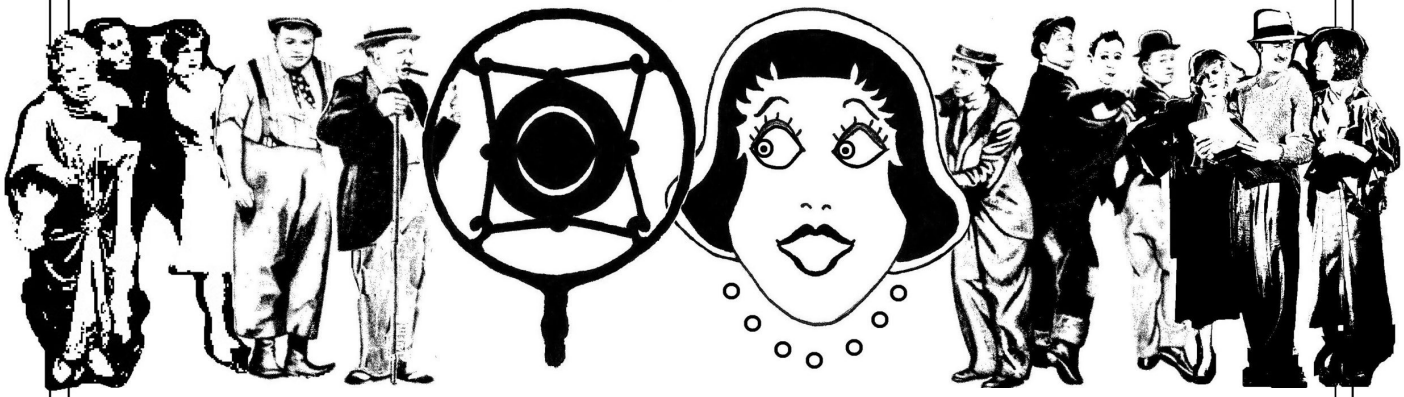
KENNINGTON BIOSCOPE presents

THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER



A CELEBRATION OF FILM COMEDY FROM THE 1930s

SATURDAY 24TH MAY 2025

10.00 SOUND BEGINNINGS

A selection of clips and short films showcasing the best of the talking comedians.
Presented by Matthew Ross.

11:30 ROOKERY NOOK (1930)

The first of the popular Aldwych Farces, screened on 35mm. Introduced by Geoff Brown.

13:00 LUNCH

14:00 THE TALKIE FUN FACTORIES

Glenn Mitchell and Dave Glass present some of the best sound short films from RKO and Mack Sennett.

15:30 LE ROI DES CHAMPS ÉLYSÉES (1934)

Buster Keaton in a French feature film that captures his silent magic. Introduced by David Macleod.

17:00 SOUND SURVIVORS

Glenn Mitchell and Matthew Ross investigate the sound film careers of the silent clowns.

19:00 DINNER

20:00 THE LOT OF FUN: LAUREL & HARDY & CO.

Classic short films from Hal Roach studios, starring Thelma Todd, Charley chase and Laurel & Hardy.

Programme curated by Dave Glass, Glenn Mitchell & Matthew Ross.
With thanks to the Kennington Bioscope Team and to all those who have contributed films, notes: or time: Geoff Brown, Bob Geoghegan, Dave Glass, David Macleod, Mark Newell, the BFI and The Library of Congress. Thanks also to David Lavelli, and of course to our projectionist Phil Clark and The Cinema Museum's team of volunteers.

THE CINEMA MUSEUM

SOUND BEGINNINGS

When sound came in, the possibilities for humour multiplied. Suddenly, there was place for musical comedy, character and dialect comedy, farce, cross-talk acts and much more. There was a place for verbal gags even in silent films, but it was restricted to the intertitles; hearing a punchline told with expression was a whole different kettle of fish.

In the scramble for new talent, a whole array of stage performers were grabbed to make their film debuts. Companies like Vitaphone and Paramount made the most of their East Coast facilities, signing up Broadway stars of shows and revues to appear in shorts and feature films. This potpourri of singers, dancers, sketch comedians, stand-up comics, impersonators and novelty acts came to the screen in a flurry of shorts and features. Many of them made but a single appearance, while others went on to shape the new world of talking comedy.

Of course, the greatest of all these, and an emblem for all that is wonderful about sound comedy, were The Marx Brothers. Their film career began in earnest with a 1929 adaptation of their Broadway show *The Cocoanuts,* followed by *Animal Crackers.* Subsequently, they moved to Hollywood and starred in bespoke screen vehicles, climaxing in the riotous *Horse Feathers, Duck Soup* and *A Night at The Opera.* They lost fourth brother Zeppo, gained production values at MGM and lost their spirit in rapid succession, but their brief comet still leaves a blazing imprint on comedy.

Perhaps tied with the Marxes as greatest talking comedian was W.C. Fields. Fields wasn't a newbie to films – he'd made them on and off since the teens - but sound added so much to his persona that he might as well have been. He just wasn't complete as a comic being until we could hear those muttered asides- "Godfrey *Daniel!",* those exasperated wheezes or his verbose bravado. From short films, he progressed to a series of feature films at Paramount and then Universal, climaxing in the idiosyncratic Indian Summer brilliance of *The Bank Dick* and *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break.*

Then there was Mae West. Her sly, sexy humour owed so much to her snarling delivery that it never could have functioned effectively in title cards. West was a true trail blazer, a peerless individual and powerful woman unafraid of courting controversy to get laughs. She starred in her own plays on Broadway, and after making her entrance to films with a scene-stealing appearance in George Raft's *Night After Night,* she went on to write and star in her own vehicles. Her first, *She Done Him Wrong,* was based on her play *Diamond Lil;* the film saved Paramount from bankruptcy. West's finest work was done in a small window, before the 1934 Production Code sanitised her work beyond recognition.

