



SILENT FILM COMEDY

AND AMERICAN CULTURE

ALAN BILTON



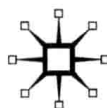
Silent Film Comedy and American Culture

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This book is dedicated with all my love to Pamela and Laurie.

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A Brief Chronology of Silent Film Comedy

1889 Birth of Charles Spencer Chaplin in South London – whether into genteel poverty or grinding poverty remains a matter of some controversy. The lack of a verifiable birth certificate has also exercised many historians, as well as the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

1895 Release of the Lumière brothers' *Le Jardinier/The Gardener* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895), generally considered to be both the first film comedy and, indeed, the first narrative film in all of cinema (although *Sortie d'usine/Leaving the Factory* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895) does have a loose narrative structure in that the gates of the factory open and the workers depart so that the process takes *exactly* the length of a reel of film; there's even a vaguely amusing bicycle incident). *Le Jardinier* features the classic combo of naughty boy/gardener/garden hose. The offending tyke is, of course, punished for his transgression at the end of the film.

Birth of Joseph Frank Keaton in Piqua, Kansas, into a family of travelling vaudevillians. Ever the publicist, his father would later claim that the town was destroyed by a cyclone only days later.

1905 Film debut of French comedian Max Linder, dapper ladies' man and one of slapstick comedy's greatest proponents. His silk hat and cut-away coat turned up in a long run of *boulevardier* comedies before the First World War. These were generally inventive, playful farces, often seasoned with fantastical effects and tremendous physical comedy. Seriously injured as an ambulance driver while serving on the front, he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1916, but nevertheless emigrated to the US as Charlie Chaplin's replacement in 1917 (Chaplin referred to him as 'the Professor' and signed letters, 'his Disciple'). Linder subsequently

returned to France in 1922, telling reporters that he 'did not feel funny anymore', although two more films, one directed by Abel Gance, followed. He attempted suicide, alongside his wife, in Vienna in 1924, before finally succeeding in Paris the following year.

1908 Former boiler maker and failed opera singer Mack Sennett learns the ropes of film-making under D.W. Griffith at Biograph. He also turns up as the leading player in the early slapstick *The Curtain Pole*, drunkenly transporting the said pole through the streets of New York.

1909 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle makes his first short films for Selig.

1910 Charles Chaplin visits the US with Fred Karno's Music Hall Company – Stan Laurel is also in the troupe.

Mack Sennett directs his first comedy shorts for Biograph.

Italian comedian Roméo Bosetti heads up the new Comica studio in Nice and becomes one of Europe's biggest stars, appearing (depending on the country of release) as Sablon, Babylas or Little Moritz.

1911 First film work of John Bunny, generally seen as the US's first true comedy star. His debut film, *Jack Fat and Jim Slim at Coney Island* (director unknown, 1910), is lost, but his surviving shorts are rather staid situational comedies, described as 'jovial dramas'. A striking anomaly is *The Subduing of Mrs Nag* (George D. Baker, 1911), a racy and sexually ambiguous comedy starring Mabel Normand, one of her few surviving early shorts.

1912 Formation of the Keystone Film Company after Sennett leaves Biograph. Alas, the story that colourful businessmen Adam Kessel and Charles O. Bauman funded it as a way of paying off a gambling debt has proved to be apocryphal. Mabel Normand, by now Sennett's lover, leaves Biograph to join him. The first Keystone double bill is made up of the ethically dubious *Cohen Collects a Debt* (Mack Sennett, 1912), starring Ford Sterling, and a Mable Normand 'diving' film, *The Water Nymph* (Mack Sennett, 1912).

Chaplin's second tour of the US, during which Mack Sennett signs him up for Keystone.

1913 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle joins Keystone; his on-screen partnership with Mabel Normand produces some of his most endearing and

enduring work. By now Keystone is the industry leader in terms of screen comedy.

Chester Conklin's walrus moustache appears adorning the upper lip of one of the Keystone cops. He was later teamed with Mack Swain in the 'Ambrose and Walrus' films, and his hirsute brush is still in place for Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936).

First film work (for Biograph) of Max Davidson, Berlin-born Jewish comedian and one of silent comedy's most interesting also-rans. All too often given stereotypically offensive roles (his early persona was 'Izzy Hupp' the pawnbroker), Davidson persisted and appeared alongside Charley Chase and Laurel and Hardy before emerging as a leading man in his own right in the late 1920s – *Jewish Prudence* (1927), directed by Leo McCarey, is a rare surviving example.

1914 *Making a Living* is Charlie Chaplin's on-screen debut. A version of his Tramp persona appears in *Kid Auto Races at Venice*, released the same year.

