

# Film: FUNNY AND UNFUNNY

by John Muri

In the twenties, when theatre organ was an important part of American life, catering as it did to all ages successfully, theatres offered a mixture of entertainment for the childish and the adult, the mature and the immature, the silly and the serious. It worked. Today's movie theatre is much more limited in its service to the very young and the old, who are treated as if they were non-existent. Television and film experimenters are wallowing in an orgy of what A. Tofler calls "future shock." The current video-taping of old Chaplin and Charlie Chan movies is a fascinating union of old material with new technology, but some of the tech boys don't want to stop with that. Gene Youngblood has written a lengthy book praising what he calls "expanded cinema," the presumptive movie of the future, in which the action becomes merely videotronics or computer-film in multiple-projection environments, reproducing for man's finite mind "the circumambient universe." Maybe you can figure that one out; I can't. Youngblood is convinced that many current filmmakers (like Alfred Hitchcock) have not tried to expand what he calls "awareness" but have simply manipulated old dramatic conventions for emotional effect. What has come out of the experimentation to date is some expensive tinkering with electronic and photographic machinery. The subject calls for extended treatment elsewhere, but it is mentioned here for its contrast with the kinds of movies we have been using at theatre organ shows.

Our appeal, justification, or excuse for the use of old films is nostalgia, a return to the by-gone, the ancient, or the primitive. Films of the twenties are most often used, and we shall have soon completed twenty

years of such showings. We have run and re-run Laurel and Hardy's *Two Tars* and *Big Business* to the point where many of us can mentally rehearse the film scene by scene. I suspect that many of our audiences can do the same.

It ought to be well known that not all old silent movies are good movies. Countless numbers of them are very bad and much less tolerable because current movies, despite the viciousness of modern film-plots and language, are technically much better than films ever were in the twenties. Furthermore, certain acting practices that were acceptable fifty years ago are now ridiculous. Audiences usually laugh at the name and characterization of "Mammy Pleasant" in the old horror movie, *The Cat and the Canary*. There are scenes in *The Phantom of the Opera* that are ludicrous, particularly when the heroine is taken into the Opera House caverns riding a horse led by the Phantom. Shade of Lady Godiva! The scene invariably invokes laughter. The film *Metropolis* is good futuristic social commentary, but it has more ham acting than ought to be permitted. The hero's actions are laughable. One special caution is in order: when renting old films for public showing, one should not fail to preview each print, because many of them are badly made. They can be too dark, too light, or they may lack definition.

Comedy films have been the most successful. Laurel and Hardy films are excellent, but they have been (and still are being) over-run. They

Mr. Muri's opinions expressed herein are his own and do not necessarily reflect the policies of ATOS or THE-ATRE ORGAN Magazine.

are shown in pizza restaurants and taverns from one end of the country to the other. There is some evidence that pizza-parlor organ-film exhibits can hurt attendance at local chapter-sponsored organ programs. Charles Chaplin's older comedies are consistently good and funny, but they, too, seem to be over-run. Some people complain of Chaplin's occasional vulgarity. His longer comedies (*Modern Times*, *City Lights*, *The Circus*) are best suited to silent accompaniments. The sound-track scores (Chaplin's own music) are dull and repetitive, but the films have not been publicly over-exposed. Shut off the sound-tracks and get a good organist.

Some comedy material by Harold Lloyd is available, but one must select it carefully. *His Royal Snyssness* is a generally unfunny film. Pare Lorentz, a respected film critic of the twenties and afterward, thought that Lloyd was lacking in "the comic sense." Personally, Lloyd did not exude humor, but the situations he got into were funny.

Larry Semon's comedies (*The Sawmill*, *School Days*) were expensively well-made by the Vitagraph company, but his characterization alternates between childishness and effeminacy. The same can be said of Harry Langdon's work. Some of it is riotous, but at least half of the available film is too childish for mature audiences. It was the least popular group in a series of comedies I accompanied at the Detroit Art Institute last year. A few comedies with Charley Chase are around, but one had better again be selective. Chase made some hilarious comedies for Metro, but they are not on the market. The *Our Gang* series has some good items, but many of them just drag along.

