COMEDY PROGRAM #2

This program is compiled mainly of the items that were somehow squeezed out of our first comedy show last month, with of course the important addition of Chaplin’s “The Pilgrim”, which was not yet available in April. We mention this in advance because we do not pretend that this show is as good as the first, when we really selected the cream available. However, we think you’ll find it a well-varied and enjoyable session. In fact there’s so much really good “second-echelon” comedy material on hand that we’re anticipating a third show in the not-too-distant future.

"THE EXTRA GIRL" (excerpts) (Mack Sennett-Pathe, 1923) Directed by F. Richard Jones; with Mabel Normand, Ralph Graves, Vernon Dent.

One of the better Sennett features, "The Extra Girl" was a Cinderella romance that combined fast slapstick with elements of pathos and melodrama — and threw in a couple of rousing fights for good measure. Our excerpts are concerned with two of the more famous comedy highlights. One deals with Mabel’s screen test — with William Desmond making a "guest" appearance. The other is the well-known (but rarely seen) sequence wherein Mabel walks a lion around the studio, believing that it is actually the Sennett dog, Teddy, in makeup! Incidentally, the studio in the film was given the fictitious (then) name of Golden State. One scene of hectic studio activity — madly racing cowboys, non-stop chases — was preceded by the title "All day — every day — at Golden State Pictures." This seems particularly amusing today, in view of the quickie company of recent years bearing the name of Golden State Productions, and responsible for action pictures which look as though they were made under just those conditions!

CHARLIE CHASE — 3 PHASES

Chase has always been one of the most under-rated of screen comics — perhaps because he made so many films. It’s doubtful that he ever made a bad one (at least, not during his days as a star for Roach) and even his lesser films gained pep and sparkle from his delightful style. These three films cover the beginning, the middle, and the close of his career.


Frankly, the whole of this comedy is an abomination; crude and unfunny. Many of the Sennettts of this period were extremely heavy and clumsy, and this particular one seems to have been made not by Sennett himself, but by some kind of second unit. None of the usual Sennett players are involved, Chase excepted, and there is a bungling oaf of a janitor played along the lines usually followed by Sennett himself when he acted in his own comedies. One cannot expect too much from an imitation of something already inferior, and "The Great Toe Mystery" soon develops into a parade of bony pratfalls and pointless running around. However, thanks to Chase, the opening sequences of the film are quite funny. He plays an outrageously effeminate shoe salesman — the sort of performance no-one could get away with today! His pantomime and malicious fun are both quite wonderful!
"ALL WET" (Hal Roach, Pathé, 1924) One reel. Directed by Leo McCarey.

Chase's comedies for Roach in the 20's maintained a remarkably high standard, and "All Wet" is a good specimen. It's an "average" Chase, which means that it's not great -- but still pretty darned good. And one of the gags, which we won't spoil by describing, is still one of the best sequences Chase ever came up with.

"FALLEN ARCHES" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1933) Two reels. Directed by Gus Meins;
starring Charlie Chase with Muriel Evans, Billy Gilbert,

Something happened to Roach comedies when sound came in. They lost a lot of the inventiveness of their silent predecessors (perhaps because much of the talent that had made them - e.g., Leo McCarey - had gone on to richer feature fields) and often seemed very badly made. Roach's economy-conscious policy was constantly reflected in cheap sets, obvious backdrops, and the infuriating repetition of a handful of musical themes, which were played indiscriminately through all of his comedies. Too, the photography, editing and sound recording was often shoddy in the extreme. Art Lloyd, who photographed most of them, was a well-liked fellow who was, however, perennially drunk, and who frequently left camera cables and other equipment lying around on the sets to be picked up and recorded by the camera.

All of this preamble is not to denigrate "Fallen Arches", which is a good comedy, but to stress that a comedian HAD to be good to triumph over the often shoddy material, and almost always shoddy production values, that Roach afforded in his sound comedies. Chase, and of course Laurel and Hardy, DID rise above Roach. Other comedy teams, like Zasu Pitts and Thelma Todd, and the Taxi Boys, were not sufficiently talented to make it. Some of the banalities that Laurel and Hardy triumphed over are really quite incredible.

Chase, at any rate, continued his Harold Lloyd-like characterization into the sound era without any change of pace or style. His voice seemed to fit his screen personality well, and he even sang effectively at times. "Fallen Arches" is a particularly good sound Chase, bringing in a number of wonderful visual gags (one of them borrowed from "All Wet", although not developed so fully), and some interesting reflections of the depression era.

Billy Gilbert was strangely unfunny, and even unpleasant, in these early Roaches (as witness also his appearance in "Their First Mistake"). Later on he adopted a completely different personality - the well-meaning simpleton - and in films like "Queen of the Mob" and "His Girl Friday" contributed some priceless comedy moments.


2 reels.

Directed by Harry Edwards, who made Langdon's best feature "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp" (one of the best feature comedies of any comedian, for that matter), "The Best Man" is one of those Sennett comedies that seems to be divided into two quite distinct halves, each independent of the other. The idea, obviously, was to use them later as single reels. It's an extremely lively entry in the Billy Bevan-Vernon Dent group, with Alma Bennett as the girl in the case, and Carole Lombard to be glimpsed, briefly, at the wedding reception, playing what may well have been her first extra role for Sennett. Billy Bevan's unique speciality was good-hearted and gleeful sadism -- as opposed to the
malicious and mathematical sadism of Laurel and Hardy. Let someone be embarrassed, or painfully injured - usually as the results of his own mischief - and Billy will howl with uncontrollable glee! It was a most effective running gag with Bevan, and is well demonstrated in this comedy. Some of the best gags break all the tabus of conventional good taste, and in those days racial barriers were an open invitation for a gag - as you'll see in "The Best Man".

