

Document Citation

Title	A great dictator
Author(s)	Ron Jenkins
Source	<i>Boston Phoenix</i>
Date	1986 Jul 22
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Chaplin, Charlie (1889-1977), Walworth, London, Great Britain
Film Subjects	The great dictator, Chaplin, Charlie, 1940 Unknown Chaplin, Brownlow, Kevin, 1983

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A great dictator

Getting acquainted with the unseen Chaplin

by Ron Jenkins

Charlie Chaplin stumbles through his films in a perpetual state of self-contradiction. Even his clothes are irreconcilable. The oversized pants and undersized jacket are hopelessly mismatched, and they often seem to be pulling his body in different directions. His arms reach out to the aid of the underdog even as his legs are itching to escape from the threat of the authorities. Courage and cowardice coexist in the cut of his attire.

Unknown Chaplin highlights its subject's contradictions by slowing down the action of his films and affording us a glimpse between the frames and into the techniques he used to create his comedies. The three-part program (Channel 2, July 14, 21, and 28) documents Chaplin's working methods with rare footage of on-camera rehearsals (outtakes preserved by Chaplin himself) and interviews with his collaborators. We see the tramp playing with props as he perfects the timing of a gag, and we hear coworkers describe Chaplin's unorthodox directorial style of personally acting out all the parts of the movie, including the background action.

Chaplin emerges from the documentary as the world's most lovable megalomaniac. Not only did he want to play all the roles in his films, he also longed to be behind the camera and in front of it at the same time. He managed to realize this fantasy of omnipotence by improvising new material on film and editing his actions after viewing the daily rushes. In this way he exercised absolute control over every camera angle while his storylines were presenting him to the lens as a vulnerable victim of tyranny. Yet the demystification of his innocent persona does not diminish his genius. *Unknown Chaplin* juxtaposes poignant moments from his films with candid flashes of off-stage anger. It is disappointing to see the gentle tramp break out of character on the set to berate one of the extras, especially when the scene depicts a tender farewell and the extra is dressed as an impoverished immigrant grandmother. But the cumulative effect of these intimate revelations is to increase one's esteem for Chaplin's ability to create the illusion of innocence out of painstaking layers of cinematic artifice.

The first installment of the program, convening the silent shorts that Chaplin made under his 1916 contract with Mutual, offers only a hint of his paradoxical relationship with the character of the tramp. The second part of *Unknown Chaplin* delves deeper into his artistic psyche, in part because it examines the making of more complex films like *The Kid* and *The Gold Rush* but also because it deals with a period in which Chaplin exerted increasing control over all aspects of his movies. This episode concludes with a segment on his laborious efforts to evoke a credible performance from Virginia Cherrill as the blind flower girl in *City Lights*. And the contrast between the sublime artistry of the finished film and the petty squabbling that surrounded its creation may shock you into a heightened appreciation of Chaplin's technique.

Chaplin had chosen Cherrill because of her inexperi-

ence, but he despaired over her unprofessional behavior. Through interviews with Cherrill and Chaplin's associates the frustration of a 524-day shooting schedule is relived. We see Chaplin coach Cherrill in the simple gesture of offering a flower for sale, we hear her describe the tedium she felt as she repeated the action over and over again. Cherrill also discusses her dismissal from the set, and she takes great delight in recounting the strategy by which she forced Chaplin to double her salary before she agreed to return to work. It all sounds like a soap opera until Georgia Hale starts reminiscing about her attempt to step into Cherrill's role for the shooting of the film's famous last scene. As Hale speaks, outtakes of the unused session are screened, and the actress's nostalgic self-glorification provides an ironic counterpoint to the selflessness of Chaplin's characters. You hear the nasal voice of the aging star praise the superiority of her version of the scene, but what you see is the youthful Hale indulging in atrocious overacting for the screen test. No wonder Chaplin doubled Cherrill's salary.

The final installment of *Unknown Chaplin* includes extraordinary fragments from an unreleased film called *The Professor* in which Chaplin plays a down-and-out music-hall comic reduced to sleeping in a flophouse. This character is a sinister alter ego of Chaplin's tramp, scowling harshly with a full black moustache that is far more menacing than the tramp's neat trim. The music-hall "professor" carries his traveling flea circus with him in a dirty wooden box, stalking the rows of tattered beds with a whip when his insect performers escape to the warm bodies of his fellow boarders. In a grim ending the embittered performer chases a flea-infested dog down an alley. If Chaplin felt compelled to express his darker sides on film, he often kept his experiments from public distribution. Only a shadow of that film surfaced many years later, in the flea-circus scene of *Limelight*.

The one movie that balances Chaplin's contradictory impulses is *The Great Dictator*. Many of his comedies center on the struggle for power, usually between the downtrodden tramp and his heartless oppressors, but in *The Great Dictator* Chaplin plays on both sides of the battle: the tyrannical führer and the persecuted Jewish barber inhabit the same skin. *Unknown Chaplin's* final episode opens with the seed for the idea of Hitler's pas de deux with the globe. This Douglas Fairbanks home movie, which shows Chaplin clowning with a globe and a German field helmet, was taken around 1930, a decade before the classic Hitler parody was filmed.

Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, the producers of *Unknown Chaplin*, have made intelligent choices in selecting material. The personal information that emerges from the interviews could easily have trivialized the documentary, but invariably they draw your attention back to Chaplin's creative process. This documentary dissects his working habits with uncommon delicacy. Like witch doctors using scraps of fingernails to commune with the dead, Brownlow and Gill have resurrected the essence of Chaplin's comic spirit with scraps from the cutting-room floor. □