

Glenn Mitchell

THE TRUE FAREWELL OF THE TRAMP

Good afternoon.

I'd like to begin with an ending ... which we might call 'the Tramp's First Farewell'.

CLIP: FINAL SCENE OF 'THE TRAMP'

That, of course, was the finale to Chaplin's 1915 short film THE TRAMP.

Among Chaplin scholars – and I think there may be one or two here today! - one of the topics that often divides opinion is that concerning the first and last appearances of Chaplin's Tramp character.

It seems fair to suggest that Chaplin's assembly of the costume for MABEL'S STRANGE PREDICAMENT marks his first appearance, even though he has money to dispose of and is therefore technically not a tramp. KID AUTO RACES AT VENICE, shot during its production, narrowly beat the film into release.

Altogether more difficult is to pinpoint where Chaplin's Tramp character appears for the *last* time. For many years, the general view was that the Tramp made his farewell at the end of MODERN TIMES. As everyone here will know, it was a revision of that famous conclusion to THE TRAMP, which we saw just now ... only this time he walks into the distance not alone, but with a female companion, one who's as resourceful, and almost as resilient, as he is.

CLIP: END OF 'MODERN TIMES'

When I was a young collector starting out, one of the key studies of Chaplin's work was *The Films of Charlie Chaplin*, published in 1965. Its authors, Gerald D. McDonald, Michael Conway and Mark Ricci said this of the end of MODERN TIMES: -

No one realized it at the time, but in that moment of hopefulness we were seeing Charlie the Little Tramp for the last time. There were to be moments in *The Great Dictator* when the little Jewish barber was to remind us of the Charlie we used to know, then the image faded and disappeared.

It's easy to understand why this view might be taken. Chaplin, aware of the international appeal of his Tramp creation, had been reluctant to pin down the character to a specific nationality, or at least to having an identifiable first language, by having him speak on screen. Both MODERN TIMES and its predecessor, CITY LIGHTS, employed the title cards of silent cinema instead of synchronised speech, long after the motif had become anachronistic. MODERN TIMES allows the Tramp a voice in only one scene, and this in the form of a gibberish song performed in a vague impression of a middle-European accent. MODERN TIMES could then safely, and tidily, be considered as leaving the Tramp a pristine, voiceless figure, his international Everyman status undiminished. Regrettably, very few things in life are as tidy as one might wish them to be, particularly in the creative arts.

By the end of the 1930s, Chaplin realized that not even he could continue to ignore sound and in his autobiography he states clearly how the dual-identity premise of THE GREAT DICTATOR allowed his usual character to remain largely unburdened by a specific voice. To quote:

As Hitler I could harangue the crowds in jargon and talk all I wanted to. And as the tramp I could remain more or less silent.

There is consequently no doubt that Chaplin saw his Jewish barber figure in THE GREAT DICTATOR to be the Tramp character, adapted to the context of the story. Theodore Huff, in the 1951 Chaplin biography that was long considered definitive, uses 'Charlie' and 'the

barber' as interchangeable terms. Kevin Brownlow and Michael Kloft, evidently in no doubt themselves, named their 2002 documentary about the film THE TRAMP AND THE DICTATOR.

Some consider the barber to be at most a diluted version of the Tramp. It's fair to suggest that Chaplin transferred some of the character's aggression to his alter ego in the film, the Hitler caricature named Adenoid Hynkel. It's also true to say that in the opening First World War scenes, the barber in uniform seems more like a well-meaning cousin of *The Good Soldier Svejk* than Chaplin's resourceful Doughboy in SHOULDERS ARMS, if only because of his gentle manner of speech. One wonders, though, if his relative passivity in earlier films such as THE BANK might bear stronger parallels to the barber had there been spoken dialogue.

In civilian clothes – or, more to the point, in the Tramp costume – the barber is more recognisable as the Tramp. His methods of evading authority – be it an honest policeman or one of Hynkel's stormtroopers – remain unchanged, as we'll see in these two extracts, separated by nearly a quarter of a century:

CLIP: THE PAWNSHOP, Charlie sneaking past a policeman; THE GREAT DICTATOR, Charlie escapes a stormtrooper

Nor was there anything new in the Tramp betraying fear of an adversary, and making a stand in spite of it. True bravery, after all, isn't about being unafraid, but about conquering one's fear ... rather like getting up and addressing a gathering such as this! There's very little difference in his behaviour between these two extracts, the second of them from THE GOLD RUSH.

CLIP: GREAT DICTATOR, barring doorway; GOLD RUSH, barring doorway

In his next film, MONSIEUR VERDOUX, Chaplin finally abandoned the Tramp costume. Despite his elegant mode of dress, Verdoux has elements in common with the Tramp who, after all, had always been identifiable even without the familiar clothing. While Chaplin's numerous imitators demonstrated that the costume alone did not constitute the character, so Chaplin himself proved that the Tramp could exist even when presented as a man-about-town, a waiter, a convict, a janitor, an alcoholic dandy, Don José to Bizet's Carmen and even in drag. When Chaplin wore his regular street clothes, without even the prop moustache, in the Keystone film TANGO TANGLES, the Tramp character was still present.

This poses a question as to the degree to which the Tramp is no more than a vehicle for the performing side of Chaplin's own personality. Chaplin himself described the Tramp as 'a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer ... always hopeful of romance' and Chaplin himself was all of these, being easily the most poetic of film comedians, gentlemanly in his public demeanour, imaginative beyond measure and certainly hopeful of romance until belatedly reaching personal contentment in his fifties.

