

even shut up the obnoxious Catlett, Al is symbolically cuckolded as he's caught in a never-ending honeymoon from hell.

Do you each have a favourite film or gag from the set?

SM: One of my favorite films on the set is *The Gangsters (1913).* This was Roscoe's very first film for Mack Sennett, it's amazing to see how he hit the ground running. Besides being very funny he pulls the focus whenever he's on screen, and his "Fatty" character is already developed at this early date. When this was made Roscoe was already a well-seasoned performer, having spent a decade touring with various stock companies around the U.S. and Asia. His film experience before this had been very limited – brief sojourns for Selig and Nestor, but he instinctively seemed to understand the intimacy of the movie camera. Understanding it, he used that intimacy extremely well and quickly became an audience favorite around the world.

CK: These films are so rare, I won't have a chance to see the films until the scans have come in from the archives. We received our first film last week, *The Sea Nymphs (1914)* from the Danish Film Institute, and it was so much fun to watch, with extended scenes shot on Catalina Island.

What do you hope viewers will take away from this set? Is there a particular facet of Arbuckle's talents you'd like them to have a new appreciation for?

SM: I'd like viewers to get a full picture of what an excellent overall comedy creator Roscoe was. He's best remembered for his on screen persona, but his work behind the camera gets taken for granted. He was a very sophisticated writer and director – even as early as 1915 his sure hand can be seen in films like *That Little Band of Gold, Fatty and Mabel Adrift (1916),* and *He Did and He Didn't (1916).* That's why after the scandal he was able to transition so easily to just writing and directing. He was already a pro, and turned out excellent shorts with comics such as Al St John, Lloyd Hamilton, Lupino Lane and Johnny Arthur.

So there you have it: a fantastic set rammed full of rarities featuring one of the true comic pioneers. I'm sure you won't want to miss out on this chance to rediscover Roscoe! Here's the full contents of the release:

Disc One

- ***The Gangsters*** (1913) – 10 min, **Museum of Modern Art** Roscoe had been making sporadic appearances for Selig and Nestor since 1909. *The Gangsters* is his very first film for Keystone..
- ***A Noise From the Deep*** (1913) – 10 min, **Museum of Modern Art**The earliest surviving film of Roscoe with his frequent co-star Mabel Normand. It is also considered to have the first use of a thrown Keystone pie.
- ***An Incompetent Hero*** (1914) – 12 min, **Library of Congress.** Roscoe is a victim of circumstances in this rarely seen comedy, which also highlights Edgar Kennedy, Minta Durfee, Al St John, and Roscoe's tight rope walking skills.
- ***The Sea Nymphs*** (1914) – 25 min, **Restored by the Danish Film Institute**Mabel, Roscoe and a seal have fun in the surf at Catalina, in a new scan made from the only known surviving print.
- ***Twixt Love & Fire*** (1914) - 10 min, ***Library of Congress*** Iceman Roscoe flirts with pretty Peggy Pearce, but then has to deal with the displeasure of her hubby Edgar Kennedy and his loaded pistols. This one of a kind print was unidentified for many years, and comes to us from the Library of Congress.
- ***Crazy to Marry*** (1921) – 40 min, **Restored by Cinematek (Brussels)**This was the sixth of Roscoe's starring features, and was only in theatres for about a week before being yanked out of distribution and vanishing. This rare survivor illustrates how Roscoe was taking polite comedy plots and working in more and more of his signature physical gags and slapstick.

Bonus: New reconstruction of ***Fatty and the Broadway Stars*** (1916) – 7 mins, **Nationalbiblioteket (Oslo) & Private collection / Restored by the USC HMH Foundation Moving Image Archive**Only a few 35mm and 9.5mm chunks are all that's known to exist today of this short. The Triangle Film Corp. had hired famous stage stars like Weber & Fields and William Collier to give prestige to their films, and used Roscoe to introduce some of these stage personalities to movie audiences.

Disc Two

- ***Never Again*** (1924) – 12 min, **Lobster/ Blackhawk**Roscoe here reworks the plots of *Fatty at San Diego* (1913) and *A Reckless Romeo* (1917) for his nephew Al St John. Scanned from the only surviving print.
- ***Stupid but Brave*** (1924) – 21 min, **Private collection / Restored by the USC HMH Foundation Moving Image Archive**Having been banned from the screen, Roscoe focused on writing and directing, creating excellent comedies with Ned Sparks, Poodles Hanneford and Al St John.
- ***Dynamite Doggie*** (1925) – 24 min, **Lobster/ Blackhawk**Al St John co-stars with Pete the Pup in this rarity that reworks material from *Love* (1919) and *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), as well as early films that featured Roscoe's dog Luke.
- ***Cleaning Up*** *(1925) - 24 min,* ***EYE Filmmuseum*** Johnny criticizes his wife's housekeeping skills, but when he stays home to prove that he can do better he lives to regret it. One of the four Johnny Arthur comedies directed by Roscoe, this comes courtesy of the only known surviving print at the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam.
- ***Home Cured*** (1926) – 10 min, **Library of Congress**Roscoe launched the series of Tuxedo Comedies for Educational Pictures which starred the fairly new screen comic Johnny Arthur. Scanned from the only known 35mm material, Johnny is a hypochondriac whose wife has had enough.
- ***Honeymoon Trio*** (1931) – 12 min, **Library of Congress**This early sound short is Roscoe's "road film," a black comic version of *Detour* (1946) or *The Hitchhiker* (1953) that details Al St John on a never-ending honeymoon from hell.
- **Bonus: Video essay** on Roscoe Arbuckle's life and career.

AL ST JOHN ...in his own words!

In the late 1950s, Al St John happened to be in London when a silent film retrospective was playing at the National Film Theatre. Al invited himself along and ended up speaking on stage. Amazingly enough, his introductory speech was recorded for posterity, affording us the rare chance to hear Al speak in his own words. He briefly covers his career in pictures, from the early days at Keystone to his second life as a B-Western player. As you'll see, some of Al's facts are a little mixed up, but it's a fascinating document nonetheless. Many thanks to the late David Wyatt for sharing this rare recording.

John Huntley (introducing Al): ...a man who's been with Chaplin, who's had his own comedy shows, who's been in Westerns recently, in fact who knows the whole world of these pictures we've been looking at because he started with them back in the days of the Keystone Kops: Mr Al St John.

Al: Thank you.
Well, as my friend here just said, I started with the Keystone Kops in the year 1911. That was, er... I'll have to start at the beginning, though, with the question "How did you get into pictures?"

Well, to tell the truth, I was a lifeguard in Long Beach, California. Mr Sennett, who was the boss and wrote that book called *Mother Goose*[1] about the Keystone comedies, wanted a high diver. And they had tried all over to get somebody to dive, and finally came down to Long Beach to take a look at our guards, and said, "Have you got anyone here who'd be able to dive 60, 65 feet?", or somethin' like that.

And I'd always had a show-off complex! I says, "I'll do it!" I'd been up fifty feet already, or something' like that. I said, well, ten more feet can't hurt... It did! *(Laughs)*

So, my first experience in pictures was Ford Sterling and Mabel Norman (sic) were making a picture (I didn't know anything of what was going on, or why). So, Mabel is running away from Ford Sterling and she runs out on a bridge, which is over a lake where we were: at home in Los Angeles. And on this bridge there is a pole that went up, oh, about 65 feet. And in those old, old early days, we had what they call an arc lamp up there. So y' put two arcs together, and trim the lamp and it burns all night so that the automobiles - or horses and wagons in those days! - can see to go across the bridge.

Well there was a platform up there where he'd go up to trim his arc lamp. Well , that's where Mabel went up, and Ford Sterling went up after her. I don't know what he's after, but he's gonna get it, anyway!

So they put me in Mabel's clothes and said, as quick as Ford Sterling makes a grab for you, jump!
Well, I sure did! *(Laughs)*

Mr Sennett came up to me, we always called him the old man - and he said " Al, that was swell, would you mind doin' it again? I said "Noooo!" So I got another ten bucks - that's ten dollars in American money.

So they put Ford Sterling's clothes on me—that's a frocked coat, striped pants, patterned shoes, spats and high hat—and they says, when we give you the signal, you jump.
So with the high hat on and everything, oop - we went! But I forgot about the high hat, and when I hit, it went down over my eyes and wouldn't come off! So I had to paddle around with my hand up in the air until the boat came and got me, or I would have drowned! So that was my first experience in pictures.

Well, the old man said, "Yeah alright, you're ok...as far as the water's concerned! Would you mind working for us?" [2]

I said, "No, I'd like to!" - and an exhibition complex came out! (*Laughs)*

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1. Al means Father Goose, a 1934 book not by Sennett, but by Gene Fowler. It's sort of a novelised biography of Sennett.

2. Interestingly, the usual story of Al's entering pictures is told a little differently, with his uncle Roscoe Arbuckle engineering an accidental audition for Sennett. Perhaps Al is referring to one of his early films after he'd already been hired.

So, I was made one of the original Keystone Kops. I worked in the Keystone Kops for about a year and then I was promoted: I got a *part!*
And you saw it tonight. That's the first time i ever played; and that's called a *part,* you know - you don't speak any lines or nothin', you just do something! That was my first part in a picture right there, with Charlie Chaplin, playing the elevator boy, going up and down.[3]

Then I became the heavy man, or we'll say The Mean Man, in Fatty Arbuckle's pictures.[4]
Now he weighed 300 pounds, and I weighed about 135 pounds soaking wet! So I'm gonna lick him every time I meet him! And we always fight over the girl, that was the subject of almost every picture.

So, I worked with Arbuckle for about 2 years, then they couldn't pay me anymore. In the meantime we had taken on Buster Crabbe[5], er, Buster Keaton, and Buster was with us. So with the three of us, I wanted more money and they couldn't pay me more. In the meantime I went with Warner Brothers. Then I left Warner Brothers and went with Fox and became known as the messenger boy on the bicycle.

I had a trick wheel that I learned how to ride, backwards and forwards, and sometimes the darn thing would ride me! I found out that there are no soft spots on a bicycle… I lost more skin off my skins going over the handlebars and everything else...

Well finally - everything travels in cycles. For instance, the two reel comedies were great, but along came a little stinker by the name of Mickey Mouse and he put us out of business. No more flesh comedies - the cartoon comedies could be made so much cheaper. So, I'm out of business, and like most good salesmen, I'll say you've got to have a new piece of goods. So, one of the greatest Western stars, who was a real, honest to God Cowboy, not drugstore cowboys, as we call them - Tom Mix— came to me. We were very dear friends, and he said, "Al, I'd like to have you play the comedy part in one of my Westerns". I said I'd like to. He said, "But you'll have to grow a beard", so i tried it. It came out red - now it's a little different. That was a few yeas ago.

I was nicknamed Fuzzy, then it became Fuzzy Q Jones. People ask me what the Q stands for, and I say I don't know, unless it's "quick" - cause if there's any trouble I'm trying to get out of the way of it quick!

But I got in an awful lot of trouble in the pictures, and it has been one of the most pleasant lives I believe any person could ever live. I've had to do something different every day, y'know, not like a person who goes into his office and you have to push a pencil all day, I didn't have to do that. Every thing I did, every single day, was *different.*

I'd say it was almost like [being] an inventor. You'd go in and create something different every day. Well, we didn't always, and of course I was a young man in those days - I watched Charlie Chaplin, I watched Ford Sterling, I watched Fatty Arbuckle.. and when they did something funny, that went down in the little book up here, if you know what I mean! You just kept on developing.

So, I became Fuzzy in the western pictures for the last twenty-something years, and I've had the pleasure of working with every Western motion picture star in the business, I do believe, and it certainly has been a pleasure. I enjoyed the Western pictures so much because it wasn't hard for me, because I was originally born on a ranch and with no brothers or sisters, all I had was cows and horses and dogs and cats to play with!

It certainly has been a pleasure to come over here for my first time in England, and I certainly have enjoyed it. I love all of you and I hope to have the pleasure of coming back again soon. I want to bid you all goodnight now, and until we meet again, may God bless all of you. Bye bye!

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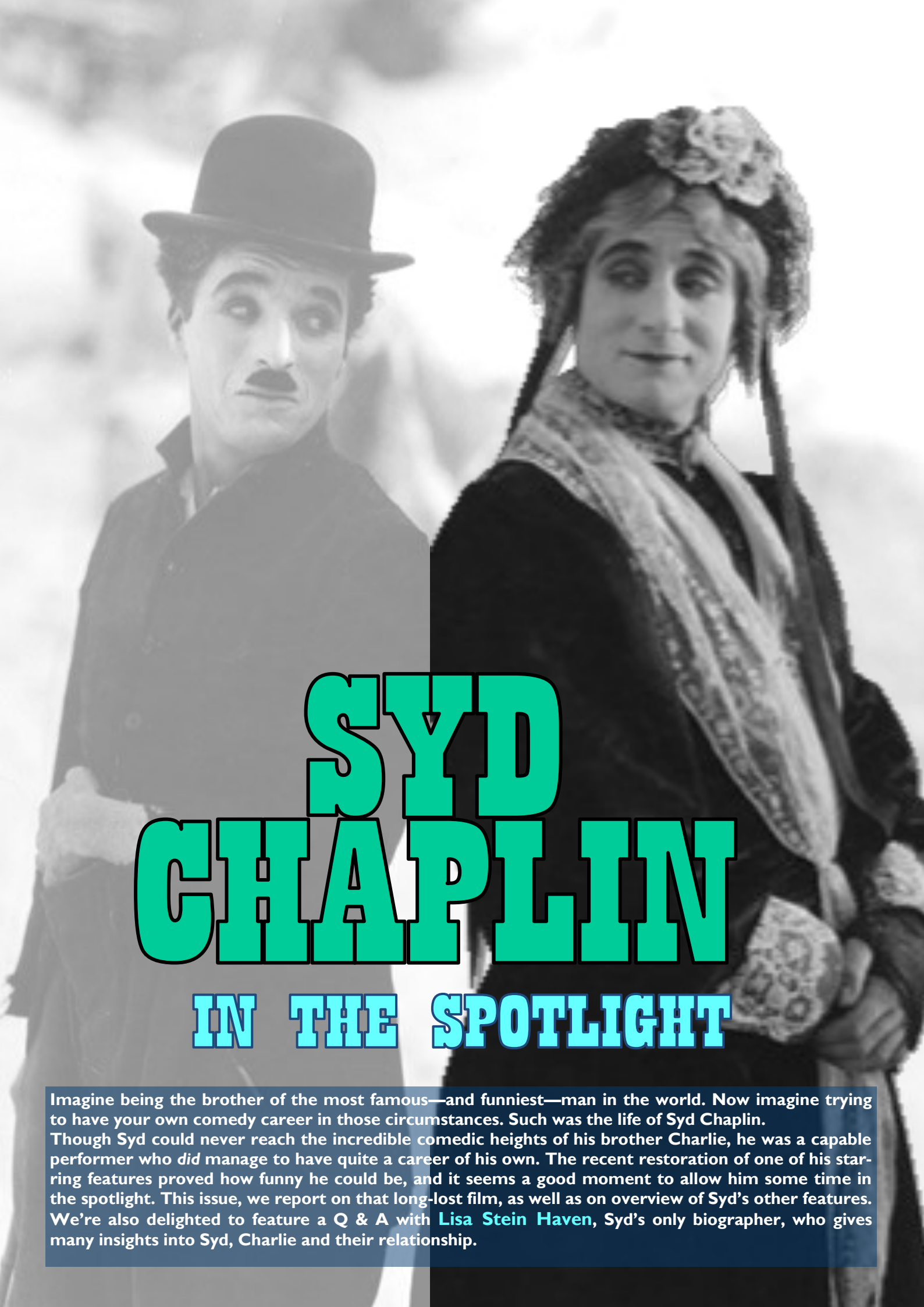
3. Al is referring to The New Janitor. *It wasn't his first film, not even his first with Charlie Chaplin. His actual first film is debated, but was made at least a year earlier.*

4. It's interesting that Al never mentions Arbuckle being his uncle.

5. St John did work with Buster Crabbe much later, in Westerns.



SYD CHAPLIN

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Imagine being the brother of the most famous—and funniest—man in the world. Now imagine trying to have your own comedy career in those circumstances. Such was the life of Syd Chaplin.

Though Syd could never reach the incredible comedic heights of his brother Charlie, he was a capable performer who *did* manage to have quite a career of his own. The recent restoration of one of his starring features proved how funny he could be, and it seems a good moment to allow him some time in the spotlight. This issue, we report on that long-lost film, as well as on overview of Syd's other features. We're also delighted to feature a Q & A with **Lisa Stein Haven**, Syd's only biographer, who gives many insights into Syd, Charlie and their relationship.

Skirts, Glass Eyes & a Missing Canary...

Syd Chaplin's

OH! WHAT A NURSE! restored

It's not very often that a Chaplin film unseen for almost a hundred years is restored and re-screened, but miracles can happen in the silent film world. OK, so the film in question doesn't star* Charlie *Chaplin, but his brother Sydney, whose own starring vehicles have been largely neglected. Syd might not be quite the comic equal of his younger brother – who is? – but his talents as a comic are undeniable, and the newly restored feature film* Oh! What a Nurse! *is a hoot. Here's more on this fun cross-dressing comedy, which is anything but a drag…

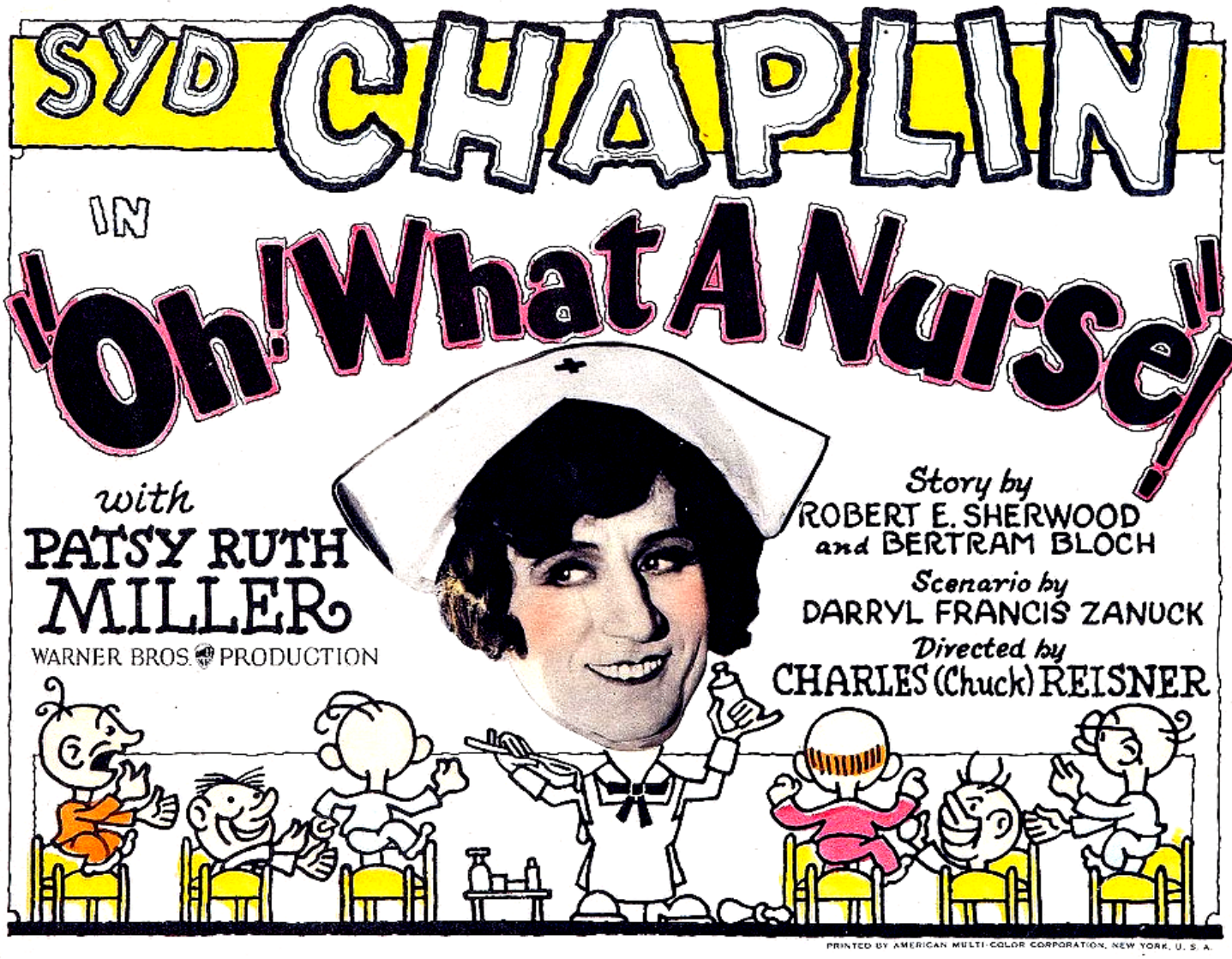
In her Syd Chaplin biography, Lisa Stein Haven recalls being shown one of two sole surviving prints of *Oh! What A Nurse* by Serge Bromberg, a piece of film so delicate that it required hand cranking through the Steenbeck. M. Bromberg's excellent work in preserving this fragile print has led to a newly restored print. Shown as a work-in-progress rough scan at last year's Pordenone, it managed to be one of the hits of the festival, even in such a ragged form. Thanks to M. Bromberg's kindness, we were delighted to provide a UK re-premiere for this incredibly rare film at the 2024 Silent Laughter Weekend, and it has been recently been shown at Bristol's Slapstick Festival. Hopefully the film will be seen more widely soon, but, in the meantime, here's a run-down of this long-forgotten gem…

Due to nitrate damage, the film begins rather choppily, with stills, freeze frames and titles filling in the missing footage. The set-up establishes that a plot is afoot by newspaper owner Tim Harrington to force the marriage of his niece Lydia (Patsy Ruth Miller) to a dubious gangster character; in return, they will split the inheritance that she receives when she marries. Meanwhile, at the offices of Harrington's newspaper, we meet young reporter Jerry Clark (Syd), who has been detailed with covering the lonely hearts column run by "Dolly Whimple", when Dolly is absent. This is the source of much hilarity to the other newspaper hacks, who fill his office with flowers, perfume and feminine decorations. (In one particularly savage prank, Jerry finds a cat inside a bird cage with a note reading "If you're looking for your canary, it's inside the cat"!). Jerry tries to take revenge with a bucket of water, but ends up soaking the editor. He is fired, but quickly reinstated when the editor realises that no-one else will cover for Dolly. The two plots become intertwined when Lydia has doubts about her upcoming marriage, and writes to "Dolly" seeking advice. Jerry's response is to tell her not to marry. With his scheme in jeopardy, Harrington furiously demands that Dolly writes a retraction.

