

CATBIRD SEAT – 3 SILENT COMEDY STARS Friday, September 4th, 2015

The earliest comedy stars followed the trend set by MACK SENNETT; his characters zipped across the screen like mechanical toys, crashing and colliding into bricks, pies, walls, furniture, and one another. He filmed them with an under-cranked camera to speed up the action, making them more frantic and thus more comical. Audiences laughed at the Sennett characters because they were machines, not real people; and whether they sank in a boat, were shot at with pistols, hit by an automobile or banged on the head with an anvil, they would somehow survive to be laughed at again and again. Plots for his films were sketchy, filled in with improvised material in a loose structure with anything for laughs. In one of his first full-length comedies (1914), "Tillie's Punctured Romance," he included a skinny city-slicker fellow who wound up with a brick or a stone or a boot hitting him in the head or seat of his pants – by the name of Charlie Chaplin.

CHARLIE CHAPLIN became not only the most popular personality in the history of the cinema, but also the most universally recognized comic figure the world had ever known. His art is emotionally based on personal experiences, especially of his childhood, which for sheer squalor rivals the novels of Charles Dickens. Born in 1889 in London as the son of music-hall performers – his father a wastrel and drunkard who died young and his mother a mentally unstable woman who eventually wound up in a mental asylum – leaving young Chaplin with his brother to become street urchins, living a hand-to-mouth existence. After a few years, the boys found occasional work as juvenile performers with touring stock companies. By age 12, Charlie went out on his own, working his way up in vaudeville acts, living simply, eventually touring the major cities of Europe with a music-hall company – and finally in his late teens made it to the USA where a representative of the Keystone Studio discovered him and brought him to Los Angeles, where he learned the basic conventions of the slapstick form.



Chaplin found the Sennett technique of spontaneous and unpredictable farce not to his liking; eventually, Sennett permitted him to slow down and develop his own style and thus the little tramp was born, producing a bonanza at the box office where "the little fellow" became a national hit.

Eventually, Sennett permitted Chaplin to direct his own films. He created a variety of roles, most of them crudely devised, though a few of them contained flashes of brilliance that continued to win at the box office. In playing a seedy dandy in "Kid Auto Races at Venice" (1914) he accidentally stumbled onto a tramp-like costume complete with baggy pants, derby, and oversized shoes – and the "little tramp" was born. In 1915 he joined up with the Essanay Company where he could make two-reelers with almost total independence.

He worked with a fixed pattern of a general outline that would permit him considerable improvisation, as shown in the short film "The Tramp," complete with undercurrents and an unhappy ending – unheard of before this in slapstick comedy. Finally he was given complete control over his little tramp character and the films in which he starred. He began to introduce social criticism, viewing the world through his pathetic slum-type characters as they existed in an uncaring society.

As he progressed up the studio ladder his successes increased; eventually, he graduated to full-length films in which he could concentrate more and more on the aspects of unfair social situations in a style that blended laughter with tears.

Although he detested scandal, his private life constantly invited it with numerous love affairs, marriages, and divorces, providing a steady stream of gaudy headlines. At one time he was accused of being a "Red" and had to flee America for it, returning to the United States in 1972, when he was invited back to receive a special Oscar at the Academy Awards. He died in his sleep at age 84 on Christmas morning of 1977, leaving behind a legacy influence on almost all other comic artists in America and the rest of the world.

HAROLD LLOYD, born in 1893 and died in 1971, also grew slowly into his comic persona in the early Hollywood days when he moved to Keystone where he learned about knockabout frenzies, then tested himself in the persona of a young man with boundless energy, and trust, who pursued success, won the girl, made money, became popular – balancing all this off what he called his Glass Character (in thick horn-rimmed glasses, small enough to allow expressions to play on his face).

In his two most popular full-length features, "The Freshman" (1925) and "Safety Last" (1923), he faces everything from a losing football team to climbing the outside wall of a skyscraper, and always triumphs through physical skill, with gags paced to build like the increasing thrills in an acrobatic act. Through his ambition and eager-to-please character development and skills he earned his laughs – so much so that he was able to break the sound barrier with full-length talkies into the forties.

BUSTER KEATON (1895-1966) plotted his films, as did Lloyd, with an eye to the "normal," but his obstacles came not from personal inadequacies but a manic world that consistently betrays him through chance, misunderstanding, and perverse coincidence. In the two-reeler "Cops," for example, he becomes involved in a municipal police parade that leads him inadvertently to being chased by the entire police force from one daring situation to another.

As a child of seven, he learned every kind of fall from vaudeville while performing with his parents, eventually moving on to motion pictures when his father's drinking habit forced him into retirement. Keaton grew up to personify "a great stone face" as his trademark, with only his rubbery body substituting for his constantly changing expressions.

His best sequences were painstakingly constructed out of comic intuition and a mastery of timing and physical control. After making hundreds of shorts, he finally embarked on feature productions, which proved successful enough to become his future in films, as his artistic and popular successes continued to grow along with him.

Only unhappiness in his private life prevented him from attaining permanency in his chosen field of endeavor. After a downward trend, winding up by making low-budget shorts and intermittent guest appearances (including one in the recently shown "Sunset Boulevard") and a film made for Canadian TV ("The Railrodder" 1965), his appearances declined, but the timeless quality of his silent films has made him and them forever popular.