Charlie Chase: A survey, 1915-1937

The Huff Society has always been a staunch Charlie Chase booster, and most of the biographical and descriptive comments that we might make here have already been made in earlier notes. To sum up briefly however, it has always seemed a great pity that Chase never had the right breaks at the right time. When he started with Semmett, slapstick was the dominant trend in screen comedy — and his dapper, "Mr. Smith seemed too sophisticated to be at home in knockabout. He turned to direction for Roach, and made some of the best Soviet Poddars. Then, fitted out with a mustache and 2-reelers, he turned to being a comedian again, at the time, his delightful little one and two-reelers had really caught on, Lloyd, Chaplin, Keaton, Langdon and Laurel & Hardy were at their peak, and there just didn't seem room for features. Especially one like Chase, with a personality that overlapped (without copying) the screen characters of Lloyd and Reginald Denny. Came the talkies, and Chase was too well established as a "classic" two-reeler comic to think of himself as feasible for features (other than a couple of roles in Roach comedy features), although he would have been marvelous in the kind of films that Charlie Ruggles was doing for Paramount. However, it is sad to think of this potential waste at the same time we can be grateful for some 16 years of Chase at his best in 2-reel comedies, and thanks to Chase's charm and doshman personality, there wasn't a dud in the bunch. Some, especially those from the 1926-28 years, are enduring classics of screen comedy; some admittedly, as may be bound to be, green on an assembly-line basis, are only routines in their comic invention and content. But Chase had the happy knack of making the great ones even finer, and the sheer weight of personality, in rescuing the dullest ones from failure. Every Chase comedy has moments and highlights that delight. One can say the same for Laurel & Hardy too, but for almost all of the other Roach and Semmett comedians (Turpin, Bevon, Edgar Kennedy, Max Davidson, even Chaplin & Langdon) one is, in all honesty, forced to be less enthusiastic.

It would be a pity to have Chase's appeal spoiled by a cult of rediscoverers, but this doesn't seem likely to happen. Modern audiences don't seem to find in Chase the nostalgia and old-time comedy they expect, for the simple reason that both his personality and his situation comedy (and especially his comedy of embarrassment) are as fresh and sophisticated as ever. His films don't date any more than Lubitsch's "Trouble in Paradise" dates, which is probably why the latter-day Lubitsch fanatics root for "The Love Parade" and "Minnocka".

Having waxed so enthusiastically about Charlie, it is perhaps a trifle unfair to put together a compilation in which few of his best films are represented. But we have already run the best ones -- "All Wekt", "Looking for Sally", "Mighty Like a Moose", "Misogynine Love" etc., in many cases more than once — and so it seemed like a better way to collect fresher, if less notable, material on this occasion; compromising only to the extent of including "Movie Night". This is one of Charlie's most delightful laugh-silents, and we have run it only once before some six years ago — so a repeat is certainly quite in order.

The films, in order of screening, are:

"HASH HOUSE MASHERS" (Keystone, 1915): A one-reeler, presumably directed by Jack Semmett who also has a supporting role; this is a typical off-the-cuff knockabout affair, with an interesting plot gimmick involving the shooting of a movie. It's pleasant, fast, never very inspired, but more restrained than most of the Semmetts of the period, and Chase's pantomime and grimacing in especially restrained when one recalls the mugging of Ford Sterling, Fred Hace and Semmett himself in these early Keystone years.

"PLAYTHIES" (King-Bea, 1917): Extract: Chase in a rather unfamiliar guise — an eccentric drug-crane bus! (Comedies were strong stuff in those days!) The film is one of Billy West's quite expert copies of Chaplin.

"YOUNG OLDFIELD" (Patha-
Bea, 1924): Directed by Lon McCarrick with Barney Oldfield, Marie Moscioni, Noah Young, Willis Conklin, Fane Hurley, One reel.
A typical entry from Chase's "Jimmy Jump" series, many of which were directed by McCarey. It's fast, full of good gags (some of the best of them almost thrown away as they often were with Chase) and in its chase climax is one of virile action which Charlie often added ("Bad Boy", "Chase Nan You're slow to prevent his dapper hero from being considered a milquetoast.

"NOVEMBER NIGHT" (Hal Roach-MGM-1929) Director: Lewis Foster 2 rls
One of the very best Chase vehicles, a study of domesticity and embarrassment; as a spoof on a Saturday movie treat, it's both a nostalgic reminder of the far more important role that movies used to play in everybody's lives and also a far funnier film than Robert Benchley's rather labored essay on the same subject some ten years later. This has some superb - and charming - gags. The print is a little on the dark side in spots, but generally adequate.

"HIS DINNER HUSH" (Hal Roach-MGM-1923) Dir; Charles Parrott (Chase) 2 rls
With Betty Mack, Jimmy Adams, Marvin Hatley, Frank Gage, Eddie Baker. Although mild in its Humour, Charlie holds this one together well. He sings, he's coy, and throws himself (literally) into the slapstick with plenty of vigor. Every time it looks like bogging down, he comes to the rescue and gets it back on its feet again.

"THE BIG SQUIRT" (Columbia, 1937) Directed by Del Lord; produced by Charlie Chase and Hugh McCollum; 2 reels
These Columbia 2-reelers represented Charlie's last screen work. Columbia rarely did right by the important comedians they used in their 2-reelers, and despite working with their old comic roles and directors, Langdon, Keaton (and on a lesser level) Slim Summerville and Andy Clyde were all handed the same brand of low-grade slapstick. Chase fared rather better however; many of his scripts were simple remakes of his old silent, and his screen character - the pleasant Mr. Average Husband (a good deal more pleasant than most of the Average Husbands one meets from day to day!) was less affected by age than were the simplotions of Keaton and Langdon. Although at that, the signs of age are only slight, for Charlie was not yet 50 when he died. "The Big Squirt" is an assembly-line to be sure, but still has some nice and typically Chase sequences in it, and such enjoyable throw-away gags as the casual ice-cream flipping routine.

INTERMISSION

"LET 'ER GO GALLOPERS" (DeMille Productions-Pathe-1927) Dir; Elmer Clifton
Scenario by Elliott Clason from the stories by Richard Harding Davis; camera: Lucien Andriot; art direction, Stephen Gooson; titles: John Krafft; edited by Harold McElrnon. 6 reels
Disney is now doing Davis' stories as a tv-3-parter, so comparisons may be interesting. Disney is doing his version in the original turn-of-the-century milieu of the stories, but it is understandable that in 1927 there would have been less nostalgia for a period only a quarter-of-a-century earlier, and thus it is done against a contemporary background. Its breezy action-plus-comedy format isn't so far removed from those cheap actioners that Frankie Darro and Kane Richmond made in the 30's, but Elmer Clifton doesn't let its negligible dramatic content stop him from slamming it over with everything he's got. Everything he is, an apprentice to Griffith (as an actor, then as an assistant director) in terms of building suspense and excitement he has remembered; fast cutting - good lighting - well varied angles - the comic vignette at the right moment. And if Clifton gives it the style that would normally be reserved for an "Orphans of the Storm", so much the better! I deliberately don't want to say too much about this film, or to over-sell it. It's a minor part of film history, and neither a great nor important film. But what a good film it is, and how much it gains from the surprises of story and style! So we'll say little about it, and let you discover its delights for yourself.

W.G. Everson

Due to a Canadian trip that will get me back to NY only a couple of hours before the Hoff show, these notes have been written rather hurriedly several days ahead, and there having been no time for scoring, music will have to be on an ad-lib basis. I hope that you'll bear with us - and that Messrs. Chase and Clifton will forgive us - if this pressure of time causes any inadequacies. We,