Also from Broadway came Eddie Cantor, who had actually made a sound short for DeForest as early as 1923 before going on to star in two silent Paramount features. Ol' Banjo Eyes brought his nervous but slyly savvy character to the screen in a series of star vehicles, including *Whoopee!*, *Roman Scandals* and *The Kid From Spain.*

The Marx Brothers weren't the only Broadway team to have a film career. Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey starred in a host of popular vehicles, from 1929's *Rio Rita* through to 1937's *High Flyers,* before Woolsey's death ended the partnership. They never reached the dizzy heights of the Marxes, but they had their moments, in films like *Cracked Nuts* and *Cockeyed Cavaliers.*

Clark & McCullough were perhaps the best of the secondary comedy teams, who in effect took over from the Marx Brothers as Broadway's top comics (and replaced them after their limited UK engagement in *Cochran's 1931 Revue*). They balanced their stage work with summers spent making short comedies for RKO. These wonderful, fast-paced films provided an ideal vehicle for their helter-skelter antics, the fast-talking Clark literally walking all over the sets as McCullough cackled on the sidelines. The best of their shorts, like *The Druggist's Dilemma, In a Pig's Eye* and *Odor in the Court,* tapped a fertile vein of comic mania. Like Wheeler & Woolsey, the partnership ended suddenly and prematurely with the death of a partner, in this case McCullough's 1936 suicide.

From top: The Four Marx Brothers; W.C. Fields; Mae West; Clark & McCullough.

Will Hay, Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt in their classic **Oh, Mr Porter!**

Short comedies were also the domain of The Three Stooges. Originally sidekicks to Ted Healy on stage, Moe, Larry and Curly struck out on their own and found a long-term home at Columbia Pictures, where they made 190 shorts in a series which lasted until the brink of the 1960s. Though their later films are crude and cheapjack, their 1930s efforts have a lot of care put into them and boast some terrific gag sequences. As Laurel & Hardy moved on from shorts to features in the mid-1930s, it was the Stooges who were kings of the two-reeler.

Short subjects also provided niches for many other talents. The original third stooge, Shemp Howard, starred in shorts on his own before replacing Curly in the act in 1947 (with Joe Besser replacing Shemp after his sudden death in 1955). At the opposite end of the sophistication spectrum was Robert Benchley, a newspaper columnist and raconteur who turned his talents to making spoof information films like the Academy Award-winning *How To Sleep.* Even Bing Crosby and Bob Hope started out (separately) in short comedies, as did Danny Kaye. Tom Howard, Bert Lahr and Willie Howard were among the many vaudeville acts who starred in shorts, and Leon Errol made another long-running series at RKO. The studios making shorts like Hal Roach, RKO and Educational also created their own stars, people like Billy Gilbert, Thelma Todd and Patsy Kelly.

In the UK, the Variety stage provided our own talent pool. As well as light comedians and farceurs like Jack Hulbert, Gene Gerrard, Tom Walls, Ralph Lynn and Stanley Lupino there were more working class acts like Arthur Lucan (as the Irish washerwoman drag act Old Mother Riley), Robb Wilton, Leslie Fuller and Ernie Lotinga. Of the latter group, George Formby and Gracie Fields managed to have cross-over appeal, sustaining careers at the nascent Ealing Studios. It was another Northerner who provided the most enduring British comedies of the 1930s, though. Hailing from Teesside, the glorious Will Hay essayed a series of shifty incompetents, bluffing their way through positions of dubious authority. His stage act had been based on a floundering schoolmaster who knew even less than his pupils, and this was transferred nicely to the screen in *Boys Will Be Boys* and *Good Morning Boys.* The beauty of this template was that it worked just as well in any other position of untenable authority; thus Hay became a prison governor *(Convict 99)* inept police sergeant (*Ask a Policeman*) and doomed sea captain (*Windbag The Sailor*) in rapid succession. In many of these he was partnered with insolent fat boy Graham Moffatt and old codger Moore Marriott in a Holy Trinity of incompetence. The trio made, in *Oh, Mr Porter!* at least one all-time classic comedy film.

Space prohibits discussing many of the other talents who debuted during the sound era, and this morning's programme only gives us a brief window to dip into the comedic riches of the 1930s. Nevertheless, we hope to give a representative cross-section of why the 1930s was one of film comedy's greatest decades. The programme will contain complete screenings of the following two films (as well as excerpts from many others):

HOW TO SLEEP (1935)

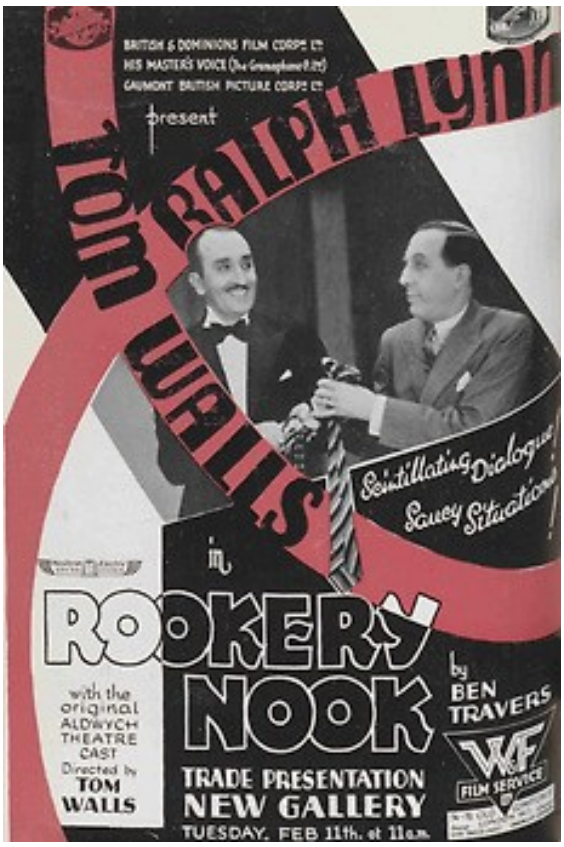
MGM. Released 14th September 1935. Producers Jack Chertok, Harry Rapf (uncredited).
Directed by Nick Grinde
Starring Robert Benchley. Screenplay: Robert Benchley (uncredited). No photography credit.
Film courtesy of Archive Film Agency.

THE DRUGGIST'S DILEMMA (1933)

RKO. Released 23rd May 1933. Produced by Lou Brock.
Directed by Mark Sandrich.
Starring Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough, with James Finlayson, Charlie Hall
. Screenplay: Ben Holmes, John Grey. Photography: William Rees, Vernon L. Walker.
Film courtesy of Library of Congress and Joseph Blough.

Matthew Ross

ROOKERY NOOK (1930)



In the 1930s, the Aldwych farceurs Ralph Lynn, Tom Walls and Robertson Hare were as well known in British cinemas as Laurel and Hardy, Will Hay and Gracie Fields. The early sound film adaptations of the Aldwych farces may now seem technically primitive, but they provided a showcase for the trio's brilliant performances and the sparkling dialogue of Ben Travers.

