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FILM

87 minutes of perfect pantomime

By DOUGLAS LACKEY

The Lincoln Art Theater has chosen *City Lights* for the second feature in its ongoing Chaplin festival. As the first, *Modern Times*, was made in 1936, and *City Lights* was made five years earlier, there is no rhyme or reason for the order of the selections. At the present rate, it will be two years before the seven features scheduled for the festival are shown — a considerable annoyance to students of film who would like to study and compare the films in proper sequence.

(It used to be possible to see the Chaplin features in quiet screenings of underground 16mm. prints, but the lodging of a lawsuit by Chaplin's distributor against the Progressive Labor Party for showing *Modern Times* at Columbia shows that the days of easy illegality are past.)

City Lights is considerably superior to *Modern Times*; it is, in my opinion, a film without flaw. Chaplin was under heavy pressure during the film's production (which ran on for close to two years) to put dialogue into it, but he wisely chose to add music and some sound effects instead, a unique and splendid solution to the problem of sound.

The result is 87 minutes of perfect pantomime, set out in alternating phases of comedy and pathos. For once the pathos is under control, and the comedy is always out of control — as things should be.

Like *Modern Times*, and unlike *The Gold Rush* and *The Great Dictator*, *City Lights* doesn't have much of a plot. The Tramp falls in love with a blind flower girl, befriends an alcoholic millionaire, manages to get money for a sight-restoring operation which he gives to the girl in the guise of the millionaire, and, in the final scene, encounters the girl who finds out that her benefactor was just a tramp.

The blindness of the girl provides a happy solution to Chaplin's general difficulties with female leads, difficulties which poison long stretches of *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin's behavior with the girl is as precious as always but, as the girl is blind, normal behavior is impossible anyway; and so Chaplin's overprotective antics are not as unpalatable as usual.

The girl's blindness, of course, sets up the great final scene, in which she recognizes the Tramp for what he is, and the Tramp sees himself through her recognition — a sequence praised out of proportion by James Agee, but still moving enough.

Recently, in the Sunday Times Magazine, Richard Schickele made the case that Chaplin's early shorts are better than his later features, which he felt were marred by sentimentality and egoism. Chaplin is certainly at his best in sheer slapstick, and the early films are slapstick and little else, but the slapstick bits in the feature films are generally better than the slapstick you find in the early shorts — even those brilliant Mutual two-reelers.

Near the beginning of *City Lights*, Chaplin and the millionaire are out to paint the town. Dead drunk in a night club, Chaplin gets New Year's Eve streamers mixed in his spaghetti, and determinedly munches his way towards the ceiling. The comic idea of two drunks out on the town turns up in two splendid early shorts, "The Rounders" (1914 — with Fatty Arbuckle) and "A Night Out" (1915 — with Ben Turpin).

Harry Myers, the millionaire in *City Lights*, is no match for Arbuckle and Turpin, but when you compare the gags in "The Rounders" (knocking over tables, scratching matches on bald pates) with *City Lights*, it's clear that the later gags are more ingenious, more imaginative, and better-timed.

The same goes for the *City Lights* sequence in which Chaplin, in a prize fight, tries to win money for the girl's eye operation. There are two prize fights in Chaplin's early films, one in "The Knockout," made in 1915, and one in "The Champion," made in 1916. In "The Knockout," Chaplin referees and Arbuckle boxes; in "The Champion," Charlie fights with a horseshoe concealed in his glove.

Brilliant ballets

Both early prize fights are brilliant ballets: even Keaton's great boxing sequences in *Battling Butler* pale in comparison — Chaplin's looping hooks are just funnier than Keaton's straight jabs. But the boxing scene in *City Lights* tops them all: a wild fugue with Chaplin and Hank Mann dancing around one another and trading places with the referee. Schickele is right when he says Chaplin should stick with slapstick. But the slapstick in the later features is the best there is.

I think the charge of excessive sentimentality in a feature like *City Lights* is missing the point. It's one thing to complain about the sentimentality with which Chaplin treats Paulette Goddard in *The Great Dictator*, and another thing to complain about the presence of a blind flower girl in *City Lights*. The Goddard character is supposed to be a real individual — Chaplin even gives her a proper name.

But the flower girl, and the Tramp too, are both types. The way they are treated is dictated by type (a flower girl you're *supposed* to get sentimental about). To attack *City Lights* you would have to attack the types themselves and the whole tradition of silent comedy that created them. And we are all too grateful to do that.