

*Chaplin: A Life*, by Stephen Weissman, M.D. Arcade Publishing, New York, 2008, 315 pp., \$27.99

*Chaplin: A Life* is a brilliant and penetrating look into the developmental years, times and creativity of Charlie Chaplin. This book was a twenty-year labor of love by Stephen Weissman who presented a series of seminars on Chaplin to the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute beginning in 1988 and later lectured on Chaplin to the prestigious film school at the University of Southern California. Weissman perceptively realized the treasure lode he could mine in the person of Charlie Chaplin using Chaplin's two autobiographical works published 50 years apart and Chaplin's lifetime oeuvre in entertainment that spanned over 65 years. Weissman wrote *Chaplin: A Life* out of his personal resonance with Chaplin's humor, his appreciation for Chaplin's immense popularity and enormous talent, and Weissman's abilities as a psychoanalyst, scholar and writer.

Weissman focuses on Chaplin's family constellation and the social setting of the slums of fin-de-siècle London to explain the development of Chaplin's talent. Chaplin's mostly-absent show business father died of alcoholism at the age of 41 when Charlie was 12. His mother fell from music hall comedienne to syphilitic psychotic and was abandoned by her husband to a lunatic asylum. These were the basic facts of Chaplin's early life that served as the unconscious Oedipal and identificatory template for much of his subsequent work in which he portrays himself as a poor, often inebriated tramp who is repeatedly saving destitute damsels in distress. Weissman is an impressive sleuth as he makes the case for Hannah Chaplin's diagnosis of tertiary syphilis, postulating how and when she acquired it. Chaplin later rescued his mother from her life of poverty to live out her final years in relative comfort in Hollywood.

We are all familiar with "flashbacks" in film and literature. Weissman presents us with numerous "flashforwards" (my term) to describe how seminal moments in Chaplin's early life found expression in his later films. For example, "In accordance with the loss-restitution hypothesis of creativity, the death of Chaplin's mother on August 28, 1928, was the stimulus for *City Lights*. While hard evidence cannot be found in studio notes, it was the mourning and grieving process triggered by his mother's death that was, to borrow the words of David Robinson, "the very *raison d'être* of *City Lights*" (p. 73).

In another example Charlie is making the trip to the Hanwell School for Orphans and Destitute Children at the age of seven where he is “stripped, inspected and deloused.” Weissman tells us that at 63 Chaplin feared he was “about to be forgotten and spurned by his once-doting public” (i.e., he worried that he would become as insignificant as a flea) and so “he created the character of Calvero the clown—a composite of himself and father, a faded music hall star and flea-bitten has been” (p. 5). Calvero’s flea gag makes its appearance in the 1952 *Limelight*, Chaplin’s his last film before his 20-year hiatus from the United States.

Weissman describes the development of Hannah Chaplin’s own creative identifications with such seductive role models as Lillie Langtry (mistress of the Prince of Wales), Nell Gwyn (royal mistress to Charles II), and Josephine de Beauharnais (Napoleon’s wife). As a little boy Charlie watched his mother improvise scenes from Nell Gwyn’s life. At 35 Chaplin impregnated a 16 year old aspiring actress whom he was then forced to briefly marry. He dressed the two of them as Napoleon and Josephine for a costume party at the home of William Randolph Hearst.

Throughout the book Weissman reveals what Chaplin attempted to conceal later in life. Weissman goes into considerable detail about Chaplin’s father, Charlie Chaplin, Sr., a butcher’s son, and Charlie’s mother, Hannah Hill (later taking the name of Lily Harley), a shoemaker’s daughter, and their dual careers on the London vaudeville stage. Charlie absorbs his mother’s improvisations at home and he begins to artfully stage his own as early as age five. Charlie’s father’s vaudeville role was that of a heavy-drinking bon vivant. His employer required his father to imbibe the liquor that he was paid to encourage his audience to drink and that led to his premature death from alcoholism.

