

# *The Kid*

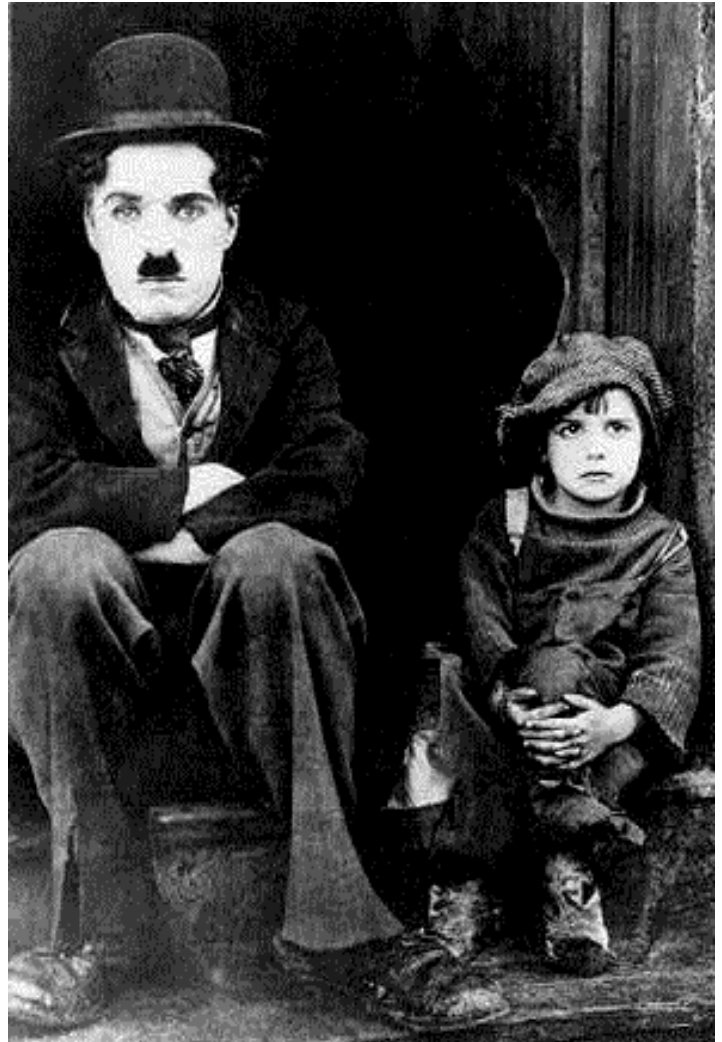
By Jeffrey Vance

“The Kid” (1921) is one of Charles Chaplin’s finest achievements and remains universally beloved by critics and audiences alike. The film is a perfect blend of comedy and drama and is arguably Chaplin’s most personal and autobiographical work. Many of the settings and the themes in the film come right out of Chaplin’s own impoverished London childhood. However, it was the combination of two events, one tragic (the death of his infant son) and one joyful (his chance meeting with Jackie Coogan), that led Chaplin to shape the tale of the abandoned child and the lonely Tramp.

The loss of three-day-old Norman Spencer Chaplin undoubtedly had a great effect on Chaplin, and the emotional pain appears to have triggered his creativity, as he began auditioning child actors at the Chaplin Studios ten days after his son’s death. It was during this period that Chaplin encountered a four-year-old child performer named Jackie Coogan at Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles, where his father had just performed an eccentric dance act. Chaplin spent more than an hour talking to Jackie in the lobby of the Alexandria Hotel, but the idea of using Jackie in a film did not occur to him. After he heard that Roscoe Arbuckle had just signed Coogan, Chaplin agonized over his missed opportunity. Later, he discovered that Arbuckle had signed Jack Coogan—the boy’s father.

Chaplin soon engaged the young Coogan at \$75 a week and began work on “The Kid,” which had the working title “The Waif.” Chaplin remembered in his 1964 autobiography: “All children in some form or another have genius; the trick is to bring it out in them. With Jackie it was easy. There were a few basic rules to learn in pantomime and Jackie very soon mastered them. He could apply emotion to the action and action to the emotion, and could repeat it time and time again without losing the effect of spontaneity.”