Early the next morning, Jerry is called back to the office by the frantic editor. There's a fun scene of him struggling to wake up, despite the efforts of his dog to help him, and soon the comedy routines really get going. The film's first great scene features Jerry's attempts to dress himself, have breakfast and leave behind his infuriatingly faithful dog, all while in a huge rush. The scene really enables Chaplin to showcase his comic ability with props and facial expressions – stuffing hard boiled eggs into his cheeks while battling with some awkward braces, for instance. There's also a nice scene as he tries to shut his dog in the garden, but the dog keeps finding gaps in the fence to escape through, and keeps reappearing at his heels. Simple stuff, but beautifully timed and perfectly played for laughs.

Jerry's commute involves a ferry, and after struggling to get on board in time, it's time for a tenuous plot connection! Patsy is also on board. Jerry falls in the water trying to rescue Lydia from falling overboard– and ends up in a boat harbouring the notorious water criminal 'The Black Widow' (Matthew Betz) whose disguise is (inexplicably) a drag outfit. With the coastguard in pursuit, the widow forces Jerry to change clothes with him and escapes. In a hair-raising moment, Jerry manages to flee the runaway boat by jumping on to a swing bridge and escaping to dry land.

He eventually makes it to the office just as Harrington arrives, insisting on seeing Dolly Whimple. Still in skirts, Jerry is of course taken for Dolly; Harrington asks her to come along to talk Lydia round to the marriage. Of course, Jerry is reluctant, but is forced to go along by the editor.



At Harrington's mansion, Jerry is astounded to realise that the girl in question is Lydia, and struggles to maintain the impersonation as Dolly. In an amusing scene (s)he is offered whisky, but each time throws the drink behind him, not realising that it is landing in the fireplace. Each time, the flames lick up at his back, eventually setting his dress on fire. While extinguishing himself and sorting out his costume, Jerry overhears the plot to force Lydia to marry, something that is going to take place on Harrington's boat. He soon runs afoul of Harrington's burly minder Edgar Kennedy, who sees through his disguise and sets off in pursuit. Jerry manages to locks him in a sauna, and after boiling for a few minutes, Kennedy emerges with a hopelessly shrunken suit. Meanwhile, Jerry has taken the place of Harrington's new nurse, and adopts his next disguise... In this guise, he begins to grow close to Lydia.

As the wedding party sets off on the yacht, Jerry tags along in his new identity, hoping to find a way to throw a spanner in the works. In the course of his snooping around the boat, poor Edgar Kennedy is on the receiving end of some Jerry's slapstick accidents. This leads to one of the film's highlights, in which the "nurse" is instructed to give Kennedy a medical examination. Jerry's unorthodox methods involve a hammer, a hot spoon, and using a huge wall thermometer, to take Edgar's temperature!

Meanwhile, preparations for the arranged marriage are taking place. The Black Widow, another one of Harrington's cronies, appears and decides that he'd like to get in on the act. As he tries to woo Lydia by appearing as a brave and charming sea captain, Jerry appears and tries to let Lydia know he's not what he appears to be. This leads to one of Syd's patented "trying to get a message across in pantomime" sequences, and this is one of his best. Trying to convey that "He's false", Chaplin acts out wonderful mimes of taking out false teeth and a glass eye. Failing to get through, Jerry resorts to desperate tactics to disrupt the wedding, announcing that the Captain has taken advantage of him with all the melodrama that he can muster. Of course, during this performance, his wig accidentally comes off, and the chase is on! All ends happily, as the villains are apprehended, and Jerry - now back in his true identity- wins Lydia's heart.

As you can tell, the plot of the film is hopelessly convoluted, but overall, the film emerges as a winner, and really came to life with an audience. It has a fair bit in common with his two preceding films, *Charley's Aunt* and *The Man on the Box,* and winds up feeling like quite a representative sampler of his work in features. As well as the farcical plot, it also features more positive recurring themes from those films: the drag act and some glorious pantomime routines. While Syd's female masquerades are certainly amusing, the real gold is in those extended comedy routines; the hurried breakfast, medical examination of Edgar Kennedy and Syd's pantomime of a glass eye are all absolutely superb. Here we can really see evidence of Chaplin's schooling at Karno, and of how he took this style and created something with his own stamp on it. It's wonderful that the film has been restored, and hopefully it will be seen more widely soon.

SYD CHAPLIN: THE FEATURE FILMS

Sydney Chaplin will forever be in his little brother's shadow, but he was a very capable comic in his own right. As a young man, Syd was a featured comedian in the music halls while Charlie was still an obscure juvenile; he had his own touring company in Fred Karno's outfit, and played lead in a number of sketches. In fact, it was Syd who persuaded 'The Guv'nor' to take a chance on Charlie in the first place. When Charlie left Karno for films and had success at Keystone Studios, the tables would be forever turned, but Syd continued to chase a starring career to the end of the 1920s and beyond.

Surprisingly, Syd was even making his first feature as early as 1919. That effort, *King, Queen, Joker*, proved to be a hubristic failure that went catastrophically over budget, and set his career back several years. However, after Charlie offered him juicy support roles in *Pay Day* and *The Pilgrim,* Syd began to rebuild his career. Supporting roles in other films like *The Rendezvous* and *Her Temporary Husband* followed, before Al Christie's production of *Charley's Aunt* effectively relaunched his career. A string of comedies for Warner Bros followed; in the end, Syd starred in almost as many full length films as Charlie. Few of those films have been generally available, and they remain surprisingly obscure for a bunch of films bearing the Chaplin name. Here's a run-down of Syd's uncelebrated career in features; I've noted where films have been made available for viewing.

KING, QUEEN, JOKER (1921)

One excerpt issued as a bonus on the Criterion reissue of The Great Dictator.

Sydney's first feature-length film was an extravagant effort, filmed in Europe at great expense. It was a tale of a Ruritanian kingdom, where the King is kidnapped; his double, an inept barber, is called in to stand in for him. Sound familiar? The basic story was revisited almost two decades later by Charlie Chaplin, to become *The Great Dictator*. Sydney himself worked on the latter film, and one whole routine was lifted from his original: a comic shaving routine. Sydney's version may be seen on the Criterion reissue of Charlie's film.

On its release in 1921, *King, Queen, Joker* was a costly failure that soured Sydney's career prospects for a few years. Today, the film itself is lost, so we can't judge it for ourselves. However, a whole host of outtakes exist at the British Film Institute, just waiting to be assembled into something coherent…

THE RENDEZVOUS (1922)

Sydney's tentative return to films came in a few of Charlie's shorts, noticeably his plum comic role in *The Pilgrim*. This helped lead to other offers, including this wartime drama starring Owen Moore, in which Syd provides comic relief. As "Wilkie", he adopts a similarly grizzled WW1 Tommy costume to *Shoulder Arms;* he would adopt an almost identical appearance again in 1926's *The Better 'Ole*. It was a small part, but one which garnered him positive notices. Most importantly, it showed that he could still be effective in a comedy role independent of his brother's films.

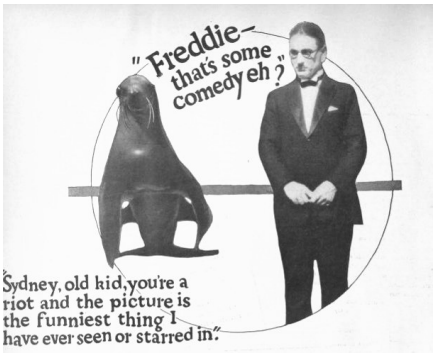
HER TEMPORARY HUSBAND (1923)

No walrus moustaches here; this is our first glimpse of the clean-cut Sydney of the mid 1920s. It's a conscious move away from his fuzz-faced, aprés-Karno, apres-Charlot characters, and towards a career as a modern, 1920s comic leading man (taken to further extremes later when he had some impossibly white teeth installed). Here he plays Judd, long-suffering butler doing his best to navigate the love triangle between Owen Moore, Sylvia Breamer and Tully Marshall.

THE GALLOPING FISH (1923)

Another career milestone, this time part of a three-way comic billing beside two other Sennett alumni: Ford Sterling & Louise Fazenda. This comedy was produced by Thomas H Ince, who was riding high on the success of *The Hottentot*, a horse-riding comedy with Douglas Maclean. *The Galloping Fish* features a rather different animal: Freddy the performing seal! Chaplin plays a nervous bridegroom who innocently gets involved with diving star Fazenda, much to the chagrin of his wife (Lucille Ricksen) and Fazenda's manager-fiancé (Ford Sterling). Things only go from bad to worse when Syd has to chaperone her performing seal for twenty four hours…

The Galloping Fish certainly has an unusual plot, not to mention a great ensemble of comedians. Critics and audiences gave it the seal of approval[1], anyway. *The Enquirer* called it "*a masterpiece of buffoonery. Could even make a tombstone grin!*", while *Moving Picture World* singled out Sydney for "*excellent pantomime work. The scenes in which he pretends to be crazy to cover up embarrassing situations are simply screams*".



Syd and his marine co-star: Freddie,* The Galloping Fish *himself!

THE PERFECT FLAPPER (1924)

Colleen Moore, as* The Perfect Flapper, *vamps the hapless Syd.

Syd plays opposite the up-and-coming Colleen Moore in this frothy jazz-age comedy. Moore plays Tommie Lou, a young lady who has been brought up by her maiden aunt to be decidedly old-fashioned for the 1920s. At her birthday party, she meets married man Sydney. The two accidentally get drunk together, and are photographed (innocently) in a compromising position. A scandal ensures when the photo is published in a newspaper, and Syd's wife decides to divorce him. Meanwhile, Tommie Lou has decided to finally update herself, so when Syd brings his wife and divorce lawyer to meet the innocent girl and straighten out the misunderstanding, he is instead confronted by "the perfect flapper". All ends happily when Tommie Lou falls in love with the lawyer.

This film was very much a starring vehicle for Moore, but Sydney graduated to a comic leading man role well; *The Billboard* remarked that he was "*funny, without being ridiculous*". *The Perfect Flapper* was another step up in his career, and definitively marked his move to lighter, more farcical comedy.

CHARLEY'S AUNT (1925)

Available on DVD in the out-of-print set American Slapstick 2, *and also on budget DVD from Alpha Video.*

Syd had harboured ideas of starring in an adaptation of Brandon Thomas' play for several years. It took him some time to find the backing, but eventually, in late 1924 things started to come together. Now that he had a few successful film roles under his belt, he was able to garner enough interest to make the film. A transatlantic production partly funded by the British company Ideal, *Charley's Aunt* was produced by Al Christie and directed by Charles F (Chuck) Reisner. Chaplin and Reisner had been friends since Keystone, and Reisner's work on Charlie Chaplin's First National films, alongside Syd, helped cement this.

Now a chestnut of a gazillion stock company, film and TV adaptations, the plot of *Charley's Aunt* has become a familiar one, but in summary: a young undergraduate is persuaded to impersonate his friend's wealthy aunt, so he can act as a fake chaperone to enable a romance. Things are complicated by the arrival of the real Aunt, and of some fortune hunters.

Syd's version allows him to show off his comic chops as both a light comedy leading man and female impersonator. He's blandly amusing in the former category, but hilarious in the second. Undoubtedly, the highlights of the film are his appearances in skirts, particularly the scene where a stray cigar finds itself into his petticoats. Syd's mixture of character comedy, body control and facial expressions are quite superb, and it's no wonder that female impersonation is the thing he's best remembered for today. *Charley's Aunt* remains a career highlight, and cast a long shadow over his subsequent work.

1. Sorry...

THE MAN ON THE BOX (1925)

A lo-res VHS transfer is available on The Internet Archive.

Charley's Aunt was an unqualified hit, and Syd had made it back to stardom. It wasn't long before he was offered a contract for five features with Warner Brothers. The first effort was *The Man on The Box,* an original story featuring Syd as a young investor who backs the purchase of a new helicopter for the US Government. Spies (Charles Gerrard & Chuck Reisner) get wind of the plans and attempt to steal them for their own country. Meanwhile, the helicopter's inventor Lampton (Theodore Lorch) is starting to think Syd has designs on his wife…

That evening, Reisner arrives to steal the plans while Lambton is out. Lampton's wife raises the alarm to Syd; in the ensuing struggle they both end up knocked unconscious in her bedroom. The furious husband calls the police, and the film's hitherto sluggish pacing now becomes suddenly frenetic as the husband, spy and cops all chase Syd in and out of bedrooms, bathrooms and through the streets. Syd takes refuge in a vacant Hansom Cab and disguises himself as the cabman – "the man on the box".

Soon he has customers – the Government representative who has purchased the helicopter, Colonel Annesley, and his pretty daughter Betty (Alice Calhoun). Syd is smitten with Betty, and manages to wangle a job as Annesley's groom and butler. The scenes which follow are among the highlights of the film, as Syd struggles to get to grips with his butler duties. There's an absolutely wonderful sequence with a stack of plates, which shows a mastery of prop comedy to equal his younger brother, and a (literally) delicious piece of pantomime in which Syd employs cookies and wafers to perform an impersonation of Teddy Roosevelt.

Later, when Lampton arrives for a dinner party, Syd fakes a toothache to avoid detection. When the spies turn up too, and he gets wind of their plot to steal the helicopter plans, he takes the place of a maid so. This provides a wonderful comic climax, as Syd tries to vamp the villains to steal the plans back, before his true identity is revealed.

The Man on The Box has lots of potential and some very funny scenes, but is somewhat stymied by its complexity. Cluttered with characters and subplots (quite a few of which I've omitted from the synopsis above), the film is much messier than it needs to be. However, in the moments where Syd is allowed to stretch out and engage in pantomime, it becomes a wonderful, laugh-out-loud comedy. It's just a shame that the writers couldn't have kept things more simple; a simple plot featuring Syd forced to impersonate butler, then maid, would have been much more effective and allowed him plenty of room for his best pantomime routines. Nevertheless, *The Man on The Box* was very popular with audiences, keeping Syd in good with Warners, and in skirts for his next film…

OH! WHAT A NURSE! (1926)

We've discussed *Oh! What a Nurse!* in depth already, but in the context of this career overview, it's worth noting that this was Syd's third film in a row in drag. What is it about female impersonation that kept drawing him back? Did the studio see it as part of the successful Syd Chaplin formula, after the success of *Charley's Aunt?* Did he especially enjoy this style of comedy? Perhaps it reduced the burden on the need to create a character of his own, with the costume providing an outline for the type he was playing. Or, at the risk of playing screening room psychologist, could the fact that female impersonation was one style of comedy that his younger brother barely touched have something to do with it…?

THE BETTER' OLE (1926)

Available on DVD in the Warner Archive series.

As if to reassert his masculinity, Syd's next film was a real change of pace from his drag pieces. This WW1 comedy sets him squarely in a man's world, as a character not at all effeminate. Here he is "Old Bill" in an adaptation of Bruce Bairnsfather's wartime comic strip series of the same name. As a piece of character acting, Chaplin's performance is superb; he successfully adds years to his age, and you'd never recognise him as the pearly-toothed farce comedy lead from his last three films. His Old Bill is gruff but warm, and occasionally just a bit poignant; a cartoon made into conceivable flesh and blood.

Set behind the front in France, the story itself is pretty light: spies are at work within the ranks, but Old Bill eventually unmasks them and saves the day. Really, it's all just an excuse for a series of army comedy skits: Bill on fatigue duty; a gang show with Bill in the back half of a cow costume; a succession of run-ins with a belligerent corporal. However, the material is all good, with plenty of original gags. A particular highlight is Bill's pantomime of a General, barking orders at his troops. He doesn't realise that a platoon is on standby just behind him, and they take his shouted orders to be real, marching all over the post and causing havoc.
A strong cast helps put over the material, too. Edgar Kennedy lends excellent support again, as the exasperated Corporal Austin, and Syd has a nice rapport with Jack Akroyd as Bill's pal "Little Alf".

Syd as "Old Bill".

Along with *Charley's Aunt, The Better 'Ole* is the most enjoyable today of Syd's surviving films. It's surely no coincidence that both are adaptations of existing stories and characters; while Syd was a talented character comedian, he wasn't really an originator. However, when he was given a strong existing subject to work with, he could really live inside the role, and create some great comedy along the way.

THE MISSING LINK (1927)

Another change of direction, *The Missing Link* takes Syd back to farce comedy, but without the drag act. This is a comedy of mistaken identity, with some animal antics thrown in for good measure. Syd plays Arthur Wells, a poet who winds up posing as an explorer searching for a giant ape; only trouble is, he's deathly afraid of animals! Comic highlights included Syd's encounter with a pride of lions, and a series of comic routines with a chimpanzee. Akka the chimp, who was apparently quite the scene stealer, won much praise in reviews. However, Syd garnered some bouquets of his own, with *The Morning Telegraph's* reviewer speculating that "*on the basis of this film, we'll soon be referring to Charlie as "Syd Chaplin's brother"!*

The Missing Link exists at The Library of Congress, and has been shown sporadically. Perhaps one day we'll see a restored version of this film? With its intriguing plot, excellent reviews, and the novelty of seeing Syd interact with his animal co-star, it certainly seems like an interesting effort.

***Syd meets Akka the Chimp… a posed still and charming cartoon capture the essence of* The Missing Link.**

THE FORTUNE HUNTER (MADE 1927, RELEASED 1928)

This appears to be the only one of Syd's starring features currently unaccounted for. It's a shame, as the film had a great comedy cast: Louise Carver, Nora Cecil and Babe London all feature. However, it does seem to be the worst-received of all his Warners features. "*Dull and uninteresting*" yawned *Motion Picture World*, while *Photoplay* was even more brutal, howling "*This is the reason why people walk out on pictures*". Several reviewers commented that Sydney was miscast as a village sheik out to find a wealthy old woman to marry, but perhaps the main problem was that this film was more of a contractual obligation. By this point, Syd was no longer a priority for Warners, and as talkies became the real news, he was quietly shuffled off their roster. *The Fortune Hunter* was to be his last American film.

A LITTLE BIT OF FLUFF AKA SKIRTS (1928)

A fresh start, in the U.K. As Monty Banks and Lupino Lane would discover, the expanding British film industry would provide excellent opportunities for comedians in the late 1920s and early 30s. Instead of being little fish in the big Hollywood pond, they could be prominent players in the U.K.. As the Brits prepared to upscale production and attempt to make more homegrown product to dilute America's influence, anyone with experience was welcomed. Heading the efforts in London were the newly formed British International Pictures. For Syd, who had rapidly run out his credit in Hollywood, this was a lifeline. *A Little Bit of Fluff* exists at the BFI, and is a lot of fun. As nervous milquetoast Bertram Tully, he's back to the henpecked husband roles of *The Galloping Fish* and *The Perfect Flapper*. Trouble begins when his friend John persuades him to have a night out to see his neighbour Mamie (Betty Balfour) sing in her cabaret show . The elaborate nightclub scenes contain Syd's equivalent to Charlie Chaplin's dance of the bread rolls, a sequence in which he animates a doll to the music, and culminate in a slapstick battle royale. Fleeing back to his apartment, Syd ends up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mixed up with a jewel robbery at Mamie's flat, he escapes disguised in her nightdress...just as his wife returns home. *Fluff* can't compare with Syd's best American features, but is a pleasant little film and benefits from the presence of comedienne Betty Balfour. Incidentally, the *other* other Chaplin brother, Wheeler Dryden, co-directed this effort, with Jess Robbins. The film was retitled *Skirts* for the American market, where MGM released it. However, it was to be the last Syd Chaplin film.

That wasn't the way Syd planned it, though. He was planning to appear in a feature length, sound version of the Karno sketch *Mumming Birds,* returning to his roots, and reclaiming the role of the drunk from his brother. Scandal – and possible financial skullduggery on BIP's part – scuppered the plans. A major career blow to Karno and Chaplin, it also denied us the chance of hearing Syd's speaking voice. According to Stein Haven's biography, Chaplin wouldn't quite give up on his hopes of making another film until the late 30s. At that point he returned to Hollywood to help Charlie with *The Great Dictator,* and may be seen in behind-the-scenes home movies taken on set. Subsequently, he lived a picaresque life touring Europe in his caravan with second wife Gypsy, and lived on until the age of 80. He passed away in 1965 – incidentally, on brother Charlie's birthday.

Reading the biography of Sydney, his career was clearly stalled by some recurring personality issues, but his surviving films are still entertaining. Let's hope that more of them, like *Oh! What A Nurse!* are made available for viewing. As a comedian, he deserves to be more than a footnote in Charlie Chaplin's story.

TALKING CHAPLIN

Lisa Stein Haven on Syd, Charlie, their careers and relationship...

While the rediscovery of *Oh! What a Nurse!* has momentarily put Syd Chaplin back in the spotlight (in the silent film community at least), for years he was an incredibly under-researched performer. For the longest time, the only information we had about Sydney were the asides that Charlie Chaplin and his biographers included about him Most of this centred around the Chaplin brothers' early years, while Syd's own film stardom and later years were seldom mentioned.

