

Finding his Screen Persona in *Making a Living* and *Kid's Auto Races*: Charlie Chaplin's Transition from English Music Hall Comedy to American Film Slapstick

by Frank Scheide

Charles Spencer Chaplin was purportedly born in his grandfather's rented accommodations somewhere in East Street, Walworth, on April 16, 1889. A bustling open air market prior to Chaplin's birth, vendors still ply their trade in the street that locals call "The Lane". For London's Victorian working class one's home, if you had one, would have been cramped and cold. It was this city's streets, like The Lane, that were alive and vibrant, where things were happening, where one "lived". One had to be streetwise to survive in this world and both the buyer and seller in the East Street Market knew it. Those purchasing were looking for a bargain. With little or no money to spend, one's life depended upon it. If you were selling something the first trick is to get noticed – "Hey! Look at me!" Get your customer's attention, win them over, buyer beware! The dynamics of the East Street Market and other London streets greatly influenced Charlie Chaplin's art and his sense of self.

Charlie Chaplin spent most of his childhood in Walworth's neighboring borough of Lambeth, which was subjected to substantial bombing during World War II. Living in America, Chaplin sent his fellow South London cockneys a poignant radio message of encouragement on March 7, 1943, which was Identified by his biographer, David Robinson, as the "Lambeth Walk talk":

Although I left London thirty-five years ago, I shall always remember the top room at 3, Pownall Terrace where I lived as a boy. I shall always remember climbing up and down those three flights of narrow stairs to empty those troublesome slops. Yes, and Healey's the greengrocer's in Chester Street, where one could purchase fourteen pounds of coal and a pennorth of pot herbs and a pound of tuppenny pieces at Waghorn's the butcher's; and Ash's the grocer's where one bought a pennyworth of mixed stale cake, with all its pleasant and dubious surprises. . . . I remember the Lambeth streets, the New Cut and the Lambeth Walk, Vauxhall Road. They were hard streets, and one couldn't say they were paved with gold; nevertheless the people who lived there are made of pretty good metal.¹

It is interesting how heavily the streets of Lambeth are featured in Chaplin's memories.

As a boy, Charlie Chaplin earned some of his first money in the streets. London tour guide and seventh generation Lambethan, Tony Merrick, has shown visitors where his grandfather, Ben Stroud, remembered seeing Charlie, as a little boy, dancing in an alley for coppers on the trap door to the cellar of "The Jolly Gardeners" pub on Black Prince Road, which faces the west end of Lambeth Walk.² Chaplin himself recalled two memorable incidents on London's streets in his autobiography:

1 Robinson, David, *Chaplin: His Life and Art*. London: Penguin Books, 2001. 40-41, 517.

2 The author videotaped Tony Merrick at this site on January 8, 1994.

One Saturday, after school, I came home to find no one there. . . . When I returned, it was night. Wearily I walked to the corner of Kennington Cross and sat on the curb near the house to keep an eye on it in case someone returned. I was tired and miserable It was approaching midnight and Kennington Cross was deserted but for one or two stragglers. All the lights of the shops began going out except those of the chemist and the public houses, then I felt wretched.

Suddenly there was music. Rapturous! It came from the vestibule of the White Hart corner pub, and resounded brilliantly in the empty square. The tune was “The Honeysuckle and the Bee”, played with radiant virtuosity on a harmonium and clarinet. I had never been conscious of melody before, but this one was beautiful and lyrical, so blithe and gay, so warm and reassuring. I forgot my despair and crossed the road to where the musicians were. The harmonium player was blind, with scarred sockets where the eyes had been; and a besotted, embittered face played the clarinet.

