

# *The Real Charlie Chaplin*: New documentary about the immortal comic actor, director

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“Enjoy any Charlie Chaplin you have the good luck to encounter, but don’t try to link them up to anything you can grasp. There are too many of them”—Max Eastman, left-wing writer and friend of Charlie Chaplin.

So opens the new Showtime documentary, *The Real Charlie Chaplin*, directed by British filmmakers Peter Middleton and James Spinney.

There is no reason to disagree with the assessment made by critic Andrew Sarris some 40 years ago that “Charles Chaplin is arguably the single most important artist produced by the cinema, certainly its most extraordinary performer and probably still its most universal icon. ... Even his earliest and crudest one-reel appearances from his 1914 Mack Sennett period are treasured today as classics rather than tolerated as archaeological artefacts.”

Chaplin (1889-1977) began his film career in the 1910s during the silent era. By the early 1920s, he was the most popular and famous human being on the planet. His movies of the 1930s and ‘40s earned him the bitter hostility of American authorities and the FBI in particular, leading to his exclusion from the US in 1952. He lived in exile in Switzerland for the rest of his life.

Those not familiar with his work are missing out on something important in life and art. Choosing almost any work, for example, *One A.M.*, *The Pawnshop* or *The Rink* (1916), *The Immigrant* (1917), *A Dog’s Life* or *Shoulder Arms* (1918), *The Kid* or *The Idle Class* (1921), *The Pilgrim* (1923), *The Gold Rush* (1925), *City Lights* (1931), *Modern Times* (1936), *The Great Dictator* (1940), *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) or *Limelight* (1952), one encounters an unmatched level of physical grace, social insight and overall comic-artistic genius.

These three brief episodes from *Modern Times*—first, Chaplin swallowed by the assembly line; second, Chaplin roller skating; and third, Chaplin inadvertently leading an angry crowd with a red flag—ought to be enough to convince the skeptical.

If *The Real Charlie Chaplin* has no other result than reviving interest in Chaplin and directing viewers toward his body of work, it will have accomplished something important.

The general attitude of documentary makers Middleton and Spinney toward their subject is sympathetic and appreciative, although certain concessions are made to the current sexual witch-hunting atmosphere. Chaplin certainly does not find favor in the present moral climate, and this may help account for the media indifference or nervousness in regard to the new film.

*The Real Charlie Chaplin* uses a combination of archival footage, film clips, home movies, title cards, audio interviews and narration by actress Pearl Mackie.

Charles Spencer Chaplin was born in London in 1889. Acute poverty, with an absentee father and a mother struggling financially, landed him in the Lambeth workhouse twice before the age of nine. When he was 14, his mother was committed to a mental asylum.

One of the most remarkable sequences in the documentary is a 1983 interview with then 92-year-old Effie Wisdom, a childhood friend of

Chaplin’s, two years younger than he. Born in 1891 to a family of 19 children, Effie is an astonishing presence, which helps explain the class and historical impetus behind Chaplin’s rise. “She remembers South London in the 1890s, the ragged clothes the young Charlie wore, the hunger that was such a feature of his youth. And in a thick cockney accent, she gleefully tells Kevin [film historian Kevin Brownlow], ‘He used to talk like me. Common!’” the filmmakers tell *povmagazine*.

Chaplin’s early hardship comes across in the evocation of the Dickensian attic room at No. 3, Pownall Terrace in Kennington, South London, where Charlie lived with his mother before she was institutionalized. (Chaplin recreates this setting in *The Kid*).

He began performing at an early age, working as a stage actor and comedian. The Fred Karno company signed the talented comic and took him to the US, first in 1910. During Chaplin’s second tour of America in 1913, Mack Sennett, the head of Keystone Studios, specializing in “custard pie warfare,” offered him a film contract. (Sennett’s voice is heard in the documentary).

Chaplin invented his iconic Tramp persona in 1914 while working at Keystone. “This character of the Tramp, who’s so wrapped up in Chaplin’s own psyche, who seems to channel his childhood and his neuroses and his humiliations of youth—it keeps replaying the traumas he experienced in London,” Spinney comments in a *Guardian* interview. “That character also turned him into the highest-paid actor on the planet and one of the most famous people in history. It’s almost like a fairytale, in some senses ... Chaplin’s determination to keep journeying inwards—the sense of introspection, how he built fibers of his life into his art—is what made our structure possible. He never rested on his laurels.”