Chaplin distanced himself from the embarrassing and humiliating details of his early life by suppressing the publication of his overly-revealing “as told to” *Charlie Chaplin’s Own Story*, a series of newspaper interviews organized into a book by Hollywood publicist Rose Wilder Lane. Instead, Chaplin’s own “*My Autobiography*,” published at the age of 75, nostalgically idealizes his childhood and parents. Weissman thoughtfully dissects this latter book the way a psychoanalyst maintains a skeptical eye when patients defensively gloss over their childhoods early on in treatment as having been problem-free.

After his father left, Charlie lived with his mother and his protective and loving older brother Sidney, moving from one small apartment to the next in a downward social spiral. His mother supported the family through her singing until her voice finally gave out. She then mended clothes for a living until she became incapacitated by her syphilitic illness. Poverty and psychosis are later parodied in *Gold Rush*, and the idea that a frenzied pace of work can drive one mad is portrayed in *Modern Times* (p. 51). Resilient young Charlie survived psychologically through his ability to play “let’s pretend,” in which he created

an almost-dissociative world of comic characters. He was also lucky when he was transferred from the poorhouse into which he had been placed to the Hanwell Orphanage School. "Compared to the barefoot and shivering children sleeping in doorways and under the arches of streets of London, life at Hanwell may have been almost utopian" (p. 42). Punishment Day by sadistic Hanwell staff provided young Chaplin with painfully rich material for his later slapstick comedy (using slaps and sticks), that caused audiences to roll in the aisles with laughter, tears pouring from their eyes.

Weissman takes us from Chaplin's theatrical years in London with *Casey's Court Circus* through his early career in Hollywood, first with Fred Karno in *Fred's Fun Factory*, then with *Keystone Comedies* and *Essansey*, until Chaplin gained control of the production of his own films. *Chaplin: A Life* is not only about the life of Charlie Chaplin but it is also a fascinating glimpse into the early life of the cinema in America as it grew from the relatively unsophisticated, silent, one-reelers, into "the movies" that we know today. Chaplin was a driving force in this transformation.

Chaplin's sense of invulnerability that served him well as a child appeared again when he fought against being charged as a communist by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947. This resulted in him moving to Switzerland in 1952 where he remained until he was allowed to return in 1972 to receive a Special Lifetime Achievement Award at the age of 82. Chaplin received his honorary Oscar from Jack Lemon and was given the "longest standing ovation in the history of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences" (p. 269).

Chaplin's daughter, Geraldine, writes a beautiful, moving and accurate introduction to the book from which a line is inscribed on the cover, "Always provocative and at times heart-wrenching...An important addition to an understanding of my father's genius and art." Each book chapter begins with a relevant quote either by or about Chaplin. Some of the evocative chapter titles include: *The Invulnerable Child*, *Life is Tragedy...in Close-up but a Comedy in Long Shot*, *Child Prodigy*, *An Actor's Life for Me*, *Clowning Around*, *The Greenhorn and the Gov'nor*, *Let's Go to the Movies*, *Birth of a Tramp*, *The Moon Shines Bright on Charlie Chaplin*, and *What Happened Next*. There are 16 carefully-selected photographs capturing important elements of Chaplin's life and career. The Afterword, *Falsehoods or False Memories: Where's Charlie?*, contains a fine discussion on the veracity of sources, both in biographical scholarship and in the clinical situation.

Weissman is an excellent writer—poetic and alliterative—with a marvelous vocabulary. A minor oddity can be found on the back of the book's jacket. Usually one finds praise for a book itself on its back cover but instead we find accolades for the person of Charlie Chaplin by other notable personages. Perhaps this reflects Weissman's modesty as well as his homage to the huge imprint that Chaplin left behind. I recently asked my 89-year-old mother what she remembered most about Charlie Chaplin. In the spirit of Chaplin's silent film career itself, her face lit up in a huge grin and she simply began to waddle as she walked.

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