Document Citation

Title	**Life & times of a clown**
Author(s)	Arthur Knight
Source	*Saturday Review*
Date	1951 Apr 7
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	Cover; 10-11
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Chaplin, Charlie (1889-1977), Walworth, London, Great Britain Huff, Theodore. Charlie Chaplin
Film Subjects	Carmen, Chaplin, Charlie, 1916 The face on the bar room floor, Chaplin, Charlie, 1914 Laughing gas, Chaplin, Charlie, 1914 The adventurer, Chaplin, Charlie, 1917 The immigrant, Chaplin, Charlie, 1917 Tillie's punctured romance, Sennett, Mack, 1914 The cure, Chaplin, Charlie, 1917 One A.M., Chaplin, Charlie, 1916 Modern times, Chaplin, Charlie, 1936 Monsieur Verdoux, Chaplin, Charlie, 1947

The great dictator, Chaplin, Charlie, 1940

Saturday Review

OF LITERATURE

TWENTY CENTS APRIL 7, 1951

WORKOUTS FOR WRITERS

By HERSCHEL BRICKELL

Charlie Chaplin, subject of a biography by Theodore Huff

Crime, Reform & the Voter

By ELMO ROPER and LOUIS HARRIS

Humor. *One of the greatest thinkers of all time, a Greek named Aristotle, carefully analyzed tragedy but shied away from a diagnosis of comedy. More intrepid souls in later ages, including our own Max Eastman and Constance Rourke, have essayed definitions with dubious success. Now a Tennessee classics professor, Albert Rapp, has explored the literature of the ancients to find "The Origins of Wit and Humor." Louis Untermeyer reviews his book on page 12. Probably most failures to parse humor are explained by Shakespeare's observation that "the property of a jest lies in the ear of him who hears it." In modern times only one clown has spoken a language universal enough to provoke people in every land to laughter—Charlie Chaplin, subject of Theodore Huff's new biography. The books by Roger Price, John McNulty, David Dodge, VIP, and others reviewed this week are representative of the latest humorous writing.*

Life & Times of a Clown

CHARLIE CHAPLIN. By Theodore Huff. New York: Henry Schuman. 345 *pp.* $4.50.

By Arthur Knight

FEW MOVIE personalities—indeed, few celebrities in any field—have ever received on the one hand such high critical praise and on the other such bitter public calumniation as Charles Chaplin. His film career, which won him immediate worldwide fame and popularity, has been repeatedly punctuated with the squalls of scandal, with charges that range between immorality and Bolshevism. For years the attacks were directed at the man himself. Despite the personal attacks, his films continued to amuse and beguile and endeared "Charlie," the screen personality, to vast rapturous audiences. In recent years, however, and especially with "Monsieur Verdoux," the attack has turned on Chaplin's pictures as well.

Why? Why has the screen's greatest comedian been subject to constant persecution in the courts, in the newspapers, in his private life? The answer is not to be found in Theodore Huff's new book, "Charlie Chaplin," admirable though it is. Mr. Huff, instead, has prepared a thoroughly readable, admirably factual account of Chaplin's life, omitting none of the sordid details but highlighting the comedian's splendid screen achievements. This is no extended *New Yorker* "Profile," such as the recent books on W. C. Fields and the Marx Brothers, filled with chatty, humorous anecdotes—and factual errors. The writing is sober, the research painstaking and complete. The book tells nearly everything there is to tell about Chaplin—everything, that is, except the *why*.

The plan of this book is simplicity itself. It pursues the Chaplin chronology step by step from his birth in London in 1889 through to the recent re-release of "City Lights." His hard and heart-breaking childhood in the London slums, his stage debut at the age of seven, his early successes in vaudeville are all traced patiently and with authority. Then, as Chaplin entered the movies, each film is described in detail, with a preliminary statement as to its importance and place in the artist's career. When the career is interrupted for travels, marriages, or court actions those, too, are examined. Magazine or newspaper accounts serve generally for sources.

This may sound somewhat superficial, but anyone who has delved at all into the beclouded Chaplin legend can testify to its difficulty. Not only are documents of his early years hard to come by, but the comedian himself—or early publicity releases—has further confused the record. According to one account, for example, Chaplin was born at Fontainebleau, in France, while his parents were touring with a band of strolling players. Lack of formal education was undoubtedly a source of some embarrassment to the man who achieved universal fame at the age of twenty-five, and, aside from tributes to his mother, a genteel mystery has been permitted to shroud that phase of his early formative years. Dozens claim to have "discovered" Chaplin; Huff has sorted patiently through these claims to divide that distinction between Mack Sennett and Adam Kessel, the man who actually signed Chaplin up for Keystone. Even the exact number, titles, and dates of the early Keystone Chaplins

