KENNINGTON BIOSCOPE PRESENTS

SILENT LAUGHTER

2026



SATURDAY		SUNDAY	
10:00	MADAM BEHAVE	10.00	THE 28MM SHOW
11.30	FOCUS ON... JOKER	11.30	THE CAVE MAN
13.00	LUNCH		
14.00	SILENT COMEDY TEAMS	14.00	THOSE TV SHOWS...
15.40	HOT WATER & SATURDAY AFTERNOON	16.00	ATTA BOY
17.30	1926: IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR	17.30	RARITIES & REDISCOVERIES
19.00	DINNER		
20.00	KING OF THE CIRCUS	20.00	THE GENERAL (& A FEW SURPRISES)

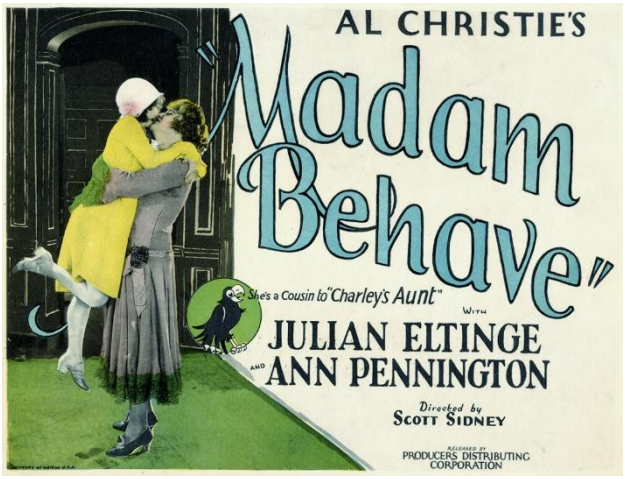
Musicians: John Sweeney, Ashley Valentine, Meg Morley, Cyrus Gabrysch, Costas Fotopoulos.

Programme curated by Dave Glass, Matthew Ross & Glenn Mitchell. With thanks to the Kennington Bioscope Team and to our many contributors: Christopher Bird, Serge Bromberg, Michelle Facey, Bob Geoghegan, David Macleod, and Thomas Reeder. Thanks also to David Lavelli, and of course to our projectionist Phil Clark and The Cinema Museum's team of volunteers.

THE CINEMA MUSEUM

KB

MADAM BEHAVE (USA 1925)



Al Christie/Producers Distributing Corporation. Released December 6th, 1925. Directed by Scott Sidney. Photography: Gus Peterson & Alec Phillips. Screenplay: F. McGrew Willis, from the play Madame Lucy *by Jean Arlette. Cast: Julian Eltinge, Ann Pennington, Lionel Belmore, David James, Jack Duffy, Tom Wilson, Stanhope Wheatcroft, Evelyn Francisco, Stanley 'Tiny' Sandford.*

Though much has changed in Hollywood in the last hundred years, one rule has remained fairly constant: if something is a success, repeat the formula. In 1925, producer Al Christie had a smash hit with a film adaptation of the cross-dressing play *Charley's Aunt,* featuring Syd Chaplin in the title role. Off the back of the film's success, Syd signed a contract to make starring films for Warner Brothers and was thus unavailable for a follow-up. Not to be outdone, Christie made plans for another cross-dressing comedy based on a play, *Madame Lucy,* and hired the most famous female impersonator in America to star in it: Julian Eltinge.

Eltinge was a veteran of vaudeville, graduating to high-profile musical comedy shows and revues on Broadway. Born William Julian Dalton in 1881, he originally trained as a dancer, but his natural poise and grace made him naturally gifted at impersonating women. He'd first shown a talent for drag roles at the age of ten, in the Boston Cadets Revue. When his father, a mining engineer, moved the family out to the high country, Julian found work performing cabaret drag acts in saloon bars. In the rough and ready, masculine world of Butte, Montana, this wasn't seen as a viable or "proper" occupation, to put it mildly. When Julian's parents discovered what the young man was getting up to, his father beat him and his mother sent him back to Boston. This wasn't enough to dissuade him from his theatrical career, however. Soon he would be topping bills across the U.S.A., and had stage shows written around his talents.

Female impersonation was far from a new phenomenon on stage. In the early days of theatre, before women were allowed to appear on stage, men took their roles. Later, in music hall, pantomime and vaudeville, playing in drag was often used for comic effect. What set Eltinge apart was that his appearances in drag were not pantomime dames, comic grotesques or deliberately transparent impersonations. He cultivated an authenticity in his performance, seeking to pass as a genuine woman (to maintain this illusion, he often appeared billed just under his surname). Only at the close of his act would he remove his wig and reveal the reality – no doubt causing some confused feelings among male members of the audience.

Inevitably, rumours circulated about his sexuality, which Eltinge combatted with an aggressively masculine image off-stage. He was photographed hunting, shooting and boxing, and would use his fists when anyone made a remark about him. There's a telling gag in Buster Keaton's *Seven Chances* where Buster, in desperate need of a bride at short notice, sees a poster of an actress outside a theatre and heads backstage. Shortly afterwards, a trunk is removed from in front of the poster revealing the performer's name: Julian Eltinge! Buster emerges a few seconds later, with eye blackened and suit rumpled.

Eltinge made his first films in the 1910s, but they were always secondary to his stage work; *Madam Behave* was his first film since 1920. To direct, Christie re-enlisted Scott Sidney from the *Charley's Aunt* team; Sidney had also recently helmed Christie's feature *Hold Your Breath,* starring Dorothy Devore. To support Eltinge, a fine cast was assembled. Leading lady Ann Pennington was also a Broadway star who spent years in the *Ziegfeld Follies*. She made a name for herself as a tap and novelty dancer, and popularised the 'Black Bottom', a craze which rivalled the Charleston. Jack Duffy made a career out of playing cantankerous old men, even though he was in fact much younger, and was a regular in Christie comedies. Burly, wooden-headed Tom Wilson played in Chaplin's First National films, and alongside Buster Keaton in *Battling Butler*; as well as 'heavy' roles, he was also in demand for blackface roles in the minstrel tradition, something unfortunately commonplace in 1920s films. Also present in the cast is Stanley 'Tiny' Sandford, best known later on as an eternally beleaguered cop in the Laurel & Hardy films.

On the film's release, the similarities to *Charley's Aunt* were played up in the publicity campaign: the slogan used was "*She's a Cousin to* Charley's Aunt". After *Madam Behave,* Eltinge would make one more silent film, *The Fascinating Widow,* but then returned to the stage. His star faded as homophobic US authorities cracked down on drag acts, which they considered subversive and undesirable. He did make a handful of sound film appearances, but died in 1941.

Today, *Madam Behave* gives us the rare chance to enjoy a pioneering, first-rate stage talent meeting the technical expertise and stock company of a great comedy studio. The film has for years only been available in middling quality, but today we are able to premiere a partial restoration, incorporating newly scanned reels from an incomplete print at the Library of Congress.

Matthew Ross

FOCUS ON... JOKER

Joker Comedies were Universal's answer to the stunning popularity of Mack Sennett's Keystone Comedies, introduced in late 1912 to enthusiastic audience acceptance. Universal found the right man to develop and nurture its new Joker brand, the versatile and extremely talented fellow named Allen Curtis.

The Joker Comedies were good – *really* good – and it didn't take long before Sennett noticed. Louise Fazenda, Bobby Vernon, and Harry McCoy, three of Joker's most popular comedians, were all lured away within a year of Joker's inception. Unfazed by this loss, Curtis regrouped and formed a talented new stock company every bit as good as their predecessors. Headlined by Gale Henry and Billy Franey, with support from Milburn Morante, Lillian Peacock, and Charles "Heinie" Conklin, the new Jokers would soldier on with their delightfully unhinged antics right up until the company closed its doors at the end of 1917.

Allen Curtis, the creative entity behind the Jokers, was ringmaster of this zany assemblage of comedians. A veteran of more than a decade of non-stop performances throughout the Midwest and West, his Allen Curtis Musical Comedy troupe enjoyed widespread popularity. During Joker's four-year run, the indefatigable Curtis would co-write and direct more than 250 single-reel shorts, an output of well over a film per week, the quality of his films surprisingly consistent.

Curtis' direction was assured, the plotlines entertainingly amusing, the films briskly paced within their single reel length, and the technical craftsmanship behind each film's production benefited from the technical crew assigned by Universal to the Jokers. The availability of standing sets erected for more expensive production didn't hurt, providing a higher-budget look than so many of its competitors. One of the brand's biggest assets were the performances of the Joker stock company.

Few of the more than 300 comedies released as Jokers have survived, but most of those which survive are very good.

From the blurb and introduction to Thomas Reeder's new book, Ten Minutes of Mirth: Allen Curtis & his Joker Comedies, 1913-1917. The book is out now from Split Reel publications: scan the QR code to find out more and order.