It was all over too soon and their exit left the night even sadder.³

It was also in the streets where Charlie Chaplin established an appreciation for his kind of comedy. Chaplin remembered:

Mother had taken a room in one of the back streets behind Kennington Cross near Hayward’s pickle factory, and the acid smell would start up every afternoon. . . . An incident stands out at that period. At the end of our street was a slaughterhouse, and sheep would pass our house on their way to be butchered. I remember one escaped and ran down the street, to the amusement of onlookers. Some tried to grab it and others tripped over themselves. I had giggled with delight at its lambent capering and panic, it seemed so comic. But when it was caught and carried back into the slaughterhouse, the reality of the tragedy came over me and I ran indoors, screaming and weeping to Mother, “They’re going to kill it! They’re going to kill it!” That stark, spring afternoon and that comedy chase stayed with me for days; and I wonder if that episode did not establish the premise of my future films – the combination of the tragic and the comic.⁴

London’s streets were hard and Charlie’s mother, Hannah Harriet Pedlingham Hill, was among those who tried to escape a life of poverty by performing in the English music hall. Its origins have been attributed to London taverns which, at the beginning of the 19th century, sought to capitalize on the desire of patrons to engage in singing– “Hey! Look at me!” - by setting aside space to accommodate this interest. Contemporary images of the tumultuous activity in these singing rooms and early music halls do not look much different from the bustle in pictures of the London streets. The songs and actions of those gathered were sexually explicit, ribald, and raucous. The better halls of Hannah Chaplin’s day boasted a more refined entertainment, but such claims were questioned by the middle class.

3 Chaplin, Charles, *My Autobiography*. New York: Pocket Books, 1966. 27-28.

4 Ibid. 30-31

Music hall was a highly interactive entertainment where the boundary between entertainer and audience was vague and sometimes non-existent. In an effort to provide some structure to the singing room amusements, landlords provided a “chairman” who tried to coordinate the musical entertainment. Professionals joined the amateurs and the space of the singing room evolved to accommodate changes in performance. By the 1880s, when Hannah Chapin was working in music hall, the larger purpose built venues were quite luxurious and, like the pubs, a tempting temporary escape from the streets. The audiences were still of the streets, however. For those selling something, in this case one’s talent, the trick was to get noticed – “Hey! Look at me!” Seller, beware. Music hall patrons were not willing to spend their hard earned money on something they did not wish to buy. One way audiences got their entertainment was by throwing things at the artistes who failed to please.

The 1900 film *Little Tich and His Big Boots*, by French director Alice Guy, documents how music hall performers directly addressed and interacted with their audiences. The eye to eye contact of the halls tended to be different from the spectator experience in the legitimate theater where actors often pretended that the audience was not there. In this film the way Little Tich’s glances at the camera – the film viewer in lieu of the music hall audience – is not dissimilar to the Little Tramp’s acknowledgement of the medium in *Kid’s Auto Races*, produced fourteen years later.

It is interesting to note that in both his act and this film, Little Tich wore working class clothing – the clothing of the London streets, if you will. As Cockney historian “Pearl Binder” wrote in her 1975 book, *The Pearlies*:

Nineteenth century working class people dressed according to their work, so that it was possible to tell at a glance what was a man’s job. The exception to this were the very poorest who wore third-and-fourth-hand clothes, often of superior origin but in the last stages of decay. Dickens complained that London dockers (then the poorest of the poor) went about their work grotesquely tricked up in decrepit tail-coats and bashed-in old hats. . . .⁵

In this working class entertainment it was not a great leap for English music hall comedians to dress in clothing associated with their audience, or expand upon the comic irony of impoverished characters “putting on airs” in the manner of their supposed “betters” while wearing that group’s cast-off garments. Arguably this comic tradition influenced the costume of Chaplin’s Little Tramp.

5 Binder, Pearl. *The Pearlies: A Social Record*. London: Jupiter Books, 1975. 20-21.



Frame enlargement of Little Tich from the film *Little Tich et ses "Big Boots"* (1900), directed by Alice Guy Blaché for Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont, and produced for Clément Maurice's Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle.

http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Little_Tich#mediaviewer/File:Little_Tich_in_Paris.jpg

Any discussion of the influence of the music hall on the comedy of Charlie Chaplin must recognize the importance of Fred Karno. English music hall performer turned film comedian Stan Laurel once told his biographer John McCabe, "Fred Karno did not teach Charlie and me everything we know about comedy, just most of it."⁶ Fred Karno began his music hall career as a gymnast. His earliest appearances in show business were as an amateur acrobat executing intricate synchronized movements with other actors. Such routines were choreographed rather than scripted, and required split-second timing. Karno added comedy to his routines and eventually created knockabout sketches performed in mime.

