

# STAGE

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## In The Good Old Fashioned Way

*Modern Times* has a sociological moral, but is at it's best when the star cuts the accustomed Chaplinesque capers

By KATHARINE BEST

The world, with the exception of those bright eyed youngsters under the age of five, has waited pretty breathlessly for the reappearance of a forlorn little figure in a derby, baggy trousers, and disreputable shoes. The fact that his reappearance was to be under the sinister title, *Modern Times*, alarmed not a few of us. This hapless creature, whose name, by the way, is Charles Chaplin, had come to mean an unchangeable element to us, the epitome of undefeatable humanity, and our heart was in our throat until we saw *Modern Times*.

We hasten to assure you it is the same Chaplin. Disguised in current mechanistic ingenuity, veiled in lukewarm disapproval of the plight of the working man, and tinted a slight shade of Red, it remains, delightfully and irrevocably, Chaplin.

It would be rather difficult for Mr. Chaplin to pick out a year that his lovable underdog poignancy would not fit. The meek shall forever inherit the earth, we are willing to believe, and he is the inimitable spokesman of them all. *Modern Times* is a pilgrim's progress through five years, realizing that he was right the first time.

The program will affectionately bill him as a Factory Worker, but until you see the way he works, that term will have no charm for you. He stands, amongst the huge and formidable machinery of a modern steel works, with wrenches in hand, twisting, twisting, twisting. The blast of the lunch whistle finds him still twisting, twisting, twisting—in open air. It is all too much. He goes gracefully daffy, and runs what is known as amuck. Amuck with his two wrenches. He twists noses, fireplugs, buttons. But he is destined to reappear rationally upon the horrid horizon for fresh bravado. He leaves a hospital for neurotic cases to wave a red flag in a Communist parade (he doesn't know he is in a parade—he is just trying to be helpful) and off he goes in the Black Maria. Just as he becomes the innocent wrongdoer in the freedom of the streets, so he becomes the inadvertent rightdoer in an attempted jailbreak.

His well meant release sends him back into a world that persists in misunderstanding and persecuting him. He would do fine things,

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but forever does them in the wrong way a the wrong time. He loses a job in a department store because of his misplaced confidence in some friendly burglars; he loses his job in the shipyards because he serenely launches an unfinished ship; he loses his job in his old wrenching ground, the factory, because of a strike. He stands again and again amid aggressive and belligerent man mountains.

Less than this has broken many a man's spirit. But not his. Each time he emerges from the local police station, there stands the Girl, played by Paulette Goddard, waiting for him, and always with good news. His final emergence from jail is greeted with the tidings of their jobs as cabaret entertainers. At the luxurious moment of success, the girl is confronted by juvenile officers. The extravagant gallantry of her champion saves her, and they leave security again to become vagabonds.

Underlining each of these progressive sequences, which carry him further and further from life, is the inexhaustible imagination of a precisionist—a precisionist not only in invention and technique and motive, but in poise and gesture and image. No one but an exact poet of Chaplin's caliber could replay the old gags with such rich-mindedness and wit. The lunch scene in the factory is, this time, streamlined and synchronized. He is served lunch from a new-fangled gadget-of-gadgets, the Automaton.

works; or rather, it pokes food into his face too fast, or too high, or too low—and then has the impudence to wipe his mouth as soup drips from his hair. It is this, no doubt, that brings on the lunacy jag. He slays his dragon by going crazy, and bears aloft the banner of innocence in a wayward world.

He gets a foot within the door, only to be driven out again, shuffling lamely, with assumed courage, on the damaged foot. His taste of jail is in the best tradition of a misfit,