Lynn, Walls and Hare first came together on stage in 1922 in *Tons of Money,* by Will Evans and Valentine. Its immediate success, despite a general depression in the theatrical world, led to a series of twelve further farces at the Aldwych Theatre. The dithering Lynn and the dominant Walls were a perfectly contrasted pair of leading man, and the regular company included Hare, Winifred Shotter, Mary Brough, Kenneth Kove and, occasionally, Yvonne Arnaud.

When sound came to the British cinema in 1929, there was an instant demand for stage stars and play adaptations. Herbert Wilcox, at British and Dominion Film Corporation, was quick to realise that the Aldwych farces were ideal material. He produced the first six film versions, starting with Travers' *Rookery Nook* in 1930.

Rookery Nook, Ben Travers' third novel, was published in 1923. A play of the same name was first produced in 1926 at the Aldwych Theatre. It was Ben's most successful farce and he told an American fan in 1962 that it gave him the greatest satisfaction of his professional career.

Producer Wilcox had originally approached Walls with the idea of filming a farce, but Tom wasn't keen. He only agreed after a test reel had been made of one act and shown to the whole cast at the Tivoli Cinema after an evening performance at the Aldwych. The film rights to *Rookery Nook* were acquired by B & D in July 1929 (*Daily Mail* 10/7/29). Travers was engaged to write the script, adapting his own play for the regular stage cast. Production took well over four weeks, and was beset with technical problems and delays according to Lynn.

Walls, a complete novice, insisted on directing but luckily he had the support of Byron Haskin from Hollywood as Production Supervisor. Haskin didn't think much of the dramatic subjects he worked on for B & D, but became friendly with Tom and was credited on the next three comedies as Technical Supervisor. The Director of Photography, Freddie Young, has described how five cameras arranged in a semicircle around the set were used on *Rookery Nook* – the central one for the proscenium arch view and two on each side for medium shots and close-ups.

Rookery Nook was trade shown on 11th February 1930 and opened soon after at the New Gallery, Regent Street. Walls commented, "We had a very good idea, of course, where the laughter would come, but we had no idea whatever that it would be so continuous". (*Cinema News and Property Gazette* 24/2/30).

Rookery Nook was voted best British film of the year in *Film Weekly*'s third annual ballot. It created a record by being held over for six weeks at the New Gallery, did similarly well on its provincial dates and secured American distribution by MGM as *One Embarassing Night.* Wilcox claimed that *Rookery Nook* cost £14,000 and took £150,000 in England alone. Its success led to the Aldwych team being signed up by B & D for six more pictures, all to be directed by Walls.

"*…a really first class English film comedy, better than anything that has yet been seen and heard… and what a relief it is to hear honest English wit, after the interminable "Gee Eddie, that's a tough break, baby!" of every all-talking-and-singing production from across the pond." Theatre World,* March 1930.

"As you watch the picture and listen to the players, you get the idea that the Aldwych crowd made it to amuse themselves… That they could walk from the stage to the studio and make one of the best talkies yet produced us an achievement of which they may well be proud." Picture Show 5/4/30.

Rookery Nook is being screened in a 35mm print from the BFI National Archive.

Mark Newell

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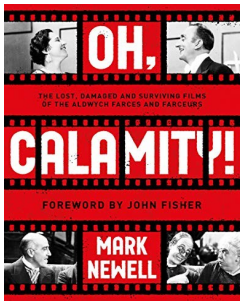


THE TALKIE FUN FACTORIES

The Mack Sennett studio earned the soubriquet of `the Fun Factory', with Sennett himself referred to personally as `the King of Comedy'. His first independent company, Keystone, was founded after Sennett's departure from Biograph in 1912 and had been the first to concentrate only on comedy production, in which category Sennett soon had both competitors and downright imitators.

The `Mack Sennett Comedies' that followed his departure from Keystone in 1917 grew in terms of scale and polish but retained the kernel of surreal knockabout, a format that sustained throughout the 1920s. By this time there was serious competition from other studios, notably from producer Hal Roach, who by the coming of sound had overtaken Sennett with a more plausible and frequently more leisurely approach to physical comedy. Sennett at least beat Roach into talking pictures by five months with *The Lion's Roar*, released on 9th December 1928.

The Dentist (1932)

Sennett's main talkie output continued mostly to resemble his silents but new avenues were being explored. *A Hollywood Theme Song* (1930), screened today, stars Harry Gribbon, a regular at Sennett in the 20s (and familiar elsewhere, as in Buster Keaton's *The Cameraman* at M-G-M) in one of the many World War One-set comedies of the period, only this time lampooning the early talkies' tendency for people to break out into song, with usually unseen musicians – their presence made visible here - on hand to provide accompaniment. Gribbon's *femme fatale* in this film, French actress Yola D'Avril, was, in addition to feature roles, also in short comedies for Al Christie and (notably for the French-language versions of his films) Hal Roach.

A different combination of music and comedy resulted when Sennett signed up-and-coming crooner Bing Crosby – just as he was about to leave the Rhythm Boys to pursue a solo career – for a series of six two-reelers, made during 1931-32. The final two were released in 1933, by which time Crosby had already become a star of Paramount features and had been replaced at Sennett by another popular singer, Donald Novis (who had been approached by Sennett at about the same time as Crosby but worked instead at Hal Roach, as in *The Pajama Party*, to be screened in today's Roach programme). One of the Novis shorts, *The Singing Boxer* (1933), was written by W.C. Fields, at a time when he was starring in a series of four two-reelers for Sennett (his script for a fifth, *Too Many Highballs*, was filmed instead with Lloyd Hamilton).

Sennett and Fields were long-time golfing buddies and had first spoken of doing a film together nine years earlier. The offer from Sennett finally came after Fields had left behind the New York stage and relocated to California, where he was making features for Paramount on a single-picture basis and was thus able to freelance elsewhere. The first, and perhaps the best, of these is today's film, *The Dentist* (1932), for which Fields revived his stage sketch `An Episode at the Dentist' from Earl Carroll's *Vanities* of 1928.