By the turn-of-the previous century Karno sketches featuring his speechless comedians were among the most popular acts in British vaudeville. One reason English audiences loved music hall so much was because it was so interactive. If an audience did not like an act, as has been noted, they became particularly interactive. Karno's most famous sketch was *Mumming Birds*, a parody of the English music hall itself. *Mumming Birds* featured Karno players performing the roles of both the awful acts and the rowdy audience members reacting to them. According to John McCabe:

6 McCabe, John. *Charlie Chaplin*. New York: Doubleday, 1978. 27.

When Stan joined the *Mumming Birds* company in Manchester, it had already become the most famous act in the halls. *Mumming Birds* (known in the United States as *A Night in an English Music Hall*) was one of the most fantastically funny variety acts ever known. Whenever old troupers from English variety or American vaudeville gather, *Mumming Birds* is spoken of as probably the greatest ensemble of the century.⁷

In 1907 an unauthorized film version of *Mumming Birds* was produced by Pathé Frères, featuring Max Linder playing the featured part of a drunken audience member who harasses the acts. This was a year before Charlie Chaplin began playing the role which made him famous in the halls. Chaplin's 1915 film *A Night at the Show* is loosely based on *Mumming Birds*, and English comic Lupino Lane's 1929 silent short *Only Me* was even closer to of the original sketch, except Lane played all the parts. *Mumming Birds* gloried in its recognition of the music hall experience – a self-reflexive parody of the music hall performance, audience interaction, and the identity of music hall itself. We can find parallels between *Mumming Birds* and Chaplin's *Kid's Auto Races*.

After being offered a film contract to make movies for Mack Sennett, Chaplin gave his last performance for Fred Karno at the Empress Theater in Kansas City, in November of 1913. Upon his arrival at the Keystone Film Company, Chaplin remembered Sennett taking him aside to tell him:

“We have no scenario—we get an idea, and then follow the natural sequence of events until it leads up the chase, which is the essence of our comedy.”

This method was edifying but personally I hated chase. It dissipates one's personality; little as I knew about movies, I knew that nothing transcended personality.⁸

Charlie Chaplin's first movie was not a success. As Sennett remembered in his autobiography:

We rushed Charlie into a one-reel picture called *Making a Living* as fast as we could. There was trouble immediately. Chaplin worked in his own costume from vaudeville, an Oxford-gray cutaway edged with black tape almost to his ankles, a checked waistcoat, a bat-wing collar, and a polka-dot tie. He wore a tall silk hat, a monocle, and a “way-down-East” droopy moustache. . . .

Chaplin's music-hall costume was wrong – funny on stage with British film comedians, no good on the screen. . . .

Chaplin was almost lost in the shuffle when [the director, Henry “Pathé”] Lehrman put him through our fast paces. . . . Chaplin was confused and plaintive. He couldn't understand what was going on, why everything went so fast, and why scenes were shot out of chronology. . . . Pathé Lehrman was technically a sound director, but he worked

⁷McCabe, John. *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy*. New York: Signet Book, 1968. 23.

⁸ *My Autobiography*. 146.

Chaplin too fast. Chaplin didn't know what he was doing and we didn't know what to do with Chaplin. . . .

[*Making a Living*] was released February 2, 1914. Later we sent it out under various titles, such as *A Busted Johnny*, *Troubles*, and *Doing His Best*. No matter what we called it, the film was a flop.⁹

Would Chaplin's efforts be different if he made an improvised film comedy in the streets? Was anyone more streetwise?