SILENT COMEDY TEAMS

There has always been a special source of humour in double acts and ensembles. As far back as the *Commedia dell'arte* and the Harlequinade, much of the entertainment derived from the teamings and interactions of contrasting and conflicting characters: clown and harlequin, fool and romantic, master and servant, or suitor and prospective father-in-law. Even Shakespeare loved a comedy double act; the bumbling antics of Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* come to mind.

It was a Shakespearean actor who became involved in one of the first film comedy double acts. The Falstaffian John Bunny - the living embodiment of a Toby Jug – was a well respected, veteran actor of the stage who was so intrigued by the new movie technology that he initially offered his services for free. Bunny starred in a series of light domestic comedies that really hit their stride when he was teamed with Flora Finch. With her "skinny, scrawny majesty", Finch was the perfect opposite to Bunny in both appearance and temperament, and their chemistry on-screen was terrific, often playing a married couple. The series made them some of the earliest movie stars, and only ended with Bunny's death in 1915.

In the Bunny-Finch mode of light, domestic comedies, two genuine couples found success. Mr & Mrs Sidney Drew made a series of funny and sophisticated shorts at Vitagraph, then at Metro. There were actually two Mrs Drews. Sydney's first wife Gladys Rankin (who wrote many of the films) died in 1914. His second wife, Lucille McVey, appeared with him in later films.

Carter De Haven and his wife Flora Parker De Haven also appeared in short and feature length comedies, including adaptations of musical comedies. Carter De Haven later moved behind the camera, and was assistant director on Chaplin's *The Great Dictator.*

At Keystone, Roscoe Arbuckle and Mabel Normand made a series of utterly delightful comedies featuring them as a couple. In films like *He Did and He Didn't* and the classic *Fatty and Mabel Adrift,* they projected a real sense of warmth, charm and genuine affection for each other.

At the opposite end of the charm spectrum were Kalem's 'Ham and Bud'. Another team of physical contrast, they consisted of 6ft 2in Lloyd Hamilton playing opposite the pint-sized Bud Duncan. Said Hamilton of their work in 1916: "*We do our best to keep our work free from anything which might be deemed offensive. [Something] which every person who desires to succeed in the photoplay comedy field should never forget".* To modern audiences who have seen a Ham & Bud film, it seems like Hamilton had his tongue firmly in his cheek: witness *Ham and The Sausage Factory,* where the duo spend the film feeding stray dogs into a sausage making machine! The team's savagery creates its own shock value humour today, but Hamilton went on to much better things as a solo comedian – as you'll see in today's programme of 1926 comedies.

Later in the 1910s, Eddie Lyons and Lee Moran became established as Universal's comedy team. The Lyons-Moran films were fun, fast-moving comedies that mixed slapstick with situation. Lyons usually played a dapper young man, while Moran tended to more eccentric character types. There were variations – occasionally they'd both play broader, more rustic characters, and the Sherlock Holmes spoof *What a Clue Will Do* presents them both as eccentric slapstick detectives. The team even made a feature film, *Everything But The Truth,* before going their separate ways.

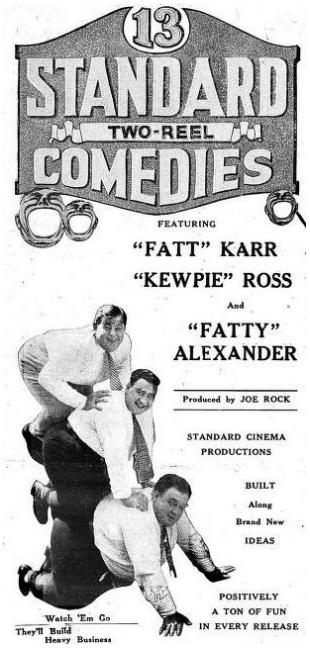
The funniest 1910s double act – though not officially billed as such - was Roscoe Arbuckle & Buster Keaton. Arbuckle's magnanimous spirit gave Buster his start in films, and the pair's off-screen friendship spilled over into on-screen chemistry. By 1918, they were sharing gags like a bona fide comedy team, and continued to do so until Arbuckle was moved into feature films.

Mack Sennett's films tended to use regular ensemble casts rather than specially billed teams, but some notable teamwork examples did arise featuring players on his roster. Ben Turpin and Heinie Conklin (aka Charlie Lynn) were briefly teamed in the late teens and early twenties; the pairing was popular enough for them to share a comic strip in the UK's *Film Fun* comic. Billy Bevan and Andy Clyde appeared together in some great Sennett films of the 1920s, including *Wandering Willies* and *Whispering Whiskers*. Their prominence as a pair of tramps in several classic and much-excerpted films creates the feeling that they were much more of a team than they actually were. Also at Sennett, Harry Langdon and Vernon Dent form an embryonic blueprint for Laurel & Hardy in films like *Saturday Afternoon* (You can catch both *Wandering Willies* and *Saturday Afternoon* later in this afternoon's programme).









From top: John Bunny & Flora Finch; Eddie Lyons & Lee Moran; Roscoe Arbuckle & Buster Keaton; 'A Ton of Fun'







Laurel & Hardy, and two pairings inspired by them: Marion Byron & Anita Garvin; Snub Pollard & Marvin Loback

Comedy Trios were a more scarce phenomenon; independent producer Joe Rock tried this variant with 'A Ton of Fun', sometimes billed less tactfully as 'The Three Fatties'. Rock's triumvirate of hefty heroes were Frank Alexander, Hilliard Karr and Kewpie Ross. They made a funny series of films from 1925 -27; today we'll be screening 1926's *Heavy Love.*

At the same time these films were being made, the ultimate silent comedy team was being born over at Hal Roach Studios: Stan Laurel & Oliver Hardy. This duo were almost a trio, too: their early films together gave almost equal prominence to James Finlayson, and contemporary publicity sometimes referred to "Hal Roach's new comedy trio". However, as the dynamic settled, it was clear that the real sensational element of the partnership was the miraculous character dynamic – and timing – between Mr Laurel and Mr Hardy.

Of all the comedy teams, Laurel & Hardy make most clear the distinction between simply appearing on screen together and creating a genuine, symbiotic partnership. Lupino Lane, who frequently portrayed a double act with his brother Wallace Lupino, wrote that "To perform a double act successfully, each performer has to study the other and know exactly how to reply and behave. This is only possible if there is […] a close bond of comradeship and affection". Stan Laurel reflected this sentiment, which goes a long way to explaining why the L & H team was so special. "Babe [Hardy] was like a brother to me," he said. "We seemed to sense each other". Through the chemistry and friendship that Laurel & Hardy portrayed on screen they managed, between the laughs, to tell many truths about human nature and relationships. This is a big part of why their films are still so beloved today.

In the wake of Laurel and Hardy's smash success, comedy teams were suddenly in vogue again. L & H's producer, Hal Roach, was quick to try and replicate their success with a female team. The talented Anita Garvin and Marion Byron made only three films together, one of which, *A Pair of Tights,* has become known as a classic. Today we're screening *Feed 'em And Weep*, which is rather more literal in its approach to creating a female Laurel & Hardy.

The most blatant – ahem - 'homage' to Stan & Ollie was made by the low budget Weiss Brothers studio, who teamed Roach cast-off Snub Pollard with hefty Marvin Loback in a series of pseudo-L & H comedies. These films replicated not just the team's image and costumes, but gags, plots and scenes wholesale from the original films. Though the shorts aren't bad at all, they can't hold a candle to the originals, and only emphasise how special – and unique – the Stan & Ollie chemistry was.

The bigger studios rushed to cash in, too, and several physically contrasting contract players were thrown together in the hope of creating the next big comedy team. It didn't always work well: Wallace Beery and Raymond Hatton made some middling features that don't evoke many laughs today. Karl Dane and George K Arthur fared somewhat better, making a really popular series of MGM films including *Detectives, Rookies* and *Baby Mine* . Even the great W.C. Fields was lumped in with walrus-moustached Chester Conklin for a short series of feature films at Paramount.

Much more successful – at least in Europe – were the Danish comedy team 'Pat and Patachon', who made dozens of films in the 1920s. Their appeal was largely limited to the continent, but they did make two British films, as well. Pat and Patachon had an oddball style that is something of an acquired taste, but must be given credit for developing a unique relationship and comic vocabulary.

And that, really, is what sets the best comedy teams apart from the also-rans. Whether they were playing buddies, adversaries, spouses or colleagues, they shared a chemistry that jumped off the screen, a spirit and authenticity that could not be replicated wholesale by others. Their performances fed off one another and created something greater than the sum of the parts. Today's screening will sample a few of these teams.

Matthew Ross

HOT WATER (USA 1924)



Harold Lloyd Corporation/Pathé. Released 26th October 1924. Directed by Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor. Photography: Walter Lundin. Screenplay: Thomas J. Gray, Sam Taylor, Tim Whelan, John Grey.
Cast: Harold Lloyd, Jobyna Ralston, Josephine Crowell, Charles Stevenson, Mickey McBan.

