

THE MOVIES

The Great Charlie Chaplin

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

FACED WITH the late spring's dreary trickle of new films, New Yorkers may perhaps be pardoned for having taken a fresh look at some old ones. Among the revivals, Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* and the Lubitsch series at the Metropolitan Museum must take first place. I trust that they will be sent on national tour.

A Woman of Paris has been unavailable in recent years. Its release now, in an excellent new print with a score composed by Chaplin himself, has caused great excitement among local cineasts. I do not suppose that it survives in quite the same sense that contemporaneous works survive—Cummings's *Enormous Room*, for example, or Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*. Compared to the novels, it is unmistakably a period piece. The conventions of 1923—the lachrymose beginning, the sententious subtitles, the simple-minded melodramatics of the plot—are more obtrusive in film than in fiction, and the innovations, more covert. Yet as one moves beyond the contrivances, one is suddenly aware of a comic vision of enormous style and originality.

This vision is so startlingly different from what audiences expect of Chaplin that the film disappointed on its initial release and has never quite won its proper place in the Chaplin canon in the years since. Instead of the little tramp, low life, slapstick, and the usual Chaplin effects, *A Woman of Paris* is an essay in high comedy, worldly and sophisticated, with strong undercurrents of satire and melancholy.

The film comes into its own after about 18 minutes, when Adolphe Menjou saunters into a Paris restaurant. With his insouciant manner, sardonic smile, arched eyebrows, waxen moustache, with his air of cynical imperturbability—whether smoking cigarettes, eating bonbons, or playing a saxophone—with the mockery that extends, one feels, to himself as well as to the world, Menjou beautifully embodies the Chaplin vision of blithe but jaded decadence. In a later time, Menjou's deplorable politics kept high-minded critics, I fear, from awarding him his full due as an actor. Nevertheless he has given a series of superb performances through the years, as in *The Front Page*, *The Milky Way*, *Paths of Glory*. But nothing he did excelled his performance under Chap-

lin's direction in *A Woman of Paris*.

Edna Purviance, who plays the heroine, is matronly by contemporary standards and at times bears a disconcerting resemblance to Margaret Dumont. She is nonetheless effective in a stately way as the woman of Paris, torn between an impecunious artist and the wealthy roué—a choice, the subtitle informs us, of "marriage or luxury." She is shocked to read about Menjou's engagement to an heiress. "It makes no difference to us," Menjou cheerfully observes. "We can go on just the same." With quick strokes and a kind of classical simplicity, Chaplin shows the bird fluttering in the gilded cage, throwing her necklace out the window in a gesture of defiance, then rushing downstairs to snatch it back from the tramp who has picked it up on the street. Menjou meanwhile blows away on his saxophone.

"You never take me seriously," she complains. Nor does he. He takes nothing seriously. After the artist's suicide, she returns to a simple country life. In the last scene, she rides with an orphan child on the back of a horse-drawn wagon as Menjou speeds by in a high-powered automobile. They do not see each other. They had never seen each other.

A Woman of Paris, with its grace, fluidity, and power of suggestion, opened up a world of high comedy to the movies. One can see why Lubitsch so much adored it and why he developed its mood in his own brilliant comedies of the later Twenties and the Thirties. So it was appropriate that the revival of *A Woman of Paris* was accompanied by a Lubitsch season at the Metropolitan Museum. Though *Ninotchka* was inexplicably omitted, most of the others were there—*Trouble in Paradise*, with its subtle and ironic symmetries of plot and characterization; *The Shop Around the Corner*, with its sparkling blend of Viennese gaiety and sentiment; *To Be or Not to Be*, the best of black comedies, in which the anti-Nazi satire seemed to some in the dark days of 1942 frivolous but which in retrospect is a dazzling triumph.

One wonders what happened to the tradition of *A Woman of Paris* after Lubitsch. Where is the high comedy of our own time? We have no contemporary Lubitsch, nor do we have players in the witty style of Menjou,

Carole Lombard, William Powell, Miriam Hopkins, Kay Francis, Herbert Marshall, Melvin Douglas, Cary Grant, Robert Montgomery, Roland Young, Charles Butterworth, Edward Everett Horton, and those other high-polish comedians of the 1930s.

No doubt if the demand existed, the directors and players would appear. Perhaps television has slowed up the perceptions of the mass audience. Andrew Sarris remarked the other day that his students are baffled by the work of Preston Sturges. The Sturges films simply have too many jokes, nuances, implications, innuendos, for a generation used to television sitcom and one point at a time. The comic modes of yesteryear require them to absorb too much too quickly.

One wonders too whether the new freedom of the movies has not had as an unforeseen consequence a catastrophic decline in irony, subtlety, and suggestion. Chaplin and Lubitsch had to work within the challenge of limitations. The limitations were often asinine, but they tested the ingenuity of directors, writers, and actors. Vernacular films were more carefully written, their dialogue considerably more vivid and arresting, in those days before Anglo-Saxon monosyllables became de rigueur. Similarly, the shot of Herbert Marshall thoughtfully eyeing Kay Francis's bed in *Trouble in Paradise* is a good deal sexier than the two lying on the bed locked in steamy embrace would have been. Uninhibited profanity, sex, and violence give filmmakers too easy an out.

I am not arguing, God knows, for a return to the Legion of Decency. But a little self-restraint might stimulate creativity. As Goethe said, the master proves himself within his limitations. ●

Answer to Middleton Double-Crostic No. 150

Robert Frost:
Questioning Faces

The winter owl banked just in time to pass
And save herself from breaking window glass.
And her wings straining suddenly spread
Caught color from the last of evening red
In a display of underdown and quill
To glassed-in children at the window sill.