Film historian and author Lisa Stein Haven finally corrected this with her book *Syd Chaplin: A Biography*, in 2011. Written with full access to the Chaplin Archives, the result was a wonderful work that successfully brought the shadowy figure of Sydney to life. Since then, Lisa has delved into the Chaplin brothers' history further for her recent book *The Early Years of Charlie Chaplin*, in addition to a terrific book on Max Linder.

Lisa very kindly agreed to field some questions on both Chaplin brothers, and her research about them. Read on for some terrific insights...

Charlie and Syd Chaplin, c. 1918

In the course of your research, you've been lucky enough to access the Chaplin archives. I'm sure there are some stories to tell from there! How did you find the experience, and were there any particularly memorable moments?

I have been very lucky in that I was in on the very beginning of the archive. I was working on my Ph. D. and had received permission from Kate Guyonvarch to come work in the Chaplin office in Paris, where most of the artifacts were housed, then later to work at Bologna as the database was uploaded (it was originally available only on the Cineteca di Bologna's proprietary databases, so could only be viewed in situ). I did a lot of work at that time deciphering Charlie's cryptic handwriting, which I seemed to be good at, and helped to create a bunch of documents of his written work that were much easier to read. I would say I worked on all of this, giving up my summers (not a sacrifice) for nearly ten years. Of course, my own work benefitted, as I finished my dissertation, then went on to write a few books that relied largely on the archive. It was also during this time that I was given the Syd Chaplin bio project, my first real book project. In addition to Paris and Bologna, this effort also took me to the Archives de Montreux, Switzerland, where physical artifacts ended up after being scanned.

Charlie Chaplin's First National Period is something of a transitional, and slightly unsung period in his career; films like A Day's Pleasure are sometimes cited as his first dip in quality. What drew you to hone on this period in your book The Early Years of Charlie Chaplin?

First, no one had written about it in close-up, outside of widely-read bios, like David Robinson's. There are books on the Keystone period, Essanay, Mutual—you get it. I also thought it would be interesting to see exactly what the turmoil consisted of and when I read all the industry press about what was going on, it became clearer.

Yes, Chaplin started to have creative blockages during this period, which he had never had before. Every artist needs that experience, so it became more interesting to me to try to investigate the contract closely and see what was really going on. In essence, it turned out to be a battle of wills: J. D. Williams, a hard-headed Aussie, was on the First National side and Chaplin was on the other, no timid wallflower.

A Dog's Life and The Kid are celebrated as Chaplin classics, but is there a First National Film that you think is particularly underrated, or that holds a significance in Charlie's career?

I think both The Idle Class and The Pilgrim are particular standouts. The Idle Class, which I know was slapped together fairly quickly, is just full of great gags. I think it is his best use of the double character—one rich and one the Tramp—and has some sophisticated moments of comedy that simply aren't surpassed in other films—the drink shaker scene, of course, but also the simple fact that the female lead, Edna, falls for the Tramp in the fancy dress scene, as if he truly is a rich man in a Tramp's costume. The Pilgrim is simply a shorter feature in a sense and contains the fantastic David and Goliath sermon in pantomime, as well as the Tramp's metamorphosis into a western bandit in the saloon scene. There's really so much to praise this film for, including the ending in which the Tramp straddles the border between Mexico and the US. And, I've failed to mention Dinky Dean and the fantastic scene between him and the two brothers, Syd and Charlie. A truly great film.

The First National films are the first time that Charlie's brother Sydney really shares the screen with him. Syd pops up in some great comic roles - the lunch wagon vendor in A Dog's Life; a soldier in Shoulder Arms, and the harassed parent in The Pilgrim, for instance - and also contributed story and gag ideas. What did you learn about their working relationship on these films, and how much do you think Charlie looked to Syd for support during this period?

Syd and Charlie in **The Pilgrim, 1923.**

Although Syd was completely frustrated with the lack of success he was having outside of brother Charlie, I think this may have been one of the most productive periods for the brothers. Syd isn't in all the First Nationals, because he was desperately trying to get his own film contract, which he did in 1919 with Jessy Lasky (a complete failure), but when he is included, his roles are memorable. But Syd was manic about making money, legally or illegally and added the ownership of an airline and a few other business ventures into the mix. He had to have been distracted back on the Chaplin stage, if nothing else, but this was still a time in which Charlie looked up to his brother. By the time Syd had been blacklisted from the business in 1929, it is easy to tell that a permanent rift between the two had occurred and Charlie did his own thing, no matter how many letters of criticism he received from Syd. But during the First National period, they seemed to work well together.

Charlie Chaplin was a bar against which all silent comedians were measured, to one degree or another. But for Syd Chaplin, sharing a family name made it impossible to escape comparisons. But, aside from his work with Charlie, what do you think Sydney's key skills and legacy as a performer were? How would history judge his comedy without his family connection?

Syd's legal last name was Hill, so he adopted "Chaplin" himself. Still, he did compare at least his financial success to that of his brother and got himself into lots of trouble trying to top it. As I have always said openly, Charlie was an artist; Syd was a skilled acrobat and athlete. He had the skills necessary, but not the finesse, and frankly, he didn't have the looks either (although Darryl Zanuck thought him the far handsomer of the brothers). He's an incredible mimic, which is why he could do drag so well, and finally achieved the level of fame and wealth he desired through opportunities provided by his turn in Charley's Aunt. Yet, he soon tired of this sort of role as well. Syd knew that he was best in secondary roles, even though he ended his career as a headliner. I think history would not record him, without the Chaplin name, however, because he just didn't have that special sauce, if you get my meaning.

Sydney's early films as "Gussle" have a certain amount in common with Charlie's Keystone films, but later on their styles diverge. With films like Easy Street and The Kid, Charlie reaches back into his past in the London slums, but Sydney rarely looked back; his films are much more firmly rooted in middle class farces. Do you think this has any significance?

Yes, indeed. Sydney hated thinking about the past and refused to visit any part of the old neighborhood, unlike Charlie. He was not unhappy to be banned from England then after the scandal in 1929 that separated him from his film career for the rest of his life. I think he ended up going back to England only once to appear in court. So, he was most definitely NOT sentimental about his past.

A question about the process of researching and writing: there can be an information overload when sifting through source material. How did you manage to focus in and begin to pull out key strands to paint a picture of Sydney – a man long forgotten, who spent much of his life outside of the limelight?

With Sydney, it was especially difficult because most of what he had published about himself was false. So there was that added problem of trying to figure out what of the written stuff had a kernel of truth in it and what did not. I like to use binders with dates on them to try to put things in order, so if I find something interesting in an industry rag and it has a date of say 1923, I'll put that in a like- labeled folder. Then when I get to writing, I can just sift through this information that's already organized for me and try to write it up in a pleasant manner. Industry rags and the media historyproject.org website are indispensable for this sort of thing, but I have to say I also received some help from Martin Humphries at the Cinema Museum, because they have so many runs of very particular or niche industry rags there. I think it was only in those that I found some indications of the scandal.

Your biography of Syd paints a fascinating picture of a conflicted man who was often his own worst enemy. There's certainly plenty of evidence that he could be caring, loyal and creative, but also that he could be philandering, irresponsible and greedy. In the process of researching a protagonist, sometimes uncomfortable facts are revealed, sometimes unknown strengths. Did diving deep into the lives of the Chaplin brothers change your opinions of them at all? Did you come away with different feelings about them, or the work they created?

I think by the time that I started the Sydney Chaplin project, I was pretty well versed in the information that both brothers were somewhat unscrupulous, especially given their business dealings. As I have said in print before, they are basically street urchins looking to get something for free and to rip off someone in some manner. Usually in their adulthood, it was the American government in the form of taxes. So I can't say that this particular project changed my mind about either Sydney or Charlie except to say that initially I started with the idea that Sydney was nothing but a corrupt individual and ended up appreciating his close relationships with his nieces and nephews, which kind of rejuvenated him for me a bit. It's very hard to write about someone who's completely a bad person because it takes so long to write and research such books that you don't really want to live with a person who has no redeeming value for that long. So luckily, I interviewed Michael Chaplin and others early on and understood then that Sydney was not entirely one-dimensional.

Family relationships are often complicated, and it seems that Syd and Charlie were no different; ultimately, how do you think their relationship was defined, and what did it mean to them?

There's a letter from Charlie to Syd that expresses Charlie's undying gratitude for Sydney in his life, and it came early on, I would say before 1920. It's also extremely rare for Charlie to write anybody a letter, because he was not very good at written English until he was in his 40s. Anyway, I would say that in the early parts of their lives, Syd and Charlie were very close and then a huge break happened at the time of the 1929 scandal or shortly thereafter. Charlie was having none of that, the whole scandal thing, and pretty much broke it off with Sydney at that point. Sydney, however, was desperate to get back in Charlie's good graces and tried to invent ways for them to be together in Europe once Charlie was over there for his 1931/ 32 tour. He succeeded down in Nice where Sydney was living with his wife Minnie at the time and where he knew the ins and outs. However, when he got back to Hollywood, Charlie pretty much employed the same disregard for Sydney's ideas, thoughts and opinions as he had at the time of the scandal. Then, surprisingly, Charlie knew that Sydney was in a very bad way after Minnie's death and invited him to come to Hollywood to work on *The Great Dictator*. This didn't work out very well because Sydney pretty much tried to take over the studio management and made a lot of enemies, one of which reported to the American government that Syd was there without a work visa. He was deported to Cuba at that point. After Charlie married Oona in 1943, and the children started coming, there seems to have been a warming up of the Sydney/Charlie relationship once again. Sydney and his new wife Gypsy spent six months of the year in Montreux, Switzerland, just down the street from Vevey and so would visit the family frequently. All indications are that those particular visits went very well and that the brothers had made peace with each other by that point. So, I would say that like every sibling relationship, there were ups and downs, but at the end everything was good between them.

I'd like to ask a question about the relationship you form with the people you're researching and writing about. Writing biographical work must be quite an intense process, as people you've never met, who have been dead for decades, are suddenly quite a big presence in your daily life. Did you experience this, and did you find yourself identifying with your protagonists in any way?

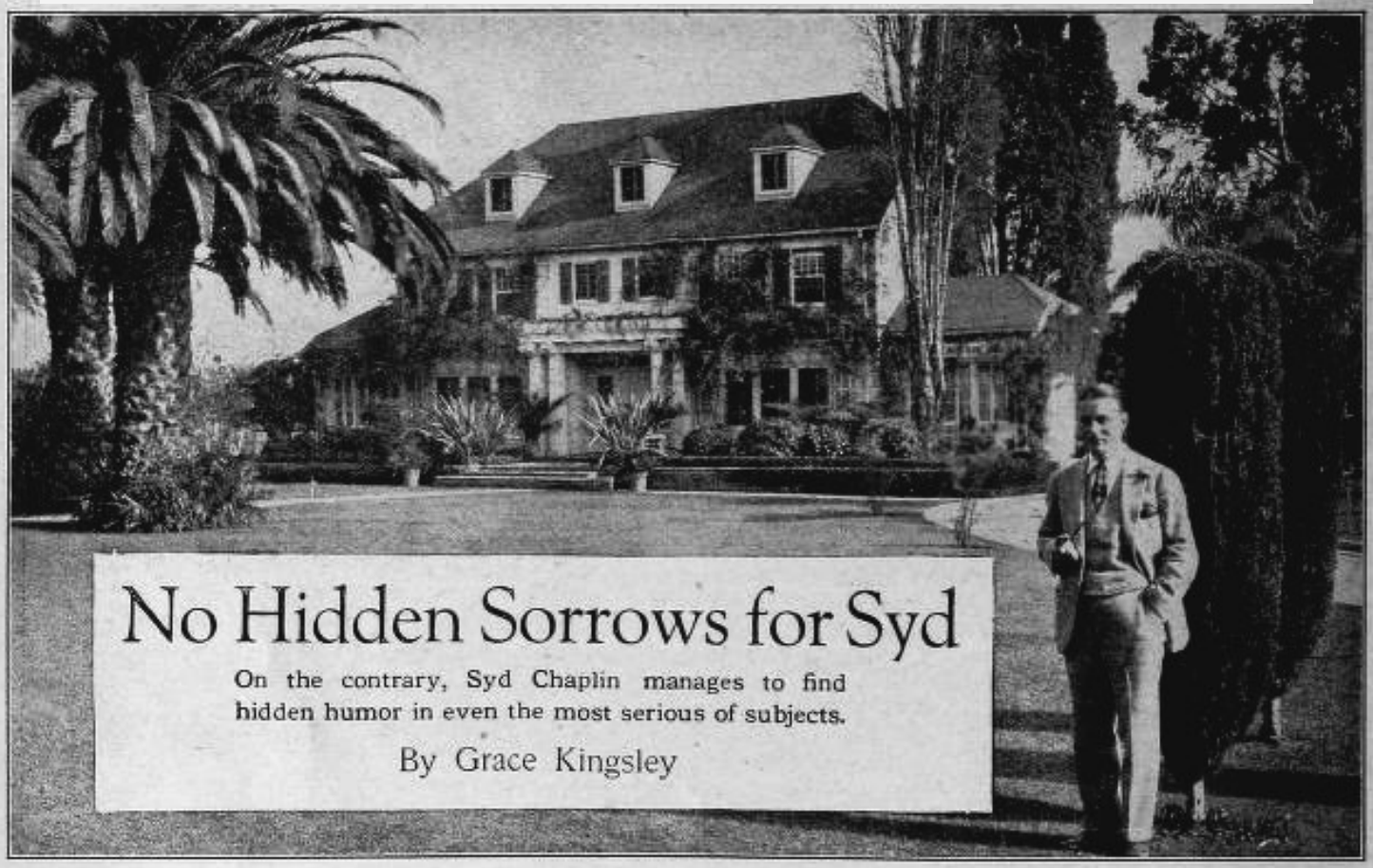
I can't say that I ever identified with my protagonists, but I did come to feel great affection for some of them, Sydney being one. The great thing about doing this kind of work is the camaraderie you create with others who are doing similar work. So during this time period I made some great friends that I've now kept for over 20 years. In fact, I don't know exactly who I would be without having had those experiences and meeting those people. I'm not particularly good at making friends, because I'm an introvert, but when you have something so niche to talk about with someone else, it seems to break the ice pretty well. Now the folks at the archives or the Chaplin office in Paris, for instance, were not always as personally invested in the particular characters that I was interested in writing about. However, they were all very kind and in many cases treated me with a respect that you might apply to an important colleague or guest, which I certainly didn't deserve. I have to say, I wouldn't trade the experience for anything, really.

Do you have any other upcoming projects you'd like to tell us about?

I just finished a book on Buster Keaton's early life and career, entitled *Early Buster Keaton: From the Vaudeville Stage to Comique Films, 1899-1920*, with Pen & Sword UK. My current book project is *The Full Monty Banks*, which should cover Banks's entire life and career. I hope to have that completed this year, maybe by September.

Huge thanks to Lisa for taking time to answer my questions. Her books on Syd and Charlie are must-reads!

A profile and interview of Syd, from the May 1927 issue of Picture-Play magazine, in which he shares a few intriguing comic ideas!



No Hidden Sorrows for Syd

On the contrary, Syd Chaplin manages to find hidden humor in even the most serious of subjects.

By Grace Kingsley

IT'S a treat, in these days of serious-minded comedians, to find one who is thoroughly merry, off the screen as well as on. Namely, Syd Chaplin. Though Heaven knows how he has managed to *keep* merry, what with making funny pictures all the time, and spending his days racking his brain for new gags. Syd has by now so thoroughly exhausted all the funny situations in the world that there's nothing funny left for him except serious things, you might say.

Take history, for instance. Syd adores history, but he converts it, with everything else, into terms of comedy. He thinks intimate historical comedies would be a scream.

"I do hope," says Syd, "that Charlie will make the life of Napoleon. There are lots of funny things about Napoleon's intimate life."

Syd is studying bacteriology and botany in his spare hours—and he'd adore to make a comedy of microbes! He has a great big microscope. I found him in his dressing room, peeking through it.

"I've got an idea," said Syd. "I've got an idea for a comedy. It's going to be based on the lives of germs. I would show a hypochondriac, and the lives and tragedies of various germs he is harboring, or thinks he is harboring——"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Where are you going to get an actor who will be willing to play a [illegible]?"

Syd Chaplin is one comedian who does not take himself seriously —he is quite as merry off the screen as on.

"Well," Syd reflected, "there was a play, 'The World We Live In,' that was all about insects, wasn't there?"

"Right," I admitted. "Go on."

"All right," Syd proceeded. "The little germs would be talking about going up on their next vacation to see the lungs. 'I went to see the heart last year,' says one germ, 'and it was wonderful! You should see that gigantic pump. There isn't another thing like it in the human body!' Other little germs would be taking joy rides on the blood streams. Then there would be a terrific battle between the bad germs and the good, healthful germs——"

"With a happy ending?" I asked.

"Certainly with a happy ending," said Syd.

But I must stop and get a little atmosphere into this interview. And Syd's dressing room is just full of atmosphere. Probably you think of a comedian's dressing room—if you think of it at all—as being a barren place except for hangings of comic garments. Not so, Syd's. His dressing room is much more ornate even than Pola Negri's—oh, much!

He has a

suite of rooms, to be exact, hung with pictures and furnished with antiques. There are soft carpets and curtains, and there is a whole library of books on stagecraft, technical lighting and —yes, there are a lot of them, too, on wit and humor, much as I hate to admit it. And of course there is a phonograph.

"There is something about the vibration of a waltz in the early morning, during the zero hour before going on the set, which simply won't let you be low-spirited," said Syd.

Who would ever think of *Old Bill* as being æsthetic!

The phonograph somehow led us to the subject of music as a scientific method of curing disease, and we *almost* got highbrow over it. But Syd saved the situation.

"If you can find a musical vibration," he chuckled, "that a microbe doesn't like, he will either die or leave you, won't he? Can't you imagine a solemn-faced old doc with a library of jazz tunes to set the measles microbes crazy? And just suppose a little microbe doesn't like classic music, and the patient doesn't, either, and they both have to listen to it just the same."

I could see that Syd was willing to get funny about anything in the world except comedy! But we simply had to get down to business.

"What is the future of comedy?" I demanded sternly.

"Character study," answered Syd promptly. "All Dickens' characters, about whom the fans haven't time to read nowadays, should be shown on the screen, whether we call them Dickens' characters or not.

"Of course we shall always have a certain amount of slapstick, because people love it. But all our comedy directors are becoming psychologists! Nowadays the comedy directors and 'comedy constructionists,' as the gag men are called now, get together and talk psychology and physiology. They have even worked out a psychological and physiological way of taking a pie in the face! They wonder whether certain sensory nerves, when irritated, would cause you to fall on your knees or forward on your face.

"'If you hit him near the pituitary gland, which is about here,' says a gag man, 'he falls forward suddenly, but if you hit him on the deltoid muscle or the serratus magnus, he goes cross-eyed and takes a slow fall. Now the question is, do you want him to fall suddenly or have a lingering fall?' Or words to that scientific effect. A little different, isn't it, from the old Keystone way, when somebody hit you 'on de bean wit' a brick,' and you did a 'brodie!'"

The success of Syd's OLD BILL *in "The Better 'Ole" is evidence of his theory that the future of comedy lies in character study rather than slapstick.*

Syd, who has to be constantly thinking up new gags for his comedies, keeps his mind fresh by taking plenty of exercise.

Among his dogs he finds pleasant relaxation from the ardors of the comedy lot.

That led us to the subject of how much more difficult comedy is now than it used to be.

"The time is gone," said Syd, "when you sat solemnly through a drama without a single laugh, and laughingly through a comedy without a single tear. All the dramatic producers are putting comedy relief into their tragedies, and all the comedians are putting tragedy relief into their comedies."

It seems that Syd has been browsing around lately in ancient books, and he got a couple of "nifties" from an old Egyptian obelisk, also a couple of gags from a Roman history. Jokes, it seems, are everywhere, if you only know how to look for them. Syd told me about some old wheezes he found lately in an ancient Greek comedy.

"Human nature stays the same," he remarked. "One man in this comedy walked onto the scene and tried to sell another man a house. 'What is the house like?' inquired the purchaser. 'Why,' replied the would-be seller, 'it's a brick house. See, I've

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No Hidden Sorrows for Syd

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even brought a brick from it as a sample!'

"And I found a mother-in-law joke in that old comedy, too. The mother-in-law had died but on the way to the burying ground a thorn on a bush by the wayside had accidentally scratched her body, drawing blood and causing her to come to life. She died again ten years later. Her son-in-law exclaimed, as they were again carrying her away, 'For Heaven's sake, keep away from that thorn bush this time!'

Syd showed me one of his books on scientific research.

"This is a great relief from comedy and gags," he explained. "I'll let you in on a secret. I'm tremendously interested in the production of synthetic pearls. Some day I mean to retire to the South Seas, hire an oyster bed, and find some way artificially to produce bigger and better pearls!"

I didn't really approve of this digression, of course, as what I wanted was a story about bigger and better comedies. But one sympathizes with Syd for wanting to fly to the calm of oyster beds for relief from the comedy lot. I really didn't have the heart to stop him.

"If," explained Syd, "you can find a way to keep up that mild irritation in the oyster which produces the pearl, without worrying him to death, and can find what it is in his diet that makes the covering of the pearl, you will have the secret. The thing to do is to scare the oyster and make him think the irritation is worse than it really is, so you can make him work overtime. Thank goodness, there are no union oysters! Then he doesn't get wise to what you are doing until you call on him and ask for the pearl."

