

## AMERICAN FILM COMEDY OVER THE CENTURY CELEBRATED IN MUSEUM BICENTENNIAL PROGRAM

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CRITICS PLEASE NOTE: Requests for screenings will be honored whenever possible depending upon print availability, so that those who so desire can see again many of the films in this series. A list of all the films is available upon request. Additional press material will follow.  
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In a Bicentennial Salute to American Film Comedy, The Museum of Modern Art will present a screen survey from historic custard pie days to contemporary black humor. The eight-month retrospective, comprised of more than 400 films, begins on May 13 at 8:30 with Harold Lloyd's 1926 film, "For Heaven's Sake." Five other Lloyd films, which have had less visibility than those of many other comics, will also be shown in the series.

Besides Lloyd, those other great pillars of American comedy -- Buster Keaton, Charles Chaplin, Mack Sennett, and Harry Langdon -- will represent the formative silent years. It was during this early period that these artists created the individual styles that constitute that uniquely American phenomenon, known as slapstick, that still produces world-wide laughter.

Many classics are included in this Bicentennial series: Chaplin's "The Circus," "The Kid," "The Gold Rush," and "City Lights;" Buster Keaton's "The General" and "Steamboat Bill;" and Harold Lloyd's "Safety Last," "The Freshman," "Speedy," and "Movie Crazy." Lloyd's last picture, re-titled "Mad Wednesday," will also be shown in its original version as "The Sin of Harold Diddlebock."

The Guest Programmer of the American Film Comedy Series is Leonard Maltin, author of "Movie Comedy Teams" and other film books. The series was initiated by Adrienne Mancina and organized by Larry Kardish of the Department of Film, in collaboration with Mr. Maltin who thinks our great comedies ageless and says, "time and the sense of yearning for simpler pleasures enhances their original appeal."

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"In the language of screen comedians," says James Agee in his famous essay, "Comedy's Greatest Era," "four of the main grades of laugh are the titter, the yowl, the bellylaugh, and the boffo. The titter is just a titter. The yowl is a runaway titter. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure knows all about a bellylaugh. The boffo is the laugh that kills." So varied is the present comedy series that Agee's theory will be put to the test, as audiences react both subjectively and collectively to the whole gamut of screen humor, beginning with the Keystone Kops all the way through to the modern, urban humor of Woody Allen.

So comprehensive is the present comedy cyle that it begins with Chaplin's first picture "Making a Living," Lloyd's first starring film "Just Nuts," Buster Keaton's very first film "The Butcher Boy" with "Fatty" Arbuckle, and Laurel and Hardy's first on-screen encounter in "Lucky Dog." In addition, the series presents "Fatty" Arbuckle in a never released feature "Leap Year" (1921), two features by Max Linder who influenced Chaplin, four Raymond Griffith films, one of which will be shown for the first time in fifty years. Raymond Griffith is an unsung comedian, highly recommended by Walter Kerr. Other since-forgotten heroes of silent comedy are Charley Chase, Lloyd Hamilton, Lupino Lane, and Snub Pollard, whose shorts will be exhibited throughout the program.

The early silent comedians combine the talents of the acrobat, the dancer, the clown, and the mime, according to James Agee. These gifted men who invented the language of silent comedy "learned to show emotion through it, and comic psychology, more eleoquently than most language has ever managed to, and they discovered beauties of comic motion which are hopelessly beyond reach of words."

Citing Ben Turpin as an example of one of the most lovable comics, Agee writes, "Nobody who has missed Turpin in 'The Shriek of Araby' can imagine how rough parody can get and still remain subtle and roaringly funny." Until recently the Turpin picture was "lost," but the Museum found a print in Russia, and it will be shown in the program (May 28 at 6:00 p.m.).

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Mack Sennett is considered by Agee to be "the father of slapstick," and his comics came out of music halls, burlesque, vaudeville, circuses, and "limbo," working in traditions dating back to the fairs of the Middle Ages and even to ancient Greece. Most of the major stars of the 20s represented in the present show -- Gloria Swanson, Phyllis Haver, Wallace Beery, Marie Dressler, and Carole Lombard -- came from the Sennett shop, as did the directors Frank Capra, Mal St. Clair, George Marshall, Erle Kenton, and Roy Del Ruth.

Charles Chaplin was also introduced by Sennett, and his "tramp," Agee believes, is as centrally representative of humanity, as many-sided, and as mysterious as Hamlet. "He was the first man to give the silent language a soul."

Among the comedians in this series are Louise Fazenda, whose face was the incarnation of rampant gullibility; "Fatty" Arbuckle with his cold eye, his loose serene smile, his silky manipulation of his bulk, and his satanic marksmanship with pies; Harry Langdon who "looked like an elderly baby" or "a baby dope fiend;" and Laurel & Hardy, whom Maltin favors over all other comedy teams.

Walter Kerr, in his highly acclaimed book "The Silent Clowns," attributes the shape of screen comedy to D.W. Griffith, who was known to dislike slapstick. Nonetheless, in one of his rare comedies, "The Curtain Pole," Griffith "laid out the master plan for what would ultimately become 'pure' silent film comedy, offering its architecture and even its details for an entire generation to copy." Kerr points out that Griffith, though more inclined to be dramatic and earnest, "grasped at the outset silent comedy's freedom to make a spectacular hash of reality without in the least compromising the camera's insistence on reality." Taken together, these two realities, both the scale of film and the permissiveness of silence, released the subconscious of the audience so that when the whole world was knocked over, it "cheered the verification of (its) wildest dreams."

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These silent films laid the foundation for all the film comedies that were to follow, spawning such directors as Gregory La Cava, George Cukor, Leo McCarey, Garson Kanin, George Stevens, and Preston Sturges. It also gave us in later "talkie" years films like "It Happened One Night," with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert; the Marx Brothers in "Horsefeathers" and "A Night at the Opera," and Mae West in "She Done Him Wrong," and "My Man Godfrey" with Carole Lombard and William Powell. While slapstick was replaced by screwball, the latter gave way to the social satires: Leo McCarey's "The Awful Truth," William Wellman's "Nothing Sacred," and "Ninotchka" made by Ernst Lubitsch with Greta Garbo.

Other stars included in the series are Eddie Cantor, Will Rogers, W.C. Fields, Jack Oakie, The Marx Brothers, and Bert Williams, famous Ziegfeld star, featured in a program of silent comedies with other Black performers. Among the comediennes are Mabel Normand, Constance Talmadge, Mary Pickford, Colleen Moore, Bebe Daniels, and Clara Bow. Every decade is represented: Marion Davies in "Show People" from the 20s; Jean Harlow and Spencer Tracy in "Libeled Lady" from the 30s; Gloria Swanson and Adolphe Menjou in "Father Takes a Wife" from the 40s; Judy Holliday in "Born Yesterday" and Marilyn Monroe in "Some Like It Hot" from the 50s; and "Dr. Strangelove" in the 60s. Among the films of more recent vintage are Mike Nichols' "The Graduate," Mel Brooks' "The Producers," and "What's Up Tiger Lily" of Woody Allen.

A schedule of the silent films in the series (through July 3) is enclosed.

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