

Chaplin's Flawed Successors

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

THE DEATH of Charlie Chaplin provokes reflections about the state of humor in America. Among movie fans, to judge by the American Film Institute poll [SR, January 21], Chaplin is already forgotten. In this poll, citizens of the Republic, presumably sane, voted that *Gone with the Wind*, *Star Wars*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* were greater films than *Modern Times*, *City Lights*, *The Great Dictator*, and *Monsieur Verdoux*. One might conclude that our national sense of humor is in decay. I am not sure that this is so. After all, most critics—in my view, rightly—chose Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* as the best movie of 1977.

And Hollywood turns out comedies as assiduously as ever. This month's entries are both from 20th Century-Fox. The presiding geniuses are Mel Brooks, who produced, directed, wrote (with assistance), and played the lead in *High Anxiety*, and Gene Wilder, a chip from the Brooks workshop, who wrote, directed, and played the lead in *The World's Greatest Lover*. Both even contributed songs to their movies. All this, of course, is in the great tradition. Chaplin wrote, directed, produced, composed, and so forth. So does Woody Allen today. Name-dropping, however, is not in the tradition. Brooks dedicates his film to Alfred Hitchcock, "master of suspense." Wilder concludes his with a self-serving message of thanks to his "friend" Federico Fellini "for encouragement at just the right time."

Some comedians, like Chaplin, Fields, Groucho, Lahr, Ed Wynn, were intrinsically funny men. For all I know, they may have been grouches in their private lives; but the moment they appeared on stage or on screen, one began to laugh. Neither Brooks nor Wilder is intrinsically funny. This is not a fatal disqualification. There have been other comedians not wildly comical in themselves but possessed of a rueful conception of character and a capacity for droll invention that suffused their movies and made us laugh helplessly when we saw them—Harold Lloyd, for example, or Buster Keaton. Mel Brooks, one

feels, is growing in this direction. Gene Wilder tries hard. Too hard.

High Anxiety is homage to Hitchcock. It offers spoofs of *Spellbound*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *The Birds*. It also sends up a number of non-Hitchcock films, from *Blow Up* and *Frankenstein* to *The Wizard of Oz*. The kind of spunky, dumb character Ed Brophy used to play a generation ago reappears here played by Ron Carey; the character looks like, and is named, Brophy. *High Anxiety* is filled with such in jokes, many more of which I am sure eluded me. In jokes are a perishable item. Did Chaplin and Lloyd go in for in jokes? Who can tell anymore?

Mel Brooks is improbably cast as a Harvard professor of psychiatry and a Nobel Prize winner. He turns out to be a surprisingly ingratiating and skilled performer; very funny too, imitating Sinatra singing at a bar or, undone by his fear of heights, sliding along the inner wall on the top floor of the open stairwell of San Francisco's Hyatt Hotel. The parody of a Hitchcock plot is okay, though the talented Cloris Leachman is required to play the villainess rather in the style of the late Lionel Barrymore.

The trouble with Brooks is that he has imperfect taste. Most of the great comedians, Chaplin and the rest, have had excellent taste. Woody Allen today has flawless taste. Brooks's unevenness is exhibited even before we get through the titles. The opening sequence has an external shot of a descending airplane, with cheerful faces at each window until the camera reaches Brooks, a picture of total misery (very funny); then Brooks, disembarking and presenting the stewardess with a bag of vomit (very unfunny); then a manic woman hurling herself at him, so Brooks thinks with murderous intent, only to rush past and embrace another passenger (very funny); then a man in a trench coat summoning Brooks into the "toilet" and revealing himself as a homosexual on the prowl (not so funny). The bad taste has none of the epic, self-loathing quality that made Lenny Bruce, say, a cultural phenomenon. It is just a cheap sense of what makes people laugh: bird-droppings, for example; or S/M bondage; or lunatics.

Still, one can forgive a lot to a man who

moves a camera into a room through a window, only to shatter the pane as it goes; or who permits a crescendo of music when a chauffeur whispers "foul play," only to display it as coming from a symphony orchestra traveling in a neighboring bus. For all his lapses, Brooks is a man of gifts; far more so, on this evidence, than his protégé.

Wilder is amiable and blameless but not naturally comical and inclined to make up in exertion what he lacks in inspiration. In his movie about a young man from the provinces trying to win a Rudolph Valentino contest in the Hollywood of silent pictures, he has two expressions—wounded astonishment and delirious self-esteem. He mugs tediously, as does his entire cast. He also pilfers shamelessly; but the assembly line scene was far funnier in *Modern Times*, and the screen tests, as well as the mistaken identity theme, were far funnier in Lloyd's *Movie Crazy*. Wilder tries so hard at slapstick that he almost wins sympathy. Alas, as Mark Twain said of his wife's attempts to swear, he has the words but not the tune. The audience, when I saw the film, watched it mostly in patient silence. Fellini may be a little promiscuous in dispensing encouragement these days. ●

Wit Twister No. 113

Edited by Arthur Swan

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word. Answers on page 53.