THE AUTHOR: In spite of a past and present of solid accomplishment, Theodore Huff insists he is a frustrated man. (He doesn't look it; of rather large, comfortable build, youthful, pleasantly blond, he seems quite centered in life.) But he defines the frustration carefully; from the beginning of his interest in movies as a boy he has wanted to *make* films, but most of his working life has been, as he puts it, sidetracked into writing and teaching about them. He has made some, too, but "always the wrong things at the wrong moments—an avant-garde picture when the fashion had swerved to documentaries—and so on and vice versa." He was born in Englewood, New Jersey; Fort Lee, one of the early centers of picture-making before Hollywood absorbed the whole industry, was nearby. Young Theodore hung about and saw pictures being made—and that was that: a life-interest was born. Chaplin admits that the children of America discovered "Charlie," and Huff says he was one of the young discoverers. He can't remember when he became "historically conscious" of the importance of films; but his encyclopedic memory seems to have been at work always. There are, for instance, no records of casts in Chaplin films before "The Kid," 1921—but his own memory provided for the present book invaluable documenting. He has worked variously: five years with New York's Museum of Modern Art film library, several years with the motion picture division of the National Archives in Washington; he has been assistant professor of motion pictures at New York University and taught at the University of California and New York's City College. At present he is working with the Signal Corps in Astoria, L. I., on Army films. He has done some TV work, and it interests him; but, speaking of TV, he thinks movies won't die—even TV will need them. He also thinks the world right now lacks and needs a new great clown of Chaplin stature. And he wants most of all (besides to make films) to write a definitive history of the movies, for he feels there is no one complete *objective* history of this social-linked art, though he says a little ruefully—"perhaps it's too big a subject for any one man to tackle." But after listening to Mr. Huff and his competent discourse on this, his ruling passion—we're willing to make book on that book. —K. S.

had been debatable until Huff's careful study, so many of them having been recut or retitled and issued as completely new subjects. His index now lists them all, along with alternate titles and, from his own vast knowledge of the period, their casts. Credit sheets were unknown in the days of the Keystone company. Huff has also quoted liberally from little-known early writings by Chaplin himself.

In "Charlie Chaplin" at last the facts are on the record and in good order. If Mr. Huff has done nothing more, we must at least be grateful for this. Books on Chaplin have been numerous, both in this country and especially abroad. While often more perceptive of the spirit of "Charlie"—or "Charlot" as he is called in France—they were invariably crammed with such choice bits of misinformation, such gaps in knowledge of both Chaplin and Chaplin's films, and such plain wild guesses as often to be self-invalidating. Huff's book provides a sound factual basis for all such works in the future.

And the work remains to be done. For Huff is no theoretician. His book is a presentation of facts, not an interpretation of the artist. Although early in the book Huff states, "We must face certain inexplicable aspects of his private life objectively . . . the better to understand him," there is small evidence of that understanding. It is apparent that with "Modern Times," Chaplin's crucial film, Huff began to lose sympathy with his subject. No longer is he simply "Mr. Funnylegs," the comedian with the flawless technique who can make us laugh or cry at will. Chaplin himself had the insight to see the road his character had chosen, had seen where the revolt always implicit in "Charlie" was leading. While preparing "Modern Times" he said, "I have seen how, not to change him one bit, but how to emphasize the traits that are *my* view of him. In the new film he will not be quite so 'nice.' . . . I'm sharpening the edge of the character so that people who've liked him vaguely will have to make up their minds." Huff was not alone in making up his mind against "Charlie," believing this sharpening to be a desertion.

Particularly now in retrospect, however, it is clear that the Chaplin character has remained a constant. By the time it had emerged fully on the screen (in the Essanay series, Chaplin's second year of film making) "Charlie" had a meaning that time could deepen but not change. Always he stood alone, apart, the heroic defender of his inner freedom. In the age of the crowd, of collectivity, of standardization, he was the individualist. Comedy was derived from pitting his feeble strength against all the organized forces of this age—the police, the army, the factory. And tragedy, too. Like Don Quixote, "Charlie" scorned reality for the illusory, sharing the Don's ability to organize and live a full, satisfactory inner life of his own creation.

But in the 1930's the world changed, and Chaplin was forced to sharpen the meaning of his character. In an interview with Alistair Cooke he voiced "a genuine danger of the little man's becoming too fragrant, of his soon being Everybody's Little Ray of Sunshine." Chaplin refused to play Everyman at a time when every man was at his neighbor's throat. "My pictures have always been for the underdog," he was to say sometime later; but in "Modern Times" he had already demonstrated that fact beyond all doubt. By the time of "The Great Dictator" the world situation had so worsened that Chaplin was forced, in the last few minutes of the film, to abandon his tramp character completely and speak directly to the audience—a departure for Chaplin and for film-makers in general that might well in its audacity be compared to Beethoven's bursting the bonds of the symphonic form to create the last movement of his Ninth Symphony. And in "Monsieur Verdoux," that misunderstood masterpiece, through its intentionally shocking inversion of moral and social values Chaplin was simply saying again what "Charlie" has said all along—that a society based on greed and cruelty must inevitably crush the common man.