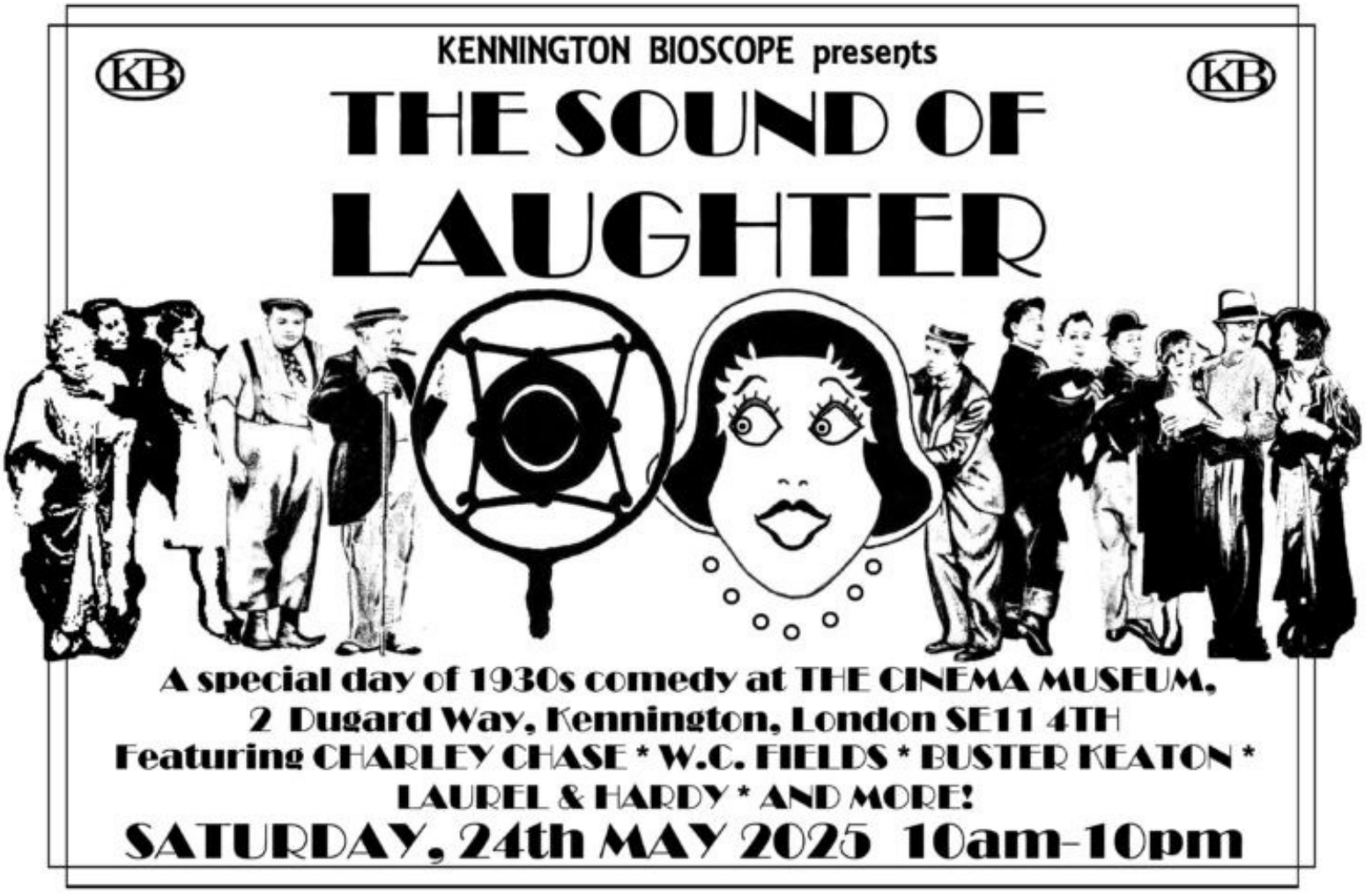
I was curious to know just how he worked—how he constructed his comedies.

"Oh, we always try to find some charming secluded spot," smiled Syd. "We wrote 'The Better 'Ole' down in Palm Springs. We used to go horseback riding in the morning, telling ourselves we needed the exercise to keep our brains from getting fagged. We talked about the comedy we were writing only whenever we thought we really ought to be doing something to earn our salaries. In the afternoon we sat down at our typewriters and banged off our ideas. Thus we constructed what we call a straight-line story.

"The gags we worked out on the set. Props often suggest gags. I like to see a set overdressed just on that account. Mack Sennett always said, 'It is hard to get a laugh among stones and trees.' A man can get a lot more laughs behind a counter in a delicatessen store."

"Just one thing more—do you get mash notes?" I inquired.

"Bless you, yes! Every comedian does! Although," said Syd, "I don't expect so many from my performance as *Old Bill*. Imagine climbing up under that mustache for a kiss! A girl would think she was lost in the Australian bush!"



Full programme and tickets:

[Kennington Bioscope presents The Sound of Laughter » The Cinema Museum, London]

Like a Rolin Stone

Harold Lloyd's *early films as the Chaplinesque 'Lonesome Luke' have long been neglected. Lloyd himself essentially disowned them, and most histories of Lloyd brush over the popular short film series. Silent Comedy author* **Steve Massa** *is setting that straight , with a new book in the works about Luke and the early years of the Hal Roach studios, then known as 'Rolin'...*

Steve Massa's catalogue of Silent Comedy books takes some beating: *Slapstick Divas*, two volumes of *Lame Brains and Lunatics*, *Rediscovering Roscoe*… all these are essential texts for the silent comedy fan, illuminating previously neglected corners of the genre . His latest book shines a similar light on a similarly under-researched topic, the early years of Harold Lloyd's career at Hal Roach. *Lonesome Luke's Lively Life: Hal Roach, Harold Lloyd and the Rolin Film Co* has just been successfully crowd-funded, and will be available shortly. In the meantime, Steve very kindly dropped by to share his insight into Lloyd's career, Hal Roach and his research. I'm also beyond thrilled to be able to share an exclusive excerpt from the new book. Huge thanks to Steve for answering my questions, and to his publisher, Split Reel, for allowing us to reproduce that excerpt here. First, some questions for Steve about the project...

The output from Hal Roach studios features some of the all-time great comedies, from Harold Lloyd, to Our Gang, Charley Chase and Laurel & Hardy. But the Rolin period is probably the least celebrated of Roach's history. What drew you to write about this time for your new book?

I've always been interested in the earliest days of the Hal Roach Studio as there's been very little investigation of it. What there is has been very perfunctory – he was an extra that got ahold of some money – set up Harold Lloyd as his star and boom! they were a huge success. Of course, there's much more meat on those bare bones. The ups and downs that they suffered during the first couple of years of the Rolin Company are very dramatic – distributors stealing their films, Hal and Harold having a major falling out, and the company being put on hold as the pair went out and worked for other outfits. Also it's never really been acknowledged where Hal got the money to set up the unit, which is a whole side story on its own with a copy of a marriage certificate to prove it.
Another inspiration are the wonderful photos that the Lloyd Estate has. Tons from the Lonesome Luke films, but also many from their earliest productions. These evocative and revealing images tell so much of the story on their own, so I only hope that my text does justice to their clarity and beauty.

The formative efforts of great artists are often overlooked, and hard to judge objectively next to their mature work. Taken in isolation from Harold Lloyd's 1920s work, where do you think the Lonesome Luke films sit in the silent comedy canon?

The Lonesome Luke films are, I think, pretty standard as far as the other slapstick comedies of the time. Since Roach and Lloyd were learning as they went along they stayed safely in the genre's requirements. In his autobiography Harold mentions that Chaplin was the rage, so it was decided that Luke had to be a somewhat similar tramp character. As they went along and got more experienced, Harold tried to broaden the character, but to really progress they had to get rid of Luke and start with a new concept. The Luke films certainly delivered to their audiences – they are chock-full of fast action and non-stop gags. They also have a great ensemble of supporting comics, and even at this early stage Harold's screen charisma is amazing. Once that star quality was combined with the right screen character there was no holding him back.

The Luke films remain quite obscure, as many were destroyed in a vault fire on Lloyd's estate. The Harold Lloyd Trust estimates that only 14 of the 67 films survive; were you able to view any especially rare Luke films, and do you think there might be any more out there?

It's been assumed for many years that most of the Luke shorts were destroyed in the 1943 fire on the Lloyd estate. But according to Harold himself that was not so – most of that story was exaggeration by the press. Harold told close friends that he didn't have the Lukes and didn't want them. In later life he dismissed the series and was embarrassed by them, and while he worked hard to save his glasses character films he actively ignored the Lukes. Harold was learning by doing in the Luke shorts, and being a perfectionist they didn't come up to his mature standards. Referring to Luke in *An American Comedy*, his 1928 autobiography, he said "I do not like to recall it, and I am sorry that it is necessary to exhume it for this autopsy." Harold was definitely proud of how he rose from being an extra to a star, but Luke was never something he wanted to discuss – he'd rather jump to where he put on his first pair of horn rim glasses.

From the research that I've done there appears to be about twenty-one Luke survivors out of the sixty-seven made. Large Pathe fires in 1919 and 1938 are thought to have destroyed the original materials. Throughout the 1920s Harold early glasses character one and two-reelers were reissued by Pathe. Not so Luke. I do think that there are more out there. Often missing films are hiding in plain sight, and sometimes bringing attention to an actor or director will cause someone at an archive to take a second look at a catalog listing or record, or a collector realize they have something rare. So I hope this book spurs on that type of interest and activity.

Lloyd in character for **Just Nuts** *(1915). This, and all other photos in this piece, courtesy of Steve Massa.*

Snub Pollard plays a big part in the Lonesome Luke and early 'glass' Lloyd films. Did you find any evidence of what Lloyd and Pollard's working relationship was like?

Harold talks a little bit about Snub in his autobiography, but doesn't go into any details on their working relationship (which lasted for five years). When they started together in 1915 Snub was a well-seasoned comedy pro, having started his career at age fourteen with companies such as Pollard's Lilliputians. Snub was much more experienced than Harold, and it seems likely that Harold must have absorbed a good deal of comedic technique and knowhow from Mr. Pollard. There are sequences in some of the surviving Lukes such as *Luke and the Bang-Tails*, *Luke's Shattered Sleep* (both 1916), and *Lonesome Luke's Wild Women* (1917) where Harold disappears for a while and Snub carries the footage alone – which almost becomes a preview of the solo Pollard comedies to come. Then Harold returns and the film goes back to the main plot.

The fledgling film producer: Hal Roach in the early days of his studio.

Aside from Roach and the on-screen comedians, who do you think were the main creative forces behind those early films in shaping the Rolin/Hal Roach style of comedy?

I think that the main creative force behind the early films, and the person really responsible for their changing and developing was Harold. From the very beginning it was Harold who was always pushing to improve. At first, he and Hal were content to get anything on film, but even after Lonesome Luke became a popular screen attraction Harold was trying to rework his tramp persona origins and clean him up. Failing to really make Luke a universal figure, Harold decided to try a new character. When told of his desire to change Pathe and Hal Roach were reluctant to let go of Luke. Pathe had spent thousands of dollars making Luke well-known so they weren't ready to drop him. But, with the determination that carried him through his entire life and career, Harold had had enough of Luke and told Roach that if his new character wasn't approved he was quitting and going into dramatic films. Luckily Roach made a strong play to Pathe and they agreed to introduce Harold's new glasses character persona, which eventually went through the roof. Harold continued to develop his comedy chops. In 1923 he left Roach to become his own producer, and his films got better and better as he lavished more time and money on them. This led to masterworks like *The Freshman* (1925), *The Kid Brother* (1927) and *Speedy* (1928).

What about the other Rolin players, aside from the stars like Lloyd, Snub Pollard and Bebe Daniels– the likes of Bud Jamison, Dee Lampton, Frank Terry? Are there any of these who you found particularly interesting, or underrated talents?

There are two of the Rolin players who were very important, and I think, unjustly forgotten today. The first is comedienne Gene Marsh. Although very attractive – tall and brunette – she was a character woman, and played all different types in the films. She was with Rolin from the very beginning – supporting Harold the year before the Lonesome Luke films started. Coming from the stage she hit films around 1913 and spent some time at the Reliance-Majestic Company in their Komic Comedies one-reelers. Before joining Rolin she worked briefly at Keystone, and her best-known appearance is as the King's favorite wife who flirts with Charlie Chaplin in *His Prehistoric Past* (1914). Switching over to the fledgling Rolin outfit she frequently played "Mazie Nut" in the ensemble of the Lonesome Luke comedies. She left the screen in early 1916, married a vaudevillian, and toured around the world.

The other overlooked and outstanding player was Dee Lampton. At two hundred eighty-five pounds the seventeen-year old Lampton was nearly a look-a-like for Roscoe Arbuckle (photos of Lampton are still mislabeled today). First appearing at Essanay, he got a lot of attention as the mischievous fat boy that helps Charlie Chaplin harass the onstage performers in *A Night in the Show* (1915). Lampton also worked in Essanay one-reelers like *Fun at the Ball Game* (1915) which were directed by Hal Roach. Specializing as annoying kids in shorts like *Luke and the Rural Roughnecks* and *Luke Joins the Navy* (both 1916), 1917 saw Hal Roach star him in his own series.

Known as the Skinny series, in shorts like *Skinny Gets a Goat* (1917), he was a teenage version of Roscoe Arbuckle's "Fatty" character. Unfortunately it didn't catch on and was discontinued after eight entries, so Lampton spent some time working for Mack Sennett in shorts like *Hula Hula Land* (1917). He returned to Rolin in 1918 as support to Harold's new glasses character. Playing all types of roles, like Arbuckle, Lampton was good at drag and often turned up as a woman. Also supporting Toto and Stan Laurel, his career ended in 1919 when he died of appendicitis at age twenty-one.

Luke's Fatal Flivver (1916)

A question about your research and writing process. Where do you begin, and how do you decide what to include and what not to include? Did the course of the book change shape at all, from what you initially had in mind? Did you make any unexpected discoveries during the course of your research?

Usually the subjects for my books find me. They're performers or aspects of silent comedy that I want to know more about – always something that I find very funny, and then am surprised that it's so obscure and overlooked. I'll have a few things in the back of my mind, and sometimes while researching something else I'll come across material that brings one of these items into focus. Once I really get interested, then I begin digging deeper and deeper. I always let the information I find shape the book, so my thoughts often change from what they might have been initially thanks to my research. Often if I'm interested in a subject I'll put aside material I come across for the day that I might really focus on it.
For this book the unexpected discovery is where Hal Roach got the money to incorporate the Rolin Film Co. It's quite a good story, but has flown under the radar for years (you'll have to read the book to find out).

What do you think are the top pick of the early Lloyd films? Have you got a top three shorts, perhaps?

My three favorite early Rolin comedies are *Just Nuts* (1915), *Tinkering with Trouble* (1915), and *Lonesome Luke's Wild Women* (1917).

Just Nuts is the only surviving pre-Lonesome Luke Rolin comedy. As the only look at the fledgling Hal Roach product the closest thing it resembles is an L-Ko Comedy. The first half is set in a park with Harold assuming the Billie Ritchie role as he bothers people there. He even looks like Ritchie with a cane, baggy pants, moth-eaten mustache, jacket buttoned high on his chest, and a scowl on his face. In this short Harold isn't his earliest character of Willie Work, and isn't yet Lonesome Luke either. No name is given to this character – he's introduced via title card as "a poor, misguided nut."

After the hi-jinks in the park, the action climaxes in a busy nightspot/cabaret where Harold hits, kicks, and stick forks into various customers and wait staff, while he avoids a cop patrolling outside. He eventually loses the girl to the cop, and the whole thing ends in a big restaurant brawl. *Just Nuts* was extremely important to the little studio as it's one of the films that convinced Pathe to give Rolin a regular contract for a steady stream of films. Making a solid connection with a distributor like Pathe was akin to finding the Holy Grail to a tiny outfit like Rolin.

Tinkering with Trouble is only the eighth of the Lonesome Luke comedies, and by this time he's been joined by Bebe Daniels and Snub Pollard as his regular co-stars. Luke's a terrible janitor, and is a trial for all of the building's tenants. When he gets fired a rival janitor is hired, and for revenge Luke slips into the basement and switches the gas and water pipes. This is the main gag situation for this one-reeler, and details tenants getting soaked when they turn on the gas to cook, or even commit suicide. Of course, Luke and Snub as inept janitors was standard silent comedy material. Whether it was as janitors, plumbers, or wall paperers, slapstick comedians from Al St John, Ben Turpin and Bobby Vernon could be counted on to do the worst possible job imaginable. The switching of the gas and water was a time-honored conceit that would continue to serve all the way up to 1940 with The Three Stooges in *A Plumbing We Will Go* and Laurel & Hardy's *Saps at Sea*.

Lonesome Luke's Wild Woman is one of the very last Luke entries, and is a re-working of the earlier *Lonesome Luke Lolls in Luxury* (1916). As before Luke and Snub get shipwrecked on an island full of harem girls, but this time with a bigger budget and in two reels. Much to the displeasure of the ruling Shah, the sailors disrupt all the girls. When they overhear a plot to overturn the Shah, Luke and Snub capture the mutineers and win their freedom in the palace. An interesting aspect of this short is a long sequence with Snub Pollard and a harem girl. The almost five minutes spent on their flirtation and difficulties essentially becomes a solo Snub Pollard comedy, with Luke nowhere in sight. The Luke returns and it's back to the main plot. Similar sequences occur in other survivors like *Luke and the Bang-Tails* and *Luke's Shattered Sleep* (both 1916) – Harold has a coffee break while Snub takes over the picture.

What do you hope that readers will gain from the book?

I'm hoping that readers will get a full sense of what Harold and Hal achieved. Having started in the film industry at the very bottom as extras the odds were against their success. Even after Hal got the funds and created Rolin – at that time in 1914 there were a ton of fly-by-night independent companies which organized, cranked out a few shorts, and folded in record time. It was important for me to give a picture and feeling of what early Hollywood was like – to show what the two neophytes were up against. Besides the particulars on Harold and Hal, I give the background on the life and difficulties of being a Hollywood extra, the catch-as-catch-can style of making comedy shorts, and the dangers and pitfalls of dealing with shady independent distributors like Sawyer Inc. and the United Film Service. Lonesome Luke was the catalyst for their

Read on for an excerpt from the upcoming book; it's an entry for the 'Lonesome Luke Philm-ography' section of the book, for the film *Luke's Late Lunchers* (1916). Many thanks to Split-Reel Publishing for giving us permission to share this extract, and thanks again to Steve Massa for answering my questions. The book will be available from their website, and the other usual outlets, very soon.

Luke Joins The Navy (1916)

Luke's Late Lunchers

Released May 22, 1916. Produced by Hal Roach for the Rolin Film Company. Distributed by Pathé. Directed by Hal Roach. One reel. With Harold Lloyd, Bebe Daniels, Snub Pollard, Ben Corday, Blanche White, A.H. Fralich.

Luke starts off as the proprietor of a bean foundry, where the gentle little flies mingle with the peaceful butter cakes, so Luke feels no qualms for the flies' digestions. It does weary him though, when the beard of one of his customers gets into the soup. Luke ties the beard about its owner's neck, and the old man Niagara's on. It worries Luke again when of his customers insults his china by calling it cracked – when there's only a hair on it! The old dish rag, soaked and wrung out as occasion requires, is the source of all soup, through which, ever and anon, a resigned bean is passed, to give the dish atmosphere. Of course, Luke can't get away with this stuff, and the picture ends in a scrap that is "enjoyed by all." (*Moving Picture World*, June 3, 1916).

Caption: Harold attends to Blanche White as A. H. Frahlich is about to put him on the menu in *Luke's Late Lunchers* (1916).

Lunch counters and wagons are extremely prolific in silent comedy. Everything on the menu is a recipe for a gag, and the various food items, tables, spoons, forks, pots, pans, and other restaurant equipment are just ready and waiting to be used as projectiles, or for some other kind of physical combat. Some of the more memorable hash house encounters include Vitagraph's *Hash and Havoc* (1916), Charlie Chaplin playing catch-me-if-you-can with his brother Syd in *A Dog's Life* (1918), Stan Laurel serving a motley crew in *Short Orders* (1923), and Lloyd Hamilton and Colleen Moore's difficulties with lunch wagons in *Nobody's Business* (1926) and *Her Wild Oat* (1927).

The king of culinary comedy was Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. In shorts such as *Fatty's Tintype Tangle* (1915), *The Waiter's Ball* (1916), and *The Cook* (1918) he flipped flapjacks behind his back, battled ripe Limburger Cheese, and without looking tossed knives and other sharp objects with deadly accuracy. Although he always made the final result look effortless, Arbuckle related just how much work was involved in those sequences to the April 1916 *Picture Play Magazine*:

> I spent just one week getting the kitchen scenes I was in alone. I used over ten thousand feet of film just for that. In one part of the play I had to toss a pancake up and catch it behind my back. I started at nine o'clock in the morning, did it on the first rehearsal, then started the camera and didn't get it until four-thirty. I'd hate to tell you how long it took me to catch the plate behind my back in "The Village Scandal!" I seldom rehearse since then.

Later in his career Arbuckle would reprise some of these routines in *Special Delivery* (1927) and *Hey, Pop!* (1932).

The Lonesome Luke company shouldered on with a hectic pace, and continued to add new individuals to the stock company:

> Ben Corday, tallest man in this vicinity, has been added to the Rolin family of "queer ones," and is bound to make a pleasing member of the Phunphilm family. It is said that he can without assistance look over Harold Lloyd's head with Lloyd standing on Harry Pollard's shoulders. At any rate Big Ben is some tall and coupled to his length is his marked ability for good falls. He makes a good addition to the Rolin forces.
>
> *Moving Picture World*, February 12, 1916

Ben Corday was one of the most intriguing and colorful individuals making up "the Rolin family of 'queer ones.'" Born in England, he ran away at a young age to go to sea. After military duty fighting in the Second Boer War in Africa, he settled in the United States where he had a long list of occupations – wrestler, doorman, stevedore, and a stage actor. Corday is listed in the cast of 1910's *Three Million Dollars* at the Chicago Opera House, doubling in the roles of a hotel porter and a chauffeur, and he spent some time as a giant or strongman attraction with circuses. Although reports on Corday's exact height vary, he was in the seven-foot range, and thanks to this

Ben Corday (center) towers over two companions in a personalized postcard.

became Rolin's resident giant. For a few months he loomed over the rest of the company in shorts such as *Luke and the Bomb Throwers* and *Luke, Crystal Gazer* (both 1916).