Tillie's Punctured Romance (Mack Sennett, 1914) is the first feature-length slapstick comedy, with Marie Dressler, Mabel Normand and Charlie Chaplin, the latter as the villain of the piece.

Chaplin leaves Keystone for Essanay.

1915 Sennett joins D.W. Griffith and Thomas Ince to set up the prestigious Triangle Film Corporation, widely interpreted as an attempt to move his material upmarket.

W.C. Fields makes his film debut for Mutual; only one short, *Pool Sharks* (Edwin Middleton, 1915), survives. Except for a cameo or two, he isn't seen again on screen until D.W. Griffith's *Sally of the Sawdust* in 1925. Sound, and his alcoholic growl, will subsequently cement his persona.

Harold Lloyd appears as Willy Work in a number of shorts for Pathé, produced by Hal Roach. His subsequent character, 'Lonesome Luke', is, if anything, even more obviously plagiarized from Chaplin's Tramp, but for a time proves enormously popular.

English-born comedian Lupino Lane starts making film comedies in London, editing them at home until the nitrate stock makes his flat unliveable. He eventually leaves for the US in 1920, signing with Fox, and creating a foppish, aristocratic idiot character, half-way between Harry Langdon and Max Linder.

Often unflatteringly shot, and described by the *Motion Picture World* as 'having no fear of ugliness', Louise Fazenda makes her on-screen debut for Keystone. She would go on to work prolifically throughout the twenties, appearing opposite Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, Charley Chase, Raymond Griffith, as well as a leading comedienne in her own right.

Edna Purviance becomes Chaplin's leading lady during his time at Essanay, remaining so until 1923 when Chaplin directs her in his only straight 'drama' *A Woman of Paris*. Despite a lack of on-screen roles after this, she remains on Chaplin's payroll until her death in 1958.

1916 *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle) is the funniest and most touching flowering of their on-screen partnership. In August, Arbuckle leaves Sennett to achieve complete artistic control over his work via the setting up of The Comique Film Corporation.

Mutual awards Charlie Chaplin his own studio.

Cartoonist Larry Semon begins to work in movies as a gag writer and comedian; by 1917 he is appearing in one-reelers as a leading clown. His comedies are characterized by absurdist 'impossible' gags and copious special effects, and for a time in the 1920s he is considered a serious rival to Chaplin and Lloyd. Alas, few complete films survive.

Bobby Vernon and Gloria Swanson make a series of light romantic comedies for Sennett, moving the studio away from purely slapstick work.

1917 Buster Keaton makes his on-screen debut in *The Butcher Boy* (Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle), attempting to purchase molasses from Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle.

The Triangle Film Corporation collapses and Sennett moves to Paramount, retaining his independence but losing all rights to the Keystone brand.

Eric Campbell, the much-loved heavy from Chaplin's films with Mutual, dies in a road accident.

Alice Howell, knockabout comedienne for Keystone, moves to Lehrman Knock Out (L-KO) to set up 'Howl' comedies. She can still be seen in slapstick comedies for Paramount in the 1920s, but eventually quits to become a straight actress, declaring such work 'unladylike'.

Billy West, probably the best-known Chaplin impersonator, starts making a series of blatant Chaplin copies for the Joy Film Company.

1918 *Mickey* (F. Richard Jones/James Young) is the only production of the Mabel Normand studios. Although the film was eventually a great success, it had to wait a year to be picked up for distribution, during which time Normand signed with Goldwyn.

Stan Laurel makes his on-screen debut in *Nuts in May* (Robin Williamson, 1918). Ironically, given his US tour with Chaplin in 1910, he was working as a Chaplin imitator on stage at the time.

Best known for his sound work with the Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields, Leo McCarey begins a long career in Hollywood, working in the silent era with Charley Chase, Mabel Normand, and Laurel and Hardy.

Chaplin marries the 17-year-old Mildred Harris in a hushed affair intended to allay any scandal. After her pregnancy proves to be a false alarm, they separate 18 months later.

1919 In *Bumping into Broadway* (Hal Roach), Harold Lloyd first assumes the role of his familiar 'glasses' character.

During the making of *Haunted Spooks* (1920), a prop bomb goes off in Harold Lloyd's hand, severely burning his face and removing the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. It takes him eight months to recover, after which he returns to the screen with the aid of a prosthetic glove.

Light comedy actress Colleen Moore's earliest surviving film, *The Busher* (Jerome Storm), with Charley Chase, is released.

With his career languishing after leaving Keystone, Mack Swain is 'rescued' by Chaplin and cast as the replacement heavy for Eric Campbell. He appears regularly in Chaplin's movies thereafter, with *The Gold Rush* (1926) being his finest hour.

