

A LITTLE FRUITFUL PANDEMONIUM

By Michael Ventura

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Ninety years ago – Feb. 2, 1914, to be exact – Mack Sennett released a nasty little comedy called "Making a Living." It ran about nine minutes, and reveled in Sennett's only theme: chaos. One event that sort of makes sense leads to another that makes less, and another and another, making less and less sense, until there's nothing but bedlam, everyone running madly, hitting and shoving and chasing, falling, leaping, and suddenly it's The End. Perhaps such films were wildly popular because their underlying structure was a great deal like what we are pleased to call, for want of imagination, "real life." One thing leads to another and another and another, nobody really understands what's going on, those who think they understand are run over by those who want to understand, and suddenly and without warning comes The End.

In Sennett's films the camera stayed still and the actors moved – but *how* they moved, with demonic energy, in utter disregard for their own safety and the safety of the inevitable innocent bystander, as fast and as heedless as the century they heralded. There is no music appropriate to their movement. The tinny jazz that usually plays behind Sennett's comedies on video is all wrong; except in New Orleans, America wouldn't hear jazz until it was recorded three years later in 1917. So mute the music. The movement itself creates a kind of sound in your mind, like a clattering of tin cans and a screeching of brakes backed by a chorus of heavy breathing.

Except for being typical of Sennett at his maddest and crudest, "Making a Living" would be forgotten if it weren't the first screen appearance of a 23-year-old English clown named Charles Chaplin. (Who knows whether I'll be around to commemorate the 100th anniversary? I'll make do with the 90th.) He's dressed like a cartoon of a gentleman in a top hat, and he sports a down-turned mustache. He uses three facial expressions: cruel, lascivious, greedy. And he's always doing the unexpected, like kissing the forehead of an objectionable old man. He kicks, leaps, punches, and runs with inhuman fury. It seems the debut of a freak, not a genius.

A week later, on Feb. 9, the genius showed his face, and it remains even now the most recognizable face of modern times: Charlie the Tramp.

The film was "Kid Auto Races in Venice." Running time: six minutes, 10 seconds – yet it's one of the most significant pictures ever. Nobody meant it to be. A happening in Venice, Calif.: little boys risking life and limb in miniature race cars. The event was real and popular – it drew quite a crowd. And it was dangerous, not only for the boys but for the crowd, who stand with no protective barrier, just feet and sometimes inches away from little cars that are going just fast enough to do some real damage. (In those days, before knee-jerk litigation and the dominance of insurance companies, none of that seemed to matter.) Sennett sent Chaplin and a crew with the instruction to make something funny of it all. Which sounds like a daunting assignment, but this was a wild time for a wildcat art and nobody seemed daunted by anything.

Chaplin wasn't a comic or a comedian. He was a clown. We've lost the distinction because we've lost our clowns. Wisecracks and embarrassment, put-downs and irony and satire are the stuff of comedy now. Clowns play for higher stakes. For the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, the war was between desire and reality. They constantly

challenged reality in the name of whatever they desired ... and saw to it that, whatever the price they might have to pay, reality was going to pay, too. Sometimes they won the object of their desire, mostly they lost, but always they left their mark on reality, proving just how fragile are the temporary arrangements we call "real" – and that was enough for their secretive air of victory when *The End* rolled around. That, and the grace of their movement, the dignity of their challenge, and the poetry of their risk.

There's little grace or dignity in "Kid Auto Races in Venice," but it is six minutes and 10 seconds of weird prophetic poetry – and mayhem. Later Chaplin had varying memories of how he created the Tramp's costume, trying on things at random in the costume room, but he concluded each version like this, as spoken to Chaplin biographer Robert Payne: "Even then I realized I would have to spend the rest of my life finding more about the creature. For me he was fixed, complete, the moment I looked in the mirror and saw him for the first time, yet even now I don't know all the things there are to be known about him." Chaplin always talked of the Tramp that way: from a distance and with respect. Even with awe, as when he told Payne: "There is death in him, and he is bringing life – more life. That is his only excuse, his only purpose. That is why people recognized him everywhere. They wanted the ghosts to come and bring them life. It's very strange, isn't it? ... You see, the clown is so close to death that only a knife-edge separates him from it, and sometimes he goes over the border, but he always returns again. So in a way he is spirit – not real. ... We know he cannot die, and that's the best thing about him. I created him, but I am not him, and yet sometimes our paths cross."

What's remarkable about "Kid Auto Races in Venice" is that it is a clown's prophetic essay on the mystery of the camera's attraction. The little movie tells no story. A newsreel cameraman is trying to film the races and the Tramp keeps getting in the way of the shot, demanding *he* be filmed instead. He absolutely doesn't care what anybody else thinks or wants; he's concerned only with the camera and wants its complete attention. He goes to outlandish lengths to stay in the shot. Pushed away, chased away, hooted away, he always comes back – and with this marvelous air of being inexplicably in the right. He *will* be filmed. It's as though he's saying, "*I'm* the reality here; I'm far more substantial than all these supposedly real people!"

The strange thing is that 90 years later you have to side with Charlie. Your eyes make you do so. The racers and spectators who are the background of every shot are dressed in fashions that have long been antique and are engaged in an activity that would no longer be allowed. But Charlie is Charlie. We've seen him countless times since; he remains a living emblem. For us, who live by images, he is one of the most indelible, contemporary even now, while the others have faded into an eternal background. The film ends in a close-up of Charlie making faces at the camera. He knows he's won. (And didn't he prophesy all those folks on quiz shows, court shows, and "reality" TV, who'll do anything to be devoured by the ravenous beast of distortion that is the camera?)

That year, 1914, Chaplin and his Tramp would make another 32 pictures for Sennett. In many he co-starred with the only female clown who could ever keep up with him, 20-year-old Mabel Normand – a veteran, she'd been in pictures since the age of 16. (She directed some of their best efforts.) Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, another wonderful clown, is in others. Chaos reigns. And is celebrated.

Now at last, and for the first time, the Sennett Chaplins are available. There are 25 on DVD, in volumes 1-4 of *The Essential Charlie Chaplin Collection*. Some of the prints are atrocious; the music is great (Jelly Roll Morton) but often inappropriate; except for Chaplin's tremendously excited habitation and exploration of his Tramp, there is little art

in sight, high or low. But I've played them (with the mute on) for high school kids who laugh like crazy. Because chaos is funny when it's relished properly and when you come to it with no expectations. And Charlie, even as rough as he is in these early days, enchants. It is, as Chaplin implied, his reason for being. And sometimes enchantment is enough, and more than enough.

There are few hints of the poignant and thoughtful Tramp who would soon appear when Chaplin took full control of his films. Instead, the Sennett Chaplins revel in the Tramp's incredible excitement at simply and suddenly coming to life. And there are strange moments of anarchic beauty when you feel, "This film is behaving very like my mind!" And moments when the chaos seems to wink at you, saying what Federico Fellini (a passionate Chaplin devotee) once said: "People are worth much more than reality."

Ninety years later we've caught up to Charlie. We, too, romp in chaos. We, too, make faces at the camera. And if we lack enchantment, we don't lack the longing for it. Charlie is still here to say: "Take heart. Reality is fragile. Enchantment is possible. If only you summon the nerve, Chaos may be your friend."

p.s. I apologize, dear reader, for my last column's geopolitical dyslexia: Switching New Hampshire and Vermont, I assigned Howard Dean's governorship to the wrong state.

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