

The Strong Man

By Bill Schelly

When film critic and screenwriter James Agee wrote his influential essay "Comedy's Greatest Era" for "Life" magazine in 1949, he deemed four silent movie clowns as the kings of comedy. They were Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon. The least successful of the group, Langdon nevertheless deserved inclusion due to his highly accomplished, specialized brand of comic acting and pantomime, which, for a time, made him an important box office draw.

Langdon came late to films, debuting at the age of thirty-nine in "Picking Peaches" (1924), after having achieved substantial fame as a vaudeville comedian. It was the first of twenty-two short comedies, nearly all made at Mack Studios. As his elfin, hapless comedy persona emerged, Langdon's popularity grew until he graduated to feature films in 1926 with "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," a modest hit directed by Harry Edwards for Langdon's own Harry Langdon Corporation. The comedian's co-star in that film was a young Joan Crawford.

With "The Strong Man," Langdon's second self-produced feature, Frank Capra was promoted from writer to director, replacing Harry Edwards because the prior feature had gone over budget. The story was by Arthur Ripley, Langdon's chief writer for the past year, and the "adaptation" was credited to Tim Whelan, Tay Garnett, James Langdon (the comedian's brother) and Hal Conklin. Cinematography was by Elgin Lessley.

Langdon plays a young Belgian doughboy who loves an American woman he has only known through Red Cross correspondence. Her photograph gives no hint that she is blind. To portray Mary Brown, the comedian put a young actress named Priscilla Bonner under contract. Although just twenty-five, Bonner had been acting in films since 1920, having co-starred with Charles Ray, Lon Chaney and Colleen Moore.

The story has five acts. Act 1: The trenches of World War I in Europe, where Harry first encounters Zandow (the strong man, played by Arthur Thalasso), an enemy soldier. Act 2: His arrival in America as assistant to the vaudevillian The Great Zandow. Act 3: Harry's search for Mary Brown in New York City,



This ad for the film appeared in a fall 1926 edition of Motion Picture News. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

where he is victimized by a vamp (Gertrude Astor) who pretends to be his sweetheart. Act 4: Riding in a bus on a vaudeville circuit with Zandow. Act 5: The longest section of the film, showing Harry's arrival in Cloverdale, where he finally meets Mary Brown, and saves the small town from ruthless bootleggers.

Each sequence was written to showcase Harry Langdon's unique comedic and pantomime skills, and gave him the chance to prove that he was not only a brilliant comedian, but an actor of rare ability. At the U. S. Immigration station on Ellis Island, he salutes the American flag army style, then with his own elfin wave, certainly a more personal sign of allegiance. He greets America with the same tentative optimism he offers any friendly stranger. In New York City, he searches for his sweetheart by planting himself on a bustling street corner and comparing his tattered photograph to the faces of passing women. When a vamp lures him in her apartment, she chases Harry around the room in a burlesque of sex-

ual seduction, with the usual male-female roles reversed. On the way to Cloverdale, Harry has caught a cold, and tries to take a spoonful of medicine in the bumpy bus, getting into a contretemps with another passenger after sneezing the medicine onto the man. Langdon performs a masterful, extended pantomime routine, which ends with him being thrown off the vehicle after he has accidentally smeared limburger cheese, rather than mentholated cream, on his chest.

Backstage in the saloon where the Strong Man will perform, Harry is looking for a place to fill a bucket with water. A stage hand tells him: "Ask Mary Brown." Langdon freezes. He turns and opens the back door, which leads into the adjacent church yard. There he sees Mary. Harry excitedly seems to run in several directions at once, as he tries to pull himself together for his big entrance. But as he passes through the doorway "the jackrabbit scamper turns into an effortless stroll," Walter Kerr wrote in "The Silent Clowns" (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975). "I don't think even Chaplin ever shifted rhythm more absolutely, more mysteriously."

Harry struts his stuff before Mary like a feisty bantam, a man of the world. Still unaware that she is blind, he finally inquires, "Aren't you glad to see me?" In a long-held close-up, Mary trembles with both joy and sorrow, for here is her dream lover, come all the way across the ocean, and she fears she will lose him when he discovers the truth. Capra cuts to a few moments later, when Harry has learned of her disability and plainly doesn't mind. They sit next to each other on a bench. The look of boyish yearning on Harry's face is poignant, for one can see that he has known loneliness and rejection, as Mary has. They understand each other, are made for each other.

The climax of the film has Langdon forced to stand in for the Strong Man on stage, because Zandow has overindulged in bootleg whiskey. Zandow's costume is oversized for Harry, making him look like a bedraggled court jester. He begins tentatively before the crowd, gradually gaining confidence as he figures out ways to fake the muscle man's feats. Outside, the town's people, led by Parson Brown, march around the saloon, singing hymns to protest the unruly den of iniquity. The drunken patrons insult the parson, and his daughter, Mary Brown. This is too much for Harry, who fires the Strong Man's stage cannon at the crowd repeatedly, eventually causing the saloon to collapse. Thus, the rabble is driven from Cloverdale.

The final scene sums up much of Langdon's screen character. Now the town hero, he appears in a cop uniform, swinging a billy club. Mary wants to accompany him on his beat. At first he refuses, but her sad look makes him change his mind. As they walk away from the camera, Langdon trips on a rock. Mary helps him up, dusts him off. Little Harry is so inept that a blind woman must lead him. As they stroll into the distance arm-in-arm, the film ends.

"The Strong Man" received almost exclusively positive reviews. In his book "The Parade's Gone By" (Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), film historian Kevin Brownlow wrote, "The picture stands today as one of the most perfect comedies ever made." This film marked the zenith of Harry Langdon's career. It was a compendium of (as Capra said, in Brownlow's "Hollywood" Thames television series), "all that Langdon could do, and do right." It was an extremely auspicious debut for Frank Capra as a director. He deserves ample credit for creating a surefire audience pleaser that broadened Langdon's appeal and topped "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp" both financially and artistically.

There was only one fly in the ointment, though it wouldn't become clear for some time after the September 9, 1926 premiere: despite all the rave reviews, and the audiences that laughed long and hard, "The Strong Man" didn't prove to be a runaway box-office hit when it went into general release on September 19. Evidence from "The Film Spectator" indicates that it ranked just seventieth out of 202 major feature film releases surveyed from February 1926 to August 1927. It did well, but only a bit better than "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp." Langdon's career went into serious decline shortly thereafter, although its follow-up, the darker "Long Pants" (1927), was also effective.

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

Bill Schelly published Harry Langdon (Scarecrow Press, 1982), the first biography of the movie comedian, which was expanded into a second edition titled Harry Langdon, His Life and Films (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008). As a popular culture historian, Schelly has written or edited two dozen books, mostly about cartoonists and comic art.