Girl Shy (1924), previously screened by KB, was Harold Lloyd's first independent feature after his amicable departure from Hal Roach. The second was *Hot Water*, for which Lloyd retained his then-usual directing team of Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor.

Hot Water is unusual - though not unique - in presenting Lloyd as a married man rather than a bachelor in pursuit of the heroine, which ordinarily would drive the plot (the working title of the film, *Hubby*, implies a statement of intent!). Instead it begins with him determinedly single until attending a wedding, where he meets and subsequently marries leading lady Jobyna Ralston. Having established that situation, the rest of the film is motivated by its gag content. The reason for this is simple: after becoming his own producer, Lloyd's intended policy was to alternate character-driven films with those where gags took priority. While *Girl Shy* had concentrated on the former, *Hot Water* was most definitely guided by the latter.

This is to some extent reflected in its structure, which is essentially three consecutive segments: running into trouble while shopping; accompanied by in-laws when trying out a new car; and spooky goings-on at night. These might equally have worked as a trio of shorts and indeed are partly reminiscent of a 1921 Lloyd two-reeler, *I Do*. For most comedians, such a gag-reliant foundation would probably have resulted in a comparative disappointment; with Lloyd and his team, the sheer level of inventiveness and skill in execution more than compensate. Contemporary audiences evidently agreed, because *Hot Water* was marginally more successful than *Girl Shy*, grossing $1,730,324 as opposed to the previous film's $1,729,636. Lloyd returned to the character-led approach for his next film, *The Freshman*, which made more than $2.6m.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON (USA 1926)



Mack Sennett/Pathé. Released 31st January 1926. Directed by Harry Edwards. Photography: William Williams. Story: Arthur Ripley and Frank Capra. Titles: A.H. Giebler.
Cast: Harry Langdon, Vernon Dent, Alice Ward, Ruth Hiatt, Peggy Montgomery.

Iowa-born comedian Harry Langdon made his vaudeville reputation in a sketch called *Johnny's New Car*. He had been in the business for twenty years, and was approaching the age of forty, when a relatively minor studio, Principal Pictures, cast him in a pair of two-reel comedies, directed by Alf Goulding, in 1923. These were still awaiting release when Mack Sennett put Langdon under contract later that year. Sennett also acquired the two existing films and released them under his own name. Though contemporary publicity described Langdon as Sennett's `greatest comedy "find" since Charlie Chaplin', early efforts under directors Erle C. Kenton and Roy Del Ruth showed difficulty in placing him within the studio's format. The answer came with a change of director and writers. When director Harry Edwards, despairing of a suitable character for Langdon, said `only God can help him', it prompted a concept, developed along with writers Frank Capra and Arthur Ripley, that innocent Langdon's survival in any situation should be guaranteed from above, without any conscious effort by Harry himself; this was perhaps summed up in the title of a 1924 two-reeler, *The Luck O'the Foolish*. The new format almost immediately propelled Langdon into the front rank of screen comedians and his successful run of two-reel comedies extended into some three-reel subjects after only a year (Sennett also put him into a feature, *His First Flame*, which was not released until after Langdon had left the studio). *Saturday Afternoon* is one of the three-reelers and is in many ways representative of everything Langdon was about: a docile, child-like man with enough rebellion – if led sufficiently astray - to try to elude his controlling wife, despite having little idea of how to misbehave and being somehow impervious to the hazards all this may bring. Langdon left Sennett several months later to make features with his own company, releasing through First National. These were initially successful but began to fail when Langdon took on directing duties himself.

Glenn Mitchell

1926: IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR

Presented by Dave Glass and Glenn Mitchell.

Since beginning these centenary-year screenings of 1920s comedy, we have tended to say each time that the year in question was a vintage one. That's because it's true. Every year of that decade produced a large number of outstanding comedies. 1926 saw Harry Langdon progressing from Sennett shorts to First National features with *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* and *The Strong Man*; Raymond Griffith did perhaps his best work in *Hands Up!*; Harold Lloyd sustained his successful run of features with *For Heaven's Sake*; while Buster Keaton made what has long been considered his masterpiece, *The General*. In the category of short subjects, Charley Chase was consolidating his position as Hal Roach's leading *farceur* after moving up to two-reelers the previous year; at Sennett, Billy Bevan was alternating between similar territory to this and more traditional knockabout; while over at Educational, Lupino Lane and Lloyd Hamilton were making excellent two-reelers. Again at Roach, the very end of 1926 saw Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy making their first recognisable film as a team, *Duck Soup*, released early the following year.

WANDERING WILLIES (USA 1926)



Sennett/Pathé. Released 28th March 1926. Directed by Del Lord. Photography: Hap Depew. Cast: Billy Bevan, Andy Clyde, Ruth Hiatt, Kewpie Morgan, Bobby Dunn, Dave Morris, Ruth Taylor.

Australian comic Billy Bevan – full name William Bevan Harris – was among those who travelled to America as part of `Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company' (though unlike Snub and Daphne Pollard, did not assume the company surname). His early film work was at L-KO, Fox, Christie, Century and Reelcraft. He first worked for Mack Sennett in 1919 and by late 1921 had graduated from supporting Ben Turpin to starring in his own two-reelers. As time progressed he appeared increasingly in man-about-town roles (compromised, as with Turpin, by a prop brush moustache) but was also often paired with Scottish-born comedian Andy Clyde as opportunistic tramps. In many ways *Wandering Willies* is the archetype of these and is also one of those films that tend to be familiar from extracts used elsewhere. This applies particularly to a famous gag involving a lively oyster, repeated several times by director Del Lord, as with Clyde Cook in a 1933 Hal Roach `Taxi Boys' comedy, *Thundering Taxis* (in which Bevan also appears) and by Curly Howard in the 1941 Three Stooges short *Dutiful But Dumb*. It was also done by Lou Costello in *Here Come the Co-Eds* (1945), directed by Jean Yarborough.

Wandering Willies will be screened on 16mm, from a print in Dave Glass' collection.

NOBODY'S BUSINESS (USA 1926)

Educational. Released 4th April, 1926. Directed by Norman Taurog. Photography: Leonard Smith.
Cast: Lloyd Hamilton, Dick Sutherland, James T. Kelly, Helen McNair, Eddie Boland, Stanley Blystone.



Lloyd Hamilton first achieved fame at Kalem in the `Ham and Bud' series co-starring diminutive Bud Duncan, some of which have been screened at KB (including our recent Halloween show). He left for a solo career at Fox in 1917 and developed a persona resembling a somewhat prissy overgrown boy, with ill-fitting clothes (topped by a chequered cap) emphasising his essentially toffee apple-like build. By 1920 he was at Educational, where for a while he was directed by Charley Chase (with whom he had previously worked at Fox), still known then as Charles Parrott. Chase later said that his performance style as a starring comedian was influenced by imagining how Hamilton would handle a given scene; he believed that something original would result from using as a template a comedian whom one admired but least resembled physically. Elements of Hamilton can indeed sometimes be discerned in Chase's body language. By 1926, one of the regular directors at Educational was Norman Taurog, formerly of Vitagraph. Originally a child actor, Taurog's multi-award winning career as director would last into the 1960s.

MOVIELAND (USA 1926)

Educational. Released 28th November 1926. Directed by Norman Taurog. Photography: Leonard Smith.
Cast: Lupino Lane, Kathryn McGuire, Glen Cavender, Wallace Lupino, Lloyd Hamilton (cameo appearance).



Taurog was also among the directors on Educational's series starring Lupino Lane; others were Roscoe `Fatty' Arbuckle (under his pseudonym of `William Goodrich'), Charles Lamont, Mark Sandrich and Lane himself, billed as `Henry W. George' (he had started life as Henry William George Lupino, before the family changed his name to please a relative). Best remembered in his native Britain as star of the stage musical *Me and My Girl*, Lupino Lane's film career began in the UK and extended to the US after C.B. Cochran engaged him to appear in a Broadway show, *Afgar*, during which he was interviewed by executives at Fox. Following a pilot film for the studio, Lane returned to stage work in Britain before continuing with the main series. After more theatre work on both sides of the Atlantic (plus a screen role in D.W. Griffith's *Isn't Life Wonderful?*) Lane signed up for a series of two-reelers at Educational. As he had at Fox, Lane initially used a monocle to project an image of an upper-class English type, as we see in *Movieland*. Aware that a comedian should appeal to any nationality, Lane was to discard this among other such English trappings, retaining only a distinctive curl of hair over his forehead. *Movieland* presents the familiar idea of repeated attempts to crash a heavily-guarded film studio, previously done by Harold Lloyd in *Hey There* (1918) and by various others. Also in the cast of *Movieland* is Lane's brother, Wallace Lupino, who had his own series of one-reelers at Educational; Kathryn McGuire, formerly Buster Keaton's leading lady; and, in a cameo appearance, Lane's fellow-Educational comic Lloyd Hamilton. This section tends to be missing from available prints but has been reinstated in today's copy, albeit in unavoidably lesser picture quality.

