



Funny FACE

Words: LARA BRUNT

When Charlie Chaplin's hastily assembled 'Little Tramp', with his toothbrush moustache, bowler hat and cane, first bumbled onto a movie set in Los Angeles in 1914, he didn't just make 'em laugh; he created one of the most iconic characters in film history. A century later, the silent film star, who went on to make over 80 movies in a career spanning two World Wars and lasting until the Swinging 60s, is still revered as one of Hollywood's finest.

"Charlie Chaplin was among the first true celebrities of the film industry," says Lisa Stein Haven, a Chaplin expert and assistant professor of English at Ohio University. While scholars and fans continue to discuss the genius of Chaplin – just last month, a four-day conference was held in Bologna, Italy, to celebrate the centenary of the Little Tramp – his 1964 autobiography reveals how the legendary character came about by chance.

While shooting Mabel's Strange Predicament at Keystone in 1914, the studio's formidable founder, Mack Sennett, felt the short film was

It's 100 years since Charlie Chaplin debuted his iconic 'Little Tramp' character. AIR looks at how the silent film star shaped Hollywood

light on gags. He ordered Chaplin, a recent recruit, to put on "comedy make-up" to inject some laughs. "I had no idea what make-up to put on," Chaplin recalled. "However, on the way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large."

1. As the 'Little Tramp', circa 1920s
2. The Gold Rush (1925) with Georgia Hale
3. Modern Times (1936)
4. On the set of The Gold Rush
5. Behind the camera in 1935
6. The Pilgrim (1923)

The then 24-year-old added a moustache to age his face without masking his expressions and the look was complete. “The moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up made me feel the person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked on to the stage he was fully born,” he wrote. And the plucky, anti-authoritarian interloper was an instant hit with audiences across the globe.

Charles Spencer Chaplin was born in London in 1889 to parents who were both music hall performers. His childhood was marked by poverty and hardship, with an absent father and mentally unstable mother. After spending time in workhouses, the young Chaplin began acting and then worked as a comedian in vaudeville, which eventually took him to the US in 1910. “Most of his silent films and even the Little Tramp character are based on his experiences in south London. It affected him throughout his career,” says Stein Haven.

After touring the US with a theatre troupe, Chaplin was offered a motion picture contract with Keystone in 1914. That same year, he appeared in 35 short films, starring as the Little Tramp in nearly all, and directing 20. “Once he got that power [to direct], he kept changing film companies in order to get more control,” says Stein Haven. He made 15 films at Essanay, followed by a dozen more at Mutual. When his contract expired in 1917, Chaplin decided to become an independent producer and built his own studio



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in a bid for even greater artistic freedom and longer production times.

His next move would have a lasting impact on how the movie business operated. In 1919, Chaplin joined forces with actors Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks and director D.W. Griffith to form United Artists, the first major production company to be controlled by artists

rather than suits. “At the time, the film companies paid actors on a bit actor scale to keep salaries low; the formation of United Artists prevented that from happening,” says Stein Haven. It also started the trend among studios to distribute films other than those they produced.

While improvisation and slapstick made him famous, Chaplin also saw



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the need to express the subtlety of a character. “His first feature film, *The Kid*, in 1921 was one of the first films to combine comedy and pathos and influenced many filmmakers of the day,” says Stein Haven. After 70 comedies in which he had appeared in every scene, Chaplin directed his first serious film, 1923’s *A Woman of Paris*. Praised by critics, audiences were not prepared to pay to see a film in which their idol did not appear.

The introduction of sound in the late 1920s proved an even greater challenge. Fearing his global audience would shrink if the Little Tramp began to speak in English,

Chaplin refused to embrace the new technology. “Although he had many people telling him it would be an easy transition, he was adamant he’d make more money if he stayed silent,” says Stein Haven. In a bold move, he went on to make two more silent films, *City Lights* in 1931 and *Modern Times* in 1936, nearly 10 years after the first ‘talkie’.

It was also during this period that the silent film star found his political voice. “During a world tour to promote *City Lights* he changed his whole philosophy about films and social issues. His eyes were opened to the devastation the Great Depression had caused outside of

America,” says Stein Haven. His next film – and first talkie – was 1940’s *The Great Dictator*, which poked fun at Adolf Hitler. “We now consider those films masterpieces because of their messages as well as their artistic qualities. But at the time, people weren’t happy to see Chaplin doing that sort of thing,” says Stein Haven.

While personal scandals dogged Chaplin throughout his career, from the “slacker” label he acquired during WWI for not enlisting in the British Army to his numerous marriages to much younger women, it wasn’t until the 1940s that his popularity rapidly declined. “The

final speech from *The Great Dictator* is very political and that began to turn the tide against him,” says Stein Haven. He campaigned vigorously on behalf of the Russian War Relief Fund, views that were seen as pro-Communist, and therefore anti-American.