A Hollywood Theme Song (1930)

The last of the quartet of Fields shorts, *The Barber Shop*, was released in late July 1933, four months before Sennett was declared bankrupt. Sennett's films of the last year had been released by Paramount (previously his distributor from 1917-21), who themselves had recently filed bankruptcy; until then, Sennett's talking pictures, including some feature-length ventures, had been distributed by Educational, a long-time competitor in the production of short comedies. In 1929 Sennett had switched to Educational from Pathé Exchange, the US distribution end of the French Pathé organisation, to whom he had moved from First National in 1923. By the end of the decade, Pathé Exchange was clearly on the decline, having lost the distribution rights for the Harold Lloyd films in 1926 and those of Hal Roach in 1927, and was about to be absorbed into a new company, RKO.

A Firehouse Honeymoon (1932)

RKO arrived at the end of the 1920s with the coming of sound. The initials came from the newly-formed `Radio Pictures' combined with the Keith-Orpheum circuit, which had been an important chain of vaudeville theatres. The new operation also absorbed Film Booking Office – `FBO' – along with Pathé Exchange. RKO initially made some attempt to keep the separate names alive, with many of the earlier shorts billed as `RKO Pathé' and opening with the familiar Pathé cockerel.

Originally in charge of the RKO shorts unit was producer Louis Brock, who was also responsible for feature films such as *Flying Down to Rio*, which introduced the Astaire-Rogers partnership. Although production was largely centred in Hollywood, in 1930 Brock made a series of six `Broadway Headliners' on the east coast, among them the talkie debut of W.C. Fields, *The Golf Specialist*. Brock subsequently handed over production duties to comedian/writer/director Harry Sweet, a former acrobat who had been appearing on screen since at least 1919. Sweet's directing work in the 1920s included Stan Laurel's Joe Rock films *Half a Man* and *The Sleuth*; as a screenwriter, he worked on some of the early talkie featurettes made at Fox by the Broadway team of Clark & McCullough, who went on to appear in two-reelers at RKO (one of which, *The Druggist's Dilemma*, appears in today's opening selection). At RKO, Sweet directed others while also starring in his own series, directed by George Marshall. Today's programme includes one of the best of these, *A Firehouse Honeymoon* (1932). Louis Brock reassumed control of the unit after Sweet's death in an air crash in June 1933.

RKO became the second studio to pick up an Oscar for best short live-action subject for the 1933 three-reeler *So This is Harris* (the first, also screening today, was for Laurel & Hardy's *The Music Box*) starring radio singer Phil Harris, long before his voice work in Disney features such as *The Jungle Book*. Elsewhere in the cast – as also in *The Druggist's Dilemma* by the same director, Mark Sandrich - is James Finlayson, one of the numerous Roach regulars to find a second home in RKO shorts; others include Charlie Hall, Dorothy Granger, Vivien Oakland, James C. Morton and Anita Garvin. Photographer-turned-director George Stevens and his longtime associate, director/writer Fred Guiol, went from making the *Boy Friends* comedies at Roach (a type of adolescent *Our Gang*) to an equivalent series for RKO, *Blondes and Redheads*, with Grady Sutton retained from the previous cast. Again from Hal Roach was Edgar Kennedy, who – initially alongside Arthur Housman – starred in an RKO series following his departure from the Roach studio in 1930. The series, known in its first season as the `Average Man' comedies, lasted until his death eighteen years later. RKO's other long-running series starred the Australian-born comedian Leon Errol, a former *Ziegfeld Follies* headliner and contemporary of W.C. Fields.

Errol died in 1951 and RKO's replacements for the Errol and Kennedy series – *The Newlyweds*, rubber-limbed comic Gil Lamb and so on - tended to revisit what had been done before, albeit with an increasing resemblance to the filmed sitcoms that would soon proliferate in television. Ironically, when RKO closed in 1957 its premises were acquired by two early TV sitcom stars, Lucille Ball (herself a former RKO name) and husband Desi Arnaz.

A HOLLYWOOD THEME SONG
Produced by Mack Sennett. Released by Educational, 7th December 1930. Directed by William Beaudine. Screenplay: Jack Jevne, Harry McCoy, Arthur Ripley, Earle Rodney. Photographed by Paul Perry, Mack Stengler, George Unholz. Editor: William Hornbeck.
CAST: Harry Gribbon (Clarence Triplett), Yola D'Avril (Madame von Hoppsburg), Patsy O'Leary (Estelle), Emma Tansley (Mrs. Triplett), George C. Pearce (1st Mayor), William McCall (2nd Mayor).

THE DENTIST
Produced by Mack Sennett. Released by Paramount, 9th December 1932. Directed by Leslie Pearce. Screenplay: W.C. Fields. Photographed by John W. Boyle (uncredited).
CAST: W.C. Fields (dentist), `Babe' Kane (daughter), Arnold Gray (iceman), Bud Jamison (Frobisher, golfing buddy), Emma Tansey (elderly woman), Harry Bowen (dentist's pal), Zedna Farley (nurse), Dorothy Granger (nervous patient), Elise Cavanna (lanky patient), Billy Bletcher (bearded patient).

A FIREHOUSE HONEYMOON
Released by RKO, 28th October 1932. Supervised by Louis Brock. Directed by George Marshall. Screenplay: Hugh Cummings, Harry Sweet. Photographed by Nicholas Musuraca. Editor: Daniel Mandell.
CAST: Harry Sweet (himself), Lee Kinney (Annie), Monte Collins (Monte), Mack Swain (chief).

Glenn Mitchell

LE ROI DES CHAMPS ELYSÉES (1934)

Who says Buster Keaton never made a decent sound feature? His 1934 French film, *Le Roi Des Champs Elysées* is an obscure and often overlooked gem. That *Le Roi* is such a breezy, fun little film is something of a minor miracle. Keaton was at a low ebb: in the throes of alcoholism, depressed after the breakdown of his marriage and the dismemberment of his comedy style by MGM. Now he was taking whatever low-budget work he could get: a series of cheap two-reelers for Educational Pictures, and occasional offers from independent and foreign studios, such as this.

Given the unhappy state of his personal life, and his high professional standards, it's no surprise that he later dismissed this work. But his Educational two-reelers contain some great moments, despite their cardboard sets and cardboard supporting actors. And with *Le Roi des Champs Elysées,* he made a film which successfully channels something of the spirit of his silent films. To be sure, it's not *The General,* but it stands up rather nicely against, say, *College.*

Buster was still revered in Europe in the 1930s, so he was greeted with enthusiasm and guaranteed a sympathetic ear to his ideas when he arrived in France in Summer 1934. However, all was not completely rosy: there were financial troubles from the start. The production company, Margot films, became unable to complete the production due to financial difficulties, and proceedings were picked up by producer Seymour Nebenzal. Nebenzal ran Nero Film, a Berlin-based company whose top successes had been director Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse* series. As the Nazis' stranglehold began to tighten on Germany, Nebenzal, Lang and the rest of the company had relocated to Paris.

