

Counter Revolutions in Silent Comedy

By Colin Fleming

Book Review:

Chaplin: The Tramp's Odyssey,
by Simon Louvish,
Thomas Dunne Books, 2009.



Flux is a constant for the ghosts of the great silent-film comedians, and I wonder if Harold Lloyd ever chides Buster Keaton in some far-off comedic Valhalla when the latest critical reappraisal nudges Lloyd, for a time, past Keaton, the Great Stone Face. Probably not, given how prone the era is to reassessment and re-coronation. Once you've been tabbed the master of silent comedy, you're sure to fall back to third or so in the pack, and then make a dark-horse run for the front, again.

In recent years, Charlie Chaplin—the former long-standing champion—has taken a particular hit, which Simon Louvish addresses and combats in what we might think of as a work of biographical nonfiction that happens to take as its subject a fictional entity: that is, not a life study of Chaplin the man, but rather the life in full of Chaplin's Tramp, a cinematic creation more iconic than John Wayne on horseback or Groucho Marx nattering away. Here, the Tramp is “truer-than-the-real-life Charlie,” and the films themselves become less like reels of celluloid and more akin to chapters of a life: precocity giving way to seasoned understanding, originality occasionally leading to self-parody.

Louvish's writing has a fabulistic element to it. We enter into an arena of “once upon a time,” where “our hero” leaps and bounds across the pages; he is pitted against great penurious odds, forever pursued by some bully, and looms as a regular Sir Walter Raleigh when a damsel is in need. Louvish's skill is for placing us in that milieu, where we trail at the hero's heels, the attendant

observer in prime position to draw our own conclusions. It's an interesting technique, and one that puts much trust in readers. Louvish surely has an argument here, though he's never didactic about it, allowing a thesis to slowly waft to the surface: Chaplin's Tramp is the embodiment of the imaginative, myth-making, myth-fulfilling possibilities of cinema itself, a sublimely prismatic figure. Through his movements, the movies became an especially fabulistic endeavor, in which broad experience triggered acute sensations. "The power that Chaplin's films hold over his interpreters derives from the contradiction of the surface simplicity of his narrative and images set against the emotional response that they generate." The Tramp, simply put, had a way of getting at you, especially when you were ripe to be caught unawares.

As a film-by-film tutorial, *Chaplin* could slot easily into a university curriculum. Louvish breaks down plot scenarios, compositions, camera effects, mannerisms. We begin to understand just how Chaplin's legacy has flagged over the years, as Keaton's has locked down the top spot. Writing about 1925's *The Gold Rush*, Louvish takes on the subject of the Tramp's ability to engender pathos, arguing that our relative familiarity with death and slaughter, beamed right into our homes, has upped the stakes in the pity game. Our age is one in which suffering is thought of as a mass affair—wide-scale casualties, for instance—rather than something that is perhaps more acute when it is centered on one or two people, which was the Tramp's speciality. In *The Gold Rush*, the explosions are psychological, with more of a Job-ian slant than we get with Keaton, who excelled at wry detachment. There's less respite in a Chaplin comedy.

Inevitably, Chaplin, the man, nudges forth in the Tramp's biography, and you come away thinking that this was a fellow with a pretty sophisticated plan from the get-go. Chaplin fictionalized his own life, and it's a howl reading his early interviews, with contradiction after contradiction. As readers, pressed into a flesh-and-blood, big-screen world, we nonetheless meet with metaphor again when Louvish recounts the sequence in *Limelight* when

the Great Stone Face, Keaton, partakes in a ramshackle musical performance with the Tramp. The two comedians thrash at their instruments, seemingly unable to control their own movements, as if being jerked by some comic muse, until the Tramp succumbs, dying inside of a drum, of all things. When asked by a reporter what he hoped to achieve with the film, Chaplin responded by saying that he was going for something funny, which is always the comedian's *raison d'être*, even when fronted by entropy.