

Safety Last

By Richard W. Bann

A man wearing glasses and a straw hat, dangling from a clock atop a tall building. This image of Harold Lloyd, the King of Daredevil Comedy, remains the single most famous and enduring scene from any silent film ever made.

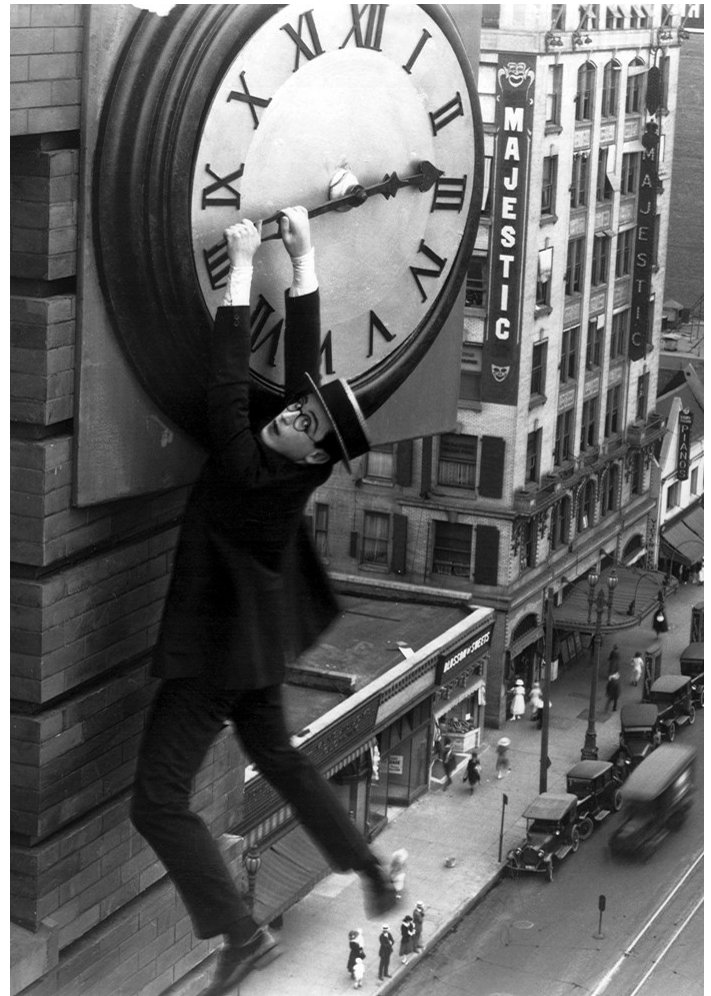
Harold Lloyd actually hated heights, but realized that movie audiences would be as frightened watching his “thrill films” as he was making them. He also realized that to be truly frightening, the experience had to be real or seem real. There was no trick photography employed in the making of “Safety Last!” neither during shooting nor during post-production. Not mirrors, not animation, not glass shots, not double exposures, and not rear-screen projection of previously photographed backgrounds.

One day in July 1922, Harold Lloyd spied a group of people in downtown Los Angeles watching a man climbing the side of a building as a publicity stunt. “I watched him scale this whole building ... Well, it made such a terrific impression on me, and stirred my emotions to such a degree that I thought, ‘My, if I can possibly do that to an audience – if I capture that on the screen – I think I’ve got something that’s never been done before.’”

Hal Roach, who produced “Safety Last!,” summed up the secret to a successful film: “Give an audience someone to like, and ... a story that average people can relate to.” Roach did just that in the more than one thousand short comedies and feature films he produced. And even though they weren’t scaling great heights, audiences identified with Lloyd’s character and how he is driven by the American success ethic and ambitious, optimistic spirit of the 1920s.

Lloyd and Roach hired Bill Strother, the “human spider” that Lloyd had witnessed, and built a story around the stunt, planning to use Strother to double the star. Certain stunts were too risky even for the exceptionally athletic Lloyd. Lloyd’s innate athleticism had recently been compromised when a prop bomb he was holding exploded, causing the loss of the thumb and forefinger of his right hand (his disability concealed by gloves). Most of the time we are indeed watching Harold Lloyd risk his life to perform these daring feats, and he was always as high above the street below as he appears to be.