By 1947, amid intense anti-Communist feeling, the US government openly questioned his moral and political views. “Chaplin’s philosophical leanings were very fluid; he never signed up for the Communist party. Instead, he wanted to spout whatever political philosophy he was interested in at the time,” says Stein Haven. In 1952, while Chaplin was in London attending the premiere of his latest film, *Limelight*, his re-entry permit to the US was revoked. “He knew his number was up,” she adds.

Chaplin moved to Switzerland



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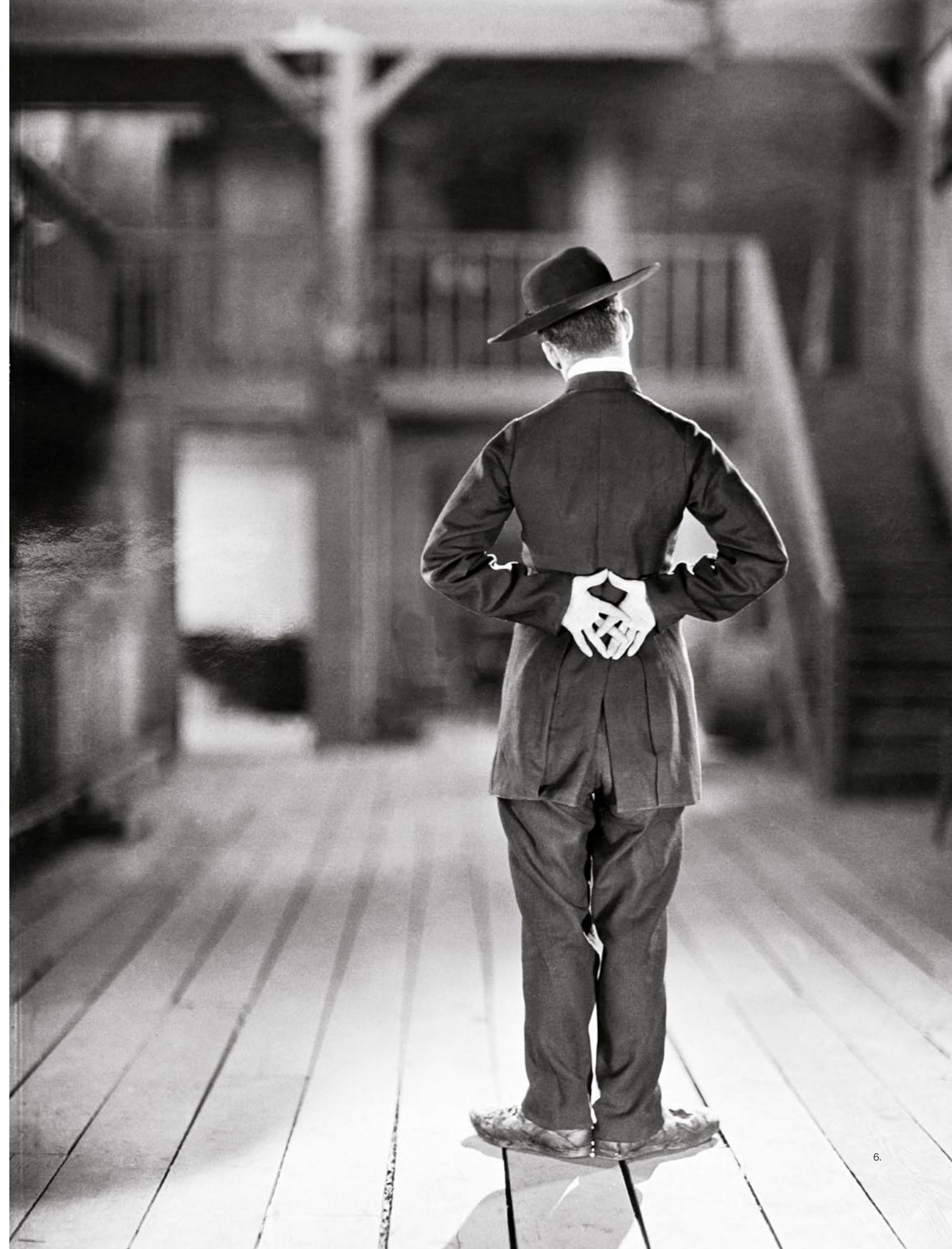
*‘He probably should have stopped with *Limelight*, which, ironically, was about an ageing comedian’*



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with his fourth wife, Oona. He made two more films: *A King in New York* in 1957, satirising the political paranoia of the Cold War era, and *A Countess from Hong Kong* in 1967, starring Marlon Brando and Sophia Loren. “It failed because the script was out-dated and Brando and Loren had no chemistry,” says Stein Haven. “He probably should have stopped with *Limelight*, which, ironically, was about an ageing comedian.”

The filmmaker returned to the US in 1972, aged 82, to accept an honorary Oscar for “the incalculable effect he has had in making motion pictures the art form of this century”. After a 12-minute standing ovation, the Little Tramp was handed his trademark hat and cane for the last time. The inimitable actor, writer, producer, director and composer died of natural causes five years later, having made the world laugh more than any other man before him.



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