MAMA BEHAVE (USA 1926)

Roach/Pathé. Released 28th February 1926. Directed by Leo McCarey.
Cast: Charley Chase, Mildred Harris, Vivian Oakland, Syd Crossley, Rolfe Sedan.



Going into any detail about the plot and gags in *Mama Behave* would constitute a major spoiler for this fine example of Chase's man-about-town persona in 1920s America. Suffice to say that its basic premise was reworked into a now-missing 1929 silent called *Thin Twins*, and that a Prohibition gag was re-used in one of Chase's first talkies, *Stepping Out*, again from 1929. Instead of her then-customary role as Charley's wife (as in the same year's *Mighty Like a Moose*, screened previously at KB), Vivian Oakland appears as a friend of Mrs. Chase. The latter is played by Mildred Harris, whose attempts to build a film career after her brief marriage to Charlie Chaplin included this one-off appearance at Hal Roach. British actor Syd Crossley appears in one of the numerous butler roles for which he was known in films on both sides of the Atlantic. His career might have taken a different direction had he not been replaced by Oliver Hardy as Stan Laurel's fellow-tramp in *Duck Soup* several months later. The jazz band seen in a nightclub is a genuine one, Paul Howard's Quality Serenaders, whose membership included a young Lionel Hampton.

Glenn Mitchell

MAX, DER ZIRKUSKÖNIG/KING OF THE CIRCUS (AUSTRIA 1924)

Vita-Film. Filmed December 1923 – April 1924. Released September 1924.
Directed by Édouard-Émile Violet, assisted by Max Linder. Photography : Eduard Hösch, Józef Bésci. Scenario: Max Linder.
Cast: Max Linder, Vilma Bánky, Eugen Burg, Viktor Franz, Eugen Gunther, Fred Boston, Walter Corty, Kurt Labatt.

Screening courtesy of FPA Classics.



Before Chaplin became the premier film comedian, there was Max Linder. Max was among the first real stars of the screen, and certainly the first to portray a more realistic character. A dapper, sophisticated – if sometimes hapless – boulevardier, he was a striking contrast to the clownish types dominating early screen comedy. A successful theatre actor appearing in Moliere comedies, Linder began moonlighting in films, and starred in shorts for Pathé from 1907. Over the next seven years, he turned out more than a hundred films showing by turns his knack for farce, slapstick, domestic and romantic comedy.

Fast-forward a decade, and the Cinema industry of the early 1920s was almost unrecognisable from the Belle Époque where Linder had made his name capering through painted scenery, primitive studios and Parisian streets. Hollywood was now dominant, while Europe and the French Film Industry had been all but torn apart by The Great War. The same might be said for Linder himself; active war service had a cataclysmic impact on his physical and mental health.

Yet he endured and adapted to the brave new world. An initial filmmaking trip to the States in 1917 was not a great success, but when he tried again in the early Twenties, the results were much better. The three films he made there in 1921-22, *Seven Years Bad Luck, Be My Wife* and *The Three Must-Get-Theres*, showed that Max was more than capable of creating work that stood alongside that of the American clowns. We've shown all three films at past *Silent Laughter* events, and if you were present at those screenings, you'll know that these are terrific films full of original gags.

Despite the quality of his American films, Linder did not find a lasting place in Hollywood. He returned to France, where his next project was a strange, impressionistic and haunting experiment made with Abel Gance: *Au Secours!* It was a somewhat prophetic title, given the parlous state of Max's health. Yet he found the strength to complete one more comedy.

The new film was made by Vita-Film, an Austrian company. Max's status as a legend of European Cinema was enough to make him an enticing asset for any new project, and it was hoped that his involvement would provide a boost for the Austrian film industry. Sadly, things didn't go as smoothly as planned. First, the film's intended director suffered a heart attack. His replacement, Édouard-Émile Violet, observed that Linder gave the constant impression of being "unstable, worried". There were reports of Linder's perfectionism holding up shooting, and then production was halted when he suffered a mental health crisis.

But once more, Max came back fighting, inviting journalists to watch him filming a lion taming scene, and the film was eventually finished. What is remarkable is that the finished film gives little hint of this turmoil. It's a charming comedy and, though Max's troubles have clearly aged him, his performance is skilful and sharp as ever. He had played some fabulous drunk roles in his early Pathé films, and gets the chance to reprise those here. Beautifully played, the scenes show that he hadn't lost his nimble comic grace; as he staggers along the boulevard in his silk hat and tails, it's like the Max of old has never gone away. Another physical comic highlight is a scene where he attempts to master the art of circus acrobatics in his apartment.

Linder wasn't the only silent screen legend in this film. Playing his leading lady was a young Hungarian actress, Vilma Bánky. Bánky's career was in a reverse image of Linder's: while he had returned from Hollywood to more humble projects in Europe, she was bound to make the trip to Hollywood a year later and find her biggest success there, playing opposite Rudolph Valentino in *The Eagle*.

For Linder, there would be no more success; the following year, his mental health problems reached another crisis from which he could not recover. Forgotten in the wake of his death, his last film went unseen for many years. Considered lost as a complete film, it existed only in patches and shreds, including an almost-incomprehensible abbreviation with hyperactive Spanish narration. Today's screening of a new restoration is the result of a decade's work by Serge Bromberg, bringing together 11 different sources, from the U.K., The Netherlands, Austria, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine and Argentina. In M Bromberg's words, *"Some shots are true survivors after dozens of generations, sometimes in 16mm. They are like ghosts, spooky visions of their original appearance. But at least they are here, and the technologies and patience of the restorers have returned them to life. When a boat sinks, you don't choose the colour of your life jacket!"*

We're very proud to host the British premiere of this new restoration, and delighted that Serge Bromberg will be introducing the film digitally. *King of the Circus* is Max Linder's final gift to the world of cinema comedy that he had helped to build; we hope you enjoy it.

Matthew Ross



THE 28MM SHOW

In 1912, the French Pathé organisation introduced a film gauge specifically intended for use in private homes. It was 28mm wide and, while still fairly bulky, required less storage space than 35mm. It offered a frame size similar to that later adopted for 35mm when the addition of a soundtrack necessitated a slightly smaller picture area. Quality was therefore excellent.

28mm was chosen partly to make it impractical for anyone to try slitting 35mm film to that size. The reason was that, for safety reasons, they used diacetate stock, an early, non-inflammable alternative to the highly combustible and chemically unstable nitrate that was standard for 35mm film. In the long term this meant that many of the films printed on 28mm survived long after the 35mm nitrate materials had decomposed or succumbed to vault fires. These 28mm releases were of films that had originally been distributed theatrically by Pathé, who were in consequence able to offer them for home use. These could be their own early French output or later American productions released in the USA through Pathé Exchange.

A great many of Pathé's French productions from the pre-Great War period used elaborate trick effects, as in one of today's films, *The Magic Screen* (1912), which in common with most of these was clearly influenced by the work of Georges Méliès. That influence was even more pronounced in the work of Spanish director Segundo de Chomón, whose 1906 film *An Arab Sorcerer* is also in today's programme.

Another ongoing Pathé motif was the farce comedy, which Mack Sennett later acknowledged as the template for his films at Biograph and Keystone. Among the numerous Pathé ancestors of the Keystone Cops is a 1907 film, *La course des sergents de ville* (known in English in variants of *Race of Policemen*), directed by Ferdinand Zecca and written by André Heuz. In 1910 Pathé established a unit in Nice, `Comica', dedicated to comedy production and led by Italian actor/director Romeo Bosetti. He directed many of the *Little Moritz* (or `Maurice') series starring Maurice Schwartz as the title character with Sarah Duhamel as his beloved `Rosalie'. Another director on the series was Henri Gambert, whose *Little Maurice Loves Rosalie* (1911) appears within today's programme in a 28mm print discovered recently in the collection of our late friend David Wyatt.

From another Pathé series is the 1912 comedy *Filendouce est insaisissable* (`uncatchable'), based around a comic criminal always able to remain one step ahead of the law (`Filendouce' being a play on `filer en douce', meaning to slip away unnoticed). Pathé's biggest comedy star of the period was Max Linder, many of whose films have come down to us in the form of 28mm prints. Today's programme includes an early – and somewhat macabre – example from 1906, *Le pendu* (`The Man Who Hanged Himself'), directed by Louis J. Gasnier.

