Hal Roach still considers Charley Chase - writer, director and comedien - the most inventive creator of comedy that ever worked for him, not even excluding Stan Laurel. Yet although his films, especially in the late silent period, were popular, funny, sophisticated and served as an invaluable training ground for a number of important writers, directors and players, he has never really been given his due. We can't really hope to do justice to him in one session, but at least we wish to introduce his work and underline that don't know him, and possibly stimulate interest in his work. This certainly happened when Chase films were included in a Hal Roach Tribute at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado last year, and at a Charley Chase presentation at the American Film Institute last January; and hopefully it'll happen in London in August, when tonight's program is repeated at the National Film Theatre there.

Like many other comics, Chase started with Mack Sennett's Keystone comedies, and found the rigid slapstick formula too limiting. He had much better luck with Hal Roach, where the comedians were recognizable human beings rather than clowns, and where plot, sophistication and sight-gags were carefully balanced and constructed. He reached his peak in the silent period, but his charm - and even a pleasing singing voice - enabled him to make a successful transition to talkies. Many of his sound 2-reelers were remakes of his silents, but their (original) near-surrealism was often toned down to the more "realistic" demands of the sound comedy, and some of the more outrageous and visually double-entendre gags had their bite removed. He was the first director to use the radio in a silent film, to good effect (as in his long sequence with Laurel & Hardy in "Sons of the Desert") he remained primarily in shorts - and made so many of them, and of such high standard, that perhaps we should in fact be grateful that he did not go into features and thus curtail his output.

His screen character was that of the would-be bon-vivante, the bachelor having a last fling before marriage, or the quadrum husband, trying to get along in business and rescue some of the abandon of earlier days. In one sense, he was almost an extension of Harold Lloyd - after Lloyd married the girl in the last reel and settled down.

Chase had charm and taste both as a performer and a director; directing The Three Stooges in "Fasada in the Air", he even managed to make the word "charm" not inapplicable to that violent trio.

Selecting a cross-section of his films to represent him is not easy. Fortunately many are still available, but one has to resist the temptation to go overboard. Good as they are, they are invariably similar in tone, and were never meant to be seen en masse. We have kept this compilation to about 2 hrs and 20 minutes, covering all phases of his career from beginning to end, including one film that he directed. Missing are such items as "Looking for Sally", a wild takeoff on the "Way of All Flesh" school of drama, "Bad Boy", one of his best silents, and "Limousine Love", unfortunately unavailable at the moment, although a good condensation of it was featured in Robert Youngson's "Four Clowns". It's the one where Chase, en route to his wedding, innocently picks up a nude girl on route and is forced to circle the church - while all the top-hatted best men run out to see what is amiss, and one by one attach themselves to the car and wave cheerily at the bride! Among the excised talkies are "Nature in the Wrong", a delightful Tarsan spoof, and "Four Parts", not terribly funny, but ingenious in that Chase does indeed play the four leading parts. However, if we stimulate interest in Chase this evening, there's no reason why these shorts should not be added to appropriate programs from time to time.

Chase used his real name Charles Farrell when he directed; he was the brother of an actress who was a successful director, and formerly a comedien who, as Paul Parrutt, looked so much like Charley that people still confuse them. Charley died in 1940, still a young man - he was 49 - in the middle of a series of two-reelers for Columbia. For more detailed reading on Chase, reference is recommended to "The Great Movie Shorts" and "The Great Movie Comedians" (both by Leonard Maltin for Crown) and "The Films of Hal Roach" (W.K. Everston, for the Museum of Modern Art).
(Films are shown in order of production)

THE GREAT TOE MYSTERY (Mack Sennett-Keystone, 1914) Frankly a poor comedy, though typical of the run-of-the-mill Sennett releases. Charley plays the decidedly effeminate shoe salesman and manages to extract humor from what is otherwise a somewhat vulgar and violent masochist comedy. (1 real)

ALL WRT (Hal Roach-Pathé, 1924) This is a brilliantly surreal little comedy in which some of Chase's most eloquent pantomime is performed merely with his wrist and hand; the basis-under-the-water gag is repeated in the talkie "Pauline", but spoiled by being made realistic". (1 real)

IMMENGE HUSBANDS (Hal Roach-Pathé, 1925) Directed by Lee McCarey, with Chase, Katherine Grant, Lucien Littlefield. 2 reels.

