



CITY LIGHTS is the December, 2014 DVD Ligonier Valley Cinema Association (LVCA) dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.

**United States 1927-1931 black-and-white live action silent feature comedy with distorted sound, as well as musical accompaniment recorded more recently Charles Chaplin Productions / United Artists
 Producer: Charles Chaplin**

12 of a possible 20 points

***** of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 2 Direction: Charles Chaplin***
- 1 Editing: Charles Chaplin, Willard Nico**
- 1 Cinematography: Roland Totheroh, Gordon Pollock**
- Still Photography: Ralph Barton**
- 1 Lighting: Frank Testera (Gaffer)**
- 0 Written by: Charles Chaplin, Harry Crocker, Harry Clive**
- Script Supervisor: Della Steele**
- 2 Music: Charles Chaplin, Jose Padilla* Arranger: Arthur Johnston**
- Musical Direction: Alfred Newman***
- 1 Settings: Charles Hall**
- 2 Sound Supervisor: Theodore Reed***

- 1 Acting
 - 1 Creativity
- 12 total points

Most critics laud CITY LIGHTS, directed by Charles Chaplin, as one of the greatest films of all time. Jorge Luis Borges, distinguished author and obscure film critic, found it considerably less enchanting. Writing a contemporary compact review of Chaplin's film, the Argentinian trounces it as "a languid anthology of small mishaps, superimposed on a sentimental story." This reviewer is indebted for an English translation of the original to www.MYmovies.it . Borges is more correct than the plenitude of popular scribes. In the body of his review, he mentions languorous pacing, constant artificiality, and absence of true narrative drive which are hallmarks of this production. Not only are core elements bad cinema, they are steeped in vaudeville tradition, which the director seemed determined to preserve on celluloid.

Structurally, CITY LIGHTS is a succession of stage skits tied together by the recurrent presence of a single star performer. It features no cast member remotely close to rivalling the little tramp in evocative skill or comedy timing. That cannot be mere coincidence.

Charles Hall's sets and props are primitive and exaggerated, partly due to directorial insistence on tight control over sound and lighting. For despite a claim by its producer that CITY LIGHTS was a silent pantomime film, it includes brazenly Ivesian cacophony, mimicking sardonically tinny, squally recordings then plaguing studio releases. Far from early sound ingratiating itself to audiences, raspiness, unpredictable lapses, and wildly fluctuating volume levels must have created agonizing tribulations for them. Studios seeking wider publicity for Broadway performers created privileging for sound films. Not waves of novelty-hunting movie patrons. With about one- third of all United States movie houses forced out of business in a few short years due to the financial impossibility of raising sufficient funds for installation of sound equipment, survivors bowed to studio demands for a monopoly of new soundies on movie screens. This was neither the first nor last time a preference

originating from producers was eventually re-categorized by media writers as a popular obsession.

With his fifth feature film, following such trailblazers as *SUNNYSIDE* and *THE KID*, Chaplin clearly sided with independents rather than major studios. Having perfected silent film performance timing while creating an Everyman character transcending national languages and costume, he was understandably reluctant to replace his universally accepted tramp with a Cockney-accented American bum. Sound effects could generate effective hilarity by themselves, as was demonstrated memorably in the sculpture unveiling scene that opens *CITY LIGHTS*. Dialogue, though, transparently displayed location and even social status of speakers, characteristics that then slipped out of the manipulative hands of a perfectionist director like Chaplin. Any glib raconteur might upstage even the most accomplished mime, something most disturbing to contemplate. Imagine, for instance, a scene involving both a loquacious Burl Ives and a mute Charlie Chaplin. Who would attract greater attention from an audience? Chaplin elected to dodge that issue.

In lieu of actual story, the principal player devised instead a procession of sketches, mixing slapstick comedy with unusual reversals, then bookending the bulk of those skits with introductory and final encounters centering on a love interest. This meant taking some new risks. Would screeners accept romantic behavior from the tramp? Could a melodrama in which a reveal is far more devastating than the complication actually succeed in holding viewer interest? Was dialogue, in fact, even necessary to maintain the concentration of a mass audience?

Apparently, the answers were yes, yes, and no. Hollywood didn't pay attention. Post-silent era releases have suffered artistic degradation as a consequence. What Chaplin realized and his fellow producers didn't, was that cinema was not an adjunct of theater. It had a separate goal and unique materials.

For a film to achieve full potential, it must primarily communicate visually. Otherwise, the story being presented is more appropriate for dramatic representation on a stage.

Oddly, at the same time he espoused sovereignty of gesture, Chaplin clung to Victorian conventions of set décor and theatrical properties. This dates some elements of his films, making them appear hopelessly antiquated. While Lloyd and Keaton were exploring location shooting, camera filters, and manipulations of space and time to create risible incongruities, Chaplin limited himself to exposing the infinite variability of human eccentricity. His concern was chiefly performance and its projection of human emotions. Expressionistic atmosphere generated by weird architecture and offbeat camera angles held no interest for him. A Chaplin film was all about character. Always.