In the process of making “The Kid,” Chaplin integrated slapstick comedy with high drama for the first time in a feature-length film comedy—a pattern he followed and developed for the rest of his career. Chaplin wrote, “There had been satire, farce, realism, naturalism, melodrama and fantasy, but raw slapstick and sentiment, the premise of “The Kid,” was something of an innovation.”



*Charlie Chaplin as The Tramp sits in a doorway with the orphan he has taken under his wing (Jackie Coogan).*

Chaplin began filming on July 31, 1919 (filming ended on July 30, 1920, and all post-production work finished on December 29, 1920). Chaplin spent \$500,000 and devoted 18 months to “The Kid,” which was shot at and around his Hollywood studio and on the local locations of Los Angeles, Universal City, Pasadena, Eagle Rock, and Occidental College. Whether the artistic desire to film a retelling of his own childhood struck Chaplin the moment he signed Jackie Coogan, or whether his path to inspiration followed a more subtle evolution, Chaplin soon found himself filming his own youth.

The angel dream sequence has been criticized as incongruous with the rest of the film. Chaplin recalled being disappointed when British author and playwright James M. Barrie, the king of whimsy, thought the sequence was entirely unnecessary, to which Chaplin frankly responded that Barrie’s own 1916 play “A Kiss for Cinderella” had influenced him.

To play the flirting angel, Chaplin cast 12-year-old Lillita MacMurray, whom the director hired again (and gave her the professional sobriquet Lita Grey) as the leading lady for “The Gold Rush” (1925) when she was 15. Early in the production of “The Gold Rush,” she dropped out of the film to wed Chaplin in a marriage that brought him more unhappiness than his previous marriage to Mildred Harris.

The scene in which Jackie is taken away from Charlie is undoubtedly the most celebrated sequence in “The Kid.” Charlie and Jackie wage a heroic struggle (including Jackie wielding a hammer as if it were a mallet) against the orphanage officials who easily vanquish them. Jackie is forced into the back of a truck and begins to plead to be returned to his father. It is a powerful, raw performance which has lost none of its emotion with time. The officials soon drive Jackie away, another unfortunate stray plucked from the dirty streets. Chased by a police officer, Charlie performs an innovative and desperate race to the rescue as he trips across the rooftops in his frantic attempt to free Jackie from the authorities. The climax of the scene finds the Tramp fiercely beating back the officials and reclaiming his child. As the Tramp kisses the trembling boy on the lips, tears of joy, relief, and exhaustion stream down both their faces. It is a high point in cinema history.

The late Victorian setting of “The Kid” clearly reflects the London of Chaplin’s youth, particularly the attic room at 3 Pownall Terrace where Chaplin had lived. In his 1974 pictorial volume “My Life in Pictures,” Chaplin wrote of the garret the Tramp and the Kid shared: “A set means so much to me. I think myself into a thing and whatever comes out has been influenced a great deal by environment. This room was based to a large extent on the places in Lambeth and Kennington where Sydney and I had lived with our mother when we were children. Perhaps that’s why the film had some truth.”

*The Kid* had its world premiere on January 21, 1921, at New York City’s Carnegie Hall in a benefit for the Children’s Fund of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures. It is the one Chaplin film for which all the reviews were ecstatic. Chaplin later recalled, “The reviews of my pictures have always been mixed. The one *everybody* praised was “The Kid”—and then they went too far, talked about Shakespeare. Well, it wasn’t *that!*”

Fifty years later, Chaplin removed scenes from “The Kid” he thought might appear too sentimental to modern audiences and composed and recorded a musical score for the film’s theatrical reissue. It had its debut at the Film Society of Lincoln Center gala tribute to Chaplin, which took place on April 4, 1972, at Philharmonic Hall, New York City, and the 82-year-old himself was in attendance.

“The Kid” remains an important contribution to the art of film, not only because of Chaplin’s innovative use of dramatic sequences in a feature-length comedy, but also because of the revelations “The Kid” provides about its creator. Undoubtedly, when Chaplin penned the preface to “The Kid,” “A picture with a smile—and perhaps, a tear,” he had his own artistic credo in mind.

*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.*