

THE  
THEODORE HUFF  
MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program for Wednesday

October 29th., 1958

NEXT SHOW: Nov. 18th.

A LAUREL & HARDY program;

concentrating on their  
lesser-known films, both  
silent and sound.

THE KID (1921)

WITH  
JACKIE  
COOGAN



and THE  
GOLD  
RUSH  
(1925)

WITH  
MACK  
SWAIN  
TOM  
MURRAY  
GEORGIA  
HALE  
(3 REELS)



CHARLIE CHAPLIN

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and "RECREATION" (1914)

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On this program we are coupling Chaplin's two most popular features from his peak period in the 20's; possibly his two most popular features from any period. Whether they, as well, represent his best work is something else again, and something that we'll discuss further in these notes. For lengthier information on the background of these films, we recommend a perusal of the chapters devoted to them in Theodore Huff's book on Chaplin.

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RECREATION (Keystone, 1914)

Chaplin's 23rd film was a strange little oddity to come after such comparatively ambitious subjects as "The Property Man", "Mabel's Married Life" and "Caught in a Cabaret" and others, many of which had been directed by Chaplin. "Recreation" was a completely ad-lib little comedy, and ran a scant half-reel, a travelogue making up the balance of the reel. There is no plot and little continuity, the whole thing consisting of some hearty knock-about fooling in a park. Our print represents some two-thirds of the original half-a-reel, and certainly contains the best of Chaplin's comedy bits. As often happens, the least important items are the best preserved; this print is of exceptionally fine quality, being from a dupe negative only just made from an original 35mm release print.

THE GOLD RUSH (United Artists, 1925). (Original length: 10 reels, for premiere; released in 9 reels; reissued with sound in 1942 in 7 reels; our version, a 3-reel condensation).

Written and directed by Charles Chaplin, assisted by Charles Reisner and H. d'Abbadie d'Arrast; photographed by Rollie Totheroh and Jack Wilson; starring Charles Chaplin with Mack Swain, Georgia Hale, Tom Murray, Betty Morrissey, Malcolm Waite, Henry Bergman.

Those who have never seen the complete version of "The Gold Rush" should not attempt to formulate any opinion on the film from this bootlegged 3-reeler put out under the title "Alaskan Adventures". Under the circumstances, it is a smoothly edited job with a concentration on the comic highlights; but there is little hint of the film's pathos (its strongest point perhaps) and the film's one real highlight - the dance of the rolls - is out entirely. Nevertheless, the famous "chicken" scene with Mack Swain, the teetering cabin, and some of Chaplin's best remembered bits of pantomime, are there, and thus it at least provides a good cross-section of the film's comic content.

14 months in production, "The Gold Rush" was Chaplin's most elaborate and costly production to date, although despite location work in Nevada, the film still had an aura of cheapness due to the overuse of rather obvious studio sets. (However, our print gives an unfair impression of this cheapness, since most of the big scenes in the dance hall, the gold fields etc., have been edited out). It was by no means an unqualified success with the critics, many of whom felt that Chaplin was getting too serious and arty, and that the film lacked the speed and comedy invention of his earlier films. Those same criticisms, levelled against all subsequent Chaplins, now make "The Gold Rush" seem, in retrospect, like pure comedy of the old school. While it is perhaps not one of the best Chaplins, it is certainly well up among the better ones. Chaplin himself has referred to it as "The picture I want to be remembered by".

"THE KID" (First National, 1921) Six reels. Written and directed by Chaplin, assisted by Charles Riesner; photographed by Rollie Totheroh; starring Charles Chaplin, with Jackie Coogan, Edna Purviance, Carl Miller, Tom Wilson, Chuck Riesner, Albert Austin, Henry Bergman, Nellie Bly Baker, Lita Grey.

Apart from "Tillie's Punctured Romance", "The Kid" was Chaplin's first film out of the "featurette" category, and certainly his first ~~sex~~-reeler. Through the years it has collected so many accolades, even from Chaplin's denigrators, that it seems a trifle presumptuous for anyone to now offer a criticism of it. But frankly - to me at least - it now seems an extremely bad film, and quite the weakest of Chaplin's features. Chaplin's films seem to have a strange habit of seeming completely different when re-seen after 10 years or so. Of course, in some measure this applies to all film. Colleague Herman Weinberg frequently frowns paternally and sorrowfully when I express an adverse

opinion of a film considered of tremendous importance in its day. Such criticism, he feels is invalid; unless one projects oneself back into the spirit of the time when it was released, one is doing the film an injustice. And of course he has a point. But can one standardise film appreciation so? "Sunrise", "Intolerance" and "Greed" are still tremendous films by any standards; they would not seem the more so by viewing them (if it were possible) in a mental state of mind that switched back to the date of their release. Conversely, they probably create an even greater impression today because their like has completely vanished from the screen; in their own day, great films rubbed shoulders far more frequently. It seems that one can appreciate - for example - what a tremendously important film "The Last Laugh" was in its day, as a contribution to film grammar, and yet be justified in criticising it today as a film that does not endure. In varying degrees, the same might be said of "The Covered Wagon", "Siegfried" and "The Informer". Obviously this is not the place to launch into a long discussion on the subject, and these notes serve merely <sup>as</sup> the constant need for re-evaluation -- not the throwing out and discarding of old opinions, but rather the adding of new ones. When all is said and done, the films themselves - good or bad - matter far more than the things that are written about them. The danger is that more people read about old films than have a chance to see and study them -- and too much reliance on the standardised opinions can lead to wholesale confusion and misleading interpretations.