During the silent era, scripts at Hal Roach Studios ran only a few pages at most. The film’s pressbook



Crowds below watch Harold Lloyd hanging around. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

states the studio never *did* have a written script for “Safety Last!” Title-writer Harley M. Walker wrote his text-titles after the first rough-cut and these pages constitute the closest extant document to a written scenario. Even before those titles were written though, filming began.

“We figured out the climb and shot that first,” Hal Roach recalled. “Running it as a test in the projection room in front of the entire studio and office force, we knew we had something exciting for the public. Only when that was finished did we go back and work out *why* Harold left his small town and how the story could lead up to the great finish we believed we had.”

The film crew, helmed by co-directors Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, worked on top of several successively taller buildings and the camera angles created the necessary illusion of distance and perspective, always keeping the street below in full view. Cameramen shot in such a way to match the horizon and capture the height and the sheer drop

but miss the safety platform below. If anyone fell, they'd drop two or three stories onto thick mattresses.

As Harold Lloyd remarked, "Who wants to fall three stories? ... The platform had no railings round it because that interfered with the camera shooting downward ... If anything happened, and you had to jump or fall to this platform, you would have to make sure and fall flat, because if you bounced, that would be the end."

Lloyd loved telling the story of the day the crew performed an experiment to test the alleged safety platform. They "dropped a dummy onto one of the platforms and it bounced off and down into the street," Lloyd laughed. "I must have been crazy to do this picture.

"The funny part is that whenever I'd done one of these sequences, I was scared to death the first couple of days. In fact, we accomplished practically nothing. I was scared to death to hardly move around up there. But after you were up there a while, then you got to another state of getting so much confidence that you had an *over-confidence*. And you'd do a certain number of hazardous things that you had no right to do. I'd walk out clear beyond the platform sometimes."

Roach recalled, "When people on the street found out we were shooting scenes with Harold Lloyd, sometimes we nearly had riots with the crowds as they gathered to watch. But everyone would stop, breathless, as the cameras turned during action. When we cut the camera, people applauded."

Mildred Davis, who played Harold's charming and winsome sweetheart, was so afraid of heights that during the closing scenes atop the building near the edge, two crew members in prone positions out of camera range were holding onto the actress by her ankles! This picture marked the end of Davis' contract with Roach and Lloyd, and she announced she was leaving to make movies elsewhere. But just as in "Safety Last!," Harold got the girl off screen, too.

He offered Mildred a marriage contract to replace her film contract.

When the film finally opened after a number of preview screenings, many theaters employed ambulance drivers to stand by for patrons who fainted from the realism ... and some did faint. Box office records fell – the studio realized a 580 percent return on their investment. Few movies throughout the industry's history could match that level of success.

The "Variety" review read, "This picture could open, say, in a city the size of Buffalo, Sunday afternoon, and before six o'clock that evening everybody in town will have heard of it. That's the kind of comedy it is...." "Safety Last!" will make all of the nation laughLloyd looks like a picture staple in the comedy line for all time."

In the trade paper "Motion Picture Herald," an exhibitor in Portland, Oregon wrote, "They are tearing the arms off the chairs and laughing so loudly the organist can't hear himself play."

When "Safety Last!" was released, an ailing President Warren G. Harding was urged by his physicians to have the picture screened at the White House as a remedy. Harding's time was well-rewarded. His thank you letters to Hal Roach and Harold Lloyd said the same thing, "Loved it!"

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Film historian Richard W. Bann, formerly with Blackhawk Films, spent \$4 million restoring and preserving the Hal Roach film library, has co-authored Laurel & Hardy also The Little Rascals: The Life and Times of Our Gang, and conceived and contributed to the revised Hollywood Corral: A Comprehensive B-Western Roundup. He is active with the Lone Pine Film Festival, and ever at work on the authorized Hal Roach biography and Movies At The Playboy Mansion.