

The Immigrant

By Jeffrey Vance

By 1916, two years after appearing in his first motion picture, Charles Chaplin had become the most famous entertainer in the world. Buoyed by the enormous success of the comedies he had made for the Keystone Film Company and later the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, he was offered the largest contract ever extended to a motion picture star—\$670,000 for a single year's work—to make 12 two-reel comedies at Mutual Film Corporation. For Mutual, Chaplin produced what many film historians believe to be his best works.

"The Immigrant," which contains elements of satire, irony, and romance as well as cinematic poetry, endures into the twenty-first century as a comic masterpiece. The film, Chaplin's eleventh in the Mutual-Chaplin Specials series, is the best-constructed of his two-reel films and was Chaplin's favorite among all his short comedies

The original idea for the film was a variation of "Trilby" set in the Latin Quarter of Paris, which evolved into a comedy about two immigrants who meet on a boat, part ways, and are reunited by a chance encounter, a menacing waiter, and an artist's enthusiasm. Chaplin had shot as much footage on "The Immigrant" as most directors would to photograph a feature-length production. In his efforts to refine the film continuously, he exposed more than 90,000 feet of negative (the finished film runs approximately 2,000 feet), and he went four days and nights without rest while editing the film to final length.

In devising "The Immigrant," Chaplin drew on his own experiences immigrating to the United States and attempted to find the humor in otherwise traumatic aspects of coming to a new land. Chaplin conjures many funny gags out of the hardships of an Atlantic passage on an immigrant vessel. The rocking effect of the boat itself, which was partly achieved by a heavy pendulum that was fitted to the camera head, enhanced these gags. Tothorh put the camera on a special tripod that allowed it to rock from side to side. Once the ship moved, the camera moved as well. The rocking interior of the dining hall was a studio set built on rockers. With the rocking effect perfected, Chaplin was free to fashion every seasick gag imaginable. He also found material for the film in his experience as an outsider careful with his money upon his arrival to America. During that time, Chaplin was in-



Charlie Chaplin and Edna Purviance aboard ship on their way to America.

timidated by waiters and realized that others shared similar feelings. This fear was the spark for the café sequence.

Chaplin was justifiably pleased with the film's opening gag, which contained the element of surprise. He wrote in 1918:

Figuring out what the audience expects, and then doing something different, is great fun to me. In one of my pictures, "The Immigrant," the opening scene showed me leaning far over the side of a ship. Only my back could be seen and from the conclusive shudders of my shoulders it looked as though I was seasick. If I had been, it would have been a terrible mistake to show it in the picture. What I was doing was deliberately misleading the audience. Because, when I straightened up, I pulled a fish on the end of a line into view, and the audience saw that, instead of being seasick, I had been leaning over the side to catch the fish. It came as a total surprise and got a roar of laughter.

The gag foreshadows a similar gag in the most celebrated moment in "The Idle Class" (1921), in which Chaplin, with his back to the camera, appears to be sobbing, yet when he turns around, he is actually mixing himself a drink with a cocktail shaker.

Undertones of social criticism are suggested in “The Immigrant,” the first of many Chaplin films to contain such themes, which were seldom found in comedy films of this period. For instance, when the immigrants first see the Statue of Liberty the immigration officials rope all the foreigners together like cattle, causing Charlie to cast a quizzical second look at the land of the free. When an immigration officer turns away from Charlie, Charlie kicks him in the backside. Carlyle Robinson, Chaplin’s publicity director, joined Chaplin’s organization on the day the dailies of this sequence were being screened. Chaplin asked his new employee what he thought of them.

“Very funny and very realistic,” Robinson replied.
“Do you find anything shocking in it?”
“Not that I can recall.”

Apparently, the social criticism issue had been raised by one of Chaplin’s associates, and Robinson’s answer satisfied Chaplin. As Robinson affirmed, “The scene was kept in the final version of the film and there was never the least complaint.” Indeed, the critics were not put off by traces of social commentary in the film. Julian Johnson wrote in *Photoplay* magazine, “In its roughness and apparent simplicity it is as much a jewel as a story by O. Henry, and no full-time farce seen on our stages in years has been more adroitly, more perfectly worked out.”

“The Immigrant” also is significant in Chaplin’s evolution as a filmmaker because it is the first film in which his character embarks upon a full-fledged romantic relationship. To help evoke a romantic mood

on the set, Chaplin—like many filmmakers of the silent era—employed “mood” musicians to play music off-camera while scenes were being filmed. Chaplin wrote in his 1964 autobiography, “Even in those early comedies I strove for mood; usually music created it. An old song called ‘Mrs. Grundy’ created the mood for “The Immigrant.” The tune had a wistful tenderness that suggested two lonely derelicts getting married on a doleful, rainy day.”

Chaplin recalled that he worked harder on portions of this film (especially the restaurant scene) than any other comedy he made up until that time. He retained a special place in his memory for the film. He wrote in his 1974 pictorial volume “My Life in Pictures,” “The Immigrant” touched me more than any other film I made. I thought the end had quite a poetic feeling.”

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.