

# City Lights

By Jeffrey Vance

“City Lights” (1931) is not only Charles Chaplin’s masterpiece; it is an act of defiance. The film premiered four years into the era of talking pictures, which had roared into cinemas with “The Jazz Singer” (1927). “City Lights” audaciously mocks the “talkies” in the opening scene and reminds the world of the beauty and artistry of silent film. “City Lights” is Chaplin’s most satisfying balance of comedy and pathos (the film is subtitled “A Comedy Romance in Pantomime”) and the apotheosis of the Little Tramp character.



*Charlie Chaplin as The Tramp and The Blind Girl (Virginia Cherrill) in a scene from the film. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.*

The perfection of “City Lights” was not achieved without pain. The film took two years to make. Chaplin was nervous about the talking film revolution, distressed by the death of his mother, and obsessive in his quest for simplicity in his storytelling. But in the end, despite all the difficulties making it, Chaplin’s favorite of all his films was “City Lights.”

Chaplin’s unwillingness to discard the universality of the Tramp, compounded by the technical failures of the first talkies and the clumsy, stilted, and inartistic use of the new medium in its early stages, led him to begin his next film as a silent. As Chaplin wrote in his 1964 autobiography: “I did not wish to be the only adherent of the art of silent pictures... Nevertheless, “City Lights” was an ideal silent picture, and nothing could deter me from making it.” His only concession to the new medium would be a musical score of his own creation and sound effects that would be recorded for the film soundtrack.

Thus, “City Lights,” arguably the biggest gamble of Chaplin’s career, became one of his greatest triumphs, a lyrical and sublime comedy of timeless humor and beauty. The film contains some of Chaplin’s greatest sequences, including the film’s opening scene in which a stone statue is unveiled to reveal the Tramp asleep in its lap; later scenes in which the Tramp accidentally swallows a whistle; his fighting in a boxing match; and the celebrated finale in which the once-blind flower girl recognizes the Tramp as her benefactor.

The genius of “City Lights” lies in its simplicity. The

film tells the story of the Tramp’s love for a blind flower girl who mistakes him for a rich man. The Tramp’s devotion to the girl forces him to undertake a slew of menial jobs to earn the money to play the part of a gentleman. He also befriends an eccentric millionaire whom he saves from suicide in a moment of drunken depression. An alcoholic, the millionaire is expansive and treats the Tramp lavishly when intoxicated but forgets knowing him when he becomes sober.

The Tramp learns that the girl’s sight might be restored if she travels to Vienna for an operation. He unsuccessfully works as a street cleaner and as an amateur boxer to earn the money for her trip. Once again he encounters the inebriated millionaire, who gives him the money. A burglary of the millionaire’s home coincides with the gift; the event sobers up the millionaire, and the Tramp is suspected of the theft. He goes to prison, but not before he has given the money to the blind girl.

The Tramp is eventually released from prison in a dejected and tattered state. The flower girl, however, is now cured of her affliction and manages her own flower shop. She longs to meet her benefactor—whom she imagines to be handsome and rich. When the Tramp wanders in front of her prosperous shop, he gazes upon her with delight. She takes pity on him by offering him a flower and a coin. As he attempts to shuffle away, she presses the coin into

his hand, which she gradually recognizes by the touch. “You?” she asks him in an intertitle, realizing that he is the man who was her benefactor. He nods and says, “You can see now?” “Yes, I can see now,” she responds. This moment of recognition, which concludes the film, is perhaps the most sublime and celebrated sequence in all of silent cinema.

Throughout much of the work on “City Lights,” Chaplin was in an unusually nervous state over the risks of making an anachronistic silent film. Adding to his anxiety was Chaplin’s desire to create for the first time a fully developed and believable romance for the Tramp. It is with typical Chaplinesque irony that he would achieve his most satisfying cinematic romance with the one leading lady to whom he felt the least romantically attached.

Chaplin had auditioned many young actresses before he noticed twenty-year-old Virginia Cherrill when they both sat ringside at a boxing match at the Hollywood Legion Stadium. Although a beautiful blonde, it was the manner in which she coped with her near-sightedness that earned her the role. Chaplin devoted much time and energy to Cherrill, spending days choreographing and filming the first meeting sequence. He would not hesitate to retake a scene if he felt she was holding a flower improperly, if the timing of her movement was off, if she was not completely concentrating on the scene, or even if she spoke the line of dialogue, “flower, sir?”—which no one would hear in the finished film—incorrectly. Another problem that plagued Chaplin was his inability to craft a plausible reason for why she should assume the Tramp to be a rich man. His unrelenting direction of Cherrill in his quest for perfection was such that the scene in which they first meet would be filmed hundreds of times before Chaplin was satisfied. It continues to hold the Guinness World Record for most retakes of any one scene.

The final cut is one of the most poignant scenes in cinema history. Although the sequence is so sublime in its perfectly executed pantomime that it is almost impossible to describe in words, famed critic James

Agee has perhaps captured it better than anyone: “It is enough to shrivel the heart to see, and it is the greatest piece of acting and the highest moment in movies.”

On January 30, 1931, the world premiere of “City Lights” was held at the new Los Angeles Theatre, the last and most lavish of the great movie palaces built in Los Angeles. It was said to be one of the greatest premieres in Hollywood history up to that time, with a crowd of over 25,000 nearly causing a riot. Chaplin’s personal guests were Professor and Mrs. Albert Einstein. In the intervening three years since the advent of talking pictures, silent film had become a curiosity. Yet Chaplin turned the novelty of the film’s non-talking status to his advantage as a daring artistic choice. Chaplin’s negative cost for “City Lights” was \$1,607,351.63. The film eventually earned him a worldwide profit of \$5 million dollars (\$2 million domestically and \$3 million in foreign distribution), an enormous sum of money for the time.

In the final analysis, Chaplin had done what many thought impossible. He had produced a critically and commercially successful silent film three years after the demise of American silent cinema. More astonishingly was the “City Lights” reissue in 1950, when it was praised by “Life” magazine as “the best movie of 1950.” “City Lights” is Chaplin at the height of his powers, providing a loving look — and farewell — to the pure art of silent filmmaking.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Essay by Jeffrey Vance, adapted from his book Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003). Jeffrey Vance is a film historian, archivist, and author of the books Douglas Fairbanks, Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema, Harold Lloyd: Master Comedian, and Buster Keaton Remembered (with Eleanor Keaton). He is widely regarded as one of the world’s foremost authorities of Charles Chaplin.*