TELEVISION

Immodest Proposals for PBS

by Karl E. Meyer

WITH THE DOG DAYS upon us and as an antidote to rerun ennui, I offer without charge these five suggestions for innovative programming to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Any corporate underwriter who takes up these ideas will be the recipient of a lifetime subscription to *Saturday Review*—at the author's expense should higher authority demur.

Television Week in Review. A common complaint about the print media is that it is unfair to television because (as Eric Sevareid recently reminded us) critics are envious, hypocritical, and incompetent. I would be the last to disagree about the inadequacy of television criticism, but even Sevareid—in a speech, excerpted in *The New York Times*, to a publisher's conference—conceded that the networks show little talent for self-criticism.

A remedy could be provided by PBS in the form of a Friday night program titled *Television Week in Review*, an appropriate companion to those long-running fixtures *Washington Week in Review* and *Wall Street Week*. The notion is very simple: a critical look, illustrated with film clips, at the best and the worst on the tube during the week.

Plainly, the host should be a paragon—a commentator with unimpeachable video credentials and a reputation for fairness, knowledgeability, and acerbity. I have a candidate: Edwin Newman, of NBC. It would be a memorable coup if PBS could lure Newman away from a network that has let this first-class professional languish in the limbo of occasional specials and *Today* show essays. (Newman's superb *Land of Hype and Glory*, a documentary on the supersell techniques in Hollywood and along Publisher's Row, was one of the better events of the past season.)

The Fonz, in French. We are, as everyone knows, a monoglot nation with a deplorable lack of interest in foreign languages. Colleges and universities periodically lament the decline of student interest in the major European tongues, dead or alive. Part of the problem, I believe, is that youngsters are exposed to other languages almost exclusively through deadly academic studies of the classics or through Berlitz-style dialogues ("How many cousins have you studying English in

the pretty cemetery three meters from this restaurant?").

The salt and savor of the vernacular is what imparts life to desiccated grammar. By chance, the other day I saw a PBS program on Paris in a series called *Visa*, which included a too-brief glimpse of *Happy Days*, dubbed in French. It was an aural revelation. Henry Winkler, who plays Fonzie in the top-rated ABC show, sounds and looks better in a Gallic context (indeed, Winkler has a raffish Mediterranean quality, half-Gabin and half-Belmondo).

Why not broadcast on PBS the French version of *Happy Days*, with subtitles and with a preface explaining the racier idioms? Winkler could do more for the language of Descartes than he did for that of Shakespeare in an inept ABC special in which he wrestled with Elizabethan English and got hammerlocked.

Gentle Grafter. Last summer, many PBS stations broadcast a fine BBC series based on the stories of P. G. Wodehouse and featuring the same actors in each playlet. As I watched, thoroughly beguiled, I wondered why American television has so inexcusably neglected our national equivalent—short story writer William Sydney Porter (1862–1910), an ex-con better known under his pen name, O. Henry.

Like Wodehouse, O. Henry was an unashamed entertainer whose stories appeared in the popular magazines. His very popularity possibly explains why he is today in critical oblivion: In this country (unlike in England), canons of taste are fixed by academics. Thus it was that PBS last year produced a series called *The American Short Story*, in which O. Henry was unforgivably omitted—a panel of professors had helped select the anthology.

True enough, the trick endings in his stories came to be mechanical. But, as a convicted bank embezzler himself, O. Henry had a wonderful understanding of the corrupt underside of American life, as explored in *Gentle Grafter* and *Cabbages and Kings*. I can envision a series in the spirit of *The Sting*, featuring (who else?) Robert Redford and Paul Newman.

The Video Boneyard. For sheer profligacy, no medium of communications can top television, in which hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent on episodes that are never aired.

A few years ago, PBS was somehow able to broadcast the unshown episodes of the CBS series *Beacon Hill*, a casualty in Nielsen Gulch. I have an immodest proposal. Why couldn't a producer stipulate in contracts that if a network cancels a series, any remaining finished productions can be offered to PBS? In most cases, the boneyard remains would not be in great demand, but the leftovers could, on occasion, be pure gold. In any event, the possibility of broadcast would help to obviate the awful frustrations of pointless labor for production teams.

The Czech Gambit. Nothing is more tedious on PBS than those intolerable and interminable fund-raising appeals. Is reform possible? While pondering this question, I remembered an entrancing feature of Expo '67, in Montreal, at the Czech pavilion—a trick movie in which viewers could vote on twists in the plot. Every contingency was foreseen, so that if the audience pressed a button ordering the heroine to rebuff the hero's advances, the film would proceed accordingly.

It is surely not beyond the wit of producers to devise a melodrama in which PBS subscribers could vote—as they telephoned in their pledges—on five or six pivotal plot developments. Is the East Coast more unsentimental than the West Coast? Through a PBS vote on such a trick program, we could attempt to find out. My nominee to confect this tour de force would be the Czech-born playwright Tom Stoppard, author of *Travesties* and of the fine BBC drama *Professional Fault*, set in post-Dubček Prague. ●

Fraser Young

Literary Crypt No. III

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer on page 37.

X B F P K Y K W C L G K -
W F P K Q T O W Q R L -
W L P X L P B T O P
I L Y L E I O Q Q K C J -
H T E P W T C L Q Z L Q F -
Q P W T O Q .

— I T K P B K