Several comedies are now on sale under the trademark "Educational," a company owned by E.F. Hammons in the twenties. They were usually cheaply made films starring some good comedians like Lloyd Hamilton and Andy Clyde, but the audiences (for whom I played dozens of these comedies) did not find much to laugh at. The films seemed to have been made in speed and desperation, for director Norman Taurog, who made a lot of the Educationals, resorted to throwing live dogs and cats around to get laughs. One had

better pick carefully among the Educational. There are a few comedies by Alice Howell, Max Davidson, Gail Henry, "Sweedie" (Wallace Beery), "Ambrose" (Mack Swain), Fatty Arbuckle (most of them good), "Hogan" (Charley Murray), and the then-popular teams of John Bunny-Flora Finch, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew, and Harry Myers-Rosemary Theby. The team of Eddie Lyons-Lee Moran was good, but I can't find any of their products. The few available Snub Pollard comedies are weak.

We are fortunate that we have not yet exhausted the available supply of silent comedy. A rather widely-held view among those sponsoring organ-film shows is that comedy "goes over" better than serious films. Conversely, this is unfortunate, since there is some fine serious film on the market. Part of the trouble lies with our audiences who have been so conditioned to fragmented television movies and meaningless action that they have trouble following an extended story.

If it is true that patronage of theatre organ shows has declined in 1979, then it is none too soon for us to evaluate our silent-film offerings and make appropriate adjustments. If audiences are going to laugh at quaint or badly-made films (and pioneer films are good examples of rough film-editing, cheap settings, and over-acting), it's a certainty that such films cannot attract modern audiences indefinitely. □

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## Closing Chord

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**Marvin C. Bachofer**, longtime member and officer of the Rochester Theater Organ Society, died on February 29th.

Having a love for the theatre pipe organ since his youth, his teacher was the late J. Gordon Baldwin, active in Rochester theatres. As an RTOS member, he served in numerous capacities, including publicity director and senior citizens coordinator. He was a member of the board since 1974.

He is survived by his wife, Marion, a son, David, a daughter Nancy and two grandchildren. □

## ATOS Member Receives Distinguished Award

Richard A. Nichols, past-chairman of the North Texas Chapter of ATOS, has been named a Rockwell International Engineer of the Year as part of that company's annual program to honor its scientific and engineering community.

Nichols is a design engineer for the company's Collins Transmission Systems Division in Dallas, Texas.

In making the announcement, Rockwell International President Donald R. Beall said, "The Engineer of the Year honor is awarded annually in recognition of demonstrated technical excellence in engineering or scientific activities relevant to our company's business. The award takes on special significance when measured against the outstanding technological performance of Rockwell International's 15,000 engineers and scientists."

Nichols has been with Rockwell International for 27 years, having joined Collins Radio Company in 1953. (Rockwell acquired Collins Radio in 1973.) He is currently involved in the company's microwave product line.

"Dick's outstanding technical leadership, design expertise and high



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engineering standards are traits which have consistently resulted in significant contributions to the company's satellite and terrestrial telecommunications program," said Robert L. Cattoi, staff vice president of Engineering for Rockwell.

Rockwell International is the leading supplier in the digital and analog microwave market.

Nichols is a native of Preston, Kansas, and a graduate of Preston Consolidated High School. He attended Pratt Junior College, Kansas, and earned a BS degree in electrical engineering from Kansas State College in 1953. He holds four patents and is a charter member of the National Management Association, Dallas Chapter. □

### OFFICIAL NOTICE

## 1980 ATOS Annual Membership Meeting

HORNCHURCH, ENGLAND  
WEDNESDAY, JULY 23, 1980  
2:30 in the afternoon