1920 Keaton's first independent short *One Week* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton) is released. He shoots *The High Sign* (1921) in 1920 but feels dissatisfied with it. Consequently, it is shelved until a production hiatus caused by Keaton's broken leg on *The Haunted House* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton, 1921) necessitates its release.

Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* is produced as 'A Picture with A Smile, and Perhaps a Tear', according to the title card.

The Simp (Charley Chase) is produced. It is a particularly non-politically correct title for one of the few surviving works of Lloyd Hamilton,

whose tubby, simple-minded everyman 'Ham' appears in films from 1913 to 1927.

1921 Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle charged with murder after the death of Virginia Rappé during a drunken party in San Francisco. It takes three court cases to clear his name, and in the process his career is ruined. In 1922 his films are banned from the screen by the industry's in-house censor Will Hays, although he is permitted to direct, and produces comedies for Educational and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) under the pseudonym William Goodrich (Buster Keaton had suggested Will B. Good).

Keaton's strangest, almost Pirandello-like film *The Playhouse* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton) contains a scene set in a deserted theatre, in which every occupant, from audience members to dancing girls to performing monkeys, bears his face.

Mack Sennett moves his production to Pathé; his greatest new discovery is Harry Langdon, his biggest star (arguably) Ben Turpin.

1922 *Cops* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton), perhaps the great comedy anxiety dream, is produced. The fact that Keaton's character is killed off at the end of the film only adds to its air of Kafkaesque absurdity and menace.

Mabel Normand is called on to testify during the investigation of the (still unsolved) murder of Hollywood director William Desmond.

Harold Lloyd makes the move to feature-length comedy in *Grandma's Boy* (Fred Newmeyer), following the four-reel *A Sailor-Made Man* (Fred Newmeyer, 1921).

1923 *Safety Last* (Fred Newmeyer/Sam Taylor) is the source of silent film's most iconic image, the man on the clock.

Buster Keaton makes the jump to features, albeit cautiously, with the episodic Griffith parody *The Three Ages* (Edward Cline/Buster Keaton), specifically shot to be able to be released as three separate shorts if audience reaction was negative.

The Extra Girl (F. Richard Jones) is Mabel Normand's last film with producer Mack Sennett, best remembered for her scenes with the run-away lion.

Harry Langdon makes his first shorts for Mack Sennett: *Picking Peaches* (Erie Kerton) and *Smile Please* (Roy Del Ruth).

J. Edgar Hoover orders the FBI to open a secret file on the activities of Charlie Chaplin.

1924 Keaton's greatest film about film, *Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton), is produced. Another masterpiece, *The Navigator* (Donald Crisp/Buster Keaton), is released the same year.

After a second scandal, this involving her chauffeur shooting a guest at a Hollywood party, Mabel Normand (whose films are actively banned in some states) retires from the screen at the age of 31. She makes four more shorts between 1926 and 1927 before her premature death to tuberculosis in 1927.

1925 Harold (Lloyd)'s suit disintegrates during the 'fall frolic' in *The Freshman* (Sam Taylor/Fred Newmeyer).

His Wooden Wedding (Leo McCarey): For my money, the best (and odddest) film starring Charley Chase, who had started off with Sennett, teamed with Oliver Hardy at King Bee, and eventually became an accomplished comedy director and star in his own right in the 1920s. His persona is no more than that of a breezy, dapper young man, but many of his films are stranger and more risqué than his contemporaries. In *His Wooden Wedding* he plays a groom-to-be obsessed with the fear that his bride might only have one leg. The dream sequence where even the family dog is one paw down is particularly memorable.

The Gold Rush (Charlie Chaplin) contains the dance of the rolls, the leather boot dinner and the prospector's shack suspended above the void; however, Mack Swain's belief that Chaplin is, in fact, an enormous chicken remains the comedy highlight.

1926 *Hands Up!* is the *other* great American Civil War comedy (alongside *The General*) and the best known work of Raymond Griffith, one of silent film's lost greats. Griffith plays a dapper, sleepy, easy going gentleman, prone to doze off in the middle of the excitement, and generally unflappable even in the most bizarre of circumstances. In *Hands Up!* he escapes from a firing squad by painting a replica of himself on the wall, leaving only a note 'Till we meet again'. A childhood illness meant that his voice could not rise above a whisper, effectively ending his career with the coming of sound. He can be glimpsed for the last time on screen as a dying soldier in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1931).

The Strong Man (Frank Capra) is the feature debut of both Harry Langdon and director Frank Capra.