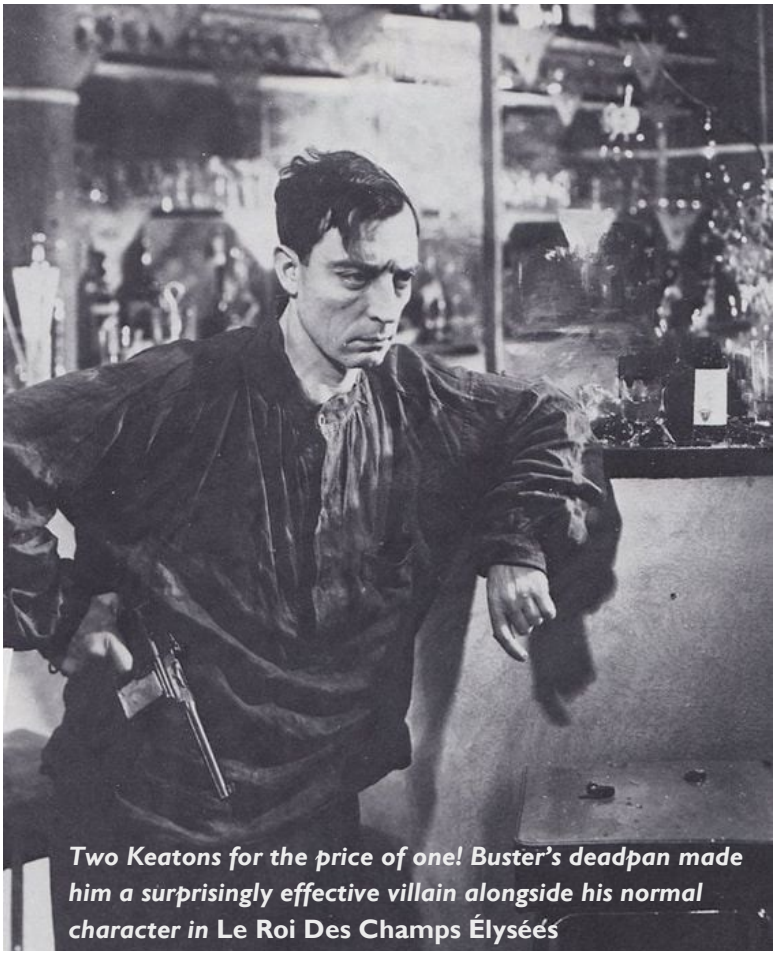
The change in production was probably a good thing; while the budget was still relatively small, Nebenzal was an experienced man and used to juggling costs to sensitively fit the budget to the film. The shooting schedule was a fairly hasty 12 weeks, and the film isn't as elaborate as the best of the Keaton silents, but in other areas there was no skimping: there's a full orchestral score, some lavish sets and plenty of location shooting.

The plot of the film is strong and fairly elaborate. Buster Garnier works as a publicist for an ailing company, but dreams of becoming a great actor. His job is to hand out 'bank note' flyers while pretending to be a millionaire; meanwhile, the company has just received 5,000 francs in cash to solve its financial worries;. Of course, there's a mix-up, and Buster ends up giving out the *real* banknotes to all of Paris, including a pretty young waitress (Paulette Dubost) who he falls in love with. Fired from his job, he contemplates suicide, but his mother (Madeleine Guitty) gets him a job in a theatre production, *Le Roi des Champs Élysées*. It's been fairly simple thus far, but now things start to get a bit more involved. Buster's part in the play is an escaped convict; the same night, an American gangster, Jim Le Balafre (also played by Keaton), escapes and his gang pick up the wrong Buster and take him back to their hideout! After a variety of mix-ups, there's a wild chase back to the theatre, where Buster arrives back on stage, captures the crooks, makes the play a roaring success, and gets the girl!

The film opens with scenes of Buster riding in the back of a car down the Champs-Élysées, throwing away bundles of his fake money. As Buster rides past famous landmarks like the Arc De Triomphe and L'Opera, it's almost as if the scenes were filmed to showcase the novelty of having him in France. Nevertheless, the wonderfully bright and sunny atmosphere stops the sequence becoming gimmicky and captures the feel of silent comedy nicely. In fact, *Le Roi* is closer to the spirit of a silent comedy than perhaps any other of his sound films. There are lots of throwaway pantomime bits, and many of the sight gags are subtly witty in Buster's best style. Indeed, there is barely any dialogue at all until at least 20 minutes in; Keaton's lines were purposely reduced to bypass his need to speak French. Of course, this fits Keaton's own sound dictum of only using talk when necessary, and Buster is the calm at the eye of the hurricane, remaining passive as he causes havoc around him. He's surrounded by some rather stereotypically verbose European actors, but none of them mow him down like Jimmy Durante had, and in fact it makes a rather good contrast to his stoic demeanour.

His first meeting with Paulette Dubost is entirely wordless, and yet beautifully expressive, as he becomes totally captivated with her and just looks deeply into her eyes. As he eventually leaves, he keeps popping back round the street corner to have one last look at her. It's a bit reminiscent of Harold Lloyd's meeting with Jobyna Ralston in *The Kid Brother,* but only Keaton could create such a convincing expression of lovelorn longing with such minimal action.

When he does speak, he's dubbed in a rather slimy and unappealing voice. Why this was deemed necessary is puzzling; while not a great linguist, Keaton could at least get by in French, and had spoken it in phonetic versions of his MGM films.



Two Keatons for the price of one! Buster's deadpan made him a surprisingly effective villain alongside his normal character in **Le Roi Des Champs Élysées**

Furthermore, he obviously did speak the lines in French before he was dubbed over; his lip movements match, and in some scenes, a few utterances like "Oui" and "Moi?" remain in Keaton's own husky voice. At the very least, they could have let him use his own voice for the American gangster character, for which his accent would have been perfectly acceptable.

No matter, most of Keaton's performance is pantomime anyway. It should also be mentioned how well he plays his dual role; his deadpan demeanour works surprisingly effectively as a villainous trait, and he imbues each character with different traits, never leaving you in any doubt which Buster you're watching.