We hear Chaplin’s voice in a 1966 *Life* magazine interview, in which the mesmerizing performer then in his twilight years elaborates on the makeshift nature of his Tramp costume, which included another actor’s boots and Fatty Arbuckle’s pants.

As the documentary explains: “In a society sharply divided by class, he not only stood up to the man, but gives them a kick up the arse for good measure ... To the millions of migrants dreaming of a new life, the Tramp is someone without a nation. Someone who has no language, but who speaks to everyone ... he upends authority and class.”

Chaplin: “So all the adulation is not for me. It’s for the little man.”

In 1919, he co-founded United Artists with Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and D.W. Griffith. Chaplin wrote, directed, produced, edited, starred in and composed the music for most of his films.

*Chaplin* presents scenes from *The Gold Rush* (1925) in which Chaplin as the Tramp and fellow prospector Big Jim (Mack Swain), in one of the most famous sequences in film history, dine delicately on one of Chaplin’s shoes to survive. The documentary takes its time with Chaplin’s prolonged shooting of a scene in *City Lights* (1931)—a silent film made in defiance of Hollywood studios who were all jumping on the sound bandwagon by this time. In the sequence, the Tramp meets a blind girl selling flowers, played by the cherubic Virginia Cherrill, who

mistakes him for a millionaire. Perfectionist Chaplin worked on the pivotal scene—explaining how the girl mistook the Tramp-Chaplin for a wealthy man—over the course of 534 days!

According to *Chaplin*, 50,000 people attended the premiere of *City Lights*. Meanwhile, on a world tour, the artist witnessed homelessness, starvation and Depression.

The filmmaker came to the attention of J. Edgar Hoover and the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation (formally named the FBI in 1935) as early as 1922. Chaplin's socially critical films *Modern Times*, *The Great Dictator* and *Monsieur Verdoux* infuriated the American political establishment. The FBI would end up assembling a more than 2,000-page file on Chaplin.

Richard Carr in *Charlie Chaplin: A Political Biography from Victorian Britain to Modern America* suggests that Chaplin's "world view" was shaped in the post-World War I period by such individuals as "radical pamphleteer Max Eastman" and socialist Upton Sinclair. Carr writes that "these figures shaped Chaplin's vague sympathies for the American (and British) working man into a more positive line on the recent communist takeover in Russia [that is, his support for the October 1917 Russian Revolution]. Indeed, according to a letter from the US Department of Justice to J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, by 1922 Chaplin stood as 'an active part of the Red movement in this country.'" Hoover wrote in a memo that Chaplin was one of Hollywood's "parlor Bolsheviks."

*Modern Times* aroused anxiety in bourgeois circles for its depiction of a worker who "is subject to all manner of indignities including constant supervision from an overly attentive boss (who looks suspiciously like Henry Ford), and being subjected to a force-feeding machine" (Carr).

In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin bitterly satirized the fascist rulers of Germany and Italy at a time when Hollywood studios were unwilling to offer any such criticism. He played two roles in the film, a Jewish barber and the Hitler-like Adenoid Hynkel.

When the barber is mistaken for Hitler, the former is able to give an impassioned speech to a crowd: "Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world—millions of despairing men, women, and little children—victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people ... Let us fight for a new world—a decent world that will give men a chance to work—that will give youth a future and old age a security ... Let us fight to free the world—to do away with national barriers—to do away with greed, with hate and intolerance."

"Let us fight for a world of reason," Chaplin's character continues, "a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness."

Chaplin's political limitations, along with those of many left and liberal artists and intellectuals of the day, rendered him vulnerable to the Popular Front siren song of Stalinism and the Soviet bureaucracy, which he vigorously defended for years.

In any event, as Sarris commented in his *American Cinema*, "The breathtaking ballet with a global balloon in *The Great Dictator* derives its effect, not from the physical properties of balloons, but from a symbolic extension of megalomania."