Although at least one critic has seen his mass-murderer character in MONSIEUR VERDOUX as the long-term successor to the ruthless early Tramp character of the Keystone films, I don't see Charlie resorting to such means, no matter how desperate his latter-day circumstances. Verdoux, however, can resort to Charlie's methods when feigning innocence:

CLIP: VERDOUX BOAT SCENE

Verdoux will also revert to Charlie when in direct confrontation with an adversary. Compare the moment when Verdoux tackles a con-man – played by Chaplin's half-brother, Wheeler Dryden - with a far earlier battle between Charlie and Mack Swain:-

CLIP: VERDOUX, slapping match; HIS TRYSTING PLACE WITH MACK SWAIN

It was inevitable that LIMELIGHT, being the culmination of both Chaplin's life and of those who had influenced its early part, would address the Tramp character to some degree. Chaplin, as the fallen music-hall comedian Calvero, makes the wry attribution of his having turned street performer to 'the tramp in me'.

Though he has been sidelined professionally, Calvero's dreams are filled with the acts that made him famous. A dream of his 'Spring is Here' routine presents us with the Tramp – albeit modified in appearance - in what is essentially an early Chaplin 'park comedy'.

CLIP: LIMELIGHT – EXTRACT FROM 'SPRING IS HERE' ROUTINE

Chaplin's body language here goes all the way back to BETWEEN SHOWERS and probably beyond, to Karno days or even the *lion comique* attitudes of Chaplin Senior and Leo Dryden. Unlike the early park comedies, in this routine we can actually hear the way in which such an absurd and eccentric-looking character can win over an attractive woman by the use of equally absurd and eccentric banter. I'd like you to consider the effect of combining these elements: -

CLIP: LIMELIGHT 'SPRING IS HERE' SOUNDTRACK COMBINED WITH PARK COMEDY FOOTAGE

In his final starring film, A KING IN NEW YORK, Chaplin perhaps wanted to leave his audience with an image of the man he had become, or at least as he saw himself to be, rather than of the character who had propelled that man to international fame decades before.

Chaplin's character, King Shahdov, is an exiled monarch, symbolic of Chaplin's own recent exile from the USA. As one might expect, he is dignified in his demeanour while in public. In private, he is, like Calvero and indeed Chaplin himself, not above breaking into almost childlike mischief. King Shahdov's behaviour with a visiting TV presenter, played by Dawn Addams, might easily be that of the Tramp ... as we can see when juxtaposing this scene with Charlie in THE FLOORWALKER and, again, THE GOLD RUSH: -

CLIP: FLOORWALKER, KING IN NEW YORK and GOLD RUSH scenes

Chaplin was by then a remarkably agile 67-year-old. In another man of that age such behaviour might seem incongruous, but with Chaplin - with whom the rules always tend to be different - it serves periodically to leaven the mood when coupled with audience memory of the comedian's younger self. Perhaps more typical of Chaplin's real-life personality is his gift for performing small humorous party-pieces, as when the King uses a society matron - and some cutlery - to simulate a visit to the dentist. King Shahdov seems never more at home than when reverting completely to mime.

Chaplin's small role as a ship's steward in his final film, A COUNTESS FROM HONG KONG, provides no direct opportunities for comparison with the Tramp ... but in this moment with Patrick Cargill, playing a valet, we see him cavorting around a bed in a way that had clearly been demonstrated to him on set by Chaplin: -

CLIP: A COUNTESS FROM HONG KONG – Cargill on the bed

So, in A COUNTESS FROM HONG KONG, the Tramp might be said to live again through the valet. Had Chaplin completed his final intended project, THE FREAK, the winged fantasy version of the Tramp that we see in THE KID might have flown once more, this time through Chaplin's daughter, Victoria.

When considering matters such as these, it's tempting to believe that the Tramp is a spirit, or at least a state of mind, created by Chaplin. This explains why the impersonators mentioned

earlier, who adopted the surface trappings of Chaplin's costume and make-up, could never be 'Charlie'. The extent to which that creation was dependent upon Chaplin's own psyche is evident in how inextricable the two had become.

Although we will never see Chaplin's completed vision of THE FREAK, there were several occasions late in Chaplin's life when the Tramp's presence was made known, albeit at the instigation of others. At a lunch engagement in London in October 1971, Chaplin was served with a prop boot, as per his emergency meal in THE GOLD RUSH. When on stage in America the following year for the Oscar ceremonies, he was presented with both an honorary award and some even more familiar props: -

CLIP: THE GENTLEMAN TRAMP – 1972 OSCARS – CHAPLIN DOES BUSINESS WITH HAT AND CANE

Just as in the conclusion of THE GREAT DICTATOR, when the barber slips logically into the role of the Dictator and then, in the final speech, into the persona of Chaplin himself, the comedian and his creation will always remain, in the public mind, inseparable. It was inevitable that, when filmed in 1974 for the documentary THE GENTLEMAN TRAMP, Chaplin - this time joined by his wife, Oona - would be asked to provide a finale that proved how Chaplin the man would never be allowed to leave behind Charlie the Tramp.

CLIP: THE GENTLEMAN TRAMP – CHARLIE & OONA WALK INTO DISTANCE

Thank you.

END