Chaplin's Little Tramp debuted in the Sennett split reel comedy *Kid's Auto Races*, which was released on February 7, 1914. As film historian William P. Finney and others have argued, it is most likely that Chaplin developed his "Tramp" costume for the one reel comedy *Mabel's Strange Predicament*, but the film crew decided to take advantage of an actual public event to produce an improvised comedy prior to the completion of the Mabel Normand picture. Filmed and edited quickly, as well as being a half reel shorter, *Kid Auto Races* was released two days prior to *Mabel's Strange Predicament*, which came out on February 9th.¹⁰ The premise the Sennett filmmakers seized upon after arriving in nearby Venice, California, was that a "documentary filmmaker" would be unable to shoot this public event featuring children racing toy automobiles, because a strangely attired observer kept ruining the footage with his mugging.

Where Mack Sennett and others have characterized *Making a Living* as a failure, many critics identify *Kid's Auto Race* as one of the most important films of Chaplin's career. Modern audiences, unfamiliar with Chaplin's work and skeptical of black and white movies, still find *Kid's Auto Races* funny. Did Charlie Chaplin suddenly become a brilliant filmmaker by abandoning what he learned in English music hall, along with his costume, to become instantly "cinematically savvy"?

Chaplin became cinematically savvy incredibly quickly, but this did not happen because he totally divorced himself from English music hall and its conventions. Rather, Charles Chaplin would adapt his knowledge, whether it be from music hall or other sources of personal experience, to meet the demands of his art. I would argue that the costume of the Little Tramp, like that in *Making a Living*, was a variation of what was then being worn in English music hall – discarded clothing of one's supposed betters as worn by the poor of London's streets. The format of *Kid Auto Races*, as a film comedy, also shares parallels with how *Mumming Birds* worked as a music hall sketch.

Where *Mumming Birds* is a music hall sketch that makes fun of the music hall, *Kid's Auto Races* is a movie that makes fun of filmmaking. The character Chaplin played in *Making a Living* pretends that the viewer does not exist, which tends to distance him from the audience. The character in *Kid's Auto Races*, like the drunk in *Mumming Birds*, is literally in everyone's face. English music hall performers, like those in *Mumming Birds*, directly addressed their

9 Sennett, Mack as told to Cameron Shipp. *King of Comedy*. New York: Pinnacle Books, 1975. 153-54.

10 While they don't credit their source, co-authors Gerald D. McDonald, Michael Conway, and Mark Ricci claim that *Kid's Auto Races* was shot in less than 45 minutes in their book *The Films of Charlie Chaplin*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1965. 28.

audiences and made them part of the performance. The Little Tramp does this as well. He also establishes an antagonistic relationship with the camera, similar to the conflict between the comic drunk and the music hall performance in *Mumming Birds*. Instead of being subservient to the plot, as was the case with the character of *Making a Living*, the Little Tramp takes on the filmmaking process and becomes the focal point of the movie. By making his film personality more dominant than this picture's narrative, Chaplin established a cinematic approach that enabled his Tramp to be more than just a film character - "**Hey! Look at Me!**" - a screen icon. And where was this icon introduced to the public? It happened in the streets.

It is not surprising that Charles Chaplin's first successful movie would be a street film, or that the Little Tramp would be associated with the open road. The street, after all, was part of Charlie Chaplin's birthright.

Bibliography

Binder, Pearl. *The Pearlies: A Social Record*. London: Jupiter Books, 1975.

Chaplin, Charles, *My Autobiography*. New York: Pocket Books, 1966.

McCabe, John. *Charlie Chaplin*. New York: Doubleday, 1978.

McCabe, John. *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy*. New York: Signet Book, 1968.

McDonald, Gerald D., Michael Conway, and Mark Ricci. *The Films of Charlie Chaplin*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1965. 28.

Robinson, David, *Chaplin: His Life and Art*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

Sennett, Mack as told to Cameron Shipp. *King of Comedy*. New York: Pinnacle Books, 1975.