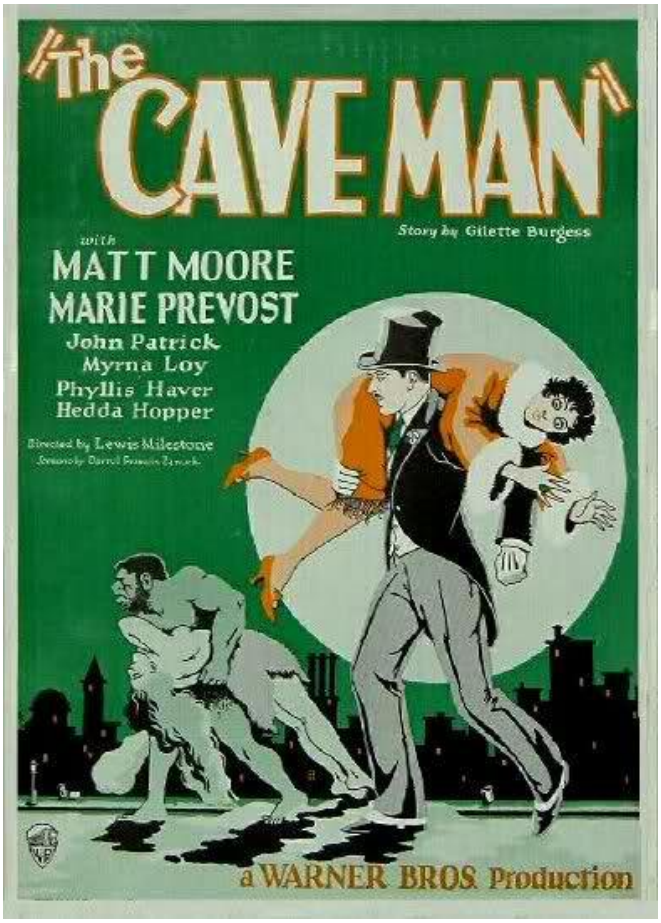
Among the American films to survive on 28mm are a number of Hal Roach comedies, which during the 1920s also began to appear on the 16mm and 9.5mm gauges that were to eclipse the 28mm format by the end of the decade. Harold Lloyd retained the negatives of his early films for Roach but many were destroyed by a vault fire in 1943. One of these was today's example, *That's Him* (1918), which has since been recovered from a single known 28mm print. Also from the US is an oddity from 1915 called *When Charlie Was a Child*, one of many films made to cash in on the then-current craze for Charlie Chaplin, albeit a clever one with an all-child cast, centred on a small boy who goes to sleep and dreams of being Charlie.

While the 28mm gauge is almost totally forgotten today, there are plenty of prints in existence and, fortunately, machines on which to project them. Today's presentation, by Chris Bird, will be using such equipment, which is now more than a century old. Please make allowances for any technical difficulties that may arise, plus of course the inevitable possibility of changes to the programme owing to the condition of available prints. There may also be extras!

Glenn Mitchell



THE CAVE MAN (AKA THE CAVEMAN) (USA 1926)



Warner Brothers. Director: Lewis Milestone. Writers: Gelett Burgess (play), Darryl F. Zanuck (adaptation), Jack Wagner (gags), Rupert Hughes (titles). Cinematographer: David Abel

Cast: Matt Moore (Mike Smagg), Marie Prevost (Myra Gaylord), John Patrick (Brewster Bradford), Myrna Loy (maid), Phyllis Haver (Dolly Van Velt), Hedda Hopper (Mrs. Van Velt), Virginia Fox (party girl, uncredited) Preserved by Library of Congress. Digital presentation. Runtime: 76 mins

"Myra the heiress is bored. What else to do but grab a he-man from the tenements and pass him off as a professor? This gender-reversed Pygmalion is one of three comedies [Ed. Two comedies, one crime thriller] *made by Marie Prevost with director Lewis Milestone who knew that sometimes all you need to get a laugh is the right camera position—and the devil's favorite coquette in a starring role. With Matt Moore as a hilarious fish-out-of-water coalheaver and Myrna Loy as the wary maid."* San Francisco Silent Film Festival 2026

SYNOPSIS. Myra Gaylord, orphan with $2,000,000, seeking adventure, throws one half $100 note out of window, offering other half if finder will come to her apartment. Michael Smagg, coal heaver, delivers it. Myra decides to groom him and introduce him into society. His caveman methods attract ladies. He balks at obeying Myra, who tells him society will ostracize him if his identity is disclosed. He doubts it, but finds it true. Eventually, after going back to old haunts, he returns, kidnaps Myra and rushes her away on coal wagon to be married. Motion Picture News 27 Feb 1926

"Screwball comedy delighted in frolicking in those effervescing spaces that supposedly exist between the classes: William Powell's "forgotten man" discovered by bored rich girl Carole Lombard; Jean Arthur's simple secretary dropped upon by a sable coat; Gary Cooper's Mr. Deeds learning that high society—shocker!—is morally bankrupt. We've become so used to thinking of the genre as Depression-era escapism that we ignore how often the setup was milked long before the Crash." Jay Weissberg – Essay on *The Cave Man* for SFSFF 2026

The Cave Man was the second half of a 1909 novel, *Lady Mechanté*, written by popular humourist, poet, author and art critic, Gelett Burgess. This part was produced as a play in 1911, spawning two film adaptations, *The Cave Man* (1926) being the second. The first version, believed lost, was produced by Vitagraph (the studio later bought by Warner Bros.), and starred Robert Edeson who had played the lead role onstage.

Story adaptation was by one Darryl Francis Zanuck, then 23-year-old film writer, one of the future kingpins of the Hollywood studio system. After returning from the battlefield in France (aged 15 he'd deceived a recruiter and joined the U.S. army), he was determined to work on moving pictures. After a stint with Mack Sennett and F.B.O. where he wrote screenplays for *The Leather Pushers* series starring Reginald Denny, he moved to Warner Brothers, wrote for the Rin Tin Tin movies and many others besides, but often under a pseudonym. By 1931 Zanuck was head of Warners' production and two years later he co-founded Twentieth Century Pictures, Inc.

Title writer, Rupert Hughes, prolific film writer, occasional director and uncle of Howard Hughes, had just completed titling for *The Sea Beast*. *The Cave Man* was his second titling job outside of his own films.

Gag writer, Jack Wagner, started with D.W. Griffith, moved on to Mack Sennett films as gag-man and assistant director, engineering many of the Keystone Cops' sight gags, plus auto and train chases. Linking up with Harry Langdon by 1924, he worked under Frank Capra and Allan Dwan, Wagner also worked on scenes for *The Sea Beast*, with his brother Bob Wagner being the cameraman. The pinnacle of Jack's career was an Oscar nomination for 1945's *A Medal For Benny*, co-written with good friend John Steinbeck.

Cameraman David Abel, as with director Milestone, was from a Russian émigré family, but by way of the Netherlands, settling in the States in the first decade of the 1900s. A portrait photographer in New York prior to starting on films with the Flying 'A' company in 1916, Abel shot several Norma Talmadge pictures, and three Marie Prevost films, including *Seven Sinners*, Milestone's





Lewis Milestone, director, and Matt Moore, right, are up to a bit of comedy work while the camera isn't watching. Moore is starring in "The Cave Man" for Warner Brothers, which explains the heavy growth on his face and the tousled hair.

first picture of three with Marie. He was the go-to cinematographer of director Mark Sandrich for many of the Astaire and Rogers musicals, from *The Gay Divorcée* on through *Top Hat* to *Shall We Dance*, and additionally, was brought out of retirement by Sandrich to capture the American Christmas classic, *Holiday Inn*.

The Cave Man was the second directorial feature credit for Russian émigré Lewis Milestone, the first having been *Seven Sinners* (1925), both Warner Bros. productions and both also being superior Marie Prevost vehicles. Indeed, Milestone had written the scenario for the star's hit 1925 film, *Bobbed Hair*, the source material having come from a novel written by 20 authors, each contributing a chapter, among their number counting Dorothy Parker. Milestone had studied engineering in Saxony at his family's behest, counter to his creative leanings. But determined to follow his instinct, he absconded to Hoboken New Jersey in 1913 aged 18, and as with cameraman David Abel, found work as a portrait photographer. And also like Zanuck, he joined the U.S. Army Signal Corps in 1917, but did his duty in N.Y. and Washington D.C. in the photography unit, trained in aerial photography, directing training films and editing combat footage. All excellent efforts, invaluable for his future profession. By 1920, he was assisting director Henry King, followed by editing for Thomas Ince, then right-hand man to William A. Seiter, crossing over to Warner Bros. with him, growing in importance to the studio, and in confidence in his own ability, he offered the story for *Seven Sinners* to Jack Warner for free, if he could direct the film. He followed up with *The Cave Man*, and for both pictures he received much praise, but a legal wrangle with the studio soon saw them part company, and he moved over to Paramount. It would also be the last Warner picture for star Marie Prevost, but for wildly different reasons. Milestone and Marie would meet again though before close of decade.

The Cave Man, distributed in the U.K. by Gaumont, had its London trade show at The New Gallery Kinema, Regent Street, on April 15th 1926. Trade magazine *The Bioscope* wrote, "Since Matt Moore played in *The Narrow Street* he has not had quite such another novel vehicle in which to show his sterling qualities as a character comedian. The trouble, however, is remedied with his latest Warner film, *The Cave Man*, with Marie Prevost… To be precise, it satirises the modern American dollar-king's daughter's craze for new thrills, and Marie Prevost extracts the maximum humour from trying to turn a coal-heaver into a social lion. Matt, as the title proclaims, has turned into a bully from being bullied, and he is a new Matt Moore in appearance, mannerisms and everything but the old ability to entertain." *Kinematograph Weekly* wrote, "Matt Moore and Marie Prevost make a very pleasing combination and give an excellent idea of their individual characteristic and ability. Matt Moore has, as a coal-heaver who is turned into a temporary gentleman by Marie Prevost, many more chances than usual and a touch of novelty which is exceedingly welcome."