All this is in Chaplin's pictures. More than any other films produced in Hollywood, Chaplin's pictures are his alone. They spring from Chaplin himself, from his mentality, from his background. Scattered through this new book of Theodore Huff's are clues, hints, indications of where they came from—just as scattered through Chaplin's films are hints and indications of the man himself. Brought together, they may yet reveal the enigma of the creative artist, the enigma of Charlie Chaplin. And why it is that vast segments of the very audience for which he created his great comedies have so bitterly turned against him.

—*From the book.*

Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan in "The Kid"—"and tragedy, too."

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The Film Forum

CHAPLIN

***The Saturday Review's* Guide to Selected 16mm. Sound Films.**

EDITOR'S NOTE: *With the recent publication of Theodore Huff's book "Charlie Chaplin" (SRL April 7) and the successful revival of "City Lights" it seems appropriate to devote* THE FILM FORUM *this week to those of Chaplin's early comedies which are currently available on 16mm. In spite of the fact that they come to us in rather poor condition—mutilated, speeded up, with added sound effects that detract rather than enhance—many of them are still a pleasure and a privilege to watch.*

All the background information for this column is based on Mr. Huff's impressive biography, published by Henry Schuman, Inc., New York. Aside from its abundance of factual material, the book is profusely and handsomely illustrated with almost 150 pictures of Chaplin off and on the screen, making it a treasure as well as a document.

LAUGHING GAS. THE FACE ON THE BAR-ROOM FLOOR. *Distributed by Official Films, 25 West 45th St., New York 19, N. Y. Available for purchase and rental from most commercial 16mm. libraries. (Each about 10 min.)* In 1914 Chaplin signed a year's contract to make his first motion-picture comedies at Mack Sennett's Keystone studios at the salary of $150 per week. He had already been successful in vaudeville and other stage productions both in England and on tour in the U.S., but this new salary was impressive compared to his former $50. In his year at Keystone Chaplin made thirty-four one- and two-reel shorts. After having completed a dozen of these films he began writing and directing them as well, as he has done with nearly every film since then. These first comedies are barely distinguishable from the other slapstick comedies of that time, but in them appeared the costume, the personality, the mannerisms, and much of the film sense that mark Chaplin's later films. ("In the Park" and "The Champion," two Essanay comedies of 1915, are also distributed by Official.)

TILLIE'S PUNCTURED ROMANCE. *Available for rental from Brandon Films, 220 West 57th St., New York 19, N. Y. (60 min.)* Chaplin's first feature film, the first full-length movie comedy, was made for Keystone in 1914. It took fourteen weeks to shoot. Mack Sennett directed, Marie Dressler starred, Mabel Normand and an "all-star cast" appeared along with Chaplin. Based on Dressler's stage success "Tillie's Nightmare" the film cast Chaplin as a city slicker opposite the hugely innocent country girl. The film has never been considered a Chaplin achievement, but it helped popularize his face and his name. Since it is still shown periodically in theatres Huff considers it an apt candidate for the oldest "living" feature film.

CARMEN *(also called "Burlesque on Carmen"). Available for rental from Brandon Films, see above. (50 min.)* With the expiration of the Keystone contract Chaplin went to work at Essanay at $1,250 a week. He made fourteen short comedies, which are said to have cleared over a million dollars for his producers. Most of these films featured the beautiful Edna Purviance, Chaplin's "perfect partner."

"Carmen" was originally produced as a two-reeler, but when Chaplin left to go to another studio Essanay padded it with extraneous Ben Turpin footage spliced in here and there. This accounts for its insanely unrelated subplot but for my money does not detract from the deliciousness of the film. The Chaplin we see in "Carmen" is the great Chaplin.

TWELVE COMEDIES *(1916-1917). Available for rental and purchase from Brandon Films, see above. (Each about 20 min.)* Less than two and a half years after Chaplin completed his first ten-minute film he signed a third contract, this time with the Mutual Company. His salary was $10,000 a week, with a bonus of $150,000—totaling $670,000. He made twelve films in eighteen months. All of them are available on 16mm. with added soundtracks of music and crude sound effects. Edna Purviance is again the leading lady, and Eric Campbell is the monstrous villain.

Of the twelve films, I have seen and can highly recommend "Easy Street," "The Cure," "The Adventurer," "The Immigrant," and "One A. M."—the latter a remarkable solo performance. Each of them has its priceless scenes, often imitated, seldom equaled, never surpassed. James Agee writing in *Life* says that "Chaplin would have made his period in movies a great one single-handed even if he [had] made nothing except 'The Cure' or 'One A. M.'"

Other available titles are "The Fireman," "The Floorwalker," "The Vagabond," "The Count," "The Pawnshop," "Behind the Screen," and "The Rink." An illustrated eight-page descriptive brochure is available on request from Brandon Films. The films are also available in three groups of four titles, spliced together as Chaplin Festival A, B, and C.

One further word: I am not now, and never have been, a subscriber to the idea that young children enjoy Chaplin comedies.

—CECILE STARR.

For a copy of the list of SRL Film Referral Libraries please write to Film Department, Saturday Review of Literature, 25 West 45th Street, New York 19, N. Y.