Another strong suit of the film is its wonderful music score; obviously expense was not spared on this. The result is perfect, jaunty in the comedy sections, beautifully wistful in all the romantic spots, rousing in the chase sequences, and often very carefully synchronised to the action onscreen. There's even an overture before the film begins, and exit music! Best of all, the clunky silence that accompanies Keaton's pantomime sequences in his other early talkies is filled, giving a real rhythm to the film.

The other rather un-Keatonesque thing about the film is his smile at the film's fadeout. Yes, you read that right; in the final scene, Buster tentatively kisses Paulette, then grabs her in his arms, purrs "*Ohhh Baby*!" in his dubbed French voice and breaks into a massive grin! Keaton had fought this his entire career; he told Rudi Blesh how director Chuck Reisner insisted on a smile to close *Steamboat Bill, Jr,* but how the audience hooted it off the screen at preview, and faced the same fight when making *The Cameraman* at MGM. It's puzzling that he agreed at this point; perhaps the more emotional Europeans insisted on it, substituted it for a stone-faced ending in the cutting room, or maybe Buster was just losing the will to fight.

The film did good business in France, and was exported across Europe, but was destined never to make it across the Atlantic. Long before the dawn of the Art-house cinema, Paramount, or anyone else just didn't have a market for French language films. It wasn't until the 1970s, when William K Everson turned up a 16mm print, that American audiences would get the chance to see Buster's French opus.

Most likely, this failure to reach America and and re-invigorate his stardom, was Buster's main reason for his subsequent low opinion of the film. It also came from a generally unhappy time in his life that he later wanted to forget (of his marriage to Mae, he later said "it didn't last very long, which is the nicest thing about it that I remember"!). Additionally, Keaton's purist nature must have hated both the restricted budget and, especially, the idea of using stock footage, no matter how intelligently it was done. In fact, it's very likely that he never saw the finished film! Had he seen how well it was put together, with careful editing and an excellent score, he may have had a better opinion. As it is *Le Roi des Champs Élysées* gives us perhaps the best glimpse of what an independent Buster Keaton sound feature might have looked like, in an alternate universe.

Matthew Ross

SOUND SURVIVORS

Buster Keaton takes the mic in* Grand Slam Opera. *Harold Goodwin is about to stage a protest.

It's a film comedy myth that the lion's share of silent comedians were out of work when sound came in. Actually, many of them remained busy and continued to produce some great comedy. However, the coming of the talkies certainly represented an epochal change for the silent clowns; it was a time of evolution and adaptation which produced some fascinating results.

Of course, there were casualties along the way as sound came in. Karl Dane, Max Davidson and Monty Banks had thick European accents; Raymond Griffith, the victim of a vocal cord problem, had almost no voice at all. But sound couldn't be blamed for the demise of all the silent clowns. Comedy had been changing in the late 20s already, and some of the stars who were supplanted by talking comedians had more or less reached the end of their starring careers, anyway: Snub Pollard, Billy Bevan or Ben Turpin, for instance. Mabel Normand died before she could ever make a sound film; scandal removed Syd Chaplin and Roscoe Arbuckle from the screen.

However, for every performer who stumbled, there was another who found new, creative opportunities in sound. A handful – Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, Charley Chase – positively flourished.

The early years of sound comedy seemed to take a schizophrenic approach to the new medium. Some filmmakers tried to continue their silent technique, adding the odd bit of dialogue or sound effects. The other approach was to give in to the new medium and embrace song, dance, dialogue and general cacophony. Because of the initial difficulties in filming with sound, neither approach quite worked out. Long, static takes robbed silent film of its fluidity, and the empty hiss of the soundtrack where live music once played created a barren atmosphere (Hal Roach's swift adoption of incidental music was in part a means of concealing such empty surface noise). Talking comedy came off a little better, but the long takes often made dialogue seem drawn out and tedious as people seemed to talk for the sake of talking. It's true that, in these primitive years, some real horrors were produced. However, as time went on, and the initial sound mania declined, more rational decisions prevailed. Technology was also improving all the time, and soon many silent comedians were making films that found a harmonious medium between their visual forte and the possibilities of the new technology. Before long, studios like Hal Roach, RKO, Paramount and Educational were producing great comedies that melded the old and new beautifully.

So what of the 'big four' silent clowns in these transitional years? Only Chaplin could afford to sit on the sidelines, biding his time in his high castle, learning from others' mistakes and ignoring sound until it suited him. The others had to ride the wave.

Like Chaplin, Harold Lloyd also had the luxury of being his own producer, but his transition was nonetheless a bumpy one. He rushed to remake his silent feature *Welcome Danger* as a talkie; the process was tortuous, the finished film shrill and unwieldy. He followed up with *Feet First,* which rather literally applied sound to his building-climbing antics. With his third effort, *Movie Crazy,* he got it right, and then produced some enjoyable features until he became rather too old to play the go-getter.

Buster Keaton had no fear of sound; his problem was that he wasn't his own producer. MGM forced him into tedious musicals, or unfunny comedies where everyone talked their heads off. But as Keaton said, "*I'm always gonna find places in the plot where dialogue is not called for... and in those we get our old routines".* He managed to sneak in little bits of visual comedy, and even the worst of the MGM films provide some glimpses of his magic. After being fired by MGM, Keaton was forced to work in lower budget films – often short, made abroad, or only in supporting roles. They may have represented a cheapening of his career, but artistically many of these are really enjoyable, showcasing his subtle visual style with sound as an asset, not a burden. Some, like *Grand Slam Opera, Pest from the West* or his French feature *Le Roi des Champs Elysees,* almost rank with his silent work.

***Harry Langdon in costume for 1939's* Zenobia.**

It's almost a cliché of film writing to malign poor Harry Langdon, especially his sound work, but this is really something that needs to stop. His sound career actually produced some very enjoyable work, quite in keeping with his silent style. His first talking films were for Hal Roach; these films are bizarre and idiosyncratic, but certainly used sound creatively, and have been re-evaluated in recent years. His later films for Educational pictures were more straightforward,

effectively updating his silent comedy style for the new era in a fun, freewheeling series. A later bunch of shorts for Columbia pictures were more hit-and-miss, but produced several gems; Langdon was on fine form in films like *Sue My Lawyer, Cold Turkey* or *A Doggone Mix-Up* (the last of which we're screening today). He also made several interesting feature film appearances: with Al Jolson in *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum!,* playing a Harpo Marx-esque Cupid in *My Weakness,* and even subbing for Stan Laurel opposite Oliver Hardy in 1939's *Zenobia.* Like Keaton, he may not have been a big box office smash anymore, but he was still funny, popular and demand until the day he died in 1944.