Today Corday is best known for his contribution to the art of tattooing. Spending his last twenty years as a tattoo designer and artist he's considered a father of modern tattooing, but was as nomadic doing this as he was in the earlier part of his life. Although his work was influential, he was reportedly a notorious alcoholic, opening shops in different parts of the country in between drinking binges. Corday died in his sleep at sixty-two in 1938.

Motography (June 3, 1916): "Harold Lloyd here takes up the duties of a beanery proprietor and after extracting all the fun from one of these much laughed at and much patronized places, finds himself, as usual, in the midst of a lively scrap."

Harold and Snub have barely survived a kitchen battle with Luke's Late Lunchers *(1916)*

THE QUIET WORKER WHO WAS JERRY DREW?

Meet JERRY DREW, a.k.a, Clem Beauchamp. Director, stuntman, aerial ace, Oscar winner… and forgotten silent comedian. **Matthew Ross investigates Drew's comedy career.**

Among the many delights of the movie trade magazines now available online, the vibrant full-page adverts stand out as highlights. These splashes of colour showcase many silent comedy stars; as well as the well-known favourites, they often feature comics whose time in the spotlight proved to be very brief. Sometimes, they provide a big showcase to launch a new star whose career ultimately came to naught, or show planned ideas for series that never came off. They show us where the studios' hopes and prospects were guided, and where the publicity money was beng directed. Educational Pictures was at its zenith in the late 1920s, and showed its prominence with a barrage of full page ads in magazines like *Film Daily* and *Motion Picture Weekly*. Here, they featured prominently alongside the ads for Hal Roach, Mack Sennett and the other comedy studios. Among the many large and colourful ads featuring familiar si-com second bananas like Al St John, Lupino Lane and Lloyd Hamilton, one unfamiliar figure stands out.

He is a dapper gentleman, in silk hat and immaculately tailored suit; on the silent comedy spectrum, he could inhabit the space between Raymond Griffith and Charley Chase. This is Jerry Drew, and he features increasingly prominently in Educational's ads in 1928 and 1929, often being given full page spreads to himself.

It's clear that Educational were pushing Drew as Educational's corner on the more sophisticated end of the two-reel comedy market. This was a trend seen across several of the comedy studios, as they attempted to keep pace with the changing demands from slapstick to situation comedy. Roach had Charley Chase and his "all-star" comedies, Sennett put Billy Bevan into suits and spats, and promoted the lighter comedy of Ralph Graves; Century had dapper performers like Al Alt. Educational found themselves in the same boat. The majority of their comedians were more clownish figures, and Drew represented a chance to broaden the scope of their output.

But despite the initial enthusiasm, Jerry Drew didn't really catch on, and disappeared after a few years; his comedies are rarely seen today. So where did he come from, and where did he go? In fact, starring as Jerry Drew was just one brief interlude in the very full, adventure-filled life of the man who was really called Clem Beauchamp.

Beauchamp was born in Bloomfield, Iowa in 1898. As a young man, he seemingly had no thespian ambitions, but certainly had a taste for adrenaline. According to later studio biographies, he enlisted in the Navy during The Great War and worked as a parachute tester, subsequently training as a pilot. When his active service ended, he decided not to hang up his flying helmet, finding work as a stunt flyer at fairs and events.

The excitement of the aviation craze soon spilled over into Hollywood. Stunt pilots were increasingly in demand, not least because of the high casualty rate. According to later studio biographies, Beauchamp apparently found aviation work in several films, and from here it was a short leap to more standard stunt double work. A later snippet from *Exhibitor's Herald* in May 1928 claims that "a near-fatal fall into a canyon" while flying his plane led him to reconsider his career as pilot.

While this colourful story makes great press copy, it's possible that Beauchamp's entry to films was a little more prosaic. *Close Up,* on August 20th 1922 cites him as production manager for a series of short films starring child star Arthur Trimble – a considerably less dramatic occupation!

His behind-the-scenes experience stood him in good stead for future work at Educational Pictures. By 1925 he was at the studio, acting as an assistant director to Stephen Roberts.[1] Under Roberts' tutelage, Beauchamp was soon appearing in Educational comedies, as well as directing them himself.

The one-reel 'Cameo' comedies provided an idea development zone for both comedians and directors, and it was here that Beauchamp learned the ropes. He spent most of 1925 there, appearing with Phil Dunham, Lige Conley and others. Before long, his supporting appearanc-

1. It's probable that Roberts was responsible for Beauchamp's entry to Educational, and possibly into films as a whole. One article from *Film Daily mentions that they were both former pilots, so maybe they knew each other from earlier times.*

IDEAL COMEDIES

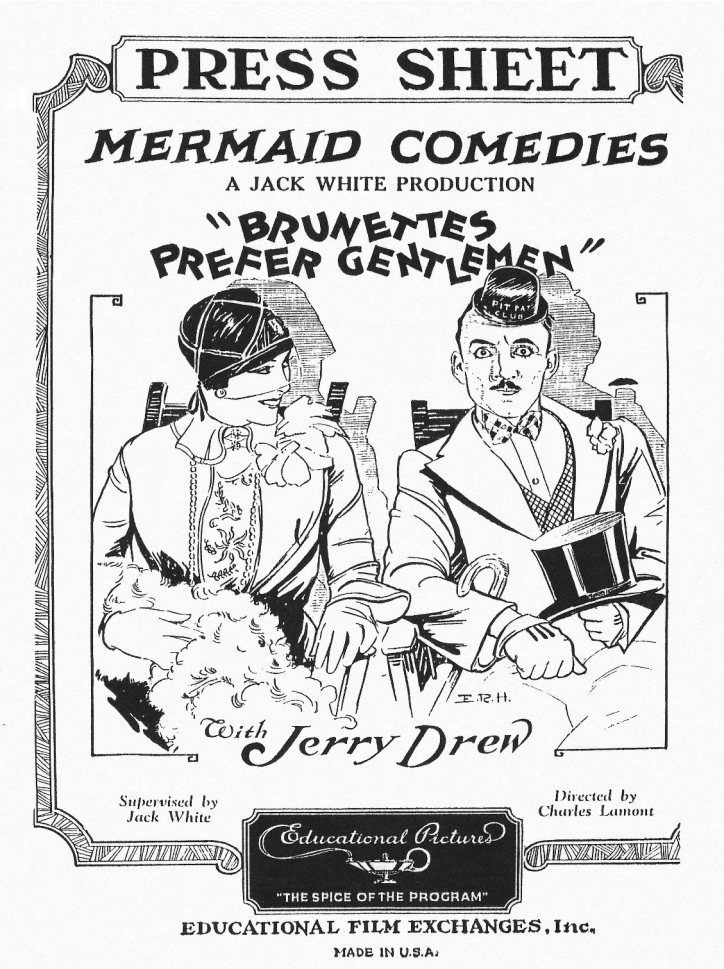
with JERRY DREW

A new series of comedies featuring Jack White's latest spectacular find--JERRY DREW. Splendidly produced, as well dressed as DREW himself, yet fast *and* snappy, Ideal Comedies truly merit their name. They are ideal comedy entertainment.

8 2Reel

Educational Pictures
"THE SPICE OF THE PROGRAM"

Produced under supervision of JACK WHITE



Stills and a press sheet from* Brunettes Prefer Gentlemen*, with Anita Garvin and Robert Graves. Press sheet courtesy of Glenn Mitchell, from the collection of the late Cole Johnson.

es began to gain plaudits from the critics.

Hanging Fires was ostensibly a vehicle for Phil Dunham, but the *Exhibitor's Herald* singled out Beauchamp for stealing the show, and printed his photo rather than Dunham's beside their review. For Squirrel Food, starring Cliff Bowes, the *Herald* raved further: "*Clem Beauchamp, as a goofy huntsman, is about the best in the picture, even though he has an exceedingly small part*". Bowes must have fumed.
The budding comedian proved especially adept at portraying inebriates, in which capacity he ran away with some of the best comedy moments in the films. His performances as drunks were singled out in films like Cliff Bowes' *Who's My Wife* and Al St John's *Pink Elephants*. Beauchamp struck up an especially fruitful working relationship with St John. From late 1925 onwards, he began making regular appearances with Al, which continued until early 1927.

Al St John's *Flaming Romance* features him as a dopey henchman to a Machiavellian general in the Latin American country of 'Guatemezala'. He makes the most of this broader role, engaging in a nice bit of tit-for-tat with St John, and later being taken in by Al's disguise in drag.

More typically, *Listen Lena* sees Beauchamp in a juicy role as Al's Rival. It's a good example of how his roles had grown from bit parts. His character had now solidified to a suave but disreputable young chap, often with a penchant for a tipple. Beauchamp also directed the film, one of several he helmed, including Phil Dunham in *Plumb Goofy*, and Lupino Lane in *Listen, Sister*.

Clem's positive press notices as performer hadn't passed Educational by, and *the* studio began to give him some starring roles. In early 1927 he made a handful of shorts teamed with the lanky Dutch comic George Davis. One of these, *Hot Lightning,* still circulates. It takes place in the Chatham Hotel, run by matronly and strait-laced Lucille Hutton; Clem is her nephew who she hopes to pass the business on to. Unfortunately, he's not quite the man he was hoping for; his entrance into the hotel is superb, seen from behind and followed by the camera, he staggers along drunkenly, dropping a never-ending series of liquor bottles from his suitcase. Immediately, the goofy house detective (Davis) pounces on him and throws him out, setting up a cat and mouse game between them as Beauchamp keeps trying to sneak back into the hotel.

Other films featuring the Beauchamp-Davis pairing include *Queens Wild* and *Brain Storms.* Another experimental pairing with a fellow supporting comic was *Fox Tales,* with Phil Dunham. Perhaps taking inspiration from Raymond Griffith's *He's A Prince,* the short casts Beauchamp as a visiting royal on a hunting trip, who enlists taxi driver Dunham to help him track down the fox.

Educational was happy with the results, and promoted Beauchamp to his own starring series. However, someone obviously decided that the name Clem Beauchamp wasn't catchy enough; the comedian would now be billed as 'Jerry Drew'.

Beauchamp/Drew's personal life was on the up at this point, too. While working at Educational, he met and wooed a young actress . The erstwhile Mrs Beauchamp is

IDEAL COMEDIES

E W Hammons presents

A Jack White Production

"The Quiet Worker"

with

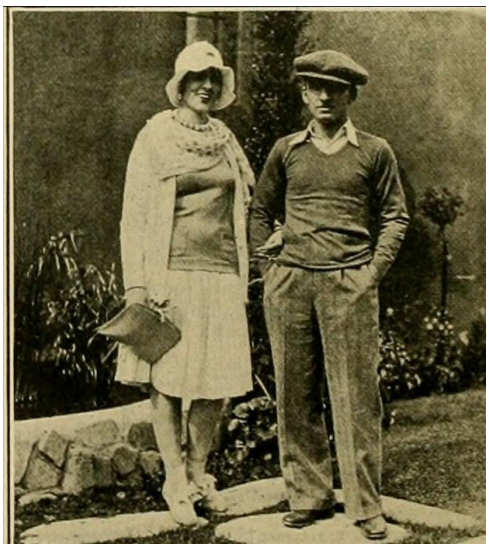
Jerry Drew

Directed by Charles Lamont

Educational Pictures

"THE SPICE OF THE PROGRAM"

EDUCATIONAL FILM EXCHANGES, INC.



now rather better remembered than her husband: she was the wonderful comedy actress Anita Garvin. Anita was working in small parts at Educational too when she met Clem, and she appears in the first of the Jerry Drew starring series, *Brunettes Prefer Gentlemen.* Jerry is the friend of an eloping couple, and is tasked with delivering them the marriage licence. However, he begins celebrating a little too early, and misses their elopement. To catch up with them, he tries to meet them at the dock their honeymoon boat departs from, and ends up sailing on the voyage, too. On board, he gets mixed up with a woman and her jealous husband. *High Strung* continues the farcical vein, and centres around a jewel theft at a hotel. Jerry is suspected by the hotel detective, who spends the rest of the film trailing him. They both wind up in a theatre as part of a hypnotist's show.

A similar premise of pursuit dominates *Indiscreet Pete*. This time, our hero is being harried by a tailor who wants payment for his suit. Jerry tries to elude him by jumping on a Pullman train. There, as *Film Daily* wearily reported, *"the usual mix-ups occur that always do occur when a comedian in a two reeler escapes to a Pullman car".*

And that withering sentence seems to be the problem with several of the Drew comedies. He's a very capable performer, but his material doesn't quite live up to the concept. Based on Educational's trade ads, one hopes for sparkling farces in the vein of Charley Chase, Raymond Griffith, or even the late Billy Bevan vehicles, but it's rare that they materialise. There are plenty of laughs to be had in the existing shorts, but aside from his swanky clothes, there isn't a whole lot of sophistication. The overall sense is that the films are perfectly good slapstick comedy, but something of a missed opportunity for Educational to do something different.

Girlies Beware, one of the surviving entries that circulates on 16mm, illustrates this quite well. Drew plays Elmer: "His Father wanted him to be a College professor, and his mother was certain he'd be President – so he wound up as a hotel clerk". The film starts with a nice original gag of Jerry/Elmer trying to get the crease right in his trousers. He hits on the bright idea of using bulldog clips, and soon has about twenty of them lined up and down his legs – a wonderfully silly sight as they flap about on his trousers. When a lady accidentally bumps into him, some of the clips transfer to her dress, leading to Jerry's awkward attempts to retrieve them. Of course, she ends up thinking he is pinching her, and slaps him.

The lady's husband (Robert Graves) soon arrives, and wants to know where the under-te-counter champagne he orders is. Elmer's attempts to open it predictably result in a soaking for all of them. Other residents of the hotel also cause problems; a party of chorus girls are hosting a wild party, and another resident (Henry Murdock) has a toothache. Murdock complains about the noise from the party, and demands that Elmer does something about it. There's a wonderfully timed little gag as he reluctantly knocks on the door, immediately ducking to avoid a fist which appears when the door opens.

To placate Elmer, he is invited in, and soon becomes tempted by the alcohol flowing freely. This gives us a good look at the tipsy act that gave him his early success, and he's pretty good at it. So far, so good. Unfortunately, things lose a bit of steam from this point on, as opportunities for farce and situational humour take a back seat to slapstick. Jerry eats a banana, which ends up down the back of a lady's dress; the peel slips him up so that he lands in the lap of another lady as her husband approaches, and so on. The gags, amusing though they are, could have been done by most of Educational's other comics. Eventually, the fuming Murdock arrives to shut down the party, goes berserk and is knocked unconscious. The film peters out in Elmer's attempts to use a pulmotor to revive him. Murdock is first inflated so much that he floats around the room, and when Jerry tries to reverse the

From top: Press ad for Drew's first starring series; a frame enlargement from* Girlies Beware!; *with wife Anita Garvin; with director Stephen Roberts and a Felix costume. The Felix cartoons were also distributed by Educational.

Jerry finds himself in an embarrassing situation in* The Quiet Worker. *Image courtesy of Steve Massa.

effect and suck out the air, he is reduced to half his original size. A pint-sized Murdock storms out of the hotel for the film's finish.

Girlies Behave is a fun little short, with Drew's performance very good, and some excellent, original gags. But ultimately, it's trying to do too many things at once - farce, slapstick, surreal sight gags, risque comedy – and doesn't quite commit to any of them enough to have a strong identity. *The Quiet Worker* comes off rather better. Surviving extracts on 9.5mm such as *Brioche Voyage* show this to have been more of the split-second timed farce comedy a la Charley Chase, as Jerry gets locked out of his cabin on board a boat, and ends up walking around the boat in his underwear and dressing gown, constantly annoying a woman and her husband. This is a film I'd like to see complete one day.

In Spring of 1928, Drew's run of short films was interrupted by an interesting diversion; on May 2nd, Variety reported that he had been loaned out for a comedy part in *Power,* a feature comedy directed by Howard Higgin. Starring Alan Hale Jr and William Boyd, it was a follow-up to the hit film *Skyscraper.* Construction of a dam sets the background for a story of two buddies being rivals for the same girl; Drew's job, as "The Menace" was to supply some comedy relief. After this hiatus, he was back at Educational. His 1928-29 series of comedies were branded as Ideal comedies, and continued in a similar vein.

Wise Wimmin was an offbeat comedy that dealt with a new invention: television. Jerry tries to fool his wife so he can attend a party, but she sees the truth over her closed circuit television set, and turns up at the party herself. However, other efforts from the second season shows rather less originality; in *Wives Don't Weaken* once more Jerry was on board an ocean liner, mixed up with jealous wives and husbands, while *Only Her Husband* raked over familiar ground of flirtatious Jerry trying to elude a hotel detective.

By the summer of 1929, the series was running out of steam, and the impending reorganisation of the studio for talking pictures put the boot in for the Drew starring comedies. There was also upheaval in his personal life at this point too, as his marriage with Garvin was on the rocks. However, there were still opportunities for him on-screen as Educational

transitioned to sound.

He is among an all-star cast in two early talkies made by the studio. *Look Out Below* harks back to Harold Lloyd's film of a decade earlier, in title and plot. It features Raymond McKee and Thelma Todd, with Jerry as a drunk causing problems for the couple in a restaurant. Later scenes ape Lloyd directly. as he and McKee end up stranded on the side of a high building. *Ticklish Business* offers him less to do, with the focus being on the tentative comedy team of Monty Collins and Vernon Dent.

As opportunities at Educational got smaller, he freelanced around other studios. He can be seen in a small (wordless) part in Joe E Brown's *Painted Face.* Better was his comic role in the Christie comedy *Love a la Mode*; back to playing comic relief as a drunk, Drew provides this tedious film's best moments. With Al Alt, he has a lovely sequence of pratfalls as the two repeatedly get in each other's way. There were occasional featured roles, such as in the short *Three Wise Clucks* with Glenn Tryon, and he pops up in the odd RKO short. Harry Sweet's *Firehouse Honeymoon* gives him quite a bit to do as one of the firemen who puts up Harry and his bride when all the hotels are full. He gets to engage in a nice running gag of Harry falling down the fireman's pole, and repeatedly needing to be let back into the bunkhouse. He's referred to as 'Clem' in the film;, proof that 'Jerry Drew' had been retired by this point. There were a few more bit parts—some of them as drunks, bringing his acting career full circle—but after 1935 he made no more appearances on camera.

With his previous behind-the-scenes experience, Beauchamp was well placed to move sideways within the industry, and came to specialise in production management and assistant direction He quickly established himself in this capacity, and his work on 1935's *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* won him an Academy Award. With this achievement on his C.V., there was no shortage of work, and Beauchamp spent the rest of his career busily employed on all manner of films, from Westerns, to the Tarzan series, to action hero films. Occasionally he would return to his comedy roots. In the late 30s and early 40s he was an associate producer (and occasional director) at RKO's comedy unit, where he supervised some of the best shorts that the studio produced: Leon Errol's *The Jitters,* Edgar Kennedy's *Beaux and Errors,* Harry Langdon's *Goodness! A Ghost!,* for instance. Beauchamp seemed to take an especial interest in the Kennedy films, writing stories for some of them, and directing the odd effort such as 1941's *Westward Ho-Hum!*

His 1950s career was highlighted by work on *High Noon* and the George Reeves *Superman* films; Beauchamp was also present as production manager when *Superman* transitioned to television. As his career neared a close, he worked on two films harking back to the golden age of comedy: *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* and *The Great Race.*

Beauchamp retired in the late 1960s, but lived on until 1992. His time as comedy star was largely forgotten; it was after all, just a couple of years in a very long and diverse film career. Those years may not have produced any comedy classics, but the surviving Beauchamp/Drew films show a talented comic who occasionally would shine through with a golden comic moment or two.

Left: 1928 portrait. Image courtesy of Steve Massa.

Above: His starring career behind him, Beauchamp finds success behind the scenes. He's seen here with Paul Wing, with whom he shared an Oscar for assistant directing* Lives of a Bengal Lancer. *1935.

Nicely tied to our article on Jerry Drew is this Photoplay article from 1928, featuring two actresses from Educational comedies: Drew's wife Anita Garvin, and Estelle Bradley.

Beauty Takes

The players you laugh at on the screen than those who are famous for "emoting." the

By Mar

Photo by Phillips

Anita Garvin is statuesque, and her beauty is vital and commanding.

LOVELY, laugh-getting ladies, *Salomes* of slapstick, unsung heroines of the custard pie and the "108," beautiful damsels bereft of dignity, goddesses of the gag—the comedy girls. Give them a hand!

The brief flash given the cast on a two-reeler leaves their names in obscurity to all but the quickest eye. The laughs they get are their sole glory, the one reward for bruises, sprains, and scratches. That is, of course, if one excepts the little—figurative—matter of salary. But the plaudits of the throng pass them by, these game, hard-working kids whose pulchritude would dazzle a Kleig.

Some of the most beautiful girls in Hollywood are in comedies. They have to be. In the fast shooting of a two-reel comic, there is no time for individual lighting, no thought for registering the best angle of profile, no fuzzy close-ups. Action is too quick to allow for charming poses, alluring expressions. A few hard lights to make the scene sharp and clear, the swift, direct movement of the gag, and that's all. They need beauty to look entrancing under such conditions, and in such unflattering situations as the grotesque absurdity of a "108"—a complete flop which ends violently in a sitting posture on the floor, legs and arms flying.