"THEIR FIRST MISTAKE" (Roach-MGM, 1932) Directed by George Marshall; with Laurel and Hardy, Mae Busch, Billy Gilbert.

Ever since we ran an excerpt from this in our recent Laurel and Hardy show, we've been asked for the whole thing - so here it is. It's one of their lesser known comedies, and certainly one of their cleverest. Their childishly discussion on the advantages of Mrs Hardy having a baby is a brilliant piece of comedy, worthy of comparison with the best of Chaplin, Fields and Keaton. Their satire on the "betrayed maiden" situation is another magnificent moment; Laurel and Hardy did this form of satire all too infrequently, but when they did it, as here (and as also in the silent "Putting the Pants on Phillip") it was truly great comedy. There's much typical Laurel and Hardy humor in this one too - some of Hardy's best exchanges with a shrewish wife, and some catastrophic falls and plunges. Sadly, the quality of the opening half isn't sustained; it shoots its bolt too soon, and tails off rather inconclusively without any real climax. But the earlier material is so good that one can readily forgive lapses later on. Incidentally, director George Marshall plays a bit as the neighbor to whom Hardy gives a cigar.

"THE PILGRIM" (Chaplin-First National, 1923) Four reels. Written and directed by Charlie Chaplin, Asst. Director Chuck Riesner; photographed by Rollie Totheroh; with Edna Purviance, Kitty Bradbury, Mack Swain, Loyal Underwood, Dinky Dean (Chuck Riesner's son); Sidney Chaplin, May Wells, Tom Murray, Henry Bergman, Monta Bell.

About "The Pilgrim", the last of Chaplin's films for First National, and the film that preceded "A Woman of Paris", Theodore Huff wrote:

"Not so well remembered as "Shoulder Arms" and "The Kid", it is one of Chaplin's masterpieces. It is highly characteristic of Chaplin, full of his irreverent name-thumbing at pomp and convention, in an expansive nothing-is-sacred mood. Not as hilarious as "Shoulder Arms" and lacking the sentiment of "The Kid", the picture nevertheless has considerable comedy and tenderness. The chief butts of its satire are rural types and small town puritanism...... trade critics at the preview worried over the reaction of the church-going public ...... (but only) ...... the strict Pennsylvania censors barred "The Pilgrim" because "it made the ministry look ridiculous" ...... at least three of its scenes equal anything Chaplin did; the famous pantomime sermon on David & Goliath, the encounter with the obnoxious boy, and the concluding booting across the Mexican border...... in this humorous and eloquent ending some have seen a symbol of the eternal pilgrim on the tragic roads of the world".

Despite Ted Huff's enthusiasm for this film, I must confess to a great personal disappointment in it - and in fact to most of Chaplin's First National films, the bulk of which seem far too pretentious and ponderous.
Somehow they seem to represent an uncertain transient period between Chaplin the comedian (as in the Mutuals) and Chaplin the comedian-philosopher (as in the features). The Mutuals (1916-1917) certainly represent the peak of Chaplin's creativity, by any standards, and it is perhaps worth noting that the best of Chaplin's First National films are also the first — "A Dog's Life" and "Shoulder Arms". They seem more like an extension of the Mutual phase, than the beginning of the next.

"The Pilgrim", while certainly a great deal better than "The Idle Class" (surely the weakest of ALL the post-Essanay Chaplins) and more polished than "Pay Day", often seems a trifle forced. The David-Goliath sermon, frankly, seems vastly over-rated, and really no funnier than Stan Laurel's pantomime of Samson and Delilah in "Slipping Wives". Yet some of the surrounding "bits of business" in the church sequence are truly classic.

However, the personal disappointment of one eccentric film society programmer should not be taken as a criterion. Certainly that disclaimer doesn't seem to be shared by most of the responsible critics and historians. In any event, quite obviously, "The Pilgrim" is the sort of film that we certainly have no right NOT to show.

Like most bootlegged Chaplin prints, this one is in pretty groggy shape. Obviously the 35mm print from which it was duped had not only been run, four times a day every day since 1923, but was also beginning to fade! In addition, it was a print with foreign subtitles. (These have now been replaced with English titles which may not necessarily correspond exactly with the originals). Parts of it are somewhat choppy, and we estimate that a total of about half-a-reel is missing. The film starts abruptly, and one section is full of jump cuts. Followers of the rarer Chaplin films have, unfortunately, accustomed themselves to this type of print. Nevertheless it is a good deal better than nothing at all, and we're extremely fortunate to be able to see it again today.


Committee of the society: Charles Shibuk, Edward Gorey, Dorothy Lovell.

Next week’s programs:

Tuesday May 20th., room 10-D:

DOROTHY GISH and BLANCHE SWEET in "THE PAINTED LADY" (Griffith, 1913)
LILLIAN GISH and RICHARD BARTHELMESS in excerpts from "WAY DOWN EAST" (Griffith, 1920)
LILLIAN GISH, LARS HANSON and HENRY B. WALT HALL in "THE SCARLET LETTER" (Victor Seastrom, 1926)

Friday May 23rd., room 9-D:

LILLIAN & DOROTHY GISH with Monte Blue and Joseph Schildkraut in "ORPHANS OF THE STORM" (D.W. Griffith, 1921)
Followed by a tape recording of Erich von Stroheim’s broadcast tribute to D.W. Griffith