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# 4 THE GOLD RUSH

Chaplin, USA, 1925

## Production Details

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|---|---|
| **Production company/studio** | Charles Chaplin Productions/UA |
| **Producer** | Charles Chaplin |
| **Director** | Charles Chaplin |
| **Cinematographer** | Rollie Totheroh |
| **Editor** | Charles Chaplin |
| **Screenwriter** | Charles Chaplin |

## Cast Includes

| | |
|---|---|
| Charles Chaplin | *The Lone Prospector* |
| Mack Swain | *Big Jim McKay* |
| Tom Murray | *Black Larson* |
| Georgia Hale | *Georgia* |
| Henry Bergman | *Hank Curtis* |

## FOCUS: Genre/Auteur

In *The Gold Rush* Chaplin's most enduring character (the tramp) goes to the Klondike in search of gold and, against all the odds and any sense of logic, finds it – eventually. In typical Chaplin manner he also finds love, again in circumstances that defy belief. That the tramp succeeds more by luck than judgement makes the rags-to-riches story that much more appealing to audiences (then and now).

Although fans of Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd might demur, *The Gold Rush* is arguably the best possible example of a silent screen comedy. It is also a towering achievement as a film in its own right. In 1958 an international jury in Brussels selected it as the second greatest film of all time. Only *Battleship Potemkin* was ranked above it.

It is due to this film (and many others) that Chaplin remains one of the key figures of world cinema. His career in some ways shaped the development of the Hollywood dream factory.

Charles Spencer Chaplin was born in London in 1889. He began his performing career in the music hall at the age of 5. He toured England and the USA with Fred Karno's 'London Comedians'. Whilst performing in the USA he was spotted by the film impresario Mack Sennett and joined the Keystone film company in 1914. Chaplin devised the character of the 'little fellow' or 'the little tramp' with what became his trademark baggy trousers, bowler hat, cane and incongruously carefully trimmed moustache. Unimpressed by the sloppiness of the production process of the time, he began directing himself. Chaplin quickly became a household name. He came to personify the power of stardom in Hollywood. In 1918 he signed the film industry's first million-dollar contract.

*The Gold Rush* is of a piece with Chaplin's world view – that the powerless are inherently good, and that all authority exists to be undermined. However, it has the advantage over his later films that the narrative is stronger than the moral message. The little tramp (described in the titles as 'a lone prospector' but clearly not dressed for the part) takes on the frozen wastes and ventures into Alaska looking for gold. Inevitably he reveals himself to be largely incapable of his task; also inevitably, he falls in love with the beautiful saloon girl, Georgia. He tries to win her heart with his singular charm.

The film is actually a series of set pieces. These individual parts are enormously well crafted and build to successful denouements. As a whole the film is overly episodic (compared say to the work of Griffith). The lasting legacy of the film is that it ushered in mature comedy. *The Gold Rush* is more than a series of visual gags. In addition, the performances are complex for such a genre (up to that point). Chaplin was doing for comedy what John Ford later did for that other popular but undervalued genre the Western (see *Stagecoach*, chapter 9).

The film is packed with moments of carefully staged and choreographed comic genius: entertaining the girls with the 'dance of the rolls', fastidiously eating a leather shoe, the extended sequence of the cabin tottering over a precipice – Chaplin's literal 'cliffhanger' – and so on and so forth.

Chaplin worked fast – how else could he have made hundreds of films? – but he was the ultimate craftsman. Twenty-seven times more film stock was shot than appeared in the final cut. The scene where the tramp and 'Big Jim' have a boot for supper took three days and more than 60 takes to get right. The boot was made of liquorice, and Chaplin (a diabetic) was later rushed to hospital suffering insulin shock.

Chaplin re-edited the film in 1942. That version, with his narration and music by Max Torr, is the one we see today. The music (nominated for an Oscar) might help a modern audience – but the narration is of a piece with Chaplin's later style. It is rather heavy-handed in its pointing to the moral message and therefore rather less engaging than the visuals.

The period from *The Gold Rush* (1925) to *City Lights* (1931) was the height of Chaplin's fame and film-making prowess. During this rich creative phase the tramp character became the centre of a style that combined pure comedy with an atmosphere of melodrama including moments of sentimental tragedy. The tramp character disappeared in 1936 as Chaplin made more overtly political films such as *Modern Times* (1936) and *The Great Dictator* (1940). These films contain moments of comic genius but they are very didactic. Chaplin's popularity began to wane – a most powerful example of the problems of using moving pictures to impart ideology.

The influence of the film (and Chaplin's 1920s work in general) is too broad and huge to detail. The mixing of slapstick and sentiment in his themes persists throughout film and television comedy today, as does the role of the underdog. The 'little tramp' is always surrounded by enormous bullies, but always survives by way of his wit and humour – just as Tom is always outwitted by Jerry, Popeye eventually triumphs over the brutish Bluto, and the roadrunner always evades the Wily Coyote.

On a more sophisticated level, it is obvious that Woody Allen (*Annie Hall*, chapter 29) owes much to Chaplin and the tramp character. Both are instantly recognisable 'types' who write, direct and appear in their own films. Both get a laugh the first time they appear in each scene because of their incongruity with the diegesis they desperately try to thrive in. Both are underdogs who survive on their intelligence and wits. Both are unlucky in love (on and off camera).



**Some Things to Watch out for and Consider**

- This film is unapologetically sentimental. Is that a bad thing?
- Have we gained anything by our determination to be cool?
- Why is the role of the 'underdog' figure so central to film comedy, past and present?
- How much did Chaplin gain or lose by the move from silent to sound?
- Compare and contrast the character of Chaplin's 'little fellow' with Woody Allen's 'Alvie Singer' in *Annie Hall* (Allen, USA, 1977).

## Further Viewing

*City Lights* (Chaplin, USA, 1931)
*Modern Times* (Chaplin, USA, 1936)
*The Great Dictator* (Chaplin, USA, 1940)
*The General* (Keaton, USA, 1926)
*It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, USA, 1946)
*Annie Hall* (Allen, USA, 1977)
*Titanic* (Cameron, USA, 1997)