Many a serial queen would blanch if required to perform the feats a comedy girl tosses off in a morning's work. With either conscious or unconscious stoicism, they run the risk of breaking bones a dozen times during the two weeks' course of a picture. On the screen their daring is not particularly obvious, because it culminates in a laugh. And the psychology of a laugh admits of nothing but just that—an explosive expression of amusement, with no undercurrents of alarm, or sympathy for the feminine vanity of the girl when the custard pie is thrown at her pretty face. Which is all as it should be. The girls themselves would be the last to deplore it. Laughs are the tickers by which they check the merit of their work. Pure, unadulterated guffaws are what they labor for. And these gorgeous-looking young things, whose perpetual aim and hope is to be laughed at, have an awful lot of fun on their own side.

Introducing three of the better known, and most beautiful—Miss Frances Lee, Miss Estelle Bradley, and Miss Anita Garvin.

Frances Lee is the Christie *pièce de résistance*. The sweetly decorative ornament of innumerable Bobby Vernon comedies, she is now in a series of two-reelers called "Confessions of a Chorus Girl." These are more or less polite comedy, but on the first day of work Frances wore roller skates, and had to take a sit-down bump that left her with a painful distaste for chairs for a week.

Frances is diminutive, cute, appealing. Neat little features without a flaw, wide, gray eyes, an inviting mouth and silky, light-brown hair. To say nothing of a figure that is a miniature Venus, modeled on 1928 lines.

Born in Minneapolis twenty years ago, Frances was intended, by parental decision, to be a school-teacher. Only Frances' initiative saved that face and figure, and those dancing feet, from burial under a schoolmarm's desk. At thirteen she began to study dancing in a neighborhood class. But in a few months she had left the other pupils to their Highland flings and sailors' hornpipes, and gone far ahead. It became evident that her aptitude was more than a flair.

Within three years she was dancing professionally. Gus Edwards played in Minneapolis and wanted to sign her for his revue. But with precocious astuteness, Frances refused and remained at home instead, earning enough from local engagements to give herself a year at college.

Later, Edwards sent for her to come to Chicago and substitute for a member of his troupe who had fallen ill. After this engagement Frances turned down his offer of a contract. Staying in Chicago, she did soubrette work at the Rainbow Gardens café, where she was nicknamed "The Baby of the Rainbow."

Billy Dooley, of vaudeville celebrity, visited the café in search of talent, spotted Frances and signed her as his partner. Their tour finally reached Los Angeles, where they were seen by Al Christie, who signed them both.

Considerable recognition has already been shown Frances. During a vacation from Christie's she was lent to Fox for "Chicken à la King." Her work in this so

the Bumps!

probably work harder to cause that laugh, This is an entertaining story of three of former.

garet Reid

pleased executives that she was offered a five-year contract. Christie, however, retained her for the chorus-girl series, and she was philosophically content.

More than ordinarily sage for her years, Frances is ambitious in a sensible way.

"In this series," she says, "I'll have a chance to test whatever ability I have. I want to find out for myself just what my *métier* is. I never thought of myself as a comedienne, but they seem to think I have talent for it. My secret desire is for the sort of thing Janet Gaynor does. But I might not be able to do it at all. It is open for experiment. Whatever I do, I'd like it to be definite—either to make them laugh, or make them cry."

After this series, in which she will have tried the former, she wants to have a fling at the latter. Being a sensible child, she will be satisfied if the experiment proves that her talent lies in the direction of comics and bumps. But being human and feminine, she would a little rather it fell in the more romantic area of the business.

Estelle Bradley flits decoratively through Educational comedies. She is a genuine blonde, pale-yellow hair framing a baby face. A round face, incredibly pink and white, decorated with very blue eyes, a delicately chiseled nose, and a mouth that can only, I am afraid, be described as rosebud. Though she uses very little make-up, even for the ruthless comedy camera, not a flaw can be noted. Technicolor was thought up for such as Estelle.

Frances Lee is giving her comedy talents a try-out, but she secretly hopes to do work similar to Janet Gaynor's.

This angel was born in Atlanta, Georgia, twenty years ago. Of an untheatrical family, and with no particular yearnings for fame herself, the road to it was laid out before her—and carpeted into the bargain. To-day, grateful as she is for the ease with which everything has come to her, she feels vaguely guilty about it: that she has had all the breaks, where so many get only broken and battered.

At sixteen, she was elected "Miss Atlanta" for 1924. And, for once, a beauty-contest winner did crash through. I mean into pictures, not into waiting on tables in some boulevard restaurant.

Estelle Bradley is one of the few to have crashed the gates of moviedom through having been a beauty-contest winner.

The late Sam Warner, on a tour of investigation into the Warner Brothers' business circuit, visited Atlanta. A dinner was given in his honor, at which Miss Atlanta, being the local headliner of the moment, was present. Warner observed the camera proofness of the Bradley ensemble and, before the assembled company, made her an offer. If Miss Bradley would care to give pictures a trial, he would pay the expenses of her and her mother to Hollywood and, on her arrival, would guarantee her a stock engagement with Warner Brothers.

In Hollywood, Estelle found that Mr. Warner had arranged everything from New York, where he had gone. Immediately she went on salary. It was, however, the slack season at the studios, that annual lull following completion of the year's schedule. Unwilling to put her in extra work, studio executives wanted to reserve her for the time when production should be in full swing. But Estelle was eager for actual exploration into this new-found interest. She wanted to work. Warner Brothers amiably agreed to let her search elsewhere. Hearing of the need for a leading lady at the Educational studio, she went after the job and—things happening that way to Estelle—got it.

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Beauty Takes the Bumps!

Continued from page 21

It was the lead opposite Lige Conley, and her first work before the camera. Since that time she has been under contract to Educational, the fair-haired baby of the lot.

But although she did not have to work to get the contract, she has worked afterward. Docilely, this gentle youngster with the Southern drawl has fallen down wells, and into barrels of flour and off runaway automobiles. She has sat on cakes and pies, she has had soot thrown at her, been drenched by fire hose, and chased by ferocious animals. She has worked with dogs and, just as placidly, with leopards and tigers. And she has taken bumps and flops and falls of every known genre.

The science of the bumps was taught her by Charles Lamont, the young director who is now her husband. Lamont, during his boyhood in Europe, was a circus performer, and the lore of his early training in the ring has saved Estelle many an unnecessary bruise or sprain. Through him, she knows how to fall loosely, how to break certain bumps with the hands, at exactly what moment to relax or brace. She is an artist of the bumps, *par excellence*.

A few months after she began work for Educational, she was assigned to a picture under Lamont, with whom she had hitherto only a casual acquaintance. In a few days they were slipping off to lunch together. Two weeks later they were engaged. Three weeks after that they were married, and took a beautiful Spanish home in the foothills, over which the youthful Estelle presides with competence surprising in a comedy confection.

Anita Garvin, Estelle's friend and confrère, is her pictorial opposite. Anita is statuesque. Her beauty is vital and commanding. Her slickly cropped hair is blue-black, and sweeping black lashes fringe her large, gray eyes. She has clear, pale-olive skin and sophisticated piquancy in the slight *retroussé* of her nose and the full curves of her mouth. She is essentially provocative—the come-hither lady for the susceptible comedy-hero. Being tall, she is in great demand as the opposite for comedians of small stature. Generally she wears the slinky satins of the burlesque vamp, and comes to an ignominious fate.

Born in New York, of Irish-American parents, she was screen and stage-struck from her kindergarten days. When she was twelve years old, while attending the Holy Cross Academy, she secretly ventured out into the grease-paint realm. Unknown to any one, she raided her sister's wardrobe and dressed up in dead earnest. Her long hair hung in curls, which she did up in elaborate imitation of her sister's coiffure. Being of the type which had developed, at twelve, into almost the duplicate of its appearance at twenty, she could pass, casually, for seventeen, which was the age she decided upon.

Teetering uncertainly on her sister's high heels, she visited the office of a theatrical agent of whom she had heard. Arriving at nine in the morning, she waited Spartan until twelve thirty. The agent was in desperate search of one more girl for the "personal appearance" of Sennett bathing beauties in conjunction with the showing of "Yankee Doodle in Berlin." He finally received Anita and opened the interview by asking what her previous experience had been. The only name Anita could conjure out of her nervousness was the "Follies." Whether he believed her or not, the agent hired her and she went to work that afternoon, without rehearsal. On her way to the theater she stopped a stranger on the street and asked her the name of the stuff she used on her eyelashes. Purchasing mascara, powder and rouge, she hurried to the theater and excitedly applied a rather inaccurate make-up. Ten minutes before the curtain went up, the irate stage manager had some one ruthlessly scrub her face and make it up properly. That done, he ordered her to let her hair down and, trying to keep back the tears threatening her mascara, she had to sacrifice the intricate, grown-up coiffure by which she set such store.

From this engagement she progressed to bona-fide shows. She appeared in "Sally," "Irene," the "Follies," and at the Winter Garden. At one time she modeled during the day, worked in "Sally" during the evening, and then did a midnight show.

During all this time, she had the movie bug in a bad way. In her spare moments, she haunted the studios—to no avail. It was the era of the petite type, and no one had a job for this tall kid who persistently begged for one. Heartlessly they told her to go home and study her algebra.

But Anita was not to be dissuaded. In the road company of "Sally" she reached San Francisco. There, with thirty-five dollars saved out of her salary, she left the show and came down to Hollywood. And at last the movies were willing to receive her. She got extra work at Christie's and the first day on the set, Al Christie selected her from two hundred extras to do a bit. It was a Bobby Vernon comedy, and the bit was to slip on a piece of butter, and, with feet skidding upward, sit down heavily. That was Anita's first bump, and her entrance into pictures.

She was put in stock at Christie's, later leaving to play opposite Lupino Lane at Educational. After several Educational pictures, she went to Hal Roach's for a brief period, but Educational recalled her at exactly four times her former salary. She alternates between Roach's and Educational, preferring free-lancing to a contract. A pie is a pie to Anita. No matter what the studio, she gets it in the face anyway. And all studio floors are of equal hardness to the bump expert.

Anita has run the gamut of violent gags, even to having "breakaway" furniture crashed over her head. A few of her bumps have given her vacations in the hospital. But she does get the laughs. Instinctively a comedienne, she invents little bits of business of her own.

Lately, she has appeared in two or three Fox features, and in one Madge Bellamy picture attracted the notice of the critics.

Only twenty-one now, she has been married nearly three years to Clement Beauchamp, the *Jerry Drew* of Educational comedies. And, despite the old apprehension about two comedians in one family, they are still romantically in love.

Like the vaudevillians who dream of crashing a Broadway production, the two-reel players hanker after features. Both Anita and Estelle have the six-reel yen. Despite the hilarious fun they have making comedies, the urge for the more polite medium is beginning to make them restless. They have gained invaluable technical knowledge from their comedy training. Now they would like to take a step ahead. Anita would like, in some Utopian future, to do the sort of thing Pauline Frederick did. Estelle, on the other hand, wants human rôles in light comedy.

The comedy field has produced many of our most famous players. It is a proficient school and its top scholars command attention. If only for this reason, make a note of the impending graduation of Estelle Bradley, Anita Garvin, and Frances Lee.

Graduate they surely will, for girls who are both beautiful and talented neither round out their careers in comedy, nor leave the screen altogether. The experience gained is too valuable to expend on two-reelers forever, and how many girls forsake the screen to marry Pittsburgh millionaires, as may be said of their sisters in the "Follies"?

The Elusive Charles Rogers

By Holly Foskett and Matthew Lydick

Hey there, we're Holly and Matthew! We really love Hal Roach Studios and the people who worked there. Upon doing some 'out-of-interest' digging, we ended up uncovering some pretty fascinating stuff about the lives and careers of several of our favourite Roach writers before and beyond their time at Hal Roach Studios - most of which we'd never seen published anywhere else. We ended up starting the blog *A Lot of Fun Writers* to delve into our discoveries regarding the lives and careers of these fascinating folks, as well as a place where we discuss and share other fun Hal Roach Studios tidbits and trivia.

Our project began after we stumbled onto stories about some of the Roach staff. The one who really caught our eye was Charlie Rogers*, perhaps best known as Stan Laurel's co-writer and director on many of the *Laurel & Hardy* comedies, as well as one of his closest friends.

One of our favourite Charlie stories happened during the production of *Babes in Toyland*. As actor Henry Brandon told historian Randy Skredtvedt, Raymond McCarey was originally set to direct the film.

"Suddenly, one day, Ray was off the picture," Henry remembered. "He was in Roach's office, and Stan was there. Ray was explaining a scene, and he had his hand up in the air. Then he noticed the door was open; Charlie Rogers had walked in. Rogers was standing behind Ray and holding his nose, going, 'Nyeeehhhh….' So Ray's hand just described an arc and hit Rogers in the face. Roach wasn't watching - he had his head down, he was thinking - and he said, 'What's going on here?' Nobody said a thing."

Rogers as The Artful Dodger, 1912

We personally found this story hilarious, and decided we had to do some more digging into Rogers - as much of his life, it seemed, was a mystery.

Charlie was born in 1887 in Manchester (UK) to Charlie and Hannah Maria Rogers. Much of the information we know about Charlie's early life was provided by his brother John Rogers for a Modern Drama article entitled, 'Charles Rogers: Late Victorian Provincial Playwright' penned by Claude Flory in 1961. His father had left the family business of waterproof-making to become a playwright. Many of his plays, for instance *1000 Dollar Reward* and *The Days of Cromwell*, became quite well known. He also penned the first ever stage adaptation of Sherlock Holmes - albeit unofficially. The younger Rogers, along with his siblings, got his start in theatre at a very young age starring in these productions. These productions were successful enough for the family to afford to send their children to fine grammar schools, and Charlie and his brother John attended Taplow College in Taplow, Buckinghamshire.

Charlie's brothers John and Gerald Rogers are also likely to be familiar faces to many fans of classic cinema, as they appeared in many well-known films throughout the 1930's and 1940's. Gerald Rogers even appears in *A Chump at Oxford* (1940)!

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*(*) We would like to mention that whilst his first name was previously thought to be spelled Charl**ey**, autographed photos and signed documents confirm that Rogers used Charl**ie** - so out of respect to his preferences, we'd like to do the same!*

Rogers' career prior to his time at Hal Roach Studios was as extensive as it is fascinating. He not only led his own theatre and vaudeville troupe, Charles Rogers & Co, but also starred in many broadway productions. Most notable perhaps is the 1912 production of *Oliver Twist* at the New Amsterdam Theater in New York, which was soon adapted into the first American full-length feature film. Rogers starred as The Artful Dodger in both, and delighted both theatre and film critics alike.

The later career of Rogers is still somewhat mysterious - he was hired as an uncredited writer for many radio and television productions, and according to one letter from Stan Laurel to mutual friend Betty Healy (star of many comedy films - including the Laurel and Hardy classic *Our Relations* (1936), and wife of Three Stooges creator Ted Healy), Rogers had also taken up an additional career in building and selling stores. This letter, along with many more, can be found on the wonderful https://www.lettersfromstan.com.

Prior to our research into Rogers, biographer Leo M Brooks had embarked on a deep dive into the career of Rogers with the assistance of Rogers' widow, Sandy, and daughters Christine and Charlene. Priorly, Rogers had gained a posthumous reputation as being nothing more than Stan's 'yes-man', who Stan allegedly kept on a personal payroll - Brooks discovered however that this was not the case, but was rather a 'version of events' shared by, of all people, special effects artist Roy Seawright. Brooks discovered that Rogers had actually been very instrumental in the functioning of Laurel and Hardy as a team, and that his talent and friendship had greatly impressed and benefitted both men. Stan Laurel had even personally emphasised the importance of Rogers to biographer John McCabe, and in turn Rogers gratefully expressed in McCabe's biographical book *Mr Laurel and Mr Hardy* that he and his coworkers were friends who worked 'in real harmony', and further mentioned that they all had 'real feeling for those two lovable, silly characters before the camera'.

Charlie is just one of the many Hal Roach scribes that we hope to delve into. Besides biographies on the writers, we're also planning to share a little taste of lost Roach films and scripts, plus some fun surprises! We hope you'll join us at **https://roach-writers.blogspot.com/**.

Top left: Rogers with Andy Clyde. Above left: Not Charlie, but Gerald Rogers, in A Chump at Oxford. Main: Charlie as Simple Simon on the set of Babes in Toyland, with Felix Knight, Henry Brandon and Charlotte Henry.

Many thanks to Holly & Matthew for sharing some of their research; be sure to check out their site, it's full of great new information!

While we're on the subject of great blogs, here are a couple of others to check out:

Paul F. Etcheverry's ***Way Too Damn Lazy to write a Blog*** features loads of great classic comedy content.

Forgotten Australian Actors *shines a light on several Australian comedy stars, among them Daphne Pollard, Leon Errol, Ena Gregory, Snub Pollard and Billy Bevan. Particularly fascinating is an archive of letters and photos from Snub Pollard to his Australian family!*

PEANUTS

THE COMEDY CAREER OF MARION BYRON

Marion Byron's screen career began with a bang, as leading leady to Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* From there she went on to Hal Roach Studios. With such beginnings, you'd expect her to be among the most celebrated female comedians, but despite her winning, perky personality and adroit handling of physical comedy, her time as a star was brief. After a promising start in sound films, she was quickly relegated to bit parts. What precious little we have of Byron on film is winning, and she could make even her smallest roles sparkle. **Matthew Ross** gives this fantastic performer her due.

The history of cinema is strewn with wannabe-film starlets desperate for a career on the silver screen. Marion Byron was unusual in that she never *wanted* to be on screen; later she would describe her film career as happening "by accident". Well, it was a happy accident! She was a natural for the camera, with fine comic timing; able to hold her own against such comic heavyweights as Buster Keaton, Edgar Kennedy and Anita Garvin, she left her mark in some of the finest silent comedies.

Byron was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1911; her real name was Miriam Bilenkin. The Bilenkin family subsequently moved out west to California around 1919. While at school, Miriam became interested not in films, but the theatre. A part in an amateur show gave her the acting bug, and she soon landed parts in more prestigious stage shows, beginning with *The Patsy.* She followed this with the lead role in *Twinkle Toes* and a part in *The Music Box Review;* it was around this time that she adopted her stage name. She also received another new moniker: her tiny size (just five feet tall) led her to be nicknamed 'Peanuts'.

Although she had declared herself uninterested in competing with the swarms of girl trying to break into Hollywood, opportunity soon came knocking. While appearing in *The Strawberry Blonde*, she was talent-spotted by someone from Buster Keaton's studios. Keaton was currently on the lookout for a leading lady to appear in his new film, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* Who could refuse?

And so, Marion's first ever time in a motion picture studio was to test for one of the biggest comedians in Hollywood. Keaton was impressed; he was probably also drawn to her small physical size, as he himself was only 5"3. Although it must have seemed a bit of a gamble giving the role to an actress with absolutely no film experience, the choice proved to be utterly inspired. Despite her novice status, Byron is very possibly the best of all Keaton's romantic leads. Their chemistry is wonderful, and her timing magnificent. A wonderful example is the scene where Buster and Marion keep missing other in the street, performed impeccably.

Though Keaton's leading ladies have a reputation for being subordinate to the comedy and slightly faceless, Marion manages to shine through as her own personality very successfully. This is especially remarkable when you remember that she was just sixteen years old, and making her first screen appearance. As we know, *Steamboat Bill Jr* turned out to be the last of Keaton's independent production, but one wonders if, in an alternate universe, he would have continued working with Byron.

***With Anita Garvin, in* Feed 'Em And Weep (1928)**

Working with Keaton was bound to throw up a few other offers, and *Exhibitors Herald* announced that Roach had signed Byron on June 16th, 1928. According to a *Screenland* profile of Marion, the producer had sent a cable to secure her services immediately after viewing *Steamboat Bill Jr* in New York. Roach was also taken by her small size, as it made a perfect contrast to the statuesque Anita Garvin, who he was planning to feature. Roach's aim was to create a 'female Laurel & Hardy', and three films teaming Garvin and Byron would experiment with this format.

Feed 'em and Weep is the first of the trio. It has a good set-up of the girls working their way to Hollywood ("to replace Gloria Swanson and Mary Pickford"), and doing a stint as waitresses in Max Davidson's railroad diner. However, it takes the 'Female Laurel and Hardy' brief rather too literally. Within the short are variations on a routine of Stan and Ollie dodging potholes from *You're Darn Tootin',* the repeated tripping of a waiter from *Their Purple Moment* and a patented L & H tit-for-tat food fight for the climax.

And here we have the quandary with these films. Gag for gag, they're amusing slapstick comedies, but when you have two performers as charismatic and capable as Garvin and Byron, it feels like a bit of a missed opportunity to force them to mimic other performers. Marion suffers especially in this respect, being made to act especially dumb and blank, and dressed in an especially unflattering costume for the first reel. Come to think of it, it makes her look like nothing so much as Harry Langdon in drag.

Mercifully, she's allowed to dress in slightly more ordinary clothes once the scenes in the diner begin. These scenes are the highlight of the film; although it's heavy on the slapstick, the two ladies perform the gags extremely well, and their comic interplay with Max Davidson is superb. A scene with swinging doors gets good comic mileage, and Marion's highlight is a scene where her skirt begins to slip while she is carrying a tray. With her hands full, she resorts to a funny sort of duck walk to prevent the skirt from slipping any further. Going back to the kitchen, she loses the skirt entirely, a fact she is unaware of; seeing people laughing at her, she repeats the duckwalk, this time in her bloomers! A mixed bag, *Feed 'em and Weep* nevertheless picks up in its second reel and shows that Byron could be very amusing in slapstick and with a broader characterisation.

The second film, *Going Ga-Ga,* repeats the template of the first, going for broad comedy, sight gags and slapstick over more sophisticated, human comedy. If anything, it turns up the dial on the otherworldly blankness of Marion's Kewpie doll Langdonette. Again, she performs in this style very capably, and has some very funny moments. There's a particularly funny opening gag where the girls are fired from their jobs at a bakery. "You would sit on that the cake!" huffs Anita to the blank-faced Marion. Shot from behind, we see the imprint of cake frosting reading "Happy Birthday" across her rear. Realising the frosting is there, she tastes it and is delighted.

