

Chaplin in "Modern Times"

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IF you have had fears, prepare to shed them; Charlie Chaplin is on the side of the angels. After years of rumors, charges and counter-charges, reports of censorship and hints of disaster, his new film, *Modern Times*, had its world premiere (gala) last week at the Rivoli Theatre, with the riot squad outside quelling the curious mob and with the usual fabulous first-night Broadway audience gazing with some doubt at a figure which didn't seem to be quite the old Charlie. For the first time an American film was daring to challenge the superiority of an industrial civilization based upon the creed of men who sit at flat-topped desks and press buttons demanding more speed from tortured employees. There were cops beating demonstrators and shooting down the unemployed (specifically the father of the waif who is later picked up by Chaplin), there is a belt line which operates at such a pace that men go insane, there is a heart-breaking scene of the helpless couple trying to squeeze out happiness in a little home of their own (a shack in a Hooverville colony). It is the story of a pathetic little man trying bravely to hold up his end in this mad world.

Chaplin's methods are too kindly for great satire but by the very implication of the facts with which he deals, he has created a biting commentary upon our civilization. He has made high humor out of material which is fundamentally tragic. If it were used for bad purposes, if it were made to cover up the hideousness of life and to excuse it, it would be the usual Hollywood product. But the hilarity is never an opiate. When the little man picks up a red flag which has dropped from the rear of a truck and finds himself at the head of a workers' demonstration, it is an uproarious moment, but it is followed by the truth—the cops doing their daily dozen on the heads of the marchers. In the entire film, there is only one moment where he seems to slip. After he meets the girl and gets out of jail for the third time, he hears that the factory is starting up again. What he wants most in the world is a home, where he and his girl can settle down and be happy. It is the same factory where he has previously gone berserk on the assembly line. From the radical point of view, the classic ending would have been Chaplin once again on the belt line, eager to do his best and finding anew that what a man had to look forward to in that hell-hole was servitude and final collapse. Instead of this there is a very funny scene where Charlie and Chester Conklin get mixed up in the machinery in attempting to get it ready for production. Just when they have it ready, a

man comes along and orders them out on strike. At this point I was worried. "Uh-huh," I said to myself. "Here it comes. The usual stuff about the irresponsible workers, the bums who won't work when they have a chance." But what follows is a scene of the strikers being beaten up by the police and Charlie back again at his life of struggle. Except for that one sequence the film is strictly honest and right. It is never for a moment twisted about to make a point which will negate everything that has gone before.

If I make it seem ponderous and social rather than hilarious, it is because I came away stunned at the thought that such a film had been made and was being distributed. It's what we have dreamt about and never really expected to see. What luck that the only man in the world able to do it should be doing it! Chaplin has done the entire thing himself, from the financing to the final artistic product. He wrote it, acted in it, directed it, cut it, wrote the music for it and is seeing that it is sold to the distributors who have been frantic to get it. It is not a social document, it is not a revolu-

tionary tract, it is one of the funniest of all Chaplin films, but it is certainly no comfort to the enemy. If they like it, it will be because they are content to overlook the significance of it for the sake of the humor.

And humorous it is. Chaplin has never had a more belly-shaking scene than the one where he is being fed by the automatic machine, with the corn-on-the-cob attachment going daft. The Hooverville hut is a miracle of ruin. When he opens the door, he is brained by a loose beam; when he leans against another door, he finds himself half-drowned in the creek; when he takes up a broom, the roof, which it has been supporting, falls in. He comes dashing out of the dog house for his morning dip and alights in two inches of water in a ditch.

Religion comes off a trifle scorched in the scene where the minister's wife, suffering from gas on the stomach, comes to visit the prisoners in jail. There are hundreds of little characteristic bits which build up the picture of Mr. Common Man faced by life. To the gratification of the world, Chaplin brings back his old roller-skating act, teeter-

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ing crabily on the edge of the rotunda in the department store where he is spending the night (one night only) as a watchman. He gives the waif (splendidly played by Paulette Goddard) her first good meal in months and a night's rest in a bed in the furniture department. His desire to get away from the cruel world is so strong that he deliberately gets himself arrested, stoking up with two full meals in a cafeteria and then rapping on the window for the attention of a policeman when he nears the cashier's desk.

From the standpoint of humor, however, the picture is not a steady roar. The reason for it is simple: You can't be jocular about such things as starvation and unemployment. Even the people who are least affected by the misery of others are not comfortable when they see it. They are not moved by it; they resent it. "What do you want to bring up a lot of things like that for?" That Chaplin has been able to present a comic statement of serious matters without perverting the problem into a joke is all the more to his credit. It is a triumph not only of his art but of his heart. What his political views are, I don't know and don't care. He has the feelings of an honest man and that is enough. There are plenty of people in Hollywood with honest feelings but with the distributive machinery in the hands of the most reactionary forces in the country, there is no possibility of honesty in films dealing with current ideas. It is this fact which makes *Modern Times* such an epoch-making event from our point of view. As I say, only Chaplin could have done it. Except for the one scene I have mentioned, he has never sacrificed the strict line of the story for a laugh. That is so rare as to be practically unknown in films. *Modern Times* itself is rare. To anyone who has studied the set-up, financial and ideological, of Hollywood, *Modern Times* is not so much a fine motion picture as an historical event.

STUART DAVIS, secretary of the American Artists' Congress, will open the Friday evening meeting at Town Hall with an outline of the events leading up to the Congress. The complete program of this open session includes the following: Paul Manship, on the threat of fascism to the established artists; Rockwell Kent, "What Is Worth Fighting For?"; Joe Jones, "Suppression of American Art"; Heywood Broun, "Suppression in Letters"; Margaret Bourke-White, "The Position of the Artist in the Soviet Union"; Aaron Douglas, "The Negro in American Culture"; George Biddle, "Nazi Olympics Art Show." Peter Blume will speak on "The Artist Must Choose." (Admission, 35 cents to \$1.10.)

The closed sessions will be held at the New School for Social Research. On Saturday morning Jerome Klein, Meyer Schapiro and Lynd Ward will discuss problems and methods of group action. The afternoon session will be devoted to "Problems of the American Artist"; the Sunday morning session to "Economic Problems of the American Artist." Plans for a permanent organization will be discussed at the final session on Sunday afternoon.

Readers desiring to enter our current Cartoon Title Contest should watch the column of contest news which appears every week in our full-page advertisement in THE NEW MASSES. By following the directions given they will be able to avoid making mistakes in sending their entries.

Another meeting of physicians has been called by THE NEW MASSES for Thursday, February 13, at 8:30 P. M. in Room 608 at Steinway Hall (111 West 57th Street, New York City). The program and organization committee, named at the last meeting, will make its report.

T. Maxwell and Sophie Anzel have back copies of THE NEW MASSES which are available to organizations or individuals interested.

The Theater Union Sunday Night program (February 16 at the Civic Repertory Theater) includes a new play by John Wexley: *Running Dogs*, on the subject of the Red Army in China. Among the other numbers on an interesting program for the benefit of the Theater Union's \$15,000 drive are *A Letter to the President* and a number of *Satires in Song*, by Paul Peters and George Sklar with music by Jerome Moross.

Seymour Waldman's article in this issue is the first of three analyses on the war danger now facing the American people. The second article will appear in an early issue.

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