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emembrance of Tramps Past



By MARK SHIVAS

12/12/71

VEVEY, Switzerland

TAKING you to meet the best-known man in the world, the taxi driver points to a tree-covered sweep of hillside above the highway and says with pride and a certain amount of reverence, "All that belongs to Monsieur Chaplin."

The driveway behind the big, white house is crisp, the lawns sprinkled with snow. Silence hangs on the air like your cold breath. The maid is surprised to see a caller, but then a lady appears at the top of a curving hall stairway. She's Miss Ford, Charles Chaplin's business manager, smilingly

and precisely English, with iron gray hair and, no doubt, the determination to match it. "Mr. Chaplin was sorry not to have time for you in London," she says sweetly, "but he'd just been in Paris for the opening of 'Modern Times' and the days in London were very busy with laying music tracks on 'The Kid.'" It's an effort to remember that "Modern Times" first appeared 35 years ago and "The Kid" more than 50.

In his study off a huge, silken sitting room, Chaplin sits, almost lies, sunk in an armchair, wrapped in a fur-trimmed rug. At 82, he looks tiny and frail, but his very blue eyes twinkle remorselessly as he points to the dead grate. "My wife doesn't like me to have too many fires. She thinks I'll catch cold if I go out afterwards." And he shakes with a little laugh.

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Eric Schaal



Charles Chaplin sits in his study in Switzerland and recalls the days when he was Hollywood's "little tramp." On Friday, the Lincoln Art Theater will begin a Chaplin Festival with his 1936 classic, "Modern Times."

Charles Chaplin

Oona is nowhere to be seen. "Her library overflows everywhere upstairs," he volunteers with a smile. "She shows discrimination and choice in her reading. I read more the hack stuff myself. Still," and he waves at the shelves, "I have nicer bindings! And, of course, as a writer, her father was no slouch. Eugene O'Neill, yes. But we never met. No, I don't have film shows here. I watch some TV—boxing, prizefights, football and so on."

Had he watched the French program about himself which coincided with the Paris showing of "Modern Times"? "Yes. It wasn't very good. They had an interviewer going round Kennington in London, where I was born, asking questions of people in pubs about me. Not all the replies were flattering. Perhaps the man's English was so bad they didn't understand what he was saying." Chaplin again chuckles in self-mockery and his eyes disappear in slits so that the face becomes almost oriental.

He often forgets names and sometimes pauses unaccountably to gaze

into space, but once or twice he comes back with an answer of surprising force. What about "A Countess from Hong Kong," his last picture? "Sophia Loren is a trouper. Brando? Impossible. The Method is a lot of nonsense. Either you do it or you don't." Talking of a script he was supposed to do with his daughter Victoria after "Countess," he finishes abruptly and slightly hurt. "But Vicky ran off with a circus performer."

When we discuss Kennington, the slum area where Chaplin grew up, he suddenly brightens, sits up and throws back the rug to reveal that he's smartly dressed in stiff collar, waistcoat and suit. He walks slowly out of the room, to return smiling with a dusty water color of the house where he was born. "There. It's been torn down now, but I still like so many parts of the old London. I go back to have a look at Kennington whenever I'm there. The price of jellied eels has gone up from three pence to six shillings, you know."

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The mansion in Switzerland could hardly be more different from that wretched Victorian two-room garret. "There's so much humiliation in being poor," he says suddenly, loudly, firmly. "But it's not really possible to appreciate luxury without it. I don't think the children can, for instance."

I venture that the early part of his autobiography, published in 1964, is by far the most vivid. "Oh, yes, certainly. You remember more of your youth as you get older. Before then, you're too busy living it. I recall very clearly touring England in my first play. I was Billie in 'Sherlock Holmes.' I got very lonely." Then suddenly again, "I still am lonely. We don't see many people here. No one much comes to visit. Still, the family is enough. Quite enough. Plenty, in fact!"

Many things Chaplin says sound arrogant in cold print. "I may show actors too much by mimicry, but I'm a damn fine director," he announces at one moment, and you have to agree with him. "I can't read a note, but I like all the music I've ever written" comes later. Why not, you think. "The Circus"? It is good, isn't it? Good shape to it. Very cleanly done." Well, yes, it is. "They're showing 'Modern Times' eight performances a day in Paris now and breaking records. Rather like the opening of 'City Lights' in New York years ago: it was so popular they played it continuously all day and the nightclubs tried to stop it because we were taking away (Continued on Page 5)

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their business."

"Modern Times" and "City Lights" are two of nine films that Chaplin is allowing to be redistributed. Owning all rights, he's leased them for the next 15 years at a reported \$6-million, plus percentage. After that, the rights revert to his estate. Back in 1952, Chaplin, who had never become an American citizen, had his visa revoked by the United States while he was sailing to Europe. He would not be allowed to return to America unless he proved his "moral worth." Chaplin became so bitter that he insisted his films never again be shown in the United States. Later, he relented, and there was a highly successful revival of Chaplin classics in 1963. However, "A King in New York," which was made in England and which received a poor reception there in 1957, has had to wait for the upcoming retrospective — which starts Friday at the Lincoln Art with "Modern Times" — to be shown in America.

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Had the lack of a U.S. release for "A King in New York" in 1957 upset Chaplin? The question is shrugged off with a smile. "I'm too rich to care and I haven't seen it for years. I hope it will be liked now. Who knows? I wouldn't call it a satire on America. It's just a comedy; anti-McCarthy, not anti-American. But, of course, I felt very keenly about the speech at the end where the king decides he must retire to Europe for peace and quiet and wait for the hysteria to end."

"I hope 'Monsieur Verdoux' goes well when it's shown again. I really excelled myself with that. It was very clever, very sophisticated, and the most difficult thing to do. Took me two years to write because the character of a bluebeard, a murderer, was entirely different from anything I'd done before. One man said to me, 'The trouble was, I didn't know who to root for.' The premiere in New York was hideous — half the audience was hissing, the other half laughing far too boisterously."

"It was a dreadful time for me altogether. I'd become very unpopular with the press because I'd been very belligerent politically, which I'm not any more. I'd agitated publicly for a Second Front in Russia during the war, and I've wondered since whether I would have done it if I hadn't just made an anti-Nazi film with 'The Great Dictator.' Or perhaps I was hypnotized by a live audience. I was accused of being Jewish when 'The Great Dictator' came out, but you don't have to be Jewish to be anti-Hitler. And when 'Verdoux' opened, the Daily News said, 'Charlie Chaplin slings Communism at us.' I've never read Karl Marx in my life! I've never been what people wanted me to be. It was the time of the McCarthy witch hunts; the man was an opportunist and a complete scoundrel."

"'Monsieur Verdoux' was picketed all over America by the Catholics and the American Legion, but it still made a profit. There was one line where Verdoux called a priest 'My good man,' which the Catholics objected to. I thought that was very odd. 'Wasn't he a good man?' I said to them."

"It's all history now. All in the ash can. I'm too old to be really bitter about it. But I certainly shan't go to America for the opening of 'A King in New York.' Far too much trouble." He chuckles at the thought. He was mobbed at Cannes this year when they made him Commander of the Legion of Honor. In the lapel of his suit is the tiny red brooch which is its outward sign. "Oh, the other bits are upstairs. The ribbon and so forth. Far too ostentatious for everyday wear." He chortles again and subsides into silence. Chaplin finally seems to have been tired by our talk.

As Miss Ford shows me out of the study, Chaplin calls after her, "Make sure he sees the view." Out of the windows of the sitting room I can see the lawns curving away toward Lake Geneva and the Alps beyond. In the evening light, it's still, cold, beautiful and terribly, terribly quiet.