There were plenty of other silent comics who found a consistent career in sound shorts. Lloyd Hamilton and Edgar Kennedy, among others, continued turning out great little films. Even Roscoe Arbuckle came back from his screen exile to make six popular talkies before his early death. Charley Chase, in particular, seemed to thrive in the new medium. A singer, songwriter, dancer and multi-instrumentalist (was there *anything* the man couldn't do?), he found many creative ways to weave these passions into his film work, and continued to push his comedy in new directions. Lupino Lane was also able to draw on his singing and dancing skills, appearing in several Hollywood musicals, before relocating to the UK where he continued to top the bill in stage shows like the long-running *Me and My Girl.* Like Chase, he also turned director for other comedians' films.

So, too, did Monty Banks, Walter Forde and Harry Sweet. Still more of the silent clowns took their comedy expertise behind the scenes to work as gagmen. These contributions helped to ensure that the legacy of silent comedy lived on to influence new generations of comedians and filmmakers.

But the most enduring contributions to sound comedy from the old guard came from Laurel & Hardy. They didn't just survive in sound, they thrived. Voices were not just an asset to their characters, but helped define them: Stan's cry, or garbled attempts to repeat a good idea; Ollie's delicate courtliness or impassioned plea for his partner to do something to *help* him. All of these added colour and new dimensions to their personalities, and helped cement their position as immortal clowns. Just try watching their silent work and *not* imagining their voices speaking the title cards. For all the excellence of their silent films, Laurel & Hardy's status as genuinely iconic film comedians was largely based on their sound film work, which represented the most satisfying passing of the comedy baton from silent to sound.

Our programme today will feature clips from many of the comedians listed above, as well as the following films screened complete:

A DOGGONE MIX-UP (1938)

Columbia Pictures. Released 4th December, 1938. Associate Producer Jules White.
Directed by Charles Lamont.
Starring Harry Langdon, with Ann Doran, Bud Jamison and Vernon Dent. Screenplay: Elwood Ullman, Al Giebler, Charles Melson. Photography: Benjamin Kline. Editor: Charles Nelson.

A 16mm print from the Cinema Museum collection.

GOOD MORNING, SHERIFF (1930)

Educational Pictures. Released 18th May, 1930. Produced by E.W. Hammons.
Directed by Alfred Goulding.
Starring Lloyd Hamilton, with Eddie Baker and Ruth Hiatt.
Screenplay: Jack Preston, Robert A. Stuart. Photography: Leonard Flynn, John Rice.

Courtesy of Joseph Blough and the Library of Congress.

OUR WIFE (1931)

MGM. Released 16th May, 1931. Produced by Hal Roach.
Directed by James W. Horne.
Starring Stan Laurel & Oliver Hardy, with Babe London, James Finlayson, Ben Turpin, Blanche Payson, Charlie Rogers.

Photography: Jack Stevens. Dialogue: H.M. Walker. Editor: Richard Currier.
A 16mm print from The Cinema Museum collection.

Top: Lloyd Hamilton and Eddie Baker in* Good Morning Sheriff *(1930).
Left: Laurel & Hardy with silent veterans Blanche Payson, Ben Turpin and Babe London in* Our Wife *(1931).

THE LOT OF FUN: LAUREL & HARDY & CO.

Just as Mack Sennett's studio was nicknamed `the Fun Factory', so that of Hal Roach was known to its employees as `the Lot of Fun'. At least during its heyday, it was exactly that: a group of talented, like-minded individuals brought together by a benign employer, who – within reason – gave them *carte blanche* to do their best comedy work.

The Hal Roach Studios – previously called `Rolin' until the departure of Roach's business partners Dan Linthicum and Dwight Whiting – built its early reputation on the Harold Lloyd comedies of the 1910s and early 20s (Lloyd went independent in 1923) while also developing other series: former supporting player Snub Pollard took over the one-reelers after Lloyd progressed into longer films; Stan Laurel worked for Roach during 1918-19 and 1923-24 before settling there permanently; Charles Parrott came in as Director-General, working on the Pollard comedies and commencing the `Our Gang' series starring children; Parrott then adopted the surname `Chase' to commence a starring series under the direction of Leo McCarey; while Chase's long-time colleague Oliver Hardy joined Roach and was soon paired with Stan Laurel. These, along with others – many grouped under the heading `All Stars' - formed the nucleus of Roach's output by the time his studio went over to talkie production in the spring of 1929.

The studio style was better suited than most to the new medium, having consciously slowed the pace of the action, placed emphasis as much on characterisation as on gags, and maintaining a policy of doing things that, however outlandish, might – *just* might – happen in real life. There is very little difference in approach between Roach's last silents and his first talkies (many of which were in any case also released as silents, to cater for theatres as yet unequipped for sound).

Laurel & Hardy were the last big comedy names to emerge during the silent era and their success prompted Hal Roach to seek ways of replicating it with others. His first thought was to develop a female equivalent but the pairing of Anita Garvin and Marion Byron in 1928 was abandoned after only three silent two-reelers. Early in the sound era, Roach tried again with ZaSu Pitts – whose dramatic credits of the 20s include Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* – and an actress he had put under personal contract in 1929, Thelma Todd. Roach had engaged her as a replacement for Jean Harlow, who had departed owing to family pressure after her famous disrobing in Laurel & Hardy's *Double Whoopee*. Thelma Todd similarly parts company with her dress in the team's first talkie, *Unaccustomed As We Are* and was to appear with them again on several occasions over the next six years.

Thelma Todd was more regularly leading lady to Charley Chase, as in the film screened today, *Looser Than Loose* (1930). This is one of the last talkies Chase made in the same spirit as his silents, in the sense of its *risqué* plot line and in his bright, man-about-town persona, which as he aged made way for the more ineffectual type he had sometimes played in earlier films. The supporting cast bears testimony to Chase's lasting friendships with colleagues; Dell Henderson, Edward Dillon and Edgar Kennedy were all at Keystone with Chase during the 1910s (his old vaudeville partner, Harry Bernard, was also at both Keystone and Roach).