The bulk of *Going Ga-Ga* deals with a kidnapped baby who accidentally gets into the girls' care, and their attempts to get it to an orphanage, while evading detective Max Davidson. The climax has them trying to disguise the baby as a man – wearing a beard and held aloft on Marion's head, the join concealed by a long overcoat. This is one of the most bizarre sights ever featured in a Roach comedy.

Once more, the film has some excellent individual gags. but they're gags that haven't been especially tailored to the personalities of the leads. It's easy to imagine most of the routines being performed by any male comics on the Roach lot. On the one hand, this shows that Garvin and Byron could perform this material just as well as male comics, but one does long for them to be able to get more of their own personalities into the film, and for the filmmakers to try a more female-focused style of comedy. Overall, *Going Ga-Ga* doesn't cut the mustard, but the third film would finally get the balance right.

Trade magazines show that Roach planned to use Byron alongside L & H, but unfortunately this never materialised. The closest they got was a series of posed photographs, and a proposed gag appearance in Garvin & Byron's third film, *A Pair of Tights*[1]. Though we never got to see that gag, the film nevertheless turned out to be a classic two-reeler.

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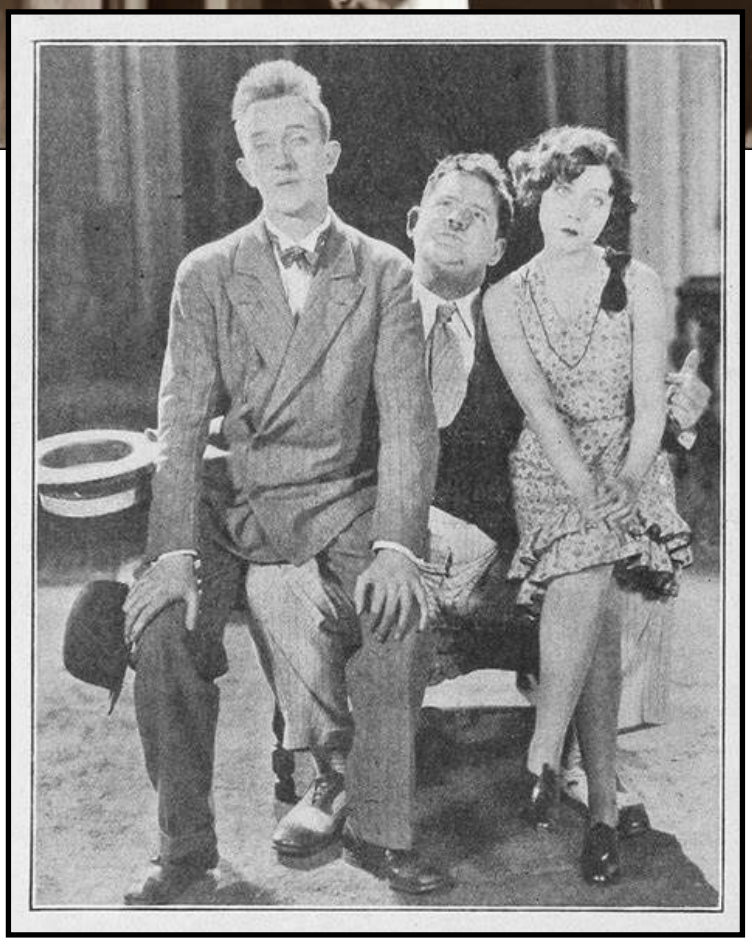
1. According to a script unearthed by Randy Skretvedt, the cameo was to take place during the final scenes of the film. A call sheet unearthed by Trevor Dorman & Glenn Mitchell proved that the boys' appearance was actually filmed, but not used. Thanks to Glenn Mitchell for this information.



Scenes from Marion's stint at Hal Roach:
Main: With Anita Garvin, hindering Max Davidson in **Feed 'em and Weep (1928)**
Above: Posed stills with Laurel & Hardy were, sadly, as near as we got to Byron appearing in a film with them.

Everything gelled in the third Garvin-Byron short,* A Pair of Tights. *But those ice cream's days are numbered….

The title refers to Edgar Kennedy and Stuart Erwin as tightwads; they are trying to avoid spending money on taking the girls for a meal. When Marion suggests stopping for ice cream, Edgar is delighted, figuring that it will spoil their appetites for dinner. However, this being a Hal Roach comedy, nothing is that simple… The ice cream parlour sequence is the comic centrepiece of the film, as each time Marion appears with the four cones, fate conspires to interfere. Swinging doors, a dog and bratty Spec O'Donell each result in four more ice cream cones being sent to the sidewalk. The gags are expertly written to build hilariously, but huge kudos must go to Marion for the way she performs the scene. From her escalating frustration, to her pained expression each time another ice cream bites the dust, to her sheepish approaches to Edgar to ask for yet more money, she adds a real human element to the slapstick. She also shows terrific mastery of physical comedy, while being bounced around by Spec O'Donnell, dodging doors or fighting off a dog that has grabbed hold of one end of her suspender belt.

A Pair of Tights corrects all the misjudgements of the previous entries in the series. Here the two women are allowed to be believable characters, not clowns in skirts. They find themselves in plausible situations, and the humour arises naturally from these; the slapstick is well integrated and not overcooked. Overall, the film is pretty close to being the perfect silent comedy two-reeler.

Though her partnership with Anita went no further, Marion would continue in two more of the All-Star comedies. Although it has attracted less attention than the trio of Garvin-Byron shorts, *The Boy Friend* is a charming little film. It's much more in the style of *A Pair of Tights* than the first two films with Anita: a situational romantic comedy that escalates naturally to absurdity in the best Hal Roach style.

Marion plays Max Davidson's daughter. She persuades Max to give her money for new shoes, and while at the shoe shop bumps into Gordon Elliott. Marion rebuffs Gordon's attempts to make her acquaintance, and eventually storms out in a huff. Gordon spots a package left on the seat, and assumes that it belongs to Marion. As he picks it up, the wrapping unravels to reveal some lingerie; this leads to a really funny scene as he chases her down the street, holding the panties in the air, with a crowd of amused bystanders amassing behind him.

The incident thaws the atmosphere between the two, and Gordon calls to visit Marion that afternoon. Max and his wife (Fay Holderness) aren't too keen on the idea of Marion getting involved with a man, and decide to put him off by pretending to be crazy. This leads to a fun series of gags featuring Max and Fay gurning at Gordon when Marion isn't looking, performing eccentric dances and generally acting bizarrely, culminating them dressing in bedclothes to appear as "Mr and Mrs Caesar"! Just at this point, Max's boss rings to tell him to pass a message on to his son – Gordon!

Cue Gordon taking flight from the house, with Max in pursuit, still in costume. To Edgar Kennedy's suspicious policeman he offers a simple explanation: "I'm just trying to tell him I'm not Caesar!". Eventually the mix-up is sorted out and all ends happily.

The Boy Friend, like *A Pair of Tights,* is a true ensemble piece, allowing all the players to shine. While most of the attention – and the laughs – in the second reel go to Max Davidson, Marion's scene in the first half are wonderful, especially her meet-cute sequence with Elliott in the shoe shop. However, Marion's time at Roach was nearly over. She appeared in just one more All-Star short, *The Unkissed Man,* before being let go in the studio's reshuffle for sound.

Another comedy studio was quick to snap her up for talking pictures, and she was soon over at the Educational Pictures lot. She appeared in the first of Jack White's 'Tuxedo Talking Comedy' series, *Social Sinners.* Top-billed was

Raymond McKee, who plays a bug exterminator at work in a fancy home; Marion plays the maid in the house, who happens to be his girlfriend. When she sees McKee flirting with the lady of the house, the jealous Marion substitutes itching powder for his bug spray. The comic climax of the film comes as Raymond unleashes the powder during a party, setting all the dancing guests to some bizarre terpsichory inspired by their sudden itches!

The film received some decent reviews, but Byron's stay at educational would prove to be brief. *Film Daily* of August 14th, 1929 carried a report on a Hollywood trend:

HOLLYWOOD, Aug. 13. — Due to the increasing demand for short musical comedies there is a premium on experienced comedians in Hollywood and as a result the comic players under Educational contracts are finding little time for themselves. In between comedies, being shot on the Educational lots, Educational is lending its players to feature producing companies, making bids for their services.

One producing company borrowed from Educational, for one feature alone, four of its players who are appearing in current releases; these were Lloyd Hamilton, Lupino Lane, Marion Byron and Harry Gribbon.

The film in question was Warner Brothers' *The Show of Shows,* and Marion appeared in the musical number 'Meet My Sister'. Though the appearance was reported as just a loan, really it turned out to be a whole change in career direction. Moving on from two-reelers, Marion appeared in a slew of high profile roles in musical feature films during the early sound years. Stage musical comedies had always been her passion before a film career intervened; now the new sound technology enabled her to do both. While many of her silent comedy colleagues struggled to adapt to the new "ALL TALKING! ALL SINGING! ALL DANCING!" idiom, Marion was in her element.

The First National/Vitaphone feature *Broadway Babies* (also from 1929) is probably her most prominent role in a feature. She's second billed to Broadway star Alice White in this back-stage romantic drama, and has a pretty substantial role as White's best friend. Though White is the focus of the film, it is Marion who brings a much-needed light touch. She's on great form as the wise-cracking Florine, puncturing some of the dewy-eyed romance nicely with some snappy wisecracks and pop-eyed double takes. In one scene, the sound of tap dancing appears from the rooms above to a pained expression from Marion. Alice blissfully coos, "My Billy! He's dancing for me." A sharp-eyed look from Marion brings her riposte: "I hope he gets paralysis of the feet!". While the role is mainly dialogue driven, there's still a real perky physicality Byron's performing style that harks back to her silent comedy training.

So, Long, Letty is a starring vehicle for the gangly-limbed Charlotte Greenwood, and boasts a strong cast of comic support: Harry Gribbon, Claude Gillingwater, Bert Roach and Marion. The role isn't as big as *Broadway Babies,* but it does afford her some good opportunities. She gets a charming musical number with Grant Withers, *One Sweet Little Yes,* showing off her best Betty Boop-style scatting.

Playing Around, a sequel to *Broadway Babies,* had a part for Marion, and she also pops up in the execrable 'Darkest Africa' musical, *Golden Dawn.* As

***Marion had a busy 1929. From top:* Social Sinners, *with Raymond McKee;* Broadway Babies, *with Alice White and Sally Eilers; in colour for Warners'* Show of Shows; *with Grant Withers in* So Long, Letty.**

Hollywood reached saturation point with musical extravaganzas and Broadway adaptations in the early 30s and began to move on to the next phase of the Talkies, Marion was one of the players left behind. She had never quite managed to break beyond second lead parts, and never really got the kind of part worthy of her talents. There were still some interesting opportunities, but her window for stardom had begun to close. Nevertheless, she pops in quite a range of films during the next few years.

Notable comedies she appears in are *The Tenderfoot* with Joe E. Brown, Jack Pearl's *Meet The Baron* and *The Matrimonial Problem* (1931) with comedy's favourite fascist, Frank Fay. She's also in two early 30s classics, *Love Me Tonight* and *Trouble in Paradise,* though in very small parts. She also dabbled in the Western genre, with Bob Steele's *Breed of The Border.*

By the middle 30s the parts were getting smaller and smaller, and were often in short subjects again. *Susie's Affairs* was a Columbia musical short, an early role for Betty Grable. The Pete Smith Specialty short *Vital Victuals* features Byron with Muriel Evans and Ruth Channing in a series of comic vignettes showing how – and how not to – cook. One notable short took her back to Hal Roach studios, for Charley Chase's *It Happened One Day.* Byron's part is small, but a lovely comic vignette; with Eddie Baker, she's a pair of lovey-dovey newlyweds. When Charley accidentally comes between them, the pair instantly turn from being sickeningly sweet to spitting venom at one another.

Wedding bells had recently for Marion in real life; she married scriptwriter Lou Breslow in 1932. Breslow scripted her final film, *Five of a Kind,* which was a story based around the Dionne Quintuplets. Marion had a small role in the film as a nurse.

After this point, Marion's time was spent off screen bringing up a family. She would remain happily married to Breslow until her death in 1985. Though she never became a big star, for someone who never particularly aspired to a screen career in the first place, she did remarkably well. Throughout her career she maintained a wonderfully natural charisma that still charms today, and though her small number of starring roles is our loss, her presence in at least two of the all-time classic silent comedies ensures that audiences will be laughing with Marion Byron for a long time to come.

One of Marion's last roles was back at Hal Roach studios. She's seen with Charley Chase and Eddie Baker.

MONTY BANKS

THE SHORT FILMS

Monty Banks was a busy man in the late teens and early 1920s. He appeared in dozens of short films, many of which are terrific comedies. Those films have largely been hard to see, but the recent BluRay collection of Monty's films produced by Dave Glass helped provide a much better overview of this stage of his career. This article is an exploration of his comedy style in those years; it's an expanded version of the film notes I wrote for that release. Thanks to Dave for allowing me to reproduce it here.

BANKS' BEGINNINGS: LKO, COMIQUE & BULLS-EYE

Before there was Monty Banks, there was Mario Bianchi. Bianchi was a young Italian, born in Cesena in 1898. Initially aspiring to be a dancer, he arrived in the U.S. without a word of English. The little man persevering against the odds would go on to become a key theme of his later film comedies; right now Bianchi himself was living the role. With impressive resilience, he learned the language, and built up a career in show business. He soon found that there was more work available in films than in dancing, and began making small appearances in films. However, although he left dancing behind as a career, it would occasionally feature in his films, and he always maintained that the body control he learned was essential to his comedy skill.

These early years were a time of muddling through for Bianchi as he tried to build a career. He worked odd jobs as well as taking small film roles, and later claimed to have been laying sidewalks at the same time he was appearing in his first films. Monty later credited his poor English during this time as actually helping his rise to fame. When he would struggle to understand the nuances of a director's instructions, he would simply improvise his own business. The results were often funnier, and helped him get larger roles.

Our earliest surviving glimpses of the young Bianchi find him as another small, knockabout comic, willing to take any job to help him climb the ladder to stardom. His earliest film were at Sennett-Triangle and Universal, with his first prominent role coming in 1918's war spoof, *The Geezer of Berlin.* This led to him joining LKO ('Lehrman Knock-Out Comedies'), the imprint of former Keystone director Henry Lehrman.

In these shorts we find our hero credited as 'Frenchie' Bianchi, a nickname bestowed on him during his stint at Sennett's studios. The European identity is pronounced in his acting too. In *The Blind Pig* (1918) he plays a French perfume salesman mistaken for a bootlegger, and his dialogue titles are written in thick dialect. Meanwhile, in *Belles of Liberty* (1918), Bianchi again gives a pronounced European swagger to his role as a mischievous suitor. While his small, moustachioed figure has often seen him compared to Charlie Chaplin, he actually gives off much more of a faux-Max Linder vibe in these early shorts.

Belles of Liberty is a curious mixture of slapstick anarchy and patriotism, featuring the ongoing WW1 Liberty Loan drive as the background for its antics. Included is footage of the cast interacting with a real-life parade, which probably provided the inspiration for the whole film – a tradition, like many of LKO's techniques, derived from the Keystone playbook. Speaking of which, LKO's version of the Keystone Kops appear in a dizzying finale of streetcars, Fords and flailing bodies, set among the Glendale orange groves.

Following his stint with LKO, our hero next found work in a handful of shorts with Roscoe Arbuckle. There was a space in Arbuckle's company for a diminutive comic, as regular sidekick Buster Keaton had been drafted and sent overseas. In the long-unseen *Camping Out* (1918) Bianchi's role is small, and in line with his LKO work. However, by the time of the following year's *Love* he is playing a much more sympathetic role. In fact, he has basically been promoted to Roscoe's sidekick, sharing in comic scenes as he tries to help Roscoe elope and save his beloved from an arranged marriage.

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1. Banks also briefly freelanced with Larry Semon in this period, and can be seen in *The Grocery Clerk (1920)*

Possibly due to Keaton's return from the army, Bianchi – newly christened Monty Banks by Arbuckle - was soon on the move again and wound up at the independent Bulls-Eye company[1]. The Bulls-Eye Comedies are often ensemble pieces featuring several jobbing silent clowns together; for the silent comedy buff they provide an enticing web of comedy connections.

MONTY BANKS

Heading his own company which is producing comedies of the two-reel variety for Warner Brothers, Monty Banks traces his success in the comedy field of motion pictures to his unique training in Keystone and Mack Sennett comedies and the experiences culled from a dancing career which took him round the world. Monty was born in Nice, France, July 18, 1897. Early in life he became an accomplished dancer and as such gained applause in almost every European country and in America. He deserted the stage to become a knock-out comedian for the original Keystone company and later was the chief support of Fatty Arbuckle with Mack Sennett.

In both *Her First False Hare* and *Coppers and Scents,* Monty is part of a trio with the burly, hangdog Mack Swain and the Chaplin impersonator Harry Mann. Swain had appeared with the real Chaplin, and would of course feature in his immortal comedy *The Gold Rush.* Harry Mann had been hired to take up the role of Chaplin imitator Billy West in Bulls-Eye's comedies: a copy of a copy. Despite this dubious assignment, he was actually a capable comic who had a much wider pedigree than you might assume; as well as six years in Universal comedies, he had appeared in character parts in features, such as *The Red Lantern* with Alla Nazimova. The trio work well together, with a lot of comedy coming from the physical contrast of little Monty ordering the others around: a highlight of *Coppers & Scents* is a scene where the mountainous Swain gingerly approaches Monty and apologetically hands him a note from his mother to explain his lateness!

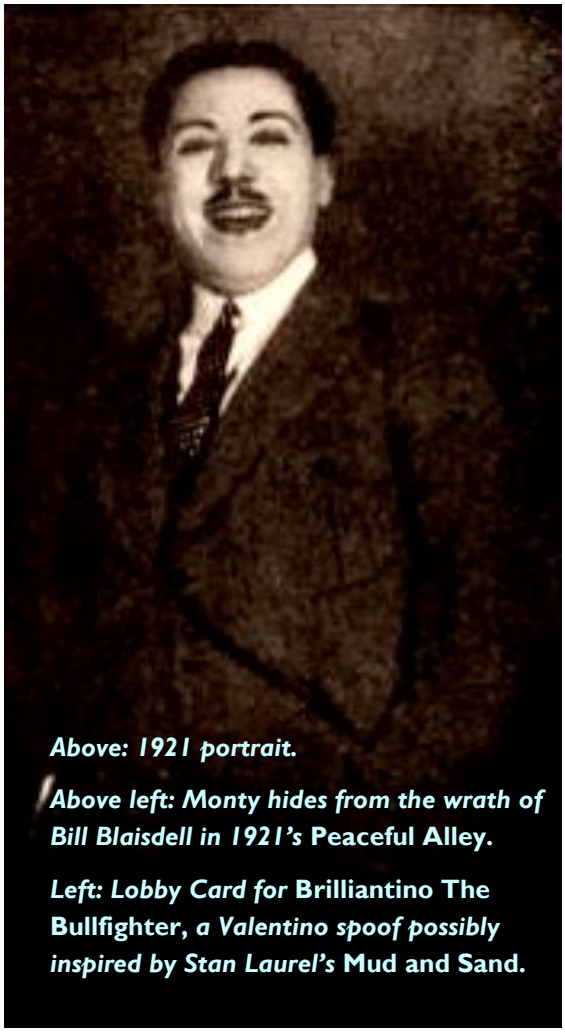
One Night Only features Charley Dorety in place of Mack Swain. One of the most anonymous third-string comics, Dorety bumped around various different units through the silent era, but never achieved any real popularity. While Harry Mann did his best to imitate Chaplin, Dorety developed a speciality of mimicking Buster Keaton: he appeared as an ersatz-Buster in a handful of shorts with Roscoe Arbuckle rip-off Gene 'Fatty' Laymon in the early 20s. (Incidentally, around the time of *One Night Only*, Dorety and Banks both appeared in the final Arbuckle-Keaton short *The Garage).* Just to add one more silent comedy connection, the director of *One Night Only* is Charles Parrott, aka Charley Chase! (I hope you're keeping up with all of this, as there will be a test at the end).
Throughout the Bulls-eye series, Monty received greater prominence and in early 1920 began filming his own starring series for the fledgling Warner Brothers company. The next four years would see him make several series of increasingly popular two-reelers, culminating in the chance to make starring feature films.

INDEPENDENT STARRING SHORTS: WARNERS, FEDERATED & GRAND-ASHER

Banks' four series of starring shorts have largely remained quite obscure; they were made by small, independent companies and released on the 'States Rights' system – rights were allocated one state at a time, rather than through a major national distributor. As a result, publicity was limited and details on some entries are scant. However, quite a number of the films actually survive.

Kicking off Monty's starring career was *A Rare Bird*, which does exist at the BFI and MOMA, but is not currently available for viewing. The second entry in the series is available though, having recently been released as part of Dave Glass' Monty Banks Kickstarter Blu Ray. *A Flivver Wedding* demonstrates that Banks was already finding a style that was more his own. Firstly, he now appears in the outfit we remember him best for: a dapper young man in straw boater and pinstripe suit, rather than low comedy garb. Secondly, he establishes a good sense of comic pacing; *A Flivver Wedding* is far less frenetic than the films in which he had previously featured. There is space for him to stretch out in extended comedy scenes, and some inventive variations on gags. The funniest scenes in the film detail Monty's struggles with his uncooperative car[2] As he and his buddy break down on a hill. Monty gets out and begins tinkering under the car; meanwhile, his friend is struggling to keep the car in place on the gradient. He eventually loses the battle, and chases the runaway car downhill. Monty is so preoccupied with wiping oil from his eyes that he

2. The film shares a theme with Harold Lloyd's *Get Out and Get Under,* filmed and released around the same time.



Above: 1921 portrait.