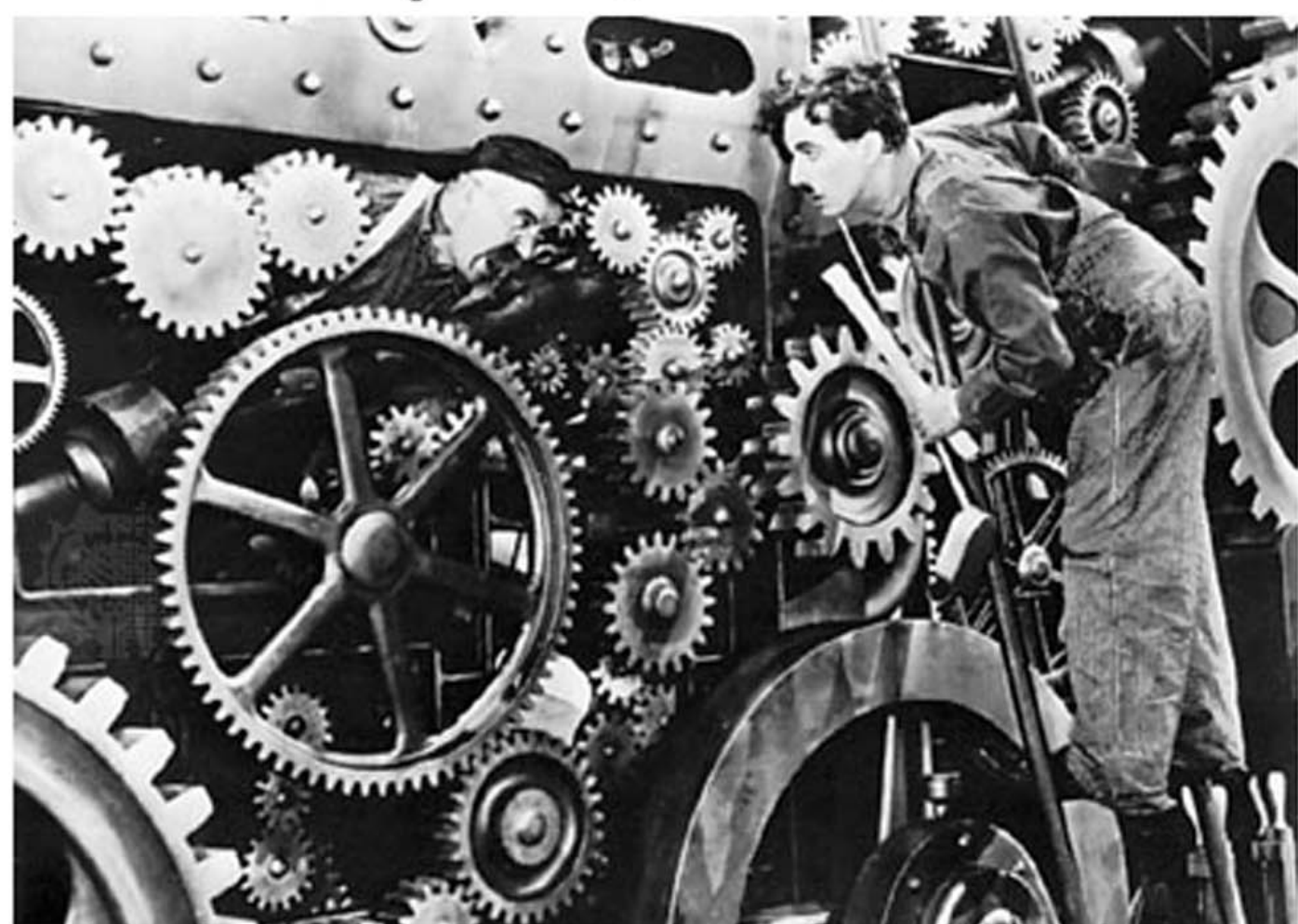




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whose freedom means misery. Yet, for his own unintentional heroism, he is awarded release. Just as the neurosis gave him simulated daring, so, too, does the nose powder that comes his way through the ancient but unmistakably efficient method of being shaken from a salt shaker. For a few short moments then, he is an unqualified hero. A conqueror behind bars, but a conqueror withal. His hilarious halt of the jailbreak costs him the exaltation of conquest—the first conquest he has ever known.

His precarious right-angle turnings, his leaning propensities, his fancy steps at moments of happiness, his terror at the sight of a cop, his extravagant gestures of gallantry and dignity—all are in that tradition only Chaplin pantomime knows—and, as such, are as old as Chaplin. Only the locale, and there-



fore the motives, change. Never, his answer to the world.

A rich moment of Keystone jubilation is his in the shack the girl finds for him. Paradise, he terms it as he shuts the door, and a beam falls on his head with a symphonic thud. He leans on the table. It collapses. He tries to clean up the mess with the broom that holds the roof in place. With characteristic generosity, he sleeps in the dog house, and arises to the luxury of an early morning dive in two inches of water. His majestic emergence from this disgraceful misadventure, and the extravagance with which he spreads his wet bathing suit across the barrel will invariably bring howls of laughter from American, African, or Indo-Chinese. It is the momentary expression of his vanity, and will always be funny, no matter where or why he does it.

Up to a certain point, this Gilbertian Don Quixote has phenomenal fortune. He is the last man through the gates of the factory,



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and the last man given a job in a newly acclaimed prosperity. He arrives on the scene of an accident in a department store, and immediately gets the injured night-watchman's position. He dons the famous roller skates and teeters terrifyingly on the edge of a broken railing. Back and forth, back and forth, until we collapse under the strain of horror and mirth. But the laws of society and economics and gravity invariably catch up with him, and he drops one more step lower in the scale of human adjustment.

His shy exaltation at being hired in the cabaret is genuine and touching. At last, it would seem, he has found his place in the sun. He struggles heroically to serve a roast duck while being pushed in a circle on the dance floor, and, after using the duck for a football and a chandelier ornament, delivers it proudly and magnificently. It is his act as an entertainer, however, that reaches the height of mimic art, and is the only new element to be found in *Modern Times*. He sings a song he has forgotten the words to, with pantomimic gibberish that ranges from a warm and eager enthusiasm to the devil's own Rabelaisian artistry. For once his own audience is sympathetic. He is established. Success is within his grasp.

Tragedy and comedy take melodious shape in his fleeting form as he rescues the girl from her tormentors. She is his only friend, and it is just that he should help her when she is troubled. And so, shuffling down a lonely road toward a rising sun, a grotesque knight errant with his gamin lady love, he walks toward higher places and, as always, shrugs a magnificent shoulder at the world's disdain. It is, thank heaven, the same Chaplin.