Matt Moore, one of a family of many acting Moores, including Owen Moore, Mary Pickford's first husband (Matt also was brother-in-law at various times to Alice Joyce, Renée Adorée, Katherine Perry and Grace Cunard), was born in County Meath, Ireland in 1888. He and his three brothers and a sister arrived at Ellis Island and passed through into the U.S.A. in May 1896. His prolific film career of near 250 parts (although a great tranche of the latter of these were uncredited) commenced in 1912 opposite 'The Biograph Girl' herself, Florence Lawrence. Working solidly, by 1925 he'd made a financial hit for Warner's *The Narrow Street* playing opposite Dorothy Devore under William Beaudine. Then it was time to work with the studio's #1 star woman, Marie Prevost.

Prior to *The Cave Man*, Prevost and Moore had been paired before, very recently, in *His Jazz Bride,* released in January 1926. The film is thought lost, another probable victim of the mass-junking of Warner Bros. pictures in late 1948. Canadian Marie Prevost was one of the most popular stars of second-tier pictures throughout the 1920's, having started out as a Mack Sennett Bathing Beauty in 1915, she quickly displayed not only her pulchritudinous charm, but a propensity for acting, in both comedic and dramatic roles. Following a period of lead roles at Universal, she moved studios in 1922 to Warner Bros. Favoured by Ernst Lubitsch who thought highly of her onscreen talents, she appeared in three of his films for the studio, including sparkling sex-comedy *The*

Marriage Circle (1923), screened here at the Bioscope. Married, and none too happily at that, to fellow studio star Kenneth Harlan, following completion of *The Cave Man*, 1926 also saw Prevost's beloved mother killed in a car crash, Marie sinking in her sadness into the arms of alcohol and Warners' letting her and husband Harlan go, just prior to her mother's passing. But she continued to make very good late silents for various production companies, some of which we have shown at the Bioscope (being as we are the premiere Prevost exhibitor in the country!). Director Lewis Milestone and Marie would unite once more in 1928 for Paramount crime-thriller *the Racket*, starring Thomas Meighan. While Milestone's star kept rising past his 1929 Academy Award for Best Comedic Director (for *Two Arabian Knights*) into the talkies (another Academy Award for 1930's *All Quiet On The Western Front* about the First World War, then onto actual war-time films such as 1943's *Edge of Darkness*, which saw him briefly return to Warners with a one-off contract), Prevost was soon relegated in the new film era to wise-cracking sidekicks for fresher female stars, descending to uncredited roles until her early demise in 1937, dying of alcoholism and malnutrition, aged just 40, and all alone, save for the company of her faithful dachshund. With more screenings of her films such as this, we hope to raise her profile. Incidentally, Matt Moore was also an animal-lover, so close to his own furry friends, two cats, he featured them in his films and they received their own stars in the animal section of the Hollywood Walk Of Fame.

Myrna Loy, playing the maid here, appeared also as a maid in the sparkling *So This is Paris* (1926), directed by Ernst Lubitsch for Warners, screened at the Bioscope in 2019. Myrna would soon enough exceed playing bit parts and enjoy a long and successful film career.

Phyllis Haver, playing Dolly Van Velt, was Marie Prevost's best friend off-screen, holding fast from their Sennett Studios Bathing Beauty days. They made a good many pictures together, including the terrific Christie comedy bedroom romp, *Up in Mabel's Room* (1926). Phyllis Haver's greatest hour though was in the knockout first version of *Chicago* (1927), screened at the Bioscope in 2022.

Screen mother, Mrs. Van Velt, is played by Hedda Hopper, former Florenz Ziegfeld reject, and future Hollywood gossip columnist. In-between these phases, she racked up over 120 roles in her screen career and would forge at least as many enemies.

"Skewering hypocrisy and the cruelty of apathetic capitalism later became part of Lewis Milestone's signature, but in 1926, after just two other features, the editor-turned-director was still finding his way within a studio system that wouldn't have cared yet about his political inclinations. Most reviews were glowing but a few perspicacious critics noted a certain unevenness, most particularly Richard Watts Jr. of the *New York Herald Tribune* who noted, "There are moments in the picture that suggest Mr. Milestone as a careful student of the methods of the German film makers: bits of comedy that trace straight from Lubitsch, photographic inventiveness reminiscent of Murnau. And then, just as you expect the comedy to develop into a first-rate bit of satiric fooling, there arrives a dreary, commonplace stretch of film …." Watts is a bit too harsh here, and any occasional lags are more than made up for by the highlights: the flight of the $100 bill is superb, as is a marvelous scene of Smagg's coal-cart horses racing back home and, perhaps best of all, a sequence at a fancy reception when the lights go out and Smagg grabs every woman nearby and kisses them, something they all wanted but wouldn't accept when the lights were on."

Jay Weissberg – Essay on *The Cave Man* for SFSFF 2026

The film, held by Library of Congress, was long thought to be missing a reel, but on closer inspection was discovered joyfully to be complete after all, gifting us with 6,200 feet of mid-1920's reverse *Pygmalion* fun!

Michelle Facey

THOSE TV SHOWS ...



For those of us who did not see silent comedies the first time around (despite appearances, the KB team has very few 110-year-olds) and belong instead to the so-called Baby Boom generation, our introduction to it all was in the form of television and – sometimes - theatrical revivals from the 1950s up until around the beginning of the 1970s. Competing for our attention with more contemporary delights such as *Ready Steady Go!* were TV series and compilation films drawn, with varying degrees of respect for the source material, from silent cinema in general and the comedies in particular. At that time these films seemed to be from a distant period in history, but were actually only from between thirty to fifty years before, which was as long ago as the 1990s, 80s and 70s are now. Perceptions of time – and the condition in which film tends to survive – have since undergone a considerable shift. Not for nothing was Paul Killiam's 1950s silent film history series called *Movie Museum*.

That series was picked up decades later by Channel 4 in revamped copies, as was Killiam's early 1960s series *Silents, Please*. The latter did not air in the UK at the time but in the early to mid-1960s one could tune in at teatime slots to find what were regarded as `kiddie filler' programmes created in the US from silent comedy footage. The most obviously child-targeted were *Funny Manns* – with comedian Cliff Norton supposedly in a different occupation for each episode, using silent comedy clips to illustrate the job in hand – and *Comedy Capers*, which used abridged, retitled versions of comedy shorts from the 'teens and (mostly) the '20s. There are instances where the original version of a film had survived until that period but was subsequently allowed to vanish, leaving only the TV adaptation. Some of the originals have since reappeared. These programmes gave modern audiences a glimpse of the source footage but told them nothing about the films or the people who had made or appeared in them. Even more anonymous were the time-filling fragments that ITV would insert if they were under-running, under the title *Take Four*. These might offer a few isolated minutes of somebody like Lupino Lane leaping around to the accompaniment of then-modern library music. At least these tended not to send up the films, unlike *Fractured Flickers*, which UK audiences were fortunately spared. This satirical approach dates back to when Warner Brothers began to reissue Sennett material (starting in 1939 with a two-reel condensation of the 1921 feature *A Small Town Idol*), the 1941 MGM Pete Smith short *Flicker Memories* and RKO's 1940s series *Flicker Flashbacks*, assembled by future director Richard Fleischer (son of cartoon producer Max). The Warner Brothers reissues, frequently mixing up Sennett and Vitagraph footage without distinguishing between the two, became a familiar sight in BBC1's Saturday morning schedules of the late 60s and early 70s.

Producer Robert Youngson defied this trend in his feature-length compilations of silent comedies. These were originally released to cinemas but became standard holiday fare on the BBC in the 1960s. Youngson's *The Golden Age of Comedy* (1957), *When Comedy Was King* (1960) and *Days of Thrills and Laughter* (1961) allowed the films to be funny on their own merits, with narration kept sufficiently light to be entertaining but also conveying something of their history. BBC screenings of these films probably did more than anything to encourage interested youngsters to seek out the original versions on 8mm film.

The same may be said of *Mad Movies*, which first aired on ITV in 1966 and continued to be repeated until at least 1971. Written and presented by comedian Bob Monkhouse, himself a noted collector of silent comedy films, *Mad Movies* again took a light approach but told viewers much of the history and presented rare footage alongside more familiar material. A BBC equivalent, *Golden Silents*, was hosted by Michael Bentine in 1969-70 and extended into presentations of feature-length silent comedies.

There were others – not least the 1930s reissues of Chaplin shorts on ITV and their narrated counterparts on the BBC in the series *The Charlie Chaplin Comedy Theatre* – but these were the main influences that led some of us to fill our heads – and ultimately our homes! – with the silent comedy legacy left to us by our grandparents' generation. Among those so influenced was Dave Glass, who will take us through the history of these revivals and screen examples of the best (and possibly the worst!).