*Monsieur Verdoux*, the first film in more than two decades in which Chaplin played no version of the Tramp character, is a dark comic work centered on a debonair former bank teller who gets laid off after 35 years. To support his disabled wife and child, Verdoux comes up with the idea of marrying wealthy women and killing them for their assets. In a voiceover, referring to his murderous activities, he explains, "This I did as strictly a business enterprise to support a home and family."

When he is finally arrested and put on trial, Verdoux argues that as for his being "a mass killer, does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and little children to pieces, and done it very scientifically? As a mass killer, I am an amateur by comparison."

Meanwhile, anti-communist hysteria had been mounting in the US, and

Chaplin, open about his pro-Soviet views, became one of its chief targets. *Chaplin* reenacts the shameful April 12, 1947 press conference, meant to publicize *Monsieur Verdoux*, which Chaplin opened by tensely addressing the journalists: "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the press. I am not going to waste your time. I shall say, 'Proceed with the butchery!'" And the lying, venal American media proceeded to do precisely that.

In a nod to the #MeToo hysterics, *Chaplin* gives inordinate weight to Chaplin's embittered second wife Lita Grey. She is shown in a television interview promoting her "tell-all" book and accusing the comic of being a serial adulterer and "sexual deviant." That Chaplin, for whatever psychological reasons, was attracted to very young women does not come as a secret at this point in history. The FBI and the US authorities used that fact for their own reactionary political purposes in the 1940s. Unsurprisingly, the documentary does not dare to make the connection between the smear campaign against Chaplin and the present-day #MeToo persecutors.

In 2018, the WSWS explained that in a pattern resembling the contemporary "disappearing" of actors, musicians and others, the FBI used an unstable individual, Joan Barry, to promote its blackguarding of Chaplin. His wartime affair with the 21-year-old actress ended in government persecution under the Mann Act (of which alleged violation he was acquitted) and a paternity suit (which, despite blood tests indicating otherwise, he lost). The Barry affair was used as a club by the vicious, right-wing gossip columnist Hedda Hopper in collusion with Hoover and the Justice Department.

The sexual and political defamation campaign resulted in damaging Chaplin's reputation and film career, isolating him from his audience. The criminal collaboration between America's "free press" and its political police finds consummate expression in this incident, also reported by Carr: "In April 1947, just as Chaplin was trying to launch *Monsieur Verdoux* to a skeptical public, Hopper had received an advance copy of *The Story of the FBI* from J. Edgar Hoover himself. Thanking him for the book and endorsing its red-baiting content, Hopper had replied, 'I'd like to run every one of those rats out of the country and start with Charlie Chaplin.'"

In September 1952, US authorities seized on the opportunity of Chaplin's sailing to England and announced that the actor-director would not be allowed to re-enter the US.

As the WSWS wrote in 2018, the US government took action "at the height of the anti-Communist hysteria during the Korean War. Chaplin had directed his latest film, *Limelight*, about an aging, washed up comic performer (Chaplin) and his relationship with a young dancer (Claire Bloom). It is a memorable, elegiac work, made all the more extraordinary by the sequence in which Chaplin and [Buster] Keaton perform together (for the only time in their brilliant careers)."

Chaplin returned to the US only once, in 1972 to accept a special Academy Award. He made two more films, *A King in New York* (1957) and *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967).

The documentary's final chapter includes home movies of fourth and final wife Oona O'Neill (daughter of playwright Eugene O'Neill) and the couple's eight children at their Swiss estate, over which we hear comments by children Geraldine, Michael and Jane.

In an interview with *goldderby.com*, director Spinney correctly asserts: "Watching his films today, we found that they felt fresh and subversive, even over a century later, and felt like a type of cinema that we don't see today."

Chaplin spoke to and for the have-nots. His films seethe with hostility toward the rich, the establishment and the police in particular. There is rarely an act of social reconciliation at the conclusion of his movies. The ending of *The Idle Class* is typical in this regard. An unpleasant, wealthy man (Mack Swain), who has wronged Charlie, offers him his hand in apology. Charlie takes it, but then points to the man's shoe. When the

latter bends over to attend to his shoe, Charlie kicks him in the rear and takes off running as fast as he can. Fade out.



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