And Chaplin, surely, is one of the personalities most in need of re-evaluation. What happened to him after he left Mutual? The Mutuals, surely, were the "Golden Age" of the silent Chaplins. Their spirit clung to Chaplin's first two for First National - "A Dog's Life" and "Shoulder Arms" -- and then what? "Sunnyside" is so bad that if it were an Arrow or Rayart comedy with some unknown comedian one would switch it off after the first reel and turn to something else. But with Chaplin, one keeps waiting - and hoping - in vain. "The Idle Class" is almost as bad. "Pay Day" is better, though routine, and "The Pilgrim" seems a sad disappointment today. Then, back at United Artists, the old spirit seems to revive in "The Gold Rush" and the often maligned "The Circus", which now seems to be infinitely superior to anything at First National after "Shoulder Arms". The wonderful opening pantomime with the baby and the hamburger is funnier than anything in "The Kid" -- and the film's pathos is far less hackneyed. "Modern Times", which we saw again a few weeks ago, now seems to be quite the funniest of all the Chaplin features, though admittedly an untidy film, and lacking in other departments. But this again is a reaction quite different from that encountered when the film was new. It will be interesting to see how "The Great Dictator" fares today. (It is currently playing at the New Stanton Theatre in Washington).

If it is unfair to criticise "The Kid's" weak comedy content, then one has to accept it on a dramatic level, and here it fails deplorably. Chaplin's obviously sincerely-felt attempts at symbolism (for example, the halo behind the head of the unwept mother) are much cruder than similar symbolisms employed - and discarded - by Griffith years earlier. The wedding scene with the husband crushing the flower beneath his heel is another lugubrious note -- although admittedly DeMille used the same trick a full four years later in "The Road to Yesterday". "The Kid" is too long, too slow, and lacking in either real drama or real comedy, its highspots being the odd moments when Chaplin seems to forget that he's making a "prestige" feature and launches into moments of comic pantomime which remind one of his Mutual heydays. Indeed, the best moments of "The Kid" seem to be reshaped repeats of bits of business from earlier comedies - with distinct traces of "Easy Street" and "Police" in particular.

Even Coogan doesn't seem to be quite as effective as memory indicated. (To check on this reaction, we ran Coogan's "My Boy" immediately afterwards -- and in that little Jackie seemed far more lovable -- and far more capable -- although admittedly making a more conscious effort to copy Chaplin mannerisms). However, the failure of Coogan to stand up may be partially due to print shortcomings. Many of his most telling scenes are played in long shot, and in our duped print, many of these long shots are flat to a degree where facial expressions have completely vanished.

A word now, about this print. Certainly it is the most complete print we have come across, containing scenes missing from the Museum of Modern Art print, the only print most of us today are familiar with. Conversely, a couple of other scenes are out - Charlie investigating the baby's sex by peering under his blanket, and part of the "moist baby" gag. These scenes were often attacked for "vulgarity", and appear to have been snipped from this print by British censors. Otherwise it all appears to be there, and the titles seem to be quite careful reconstructions of the originals. Frankly the pictorial quality is not as good as we had been led to expect. It has many of the shortcomings of duped prints, although it seems to have been duped from a remarkably good original print that was free from splices and scratches.

However, our qualms about print quality may be unfounded. Since our print arrived, a second one has been made available to us. This second one, (with a musical score on the track incidentally) is the print used to make the dupe negative from which the other print was made. So it will be at least a generation better in picture quality, and if it is in as good a physical condition as the dupe indicates, promises to be a very nice print indeed. So all may be well after all. After years of being bereft of "The Kid", it's a nice, cosy, secure feeling to have two prints to choose from!

Quite certainly "The Kid" (to me at least) is a sad disappointment today. But by any standards it's a film well worth the re-viewing, and an entertaining film despite its faults -- faults which probably no-one else will agree exist anyway!

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Program Notes & Enquiries:  
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Committee: Edward S. Gorey, Sandra Everson, Charles Shibuk, Dorothy Lovell  
(art-work)

SPECIAL PRESENTATION NEXT MONTH

Our second show in November will be headed by NELL GYNN (Herbert Wilcox, 1926) starring DOROTHY GISH. This is one of the loveliest toned 35mm prints we've come across in ages, and a real joy to behold. Because of the 35mm angle, the screening will have to be held in a small private theatre somewhere, so we cannot yet give a date and time, although we're trying to stick to our regular date. Full information in our next mailing.