Glenn Mitchell

ATTA BOY (USA 1926)

Monty Banks Productions. Released by Pathé Exchange, October 10th, 1926.
Directed by Edward H Griffith. Photography: William Rees, Ted Tetzlaff, Blake Wagner. Screenplay: Charles Horan, Alfred J Goulding, Harold Christie.
Cast: Monty Banks, Virginia Bradford, Ernest Wood, Fred Kelsey, Virginia Pearson, Henry A Barrows, Earl Metcalfe, Mary Carr, America Chedister, Jimmy Phillips, William Courtwright.



Russian poster for Atta Boy

Monty Banks' achievements as a silent film comedian are underrated. A popular star for the best part of a decade, he was one of the few comics beyond "the big three" of Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd to graduate from two-reelers to features successfully. In fact, he spent much of the 20s making full-length comedies. His films followed the template defined by Keaton, Lloyd and their gagmen: having a solid story premise building to a climax combining sight gags, action and thrills. Although they were clearly derived from trying to replicate this model, Monty's own silent features were hardly cheap, thoughtless knockoffs. Far from it, they were high quality, still entertaining today, and belie the theory that none of the second-string comics could sustain a career in full-length comedies.

To put things in perspective, Banks made nine features. That's more than Langdon managed and almost as many as Keaton & Lloyd. Banks may have lacked the special ingredient to make truly timeless work, but he was nevertheless a very capable comic whose films still hold up well. Particularly adroit at high-speed, high-risk, comic thrill sequences, he could also handle situation comedy with aplomb, and came to develop his own particular style. We've shown several of his films at previous Silent Laughter events: *Flying Luck, A Perfect Gentleman* and *Play Safe* (the one with the unforgettable train chase!), and all have been audience pleasers.

Atta Boy sits very well alongside those entertaining films. It was perhaps the most high-profile film that Banks made, being his first release on a lucrative new contract for Pathé. Still smarting from their loss of Harold Lloyd to Paramount, the company directly promoted Banks as Lloyd's successor. Accordingly, they went great guns on promoting their new star as, "Monty Banks, the grandson of laughter!"

Atta Boy was filmed in the summer of 1926; lacking his own studio, Banks was able to reach an arrangement to film on the Hal Roach lot during the studios' annual summer closedown. Roach also distributed his films through Pathé, which probably helped seal the deal. Director Edward H Griffith wasn't really a comedy specialist, having made more dramas, so it's probably safe to assume that Banks himself had a hand in staging the comedy routines (he later went on to be a comedy director of note).

Of those comedy routines, notable is the climax: a wild ride through the streets of L.A. with Monty dangling from a ladder atop a speeding car. Elsewhere, there is a shift to more farcical situation comedy, and one of the funniest parts of *Atta Boy* is a much more low-key gag sequence. Monty has innocently come into possession of a bottle of bootleg liquor, and detective Fred Kelsey (who else?) is on his trail. Monty nonchalantly tries to rid himself of the bottle in an escalating series of gags where somehow, the bottle always seems to find its way back to him. It's another great example of Banks' skill at milking an idea for as many laughs as possible.

Leading lady Virginia Bradford went on to several prominent feature appearances, most notably in *Chicago* (1927). Veteran character actors Mary Carr and William Courtwright also make appearances, as well as ubiquitous comedy heavy Kewpie Morgan. The eagle-eyed might also spot a very brief glimpse of Charlie Hall in the closing scenes. One person *not* in the cast is Stan Laurel, but for many years this film erroneously found itself listed in his filmography. Apparently Laurel himself included it in his personal list, but there's no sign of him here.

Released on October 24, 1926 amidst a high-octane publicity campaign, *Atta Boy* was perhaps Banks' most successful film on its original release. *Moving Picture World* was a particular supporter of the film: *"We don't believe we've ever seen a comedy more merrily supplied with gags, and every one of them rings the bell"*. Following on from this success, Banks would make another three features for Pathé before moving to Britain and continuing his career there. Today's screening of *Atta Boy* is the big screen premiere of a new restoration by Dave Glass, now available on the BluRay *Monty Banks: Silent Comedian*, alongside Banks' classic *Play Safe,* and a host of Monty's shorts.

Matthew Ross

RARITIES & REDISCOVERIES

'TWIXT LOVE AND FIRE (USA 1914)

Produced by Mack Sennett for the Keystone Film Co. Distributed by the Mutual Film Corp. Released February 23, 1914. Directed by George Nichols. Working titles: The Finnish *and* His Finnish.
Cast: Roscoe Arbuckle, Edgar Kennedy, Peggy Pearce, Charles Avery, Frank Opperman, Dixie Chene, Alice Davenport, Harry McCoy, George Jeske. One reel.



Long thought lost, *'Twixt Love and Fire* was rediscovered and recovered just a few years ago by retired Library of Congress moving image curator Rob Stone from an unidentified European print. Arbuckle turns up in his "street Fatty" persona – also seen in *The Knockout* (1914) and *Fatty's Faithful Fido* (1915). Here he has support from pretty Peggy Pearce, and an Edgar Kennedy with a full head of hair. Also around the edges are usual Keystone suspects like Charles Avery, Harry McCoy, Hank Mann, and Alice Davenport. Director George Nichols is better remembered today as a character actor in the films of D.W. Griffith, Erich von Stroheim, and Mabel Normand, but after being an assistant to Griffith he made the rounds as a director for Thanhouser, Gem, Lubin, Sterling, L-KO, and Selig. His best work was at Keystone where he directed Arbuckle, Charlie Chaplin, and Charlie Murray in shorts such as *Fatty's Flirtation* (1913), *The Star Boarder*, *Mabel's Bear Escape*, and *Finnegan's Bomb* (all 1914).

Steve Massa

THE FAKE ALARM (USA 1924)

Arrow/Produced by Eddie Lyons. Released February 1st, 1924.
Directed by Eddie Lyons. Cast: Bobby Dunn



Bobby Dunn was one of the real workhorses of film comedy. Never becoming a big name, he nevertheless made a host of starring films and kept busy from the teens right up until his death in 1937. Born in Wisconsin, Dunn was a champion high diver before entering films. Buster Keaton once recalled him doing double duty, disappearing from the set of a Sennett film to perform a diving stunt for Henry Lehrman, pocketing an extra $5 for the task, and then returning to act in the first film before he was missed! Dunn's dives didn't always go so smoothly though. One stunt required him to dive into a barrel of water, but unfortunately someone had left a match floating on top. Dunn's eye was badly damaged as a result, something visible in his mid-20s appearances; he later replaced it with a glass eye, giving him a slightly unfocused, otherworldly appearance.

At Keystone, Dunn often appeared beside Charlie Murray and Slim Summerville. The lanky Summerville was Dunn's physical opposite, but the two became close friends; Summerville later directed some of Dunn's starring films. Later he appeared at Universal, L-KO and in Fox Sunshine Comedies before having his own starring series of 'Mirthquake' comedies for Arrow. *The Fake Alarm* is from that series. It was directed by another comedian, Eddie Lyons (of Lyons and Moran). Like Our Gang's *The Fourth Alarm*, this film's title burlesques *The Third Alarm*, a firefighting melodrama released the previous year.

The comedies made by Arrow and other minor companies have rarely been shown much love in terms of reissue and restoration. Today's screening of *The Fake Alarm* is a rare chance to see one in good quality, scanned from a 35mm print in the collection of Dave Glass.

THE AGENT (USA 1922)

Larry Semon Productions/Vitagraph, released November 19th, 1922.
Written and directed by Larry Semon and Tom Buckingham. Photography: Hans F Koenekamp.
Cast: Larry Semon, Lucille Carlisle, Oliver Hardy, Al Thompson, Kittie Rhinehart, Bill Hauber.



For a while in the late teens and early twenties, Larry Semon was considered in the top handful of silent comedians. His reputation isn't that high today, partly because his most widely seen films are largely the ones made past his peak. However, his best work has a great comic energy and slapstick fervour. The son of a magician, Zera the Great, he was a newspaper cartoonist before becoming a writer and director for Vitagraph; illusion and cartoon gags remained part of his repertoire in live action films.

Semon began starring in his own one-reelers in late 1915. The films quickly became a big success and in 1918 he was promoted to two-reelers. *The Agent* finds Larry south of the border, as a federal agent pursuing Mexican bootleggers. His leading lady, Lucille Carlisle, was his wife of the time; the chief bootlegger, rejoicing in the name of 'Don Fusiloil' is none other than Oliver Hardy. Hardy was Semon's regular 'heavy' and did a terrific job of providing comic menace and bluster. He later spoke of Semon with admiration, saying that *"I never saw anybody work harder at a gag, except maybe Stan [Laurel]*". Semon would soon begin overreaching himself and his work began to decline, but *The Agent* catches him still close to the top of his game.