Leo McCarey, creator of some of the finest comedies, both wild and sophisticated, of the 30's, was generous in crediting Chase with teaching him all he knew about comedy, and they made a most felicitous star-director team, especially with the equally adept F. Richard Jones along as supervisor. It's also well known that Rene Clair was much influenced by Roach's comedy, and one can't help but wonder whether he saw this one. It's a comedy of marital misunderstandings that starts with the destruction of a straw hat. Just the following year, Clair made his classic "The Italian Straw Hat"—which doubtless he'd have made anyway, but which certainly shows Roach's influence. Among other things, its star, Albert Prejean, formerly clean-shaven in the Chevalier tradition, adopted the Chase mustache and played his role entirely on Chase lines. In any case, it's an excellent comedy, with gags that are sophisticated one moment, and wildly improbable the next.

HIS WOODEN WEDDING (Hal Roach-Pathé 1925) Director: Leo McCarey. 2 reels.

Chase pairs with Katherine Grant again in a comedy with a rather cruel premise that becomes warm as well as funny in Chase's hands.

MIGHTY LIKE A MOUSE (Hal Roach-Pathé, 1926) Director: Leo McCarey. 2 reels.

Together with "Limousine Love", this is probably Chase's masterpiece, and a perfect demonstration of the difference between slapstick (of which it has none) and the sight-gag (in which it abounds). It's also a perfect example of how silence helps comedy; although it was remade as a talkie, it didn't work. The mere presence of voices, as you'll see, would render the whimsical plot absurd. Apart from its humor, there's a pleasing sense of camaraderie between Chase and wife Vivienne Oakland; and the climactic sight-gag, apart from being funny in its own right, is almost certainly a lampoon on the ridiculous (though played straight!) quick-change cleftsman of Chaney's "The Black Bird", released earlier that year.

— Ten Minute Intermission —

MOVIE NIGHT (Hal Roach-MGM, 1929) Directed by Lewis Foster. 2 reels; with Chase, Eugenia Gilbert, Sue O'Donnell, Edith Fellowes, Tiny Sanford, Harry Semel, Charles Rogers, Charlie Hall.

While the MGM Laurel & Hardy's were infinitely superior to their Pathé predecessors, the MGM Chases, despite added production values, did not live up to the overall standards of the Pathés, "Limousine Love" notwithstanding. McCarey spent more time with the Laurel & Hardy unit, Lewis Foster, Fred Guiol and others, worked on the Chases, and they were for the most part more leisurely and less outrageous. Nevertheless, they were enjoyable, and this one reminds us that Chase was also somewhat of a forerunner to both Robert Benchley and Jacques Tati.

ON THE WRONG TREK (Hal Roach-MGM, 1936) Directed by Charles Farrell (Chase) and Harold Law; 2 reels; with Clarence Wilson, Rosina Lawrence, Bud Jamison, Bob Kortman.

Cross-country trekking occupied a lot of screen-time in the depression, and a number of the Chases offered some hilarious sight gags on a basically rather sad situation; this one even takes a rather strong pot-shot (pre-Steinbeck!) at the strong-arm police stationed to keep vagrants out of California. Directed by Chase (the co-director credit is virtually meaningless), it's a funny and pleasing little short, a parody in which Charley gets a chance to sing. There are also a couple of unbillied surprise guest stars.


Chase had much better luck at Columbia than Harry Langdon and Buster Keaton, and his 2-reelers maintained a high standard. It's rather satisfying that this one, his third from last film, should turn out to be the rare exception in his most atypical, more of a vicious W.C. Fields type comedy, with Charley far from sympathetic, it is probably one of the most original 2-reel comedies ever made in the sound period. How much it owed to Chase however, one can glean from looking at the far less successful remakes with Shemp Howard. Del Lord was one of the best of the old Sennett directors, and works well with Chase here.

Wm. L. Eversen... Program ends approx. 10.15 and will be followed by a brief question period.