

## Charlie Chaplain

(1889 - 1977)

“Who is the real Charlie Chaplain?” asks this 2021 documentary, and the answer is: “Who knows?” To quote the writer Max Eastman: “Enjoy any Charlie Chaplain you have the good luck to encounter, but don’t waste your time trying to link them up...There are too many of them.” He was one of the greatest and widely-loved silent movie stars. From 1917’s *Easy Street* to 1936’s *Modern Times*, Chaplain made many of the funniest and most popular films of his time. Best known for his character the naïve and loveable *Little Tramp*, he is this kind-hearted character we associate with the time before the talkies.

In 1914, at age 25, this London-born actor made thirty-five short silent films, a genre allowing very little time for anything but physical comedy, and Chaplain was a master at it. Chaplain’s slapstick acrobatics made him famous, but it was the subtleties of his acting that made him great. While Harold Lloyd played the daredevil hanging from the clocks, and Buster Keaton maneuvered through surreal and complex situations, Chaplain concerned himself with improvising. For Chaplain, the best way to locate the humor or pathos of a situation was to create an environment and walk around in it until something natural happened.

Chaplain typically improvised his story in front of the camera with only a basic framework of a script, shooting and printing hundreds of takes when making a movie. Many actors found the constant takes and uncertainty grueling, but always went along with it because they knew they were working for a master.

The documentary reveals still shocking accounts of his several marriages to (and affairs with) very young women. Much is made of how these women were silenced by Chaplain (his autobiography never even names the second of three teenage brides, Lita Grey). By a strange twist of fate, the only woman with whom Chaplain had a lengthy, stable relationship – his fourth wife, the actress Oona O’Neill – left almost no recordings of her voice, leading her daughter to note forlornly that “my mother’s voice doesn’t exist.”

During an 18-month world tour between in 1931 and 1932, Chaplain witnessed severe economic angst and a sharp rise in nationalism. He was shocked by the cruelty of the Hitler and Mussolini governments, saying “I’m just a human being who wants to see the return of decency and kindness.” But Chaplain was not universally embraced. His romantic liaisons led to his rebuke by some women’s groups, which led to his being barred from entering some U.S. states. When he took a hard line against Communism, he became a target of right-wing conservatives. In 1952 the incensed Chaplain, at age 63, bade goodbye to the United States and took up residence on a small farm in Switzerland, where he spent the final 25 years of his 88-year life.

Near the end of his life, Chaplain made one last visit to the U.S. in 1972 when he received an honorary Academy award. Five years later he died at home in Switzerland, his wife Oona and seven of his children at his bedside at the time of his passing.