"Larry Semon offers an abundance of hilarious comedy in this. He has handled old material with many original flourishes and the laughs come fast and furiously. Larry Semon fans and all slapstick enthusiasts will welcome The Agent*" – Moving Picture World*, December 30, 1922.

IT'S A GIFT (USA 1923)

Produced by Hal Roach. Released by Pathé Exchange, October 14th, 1923. Directed by Hugh Fay and (uncredited) George Jeske. Titles by H.M. Walker.
Cast: Snub Pollard, Wallace Howe, William Gillespie.



Little Snub Pollard, the man with the Kaiser Wilhelm moustache worn upside down, was one of the totemic faces of silent comedy. *It's a Gift* is one of his best known – and funniest - films; the image of inventor Snub riding in his little bullet shaped, magnet-powered car remains his contribution to silent comedy's best-remembered scenes. Ok, so this film isn't a rarity. BUT... it has been newly restored in a stunning 4K scan, and hasn't looked this good in a century. Today's screening is the premiere of this new version, which will shortly be released on a new Snub Pollard Blu Ray collection.

Born in Australia, Snub fell in with Hal Roach when both worked at Essanay, and joined Roach's stock company of comedians when the producer set up his Rolin company. Having been promoted from Harold Lloyd's sidekick to his own starring one-reel films in 1919, Snub's series really came into its own when Charles Parrott (soon to become Charley Chase) began supervising the films. As well as being chief gagman, Parrott directed many of the films himself; he had a wild imagination and a talent for spinning out as many gags on a single theme as possible, something that came to characterise the films. The success of the series saw Snub promoted again, to two-reelers. However, all was not entirely well behind the scenes. One film, *The Inventor*, posed particular problems, and was eventually cut down to a single reel, released under a new name.

The new title was *It's a Gift*. It's funny to think that this beautiful little comedy was originally considered a failure, but perhaps part of the reason for its enduring success was that it distilled the best moments (and higher budget!) of the two-reeler into a concise and perfect single reel. This new restoration lets the film shine brighter than ever.

Matthew Ross

THE GENERAL (USA 1926)

Joseph M Schenck/United Artists. Filmed June-July 1926. Released February 5th, 1927
Written and directed by Buster Keaton and Clyde Bruckman. Adapted by Al Boasberg and Charles Smith. Photography: Dev Jennings and Bert Haines. Technical Director: Fred Gabourie. Lighting effects: Denver Harmon
Cast: Buster Keaton, Marion Mack, Jim Farley, Frederick Vroom, Frank Barnes, Joe Keaton, Mike Donlin, Tom Nawn.



Buster Keaton's own favourite among his films was also his most ambitious: a civil war epic on a grand scale, based on a real incident from the history books. Keaton collaborator and co-director Clyde Bruckman discovered William Pittenger's book *The Great Locomotive Chase* and recommended it to Buster. It offered a perfect opportunity to nestle Keaton's character into history in the character of Johnnie Gray, a dogged engineer pursuing his stolen engine, which has been taken by enemy spies.

Buster originally intended to shoot in the genuine Southern locations of the story's setting, but found the railroads down there unsuited to his purpose. He eventually settled on Cottage Grove, Oregon, and once on location the production became one of the most elaborate, epic undertakings of the silent film era. It also incorporated many of Buster's favourite filmmaking themes. His love of engineering and mechanical props reach their apotheosis here: he essentially had a full network of run-down railroads to use as his own personal train set. His affinity with the great outdoors also takes centre stage, with the epic wilderness of Oregon's forests, rocky bluffs and rivers forming the perfect backdrop to his comedy.

Historical settings were another Keaton favourite, previously seen in *Three Ages* and *Our Hospitality*. Now he stepped up his research and production a notch, on a mission to make it "so authentic it hurts!". The painstaking attention to period detail, based on contemporary photographs of Matthew Brady, is still astounding. No expense was spared in staging elaborate stunts, battles and scenes. Among these, the wrecking of an engine - the *Texas* - became the most expensive single shot of the silent film era.

All of these elements are showcased wonderfully with dynamic camerawork, beautiful cinematography and brilliant direction. And that's to say nothing of the gags and stunts, all seamlessly integrated into the plot. *The General* is at once an historical epic, a thrill-filled blockbuster, an action comedy, a war film, a romance and a meditation on man and machine. Most of all, it is a film that nobody else could have made. It is as uniquely Buster Keaton's as those big eyes, that deadpan face.

It's strange to realise that *The General*'s production is now closer in time to its Civil War setting than to the present day. The film still seems so dynamic and fresh that one can scarcely conceive of it being a century old. One might add that, in the age of Artificial Intelligence permeating culture, the authenticity and refusal to fake things in Keaton's work is more attractive than ever.

The General is a film that will continue to amaze, entertain and inspire for the next hundred years and beyond. I'm not sure that any one essay or introduction can sum up its artistry, technical skill and unique beauty, so here's a sampling from the multitude of things said and written about the film since 1926:

Orson Welles: *The General* is the greatest comedy ever made, the greatest Civil War film ever made, and perhaps the greatest film ever made. It really deserves that tired word: masterpiece.

Jim Kline: If someone wanted to know just who the real Buster Keaton was, what kind of personality he had, what he was really like as a flesh-and-blood human being, one need only watch *The General*. Although hardly autobiographical, it is Keaton's most personal film, embodying his essence, his spirit.

Buster Keaton: I was more proud of that picture than any other I made, 'cause I took an actual incident from the Civil War, out of the history book, and I told it in detail. It was my own continuity, I directed it, I cut and titled it. So actually it was my pet.

Marion Mack: They used today what I think would be called an outline. Not a real script as we now know it. I mean, they told you what the scene was, but you were expected to make up your own bits of business, and if anybody had an idea they would try it and see how it played. I didn't know they were going to make the scene with the waterspout aimed for me, and that when the train would start they'd let me have it [with a jet of water]. They didn't tell me they were going to do that, so I was pretty angry about it and I let him have it!

Keaton: Oh [she] didn't mind at all. Oh god, that girl in *The General* had more fun with that picture than any film she'd made in her life. I guess it's because so many leading ladies in those days looked like they'd walked straight out of a beauty parlour – even when they were in covered wagons. We said to thunder with that, we'll dirty ours up a bit and let them have some rough treatment.

Walter Kerr: The sense of epic in *The General* does not end with the spectacular shape of the film. The epic feeling permeates with its authenticity the weatherbeaten clapboards of wayside houses, the close-to-peeling pillars of the girl's colonial 'mansion,' the dusty roads of smallish towns and teeming military encampments, the very weeds that push through gravel to wrap themselves about railroad ties. We do not seem to be looking at 'sets' at all, but at a mythic past in its tangible life recovered whole after a hundred years.

Raymond Durgnat: Perhaps *The General* is the most beautiful [film], with its spare, grey photography, its eye for the racy, lunging lines of the great locomotives, with their prow-like cowcatchers, with its beautifully sustained movement.

Walter Kerr: *The General* must be the most insistently *moving* picture ever made.

Kevin Brownlow: A great deal of the chase was shot, not from the engine, but from a vehicle tracking alongside from the road. The tracking shots are perfectly timed so that the engine is held centre of frame, and there is no vibration. Keaton fitted Westinghouse shock absorbers on the automobile and used a road scraper to smooth down the surface before shooting. " We were pretty fussy about that," he says.

Louise Brooks: I was speaking [to Buster] of a shot of him hiding under the table in *The General:* "You were so terribly beautiful in its tragic lighting, Buster, so out of key with your comic character. I can't understand why you didn't cut that shot out of the picture". He had evidently never considered people's reactions to its beauty. For an instant his expression was mystifyingly shaken up like a snowstorm in a crystal paperweight, and then, dismissing the whole damned thing, with his little-boy walk he trudged into the kitchenette to get himself a cold beer.

Jim Kline: *The General* is an eight-reel close up of Buster's face. Every inch of the film is fabulously rich, emotionally understated brilliance. Because Buster was so successful at downplaying the film's subtly dazzling attributes, it proved a box-office flop and, ironically, contributed to his losing his artistic independence.

Tom Dardis: The New York reviews of the picture were terrible. The regular *New York Times* critic, Mordaunt Hall, perhaps the man with the greatest track record in film history for being wrong, felt that it was "by no means as good as Mr Keaton's previous efforts". The *Herald-Tribune* found it "long and tedious"; the *Daily Mirror's* reviewer advised Keaton to "Pull yourself together, Buster. That's all".
Before attaining its current status as a classic, Keaton's most ambitious film had to go through a long period of almost total rejection.

Rudi Blesh: Buster Keaton would likely not relish being called a poet. But poetry is where you find it, and it is in *The General.* Time has not staled it. Time, indeed, has not yet destroyed the locomotive that plunged through the burning bridge. *The General* deserves the honour of never being retired again, of being shown anew to each generation.

Keaton: Railroads are a great prop. You can do some awful wild things with railroads…

Matthew Ross