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A Fresh Look at Early Chaplin Shorts

VCR Viewing

By SUSAN KING
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Earlier this year, Kino on Video released the restored versions of the extraordinary comedy shorts that Charlie Chaplin made for the Mutual studio. This week, Kino has unveiled its latest installment in the definitive collection of Chaplin's early one- and two-reel comedy shorts, "The Chaplin Essanay Comedies Vols. 1-14" (\$20 each).

These 16 shorts, made during 1915 for the Essanay studio, were restored over a three-year period by film historian David Shepard. The result is the most complete digitally restored versions available.

Though these shorts are well-known among Chaplin buffs—several ideas he introduces in these films were used in later works—they have been virtually ignored. For the last 75 years it was nearly impossible to see the films in decent quality at correct speeds with appropriate music.

The films were the most important assets in Essanay's library. But the studio had very little regard for them. It made so many prints that some of the negatives were worn out by the time the studio went out of business in 1920. A decade later, it was almost impossible to produce a complete print from the original comedies, and what prints remained were tattered shadows of their former selves.

Shepard put this collection together from all the prints he unearthed in a decade of searching. Flaws were removed frame by frame, and the prints were digitally remastered. Robert Israel and Eric



Kino Video



James composed new scores for all 16 shorts.

Among the classics included in

Charlie Chaplin's "In The Park," above, and "Burlesque on 'Carmen,'" left, with Edna Purviance, have been restored and released on video.

Volume 1: "A Night Out," which features Ben Turpin and frequent Chaplin co-star Edna Purviance in her first film with him, and "His New Job," his first production for Essanay, which also features Turpin and a young Gloria Swanson as an extra.

"The Tramp" is the highlight of Volume 2. Charlie saves a farmer's daughter from some thieves but learns that she doesn't love him. It was the first time Chaplin combined comedy with pathos, and audiences weren't accustomed to a comedy having a sad ending.

"A Woman," from Volume 3, includes Chaplin's last and most im-

pressive female impersonation. He's a riot. Also featured on this tape is the oddity "His Regeneration," in which Chaplin puts in a cameo appearance as the Little Tramp in this "Bronco Billy" Anderson drama. The main titles also state that Anderson was "slightly assisted by Charles Chaplin," which has led some historians to believe that Chaplin was involved in the directing of the film.

Volume 4 contains the amazing "A Night in the Show," a slapstick masterpiece in which Chaplin plays both a drunken dandy and a dissipated working man.

"Burlesque on 'Carmen,'" a spoof of Cecil B. DeMille's recent version of "Carmen," was released as a two-reel short. But after Chaplin left Essanay, the studio put in discarded material, and new scenes were filmed, expanding it to four reels. This is the most complete version of Chaplin's original cut.

"Triple Trouble," released in 1918, was billed as a new Chaplin comedy but actually was assembled from other films.

To order the Chaplin films, call (800) 562-3330.