1927 *The General* (Clyde Bruckman/Buster Keaton) includes the destruction of the Union locomotive on the Rock River Bridge, re-enacted with real locomotive and real bridge, and the single most expensive shot in all of silent film.

Stan Laurel teams with Oliver Hardy for Hal Roach at RKO: *Duck Soup* (Fred Guiol, 1927), *Sailors, Beware* (Fred Guiol, 1927) and *Flying Elephants* (Frank Butler, 1928) are among their early work.

In a similar move, the squat Polly Moran, who started work as a comedienne with Sennett at Keystone, is teamed with the Amazonian Marie Dressler for a series of comedy shorts.

It (Clarence Badger) is Clara Bow's most lovable film and the finest romantic comedy of the twenties.

The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland) is released on the 6 October in New York.

1928 *The Circus* is now widely seen as one of Chaplin's finest films, although it is never mentioned in his autobiography.

Harold Lloyd's final silent comedy, *Speedy* (Ted Wilde), is released.

Buster Keaton signs with MGM and, despite well documented production difficulties, completes *The Cameraman* (Edward Sedgewick), his last great film.

1929 *Big Business* (Hal Roach) is arguably Laurel and Hardy's finest hour, wherein they methodically demolish James Finlayson's suburban home in a series of tit-for-tat indignities and injuries.

Welcome Danger (Ted Wilde), Harold Lloyd's latest, is pulled by the studio and reshot in sound. The follow up, *Feet First* (Clyde Bruckman, 1930), attempts (mainly unsuccessfully) to rework *Safety Last* (1923) for the new medium.

Harry Langdon, by now at the stub end of his career, makes a number of sound films for Hal Roach. If anything, his odd, thin voice makes them even more eerie (funny-peculiar rather than anything else) than his silent films. By the 1930s he is working as a gagman for Laurel and Hardy.

1930 Keaton's first sound film, *Free and Easy* (Edward Sedgewick), is a personal catastrophe but a commercial success.

1931 *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin) showcases a synchronized score (also by Chaplin) and sound effects but no speech. It also contains perhaps the funniest opening and saddest last shot in all of American cinema.

1933 After returning to the screen in a series of shorts for Vitaphone, Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle signs a deal with Warner Brothers to make his first feature-length comedy for a decade, but dies of a heart attack the same night.

Buster Keaton is fired by MGM.

Mack Sennett declares bankruptcy.

1936 *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin): Chaplin's last (nearly) silent film and farewell to the Little Fellow, the Tramp. His next role would be the serial killer in *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947).

1938 After *Professor Beware* (Elliot Nugent), Harold Lloyd announces his retirement from the screen, choosing instead to concentrate on his keen interest in nude women and 3D photography.

1940 *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin) is Chaplin's first true 'talkie'.

1947 Preston Sturges coaxes Harold Lloyd out of retirement to make *The Sin of Harold Diddleback*, opening where *The Freshman* (1925) left off. Lloyd disowns its 'cynicism' and obsession with 'smart dialogue' at the expense of comedy.

1952 In *Limelight* (Charles Chaplin), Chaplin and Keaton are teamed for a vaudeville routine for the first and only time.

After leaving the US to promote *Limelight* in Europe, Charlie Chaplin finds his re-entry visa rescinded by the Immigration and Naturalization Department on the grounds of 'gross moral and financial turpitude'. Chaplin vows never to return.

1955 Publication of Mack Sennett's notoriously unreliable memoirs, *The King of Comedy*, 'as told to' Cameron Shipp.

1961 After protests, it is decided not to award Chaplin a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

1964 Publication of *My Autobiography* (note the possessive pronoun) by Charles Chaplin.

1965 Buster Keaton appears (albeit only shot from behind) in the Samuel Beckett scripted *Film* (Burr Smidt). The Venice Film Festival hosts a large-scale appreciation of Keaton's life and work, leading to his critical revaluation and revival.

1966 Buster Keaton appears in *The Scribe*, produced (ironically, given his incredibly perilous stunt work in his youth) for the Constructors Safety Association of Ontario. He dies the same year.

1967 *A Countess from Hong Kong* (Charles Chaplin) is Chaplin's last film, starring Marlon Brando and Sophia Loren.

1968 Publication of Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By*, a seminal collection of interviews with silent cinema's great practitioners.

1972 Charlie Chaplin returns to the US to receive an honorary Academy Award.

1977 Death of Charlie Chaplin at the age of 87. His body is stolen by grave robbers in 1978 but recovered 11 weeks later.

2012 *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius) becomes the first (predominantly) silent film to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards since *Wings* (1928) (pedants may like to note that F.W. Murnau's sublime (and silent) *Tabu* (1931) won the award for Best Cinematography in 1932)).