



Chaplin: Man and Artistic Image

Reviewed by James T. Farrell

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Clare," the Danny O'Neill trilogy, etc.*

Charlie Chaplin.

By Theodore Huff.

Schuman. 354 pp. \$4.50.

CHARLIE CHAPLIN, the man, has become somewhat separated from the little tramp of the films. Once, at a party, my young son was introduced to the chubby, gray-haired man; he couldn't quite assimilate the fact that here was the same funnyman he had seen on the screen. Chaplin turned to his own son, and remarked: "You tell him you are Charlie Chaplin. You look more like Charlie Chaplin than I do."

I mention this because it seems to me to epitomize a widespread attitude toward Chaplin. Man and artist have become interposed. The creation of the artist lives a separate life of its own, independent of the man, and, to millions, more real. This creation is meaningful to primitive people, to ordinary citizens, to highly educated and cultivated persons—it is a universal artistic image.

These observations are consistent with the story of Charlie Chaplin, as it is simply told by Theodore Huff, who has been assistant professor of motion pictures at NYU, CCNY and Southern California, and who was associated for five years with the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in New York City. Professor Huff's book is diligent, careful and conscientious. The author has dug up facts about Chaplin's early life and movie career; he knows film making and its history; he has carefully studied all the available Chaplin films.

Professor Huff writes out of admiration, but his book is decidedly valuable because of his diligent presentation of factual material, his clear accounts of Chaplin films, and the way in which he relates Chaplin's life to the content of the films.



Chaplin's childhood was poor; he became an actor as a boy. By the time he came to America, with the Karno Company, he was well known in England. He had learned "the traditional English pantomime together with sure-fire gags, comedy routines, and other time-honored devices." He was receiving \$50 a week when, in 1913, he was hired by Mack Sennett at a salary of \$150 a week. When he went to California in November 1913, he was "filled with fears and doubts about the future of films and his part in them." His first pictures were made in the Keystone studio, "hardly more than an open platform with the sun diffused by muslin sheets hung above." Mabel Normand at first refused to go on with him, remarking that he looked like "a package mis-sent." But his rise and development were steady.

Professor Huff uses admirable tact in discussing Chaplin's love affairs. He talks about Chaplin's more recent politics and plays them down. This, I think, is proper. Chaplin was never and is not an active politician, and the consequence of a few political stands he took, which seemed much like fellow-traveling, were not serious. In this regard, Professor Huff quotes Max Eastman:

"I learned . . . never to try to drag Charlie in, as I did most of my rich friends, on various schemes of social reform. Charlie likes radical ideas; he likes to talk about transforming the world; but he doesn't like to pay for the talk, much less the transformation."

Charlie Chaplin.

This suggests something else which Professor Huff brings out, named tightness about money which seemed to be part of Chaplin's character. Professor Huff also suggests a contradiction in Chaplin, expressed in, say, the two roles played by him in *The Great Dictator*. Power and vanity and meekness seem to contradict one another in his makeup.

But I look upon Chaplin's personal life, and his sometimes foolish political actions, as secondary to his art. Some journalists, legislators and others feel otherwise and have demanded his deportation, tried to organize boycotts of his films, applied pressure to theater owners to stop showing his pictures. But should such pressures succeed, Chaplin alone will not be the victim. We, our children, and children yet unborn will also suffer a deprivation. The acting of Charlie Chaplin has enriched our lives; it has become part of our experience. Regardless of how his casual and unserious politics are interpreted, irrespective of what attitude is taken toward newspaper stories of his private life, his films have a demonstrably healthy influence on audiences. All one needs to do to prove this is to sit in a theater and listen to the genuine laughter which Chaplin evokes.

I should like to recommend this biography to all who are interested in motion pictures. It contains an appendix with a complete list of Chaplin's films and their casts, and capsule biographies of actors, associates and others who have figured in Chaplin's career.