***Above left: Monty hides from the wrath of Bill Blaisdell in 1921's* Peaceful Alley.**

***Left: Lobby Card for* Brilliantino The Bullfighter, *a Valentino spoof possibly inspired by Stan Laurel's* Mud and Sand.**

is completely oblivious to the car's disappearance. Just at that moment, a second car pulls up above the spot where he is lying, in time for him to continue his engineering. Fed up with the whole thing, Monty begins yelling at the car, and smashes it up in a rage, to the horror of the car's real owner.

In this short, Monty is paired with Sid Smith. Best known for his later roles in the *Hall Rooms Boys* comedies and shorts for Mack Sennett, Smith looks rather different here, with a fuller head of hair and lacking his trademark pencil moustache.

Smith appeared with Banks again in *His Naughty Night* and *Where's My Wife,* but soon left the series. Nevertheless, many of the other pieces were already in place for the Banks comedies that would follow. The 'heavy' in the films, Bill Blaisdell, would be a solid fixture in the series. An experienced veteran of comic operas on stage, Blaisdell had appeared in Rolin comedies with Harold Lloyd and Snub Pollard, before he settled down for a regular gig as Banks' heavy. Playing a succession of villains, bosses, irate fathers-in-law and other authority figures, Blaisdell would be to Monty what Eric Campbell was to Chaplin and Big Joe Roberts was to Buster Keaton.

Banks' regular leading lady was Florence Gilbert, followed later by Catherine Bennett and Ena Gregory, among others. Incidentally, two of these women played ingenue roles for Stan Laurel around the same time: Gilbert in *A Lucky Dog,* and Gregory in several of Laurel's shorts for Hal Roach. And speaking of Stan Laurel, his brother – Teddy Jefferson – may be seen in several of Monty's films from the early 20s. Behind the camera for the series were Herman C Raymaker and Gil Pratt, later joined by Ward Hayes and Harry Edwards. This team would come to specialise in snappy, fast moving comedies full of gags and thrills.

Banks has been accused of stealing many ideas from Chaplin, but in truth there are few overt examples of this in his existing short films. *Peaceful Alley* is often cited as a rip-off of Chaplin's *Easy Street,* but while the tenement setting, and Bill Blaisdell's appearance as an Eric Campbell-esque bully, certainly set a few bells ringing, the gags are largely different. One direct steal from Chaplin does occur in *Squirrel Food*, as Monty recalls Charlie's ballet from *Sunnyside* in a scene where he frolics, Pan-like, with some girls. This turns out to be a dream, and he's rudely awakened in his prison cell. The rest of the film takes a much different approach from the bucolic setting of *Sunnyside,* detailing an attempted prison break led by Bill Blaisdell. Pressganged into helping, Monty finds tools – and an entire length of rope – concealed inside a small loaf of bread. Tying one end of the rope to the bars, he attempts to lasso the end of a passing car to pull off the bars, but only succeeds in tearing the body of the car from its chassis. A lorry proves a better bet, and

as the wall crumbles, Monty makes his getaway. The rest is a series of fun chase gags, including a great one where Monty, in his prison garb, disguises himself against a striped tent.

What both these films demonstrate is that, while Monty's stories were seldom especially original, he and his team would always put their own spin on the individual gags. Along the way, they created some very watchable films and, occasionally, some great gags that were uniquely theirs.

Amusing shorts appeared in rapid succession. *Fresh Air* details Monty's hunting trip to catch the mysterious 'Woof'; *Bride and Gloom* details his unsuccessful attempts to become injured so he can make an insurance claim. *Cleaned and Dry (1921)* is a snappy little comedy that begins with Monty running a dry-cleaning business (named 'Volstead's Drying' in a sly nod to the Volstead Act which brought in prohibition. Invited to a party, he gets to show off a glimpse of his past as a dancer, in one lovely little bit of comic choreography.

By this point, Monty was popular with audiences and exhibitors, and receiving increasingly good reviews. However, there was trouble brewing behind the scenes. Warners were becoming dissatisfied with the lack of promotion that Federated were giving the Banks comedies. In a fit of pique, they decided to release their own series directly onto the States Rights Market. Federated would later woo Banks back, this time in partnership with Ben Wilson Productions. What all this skullduggery means for us a century later is that the Banks films suddenly become harder to trace. States-rights films often flew under the radar, receiving little coverage in the Trade magazines. Still photographs and reviews are scarce for these two series of films, making it tricky to pin down details of each individual film. Nevertheless, there are survivors from this period; *Love's Handicap* is one of the shorts from the Wilson series. A tale of horse racing, this film shows Monty's developing taste for adding speed and thrills to his comedies. The climax is an exciting horse race, during which Banks himself is clearly in the saddle. In watching Banks' comedies, it's impressive how much of the stunts are performed by the man himself.

On this theme, Monty became very fond of including high-and-dizzy comedy routines in his films, with some impressively limber stunting. 1922's *Be Careful* featured his first extensive foray into this subgenre, and the following year's *Paging Love* has persistent book salesman Monty peddling his wares on an unfinished skyscraper; 1924's *A Wild Goose Chase* features a very similar set to Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last*. With his focus on both stunts and a dapper, 'man-next-door' character, Lloyd is maybe the biggest influence on Monty's comedy in this period. There's also quite a lot of overlap with Stan Laurel's comedies at this time. For instance, *Paging Love* takes its central situation of a pesky salesman from Laurel's *The Pest,* as well as a slightly dubious gag set outside a Deaf and Dumb Institute. Banks' Rudolph Valentino spoof, *Brilliantino The Bullfighter (1923)* was almost certainly influenced by Laurel's *Mud and Sand,* a big success the year prior.

Like Laurel, Banks had a great ability to milk endless comedic variations from simple setups, and this skill comes fully to fruition in his final series of short films. Made for another independent company, Grand-Asher, in 1923-24, these fea-

***Left:* Safety Last*-style antics in* A Wild Goose Chase (1924).**

***Above: lobby card for 1923's* Southbound Limited.**

ture some of his very best gag routines.

Always Late provides a wonderful example, featuring a fantastic routine of Monty, late for work again, trying to have breakfast and shave while riding his bicycle. Once more, there's very little trickery used; he really is riding the bike while doing all those things. There's also a wonderful daredevil gag as a cherry on top of the sequence. Monty has dressed in such a hurry that he has left his coat hanger inside the jacket he is wearing. As he cycles past a lorry full of poles, the hook snags on one of them. Monty is whisked from his bike, and careers through the streets, hanging off the end of the pole!

Happily, the Grand-Asher films have a good survival rate, enabling us to see many of Monty's gag routines from this period. There are plenty of good examples of his skill at building extended gag routines: *The Golf Bug* details Monty's pursuit of his golf ball, which leads him up a tree and underwater. The bulk of *Wedding Bells* details his attempt to rid himself of an unwanted dog, at his girlfriend's insistence; another canine features in *The South Bound Limited,* as Monty tries to keep the animal hidden on a train ride.

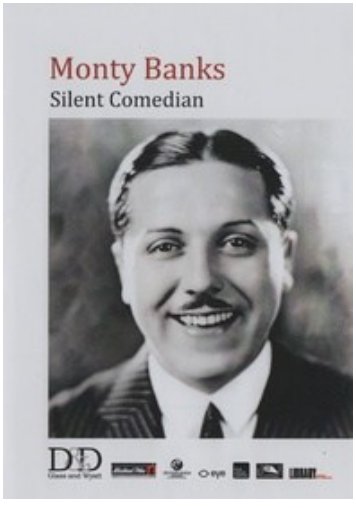
Home Cooking features a similar milking of gags, but shows off a more gentle, domestic style to Banks' work, perhaps inspired by Lloyd's comedies like *I Do* and *Doctor Jack*. Featuring Monty and Ena Gregory as a married couple, most of the comedy comes from Ena's terrible cooking. The opening scene establishes the premise, as she serves him an awful breakfast. Monty's attempts to persevere with drinking awful coffee and eating touch hotcakes are funny, and even a little bit touching; you get the feeling that he really wants to please her, making them seem like a believable married couple. When Monty's parents and boss come to dinner, he tries to make the dinner himself, but after failing to cook a goose dinner, he "borrows" a neighbour's dinner… This fun short shows that Banks didn't need to have complex set-ups or high-stakes stunts to turn out an amusing piece of work.

Hot Sands presents a similarly casual approach, riffing on simple themes. It's a typical, make-it-up-as-you-go 1920s beach comedy, which sees Banks reinvent Max Linder's routine of staging a fight with himself, and get plenty of gag mileage from a recalcitrant deckchair. There's nothing hugely original in the film, but the gags flow thick and fast, creating a very watchable, well-paced little short.

The Covered Schooner is quite an elaborate little film, with lots of unique gags. It opens with a wonderfully simple moment of Monty working as a florist. Absentmindedly, he plays "She loves me not" with half the flowers in his shop, and we see him sat among a giant pile of petals on the floor. There follows a nice little routine of him trying to leave the shop to meet Ena Gregory, but constantly being thwarted by customers arriving. Mistakenly thinking he has been jilted by his sweetheart, Monty attempts suicide by jumping off a dock, but is dissuaded when a sea lion pops its head up from the water. Without thinking, he tosses away the rock that is tied around his neck and is hurled into the water. Dredged up by a boat captained by his rival Bill Blaisdell, Monty joins the voyage; the boat is carrying a rare ape. Sent into the ape's cage at feeding time by Blaisdell, Monty makes friends with the beast; they are found playing cards together! Ultimately, the pair end up back on dry land, commandeering a lunch wagon to halt the wedding of Gregory to Blaisdell.

T*axi Please* features another great opening sequence. Taxi driver Monty has been in jail, and decides to resume his business; when he finally relocates his cab, he finds it completely overgrown with weeds, and has to go to great efforts to start it up again.

A Wild Goose Chase was the last short that Monty made. It begins with a simple – albeit ridiculous – premise; Monty is just about to put an engagement ring on Ena Gregory's finger when a goose appears and swallows the ring! Monty's attempts to pursue the creature lead him up and down the city streets, through a gymnasium and up onto the window ledges and roof of an office. (Through all Monty's risk-taking acrobatics, the bemused goose looks on with a stoicism to rival Buster Keaton!) Eventually, he follows it out on to a flagpole. When the flagpole breaks, Monty and Goose are catapulted through a window, and the ring is retrieved.



The success of the Grand-Asher films gave Monty an increased popularity and prominence, especially as Keaton and Lloyd left short films behind. Grand-Asher decided to take a risk and make his next effort into a feature film. That film *Racing Luck*, centred around the world of motor car racing. With a mixture of speed, thrills and gags, it would be a big success, and set a template for the series of Banks films that followed. You can read about those features in an earlier article I wrote, in issue 11 of *The Lost Laugh*. For more information on his short films, including the most complete filmography currently possible, you'll want to pick up *Monty Banks, A Filmography 1920-1924,* by Robert S. Birchard, with Rob Farr, Sam Gill, Robert James Kiss, Steve Massa and Karl Thiede. To watch the films themselves, pick up the wonderful BluRay release *Monty Banks: Silent Comedian*, which also features Banks' features *Play Safe* and *Atta Boy.*

This vintage article, from *Pictures and Picturegoer* of September 1923, gives some insight into the making of Banks' silent shorts.

No Joke!

by MONTY BANKS

A fellow once asked me "Why is it that comedians always seem so sad and serious when you meet them in real life? Goodness knows that they have no cause for melancholy with the lives that they lead."

"That's where you are wrong," I told him. "Being funny is no joke at all, and making people laugh is just about the hardest work I know.

He laughed, thinking that I was kidding. When you have a reputation as a mirthmaker, people always refuse to take you seriously. But although it may sound contradictory, I maintain that funmaking is a very serious business. I have worked in a good few fun factories in my time, and I know.

I shall always remember my first comedy. I was attached by a rope to a Ford car and pulled down the face of a cliff, after which I spent eight days in hospital. That is just one of the hundreds of thrills I have had, but it stands out in my memory, because it was the first. At another time, I had to slide off a sloping roof and my head hit the edge, taking off all my hair almost to the top of my head. On still another occasion, I was lying in a bed behind the upper storey of a prop house. A fire engine hit the lower part and the bed, attached to the front, went over toward the camera. They had told me that the mattresses on which I was lying would protect me from injury. But when we fell, I never even saw the mattress again. It went one way, I went another, and I got off with a broken ankle. If people realized what a job it is to make comedies and do this daredevil stuff, they would probably appreciate them more than they do even. But we get used to thrills—they are part of our daily existence.

My fellow comedians at the Grand Studios all have a similar tale to tell. I asked Joe Rock what was his most thrilling movie experience, and this is what he told me:

"When I first went to work with Larry Semon in New York, for Vitagraph, a dare-devil stunt was allotted to me for a picture which was made at Dreamland Pier. The company didn't want me to do it, but we signed a release in case of injury. I received the munificent sum of five dollars a day at that time for taking my life in my hands several times a week. The stunt in question was to drive an old car off the pier into 35 feet of water. There were four of us in the machine, with me at the wheel and another standing on the running board hanging on to the wheel also. Behind was one fat man and a smaller chap. It was the time of the shark scare to make matters more exciting. When the machine went off the pier it dived head foremost. The man standing on the running board jumped and pulled the wheel toward him, which threw me to the left. The machine did a flip flop and the tonneau hit me on the head. I thought it was the fat man, but he had made three complete somersaults clear over the whole thing. I went down like a shot. The machine split in two parts. I thought I'd never reach the bottom and all I could think of was 'sharks.' Then I started up by pushing and kicking, but I was almost out of breath and when I reached the surface it was to find myself right in the centre of all the wreckage. It was a miracle I was not pinned under by it. The life savers from Coney Island were all scattered around and nobody expected me to appear where I did. It was a great shot and a thrill all right—but never again—at least not for

Above: Monty Banks in a mirthful mood, and a general view of a modern fun factory, the Grand Studios, Hollywood, California.

Painless (?) extraction—Monty Banks in "A Concrete Mixup"

five per day! The funny thing was, I learned afterward, the impact would have frightened off all the sharks if there had been any—and sharks were all I was afraid of."

Then Billie Rhodes, Joe Rock's leading woman, joined my symposium with the following experience:

"Riding a racehorse was my biggest thrill," says Billie. "I am a pretty good rider, but never before had I been on the back of a spirited animal like this one—it was in a picture called *Hoop-la*, and I was starring for National at the time. The horse was a beauty and fast. I don't know his exact speed, but it was fast enough for me. When we started and he got his gait, my sensation was that I would go over his head and I kept looking for an easy place to fall. I couldn't stop him but I started pulling him right and left and finally he got confused and stopped suddenly, almost throwing me. But I won't forget the feeling soon. It was like riding in an aeroplane, I imagine."

Lastly, Sid Smith, gave me the following account of a hair-raising episode in his comedy career:

"We were making a comedy wherein I was called upon to walk along a ledge of the Rosslyn Hotel, Los Angeles, about three stories above the street. The space was not wide, and I had to pass from one window to another. In my coat pocket I had a small box and forgot to remove it. As I was midway between windows, the box hit against the side of the building. It takes very little to throw one off his equilibrium under such circumstances and I felt myself starting to go. I looked down and saw a big motorbus and figured that if I went over I would try to hit that—it would be softer than the sidewalk. But by a supreme effort I righted myself and got to the window casing and clung on. But my heart was right up in my throat for about thirty seconds, I can tell you."

A comedy studio is a fun factory, and as such it is quite as serious as any other place of business. When you see a happy-go-lucky slapstick farce on the screen, you little realise the amount of thought that has gone into the making of each scene.

Mirth is more or less spontaneous when an effort to create it is apparently lacking. But once an individual, or a group of individuals, sets out deliberately to make people laugh, the process is likely to become a difficult one. The most unctuous comedian is the most successful, as a rule. The time has gone by when mere clowning, unless accomplished by a great artist, can affect the risibilities to any great extent.

Take it from me, being a fun-maker is no joke!

Circle: Sid Smith and Diane Thompson in "Hats." Above: Monty Banks in "Taxi Please!"

SCREENING NOTES

Film comedy odds and ends under the spotlight...

APARTMENT WANTED (1922)

Lee Moran, Edna Gregory, Alberta Vaughn, George 'Zip' Monberg, Jackie Morgan
Directed by Alf Goulding
A Century Comedy, released July 12th, 1922

Apartment Wanted is a Century Comedy starring Lee Moran. After spending most of the teens teamed with Eddie Lyons, the lanky, gormless Moran made his own successful series of comedy shorts, including a series for Century. The print I saw was in the collection of the late David Wyatt, a 16mm copy with original Century titles.
I've seen some fun Lyons and Moran films, but still wasn't prepared for what a goofy little gem of a film this turned out to be. Helmed by reliable – if usually undistinguished – director Alf Goulding, it takes a simple conceit (Lee, Alberta and their five kids can't find a place to live) and absolutely milks it in a series of beautifully ridiculous gags.

The film begins with the family repeatedly turned away by landlords. A sign at one apartment block sums up the situation: "Cats Allowed. Dogs Allowed. Pets Allowed. Anything but Children!"
Lee's first idea is to disguise the children as an adult; he makes them stand on each other's shoulders, and conceals the deception with a long overcoat. With the addition of a fake beard, the creation becomes "Grandpa". The landlord notices the short trousers and bare legs protruding from beneath the overcoat and becomes suspicious. "He's a golfer," explains Lee. The ruse is up when "Grandpa" stands next to a bowl of tempting fruit; suddenly, the kids' hands appear from the coat to help themselves.

Unfazed, Lee soon hatches another scheme. One apartment block is looking for a new janitor; Lee gets all the other candidates drunk and is hired, then lets his new employer meet his "small family". Unfortunately, the janitor's room is tiny, and after trying to stuff the whole family into it, Lee makes it his mission to, ahem, "persuade" some of the other tenants to vacate…

First, he releases mice to scare away some of the female tenants, and then stages a fake fire alarm. The mass evacuation scene which follows is terrific, a wonderful example of comic exaggeration as the tenants panic en masse. Not only are suitcases thrown out of the windows, but everything from safes, to pianos, to barrels of liquor, and mong the mass exodus of people is a sledge pulled by hounds! As cartoonish silent comedy moments go, this is one of my favourites.

When the tenants discover that the alarm is a fake and return, Lee has one more trick up his sleeve. Dressed in a bizarre skeleton costume, he prowls the corridors frightening the residents, and performing a bizarre eccentric dance (perfect for such a long, gangly-limbed comedian!). Unfortunately, the landlord catches him at it and unmasks him. A title follows: "finally, a home, rent free…"
Fade in on the family, content in their jail cell, with matching prison uniforms.

Apartment Wanted is an unexpected delight all the way through. It might be a simple set-up, but the number of original (and bonkers!) gags peppered through it make it a wonderfully cartoonish treat. Lee Moran is definitely an undervalued talent, and it left me keen to see more of these Century comedies.

A HOLLYWOOD THEME SONG (1931)

With Harry Gribbon, Patsy O' Leary, Yola D'Avril, Glen Cavender, Barney Hellum, Gus Leonard, Tiny Ward.
Directed by William Beaudine.
A Mack Sennett Comedy, released by Educational Pictures, December 7th 1930.

The Mack Sennett talkies could fluctuate wildly in quality. Many a time I've begun watching one with high hopes, only to find my enthusiasm ebb away five or six minutes in, thanks to bad dialogue and poor pacing. So, it's always a joy when one turns up that is genuinely entertaining.

A Hollywood Theme Song succeeds by guying exactly the thing that was bringing Sennett down – the awkwardness of the early talkies. Combined with a choice selection of visual gags, the result is a winner, and a devastating take-off for Hollywood's propensity for shoehorning musical numbers into films.

Much of the credit for this film must also go to star Harry Gribbon. Always a reliable performer from the 1910s onward, Gribbon never quite became one of the most beloved or remembered silent comedians, but he was uniformly good. With his shifty glances and twitchy, just-barely-contained temper, Gribbon had a comic vocabulary all of his own. Though he was a physically big man, he specialised in playing vulnerable characters at the end of their tether who might just be about to crack (think a more mentally damaged version of Edgar Kennedy, and you're getting close). Talkies allowed him to add another dimension to his comic mania, and he became a star in sound shorts for Sennett, RKO and Educational in the 1930s.

Gribbon also had extensive stage training in musical comedy, making him the ideal fit for this short. Its basic premise is a simple story of Gribbon going off to war and capturing a spy – but presented as a ridiculous mini-musical. The film succeeds through a sly, self-aware wit that skewers the genre with pinpoint accuracy. The musical numbers all come at ridiculous moments, an example being when Gribbon and his troops are called to the front. "We haven't a moment to lose!" he tells them – before immediately launching into a lengthy song about how time is of the essence. By the time he's finished, the general arrives to tell him that it's too late for them to reach the battle. Cue *another* musical number, with a chorus of "It's never too late to win!"

Another running gag is provided by Gribbon's sparring with the musical trio who provide his cues (Barney Hellum, Gus Leonard and Tiny Lipson). Variously, they either miss their cue, or interrupt his romantic moments by beginning a musical interlude; trapped within the genre, Gribbon is compelled to reluctantly break into song, even when he'd rather be doing something else. On another occasion, Gribbon is faced with a firing squad and speaks his dramatic line "I die for the flag I love!". A long pause. He repeats the line. Still nothing. He walks out of the scene, and finds the musicians relaxing with a beer and sandwiches. "I die for the flag I love!" snarls Gribbon through gritted teeth, causing them to hurriedly grab their instruments and launch into a patriotic theme. The musical number ultimately proves to be Harry's salvation, as the German soldiers become caught up in it, acting out a dance routine with their rifles. As everyone strikes a grand finale pose, he sneaks out and makes his escape.

These gloriously silly running jokes work really well, producing a very satisfying, off-beat comedy. *A Hollywood Theme Song* set a high bar for Sennett's talkies… until a chap called W.C. Fields entered the studio a year later. Incidentally, this film has much the same free-wheeling satirical spirit as Fields' *A Fatal Glass of Beer*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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