Alone, he downs his ___ ___ ___
___ ___ and his steak,

Then goes to face his triumph's ___
___ ___ ___ and din.

How ___ ___ ___ ___ the
crowd assembled for his sake!

How grand the ___ ___ ___ ___
___ march that plays him in!

This ___ ___ ___ ___ welcome
makes him wryly view

His life as some pat ___ ___ ___
___ ___ tale come true. A.S.

Booked for Travel

Baghdad on the Thames



Arab visitor at a London market—"Their shopping list includes the hotels themselves."

by Horace Sutton

WHATEVER PROBLEMS may be encountered by those Arabs who live on the West Bank of the Jordan, other disciples of Allah are having no trouble encamping in force in the West End of London. Those upper-middle-class sheikhs who once roistered in Beirut before it became a revolutionary shooting gallery have long since elected to dispense their favors in London's spiffiest neighborhood. The West End, and particularly Park Lane, has become a playland where visiting Arabs sift through the expensive boutiques, browse in the Rolls-Royce showrooms where lavender limousines are displayed with signs printed in Arabic, and engage vast suites of rooms in the city's best hotels. Their shopping list has included some of the hotels themselves. Of the elegant cluster of Park Lane hotels—the two-year-old Inter-Continental, the small Londonderry, the Hilton, the Grosvenor House, the Dorchester, and the Inn on the Park—one, the Dorchester, is already in Arab hands.

At tea there the other day, the waiters in tailcoats were bustling about as always, carrying trays of sweet tarts and setting down pots of steaming brew, the lifeblood of the British. There was no outward evi-

dence of Arab ownership, but according to a British friend, that was to be expected. "They buy the hotels and then make sure no other Arabs come there," he said. The line was delivered as an off-the-cuff snippet of blasphemy that should not be accepted as ordinary Arab modus. If anything, the Arabs here tend to keep a low profile in their financial arrangements; they bought the Chelsea Hotel and then turned it over to Holiday Inns to run. Somewhat more harrowing was the Arab purchase of the Carlton Tower, allegedly even while Prime Minister Begin of Israel was asleep inside.

The Arabs' private presence in London, as apart from their financial investments, often seems bizarre, especially played against the backdrop of this supercivilized settlement on the Thames. The hotel managers are sometimes placed in difficult straits trying to accommodate a sheikh who arrives at the head of a sizable entourage. Arabs from the Gulf states are as punctilious in living according to religious dictate as they are by seasoned custom. Wife or wives must be installed on a different floor from the paterfamilias, and a meeting room must be arranged somewhere in between. A common room for bodyguards and other functionaries also needs to be set aside. And then there is the matter of special dietary requirements.

Some sheikhs, and other Arab males of high social station, arrange quarters for their families in Park Lane hotels and then lease a separate suite for themselves in another part of town. The men have the run of the city, and the women and the children are left to behold the Disneyland of the city: elevators coming and going, splendid horse guards riding past hotel windows, and the flow of buses, cabs, limousines, and people coursing the boulevards. The children sent downstairs to the kiosk for purchases of gum or candy are given crisp bills with which to pay, but they often disdain the change. Stories accrue of "fivers"—five-pound notes—found in the gutter, dropped, possibly disdainfully, when handed as change by a cabby. There are even gaudier tales of Arabs who arrive in London, buy a Rolls or a Bentley, and upon leaving again for home give it to the chauffeur. The word is, or so says a London Arab watcher, to use a Rolls while abroad in Britain, but go back to a Cadillac at home.

That stretch of rarified London between Wellington Arch and Marble Arch, which marks the limits of Park Lane, has become such a popular neighborhood for visiting Arabs that a newsstand strategically placed along the byway carries over 20 journals printed in Arabic. There is not an English, French, German, Italian, Greek, Japanese, or American paper among them.

What brings the Middle Eastern visitors to this particular quarter are the fine hotels, which now occupy much of the eastern fringe of Hyde Park, and, of course, the proximity to Piccadilly, Regent Street, Bond Street, and Grosvenor and Berkeley squares, all of them a modest walk in decent weather.

The latest American-managed entry along this newly developed hotel row, the London Inter-Continental, has landed on the most advantageous site of all, right at Hyde Park Corner. Some rooms face the heroic Wellington Arch, and at 10:45 each morning—for those still lolling about their hotel rooms—the Household Cavalry in shiny, plumed helmets, swords at the shoulder, ride past the south face of the hotel en route to the changing of the guard at Whitehall.

The Wellington Arch, with all its fluted columns and cornices, is topped by the Quadriga, a two-wheeled Roman chariot representing war, into which a winged bronze figure (Peace) has seemingly just landed. Of course Peace didn't just land, for the statue has been in place, both maligned and adored, since 1912. It replaced an even more controversial equestrian