Looser Than Loose is one of several Roach comedies of the time where the producer experimented with the new talkie medium by having the opening credits read out by twin girls, Beverly and Betty Mae Crane. Another short-lived practice of the early sound era was to make multiple versions of the films in different languages, before dubbing and subtitling became standard for overseas markets. Two foreign-language versions of *Looser Than Loose* were shot, each running longer than the domestic edition. The French-language *Garde la Bombe*, with Pauline Garon and Georgette Rhodes replacing Thelma Todd and Dorothy Granger, is not known to exist. Its Spanish equivalent, *Una Cala Al Aire*, with Carmen Guerrero and Carmen Granada as the female leads, has survived. Dorothy Granger was retained for both in a non-speaking role as a dancer (not seen in the English version). Chase spoke several languages and did not need the coaching and off-camera prompt boards that others at Roach used for these alternate versions.

***Above: Charley Chase in* Looser Than Loose. *Right: Billy Gilbert, ZaSu Pitts and Thelma Todd in* The Pajama Party.**

Thelma Todd left Chase's unit when her series with ZaSu Pitts commenced in 1931. The first, *Let's Do Things*, was officially a part of the studio's `Boy Friends' comedies (detailed elsewhere in today's notes) and, as was usual with the first of a new series, directed personally by Roach. The next, *Catch-As-Catch-Can*, was directed by Marshall `Mickey' Neilan, a brilliant but troubled talent notorious for alcohol-prompted disappearances. Neilan was intended as director for the entire series but the third film, *The Pajama Party* – screened today – again bears director credit for Roach despite studio records suggesting it was actually Neilan's work. (Oddly, the fourth entry, *War Mamas*, credits Neilan despite his apparently having had no involvement.) Georgette Rhodes reappears as one of the French maids assigned to look after ZaSu and Thelma; the other is Germaine de Neel, who also worked in some of the French-language versions of Roach's films and may be seen with Laurel & Hardy in their combined remake of *Be Big* and *Laughing Gravy*, a quasi-feature from 1931 called *Les Carottiers*. (Trivia note: an enigmatic-sounding line during this section, `Eventually ... why not now?', was actually the slogan of Gold Medal flour and for decades had catchphrase status in the USA.)

A foreign guest is played by Lucien Prival, who appeared in Roach's German-language productions and in English-speaking films where Teutonic types were required (as in Charley Chase's World War One-set *High C's*). He may be seen as a Stroheim-like film director - which presumably struck a chord with ZaSu Pitts! - in the last Pitts-Todd short, *One Track Minds* (1933). The Pitts -Todd films ended when ZaSu Pitts left after making an unsuccessful request for more money; some believe this request was only made as an excuse to leave the series in order to take up feature work elsewhere. She was replaced by Broadway comedienne Patsy Kelly, with whom Thelma Todd co-starred until her mysterious death in December 1935.
The Pajama Party has additional interest today in providing a rare glimpse into the studios of a local radio station, KFVD, which had moved into premises on the Roach lot in February 1929. Roach's various stars would make appearances on the station and Thelma Todd reportedly had her own show. Regular Roach player Eddie Dunn was one of the station's announcers and is seen in that capacity in *The Pajama Party*. Also present is singer Donald Novis who, as mentioned elsewhere in today's notes, later appeared in two-reelers for Mack Sennett. (He and Thelma Todd both appear, coincidentally, in the 1932 Paramount feature *This is the Night*). KFVD's breakfast programme, *The Cuckoo Hour*, was a comedy-with-music affair with their house band, `The Happy-Go-Lucky Trio', headed by T. Marvin Hatley. The show concluded with a counting-down time signal tune written by Hatley that ended with what in Britain are called the `pips', but in the form of cuckoo sounds. Stan Laurel heard this `ku-ku' theme and obtained permission from Hatley to use it as the opening music for the Laurel & Hardy comedies. It was first employed thus in *Night Owls*, shot in late 1929 and released early the following year.

Neither Laurel & Hardy nor what is perhaps their most famous film, *The Music Box*, need lengthy introduction here. Suffice to say *The Music Box* was a reworking of one of their first major hits – the now-missing 1927 silent *Hats Off* – and was recognised with an Academy Award as the best comedy short of 1931-2. Hatley's `cuckoo' theme is of course to be heard, albeit in briefer form than is usual, and it is Hatley himself who provides the piano music from off-camera. The famous lengthy flight of stone steps, which they climb while delivering a player-piano, remains in place to this day (despite considerable alteration to the immediate surroundings) and has long been a place of pilgrimage for L&H admirers from around the world.

Laurel & Hardy sit in with Marvin Hatley's 'Happy-Go-Lucky Trio'. Hatley at rear, with cornet and bass.

THE PAJAMA PARTY
Released by M-G-M, 3rd October 1931. Produced and directed by Hal Roach (see above). Photography: Walter Lundin. Editor: Richard Currier. Dialogue: H.M. Walker.
CAST: ZaSu Pitts and Thelma Todd (themselves), Donald Novis (singer), Eddie Dunn (radio announcer and drummer), Elizabeth Forrester (hostess), Germaine de Neel and Georgette Rhodes (French maids), Billy Gilbert and Frank Terry/Nat Clifford (footmen), Lucien Prival (foreign guest), Charlie Hall (drunk). *A 16mm print from the Cinema Museum collection.*

LOOSER THAN LOOSE
Released by M-G-M, 15th November 1930. Produced by Hal Roach. Directed by James W. Horne. Photography: Art Lloyd. Editor: Richard Currier. Dialogue: H.M. Walker.
CAST: Charley Chase (Charley), Thelma Todd (Thelma), Dell Henderson (Mr. Henderson), Dorothy Granger (Maisie), Edward Dillon (Thelma's father), Wilfred Lucas (Charley's boss), Edgar Kennedy, Eddie Dunn, Charlie Hall.

THE MUSIC BOX
Released by M-G-M, 16th April 1932. Produced by Hal Roach. Directed by James Parrott. Photography: Len Powers and (uncredited) Walter Lundin. Editor: Richard Currier. Dialogue: H.M. Walker.
CAST: Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (themselves), Billy Gilbert (Angry Professor), Hazel Howell (his wife), Charlie Hall (postman), Lilyan Irene (nursemaid), Sam Lufkin (policeman), William Gillespie (piano salesman). *A 35mm print from the Cinema Museum collection.*

Glenn Mitchell