So why does this one seem to seesaw between calculated vulgarity and subtle art? Partly because it was intended to provoke various censoring organizations which had made pillorying Chaplin and his performances a top priority. They had also closed down Charlie's pictures in many backwater movie houses, something that cried for potent response. Mocking municipal politicians, police, and laws was a form of retaliation adopted with gusto by Mr. Chaplin, very much in evidence throughout CITY LIGHTS.

Overindulgence in alcohol, fickle friendships of wealthy parasites living exclusively on unmerited profits, obedient servants willing to camouflage moral scruples in order to acquire money and security, unorthodox couplings in bedroom and boxing ring, dodges and frauds, illusions pursued far more diligently than realities --- these are components Chaplin chose as modelling clay from which to mold what he intended as scathing social satire. Words were superfluous, actions speaking here with greater clarity and power.

Unsurprisingly, a meeting between romanticizing flower girl and equally fantasy-bent prince of gutters occasioned more than three hundred takes to satisfy its author. Having painted himself into a corner by imagining a situation prior to fleshing out its participants, Chaplin was forced to shut down production for weeks, scrounging about mentally for a credible solution. Since there existed neither storyboarded plot nor any possible verbal bridge through dialogue, the problem loomed enormous and menacing, diverting time and thought from other aspects of storytelling. This may have caused dawdling repetitions in less significant scenes, such as a painfully sluggish episode in front of an art shop showcase, where the tramp's prurient fascination with a female

nude sculpture is quickly established, only to be revisited several more times with no further insight afforded. Similarly, attenuation of a scene where lush host pours alcohol intermittently into guest's baggy pants plays out at a sluggish pace disclosing no additional character discoveries, only mechanical reruns of initial setup. This may have been wildly enthusing to English music hall patrons, but it here only acts like a nail inching progressively deeper into a tire. Both images are equally deflating, anything but entertaining to watch.

What, then, is the allure of this film, causing so many perceptive critics to hail it as a cinematic masterpiece, Chaplin's finest achievement in film?

Could it be the music? Partly composed by the star himself, tunes are mostly ingratiating but shallow. They serve a surreptitious purpose of underlining essential shallowness generated by a hollow shell masquerading as a tragicomic tale of impossible, unrequited love.

The tremendous potency of a double duty climax and conclusion, where Chaplin balances adroitly on a tightrope between false sentimentality and stark horror, is unarguable. It's one of an assortment of grace notes managing collectively to supersede the film's failings as either astute social commentary or impassioned drama.

Again and again, the director follows tender romance immediately with either brusque farce or grim disillusionment. Think of the abrupt alteration in behavior exhibited by a deep-pocketed comrade towards his drinking buddy as soon as he sobers. Or a blind flower girl's accidental showering of the tramp when she leaves the fountain beside him. Just as pivotal is the termination of a delicately choreographed prize fight, one belied by actions immediately preceding it.

Viewer expectations are being consistently thwarted, resulting in mounting suspense and sustained fascination. Only the most confident of master artists would attempt such a feat. At this point in his career, Chaplin belonged in that category.

Climax, pugilism scenes, the second of two abortive suicide attempts, and a lit cigar farce still work efficiently, enough so they are fondly remembered. These and the timelessly spellbinding artistry of a veteran mime continue to

reward anyone watching this creaky Chaplin vehicle. Though a mixed bag overall, when highlights do occur, they are extremely lofty.

Lighting is low-key, yet sufficient.

Sparsely utilized sound is ingeniously integrated into the action.

Supporting players, namely everyone other than Chaplin, perform appropriately. However, as their personalities are mere stereotypes, none rise above the level of puppets. With the noteworthy exceptions of newsboy Robert Parrish, deadpan boxer Hank Mann, and minutely guided Virginia Cherrill as an indispensable Blind Flower Girl.

CITY LIGHTS cannot be recommended as a film, but is essential viewing to anyone wondering why Chaplin was the quintessential silent film performer. His ability here to coax water from a stone is truly incredible.

Not an appropriate film for preteen children due to situations already cited in the review above.

The Criterion Blu-Ray / DVD Combo Pack release includes the following bonus features:

1. audio commentary by Chaplin biographer Jeffrey Vance
2. Chaplin Today: CITY LIGHTS, a short 2003 documentary featuring insights from animator Peter Lord --- 27 minutes
3. Chaplin Studios: Creative Freedom by Design with visual effects technician Craig Barron --- 16 minutes
4. Production Footage --- 9 minutes
5. Costume Test --- 7 ½ minutes
6. Rehearsal Footage --- 1 ½ minutes
7. Unused Scene --- 1 ¼ minutes
8. Excerpt from Chaplin's 1915 short THE CHAMPION --- 9 ¼ minutes
9. Documentary Footage of Chaplin Clowning with Boxers from 1918 --- 4 ¾ minutes
10. Trailers --- 9 total minutes
11. Booklet including an essay by critic Gary Giddins and a 1966 interview with Charles Chaplin

Kino Ken is indebted to Gary Tooze at www.dvdbeaver.com for timings on the special features above.