



Charlie Chaplin's Own Story

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“I remain just one thing, and one thing only — and that is a clown. It places me on a far higher plane than any politician.” – Charlie Chaplin Only a select few actors become international stars in their time, but none had as unique a career as Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin was the first true film star, and he managed to do so even when films were still silent. He has been honored with too many awards to count, and the fact that his name remains instantly recognizable nearly a century after his first film is a testament to his influence. Even today, Chaplin’s films are arguably more recognizable than those of perhaps any other actor or director; everyone is familiar with the famous “Tramp” costume and persona, and even the casual film enthusiast has likely seen films such as *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936). Chaplin is known for the singular blend of pathos and humor evinced by his films, and it is not uncommon for audiences to laugh and cry at alternate points of a Chaplin film, a trait that continues to endear audiences even to this day. For this reason, in his review of Stephen Weissman’s biography of Chaplin, Martin Sieff noted, “It is doubtful any individual has every given more entertainment, pleasure, and relief to so many human beings when they needed it most.” As Sieff’s comment suggests, Chaplin’s career coincided with the two World Wars and the Great Depression, but while Chaplin the actor was popular, Chaplin the person became controversial in the final decades of his life. In fact, there is a wide discrepancy between the almost uniformly enthusiastic praise of Chaplin today and the subversive identity he cultivated toward the latter part of his career. Although accusations of being a communist sympathizer and Chaplin’s confrontation with the House Committee on Un-American Activities have mostly become a footnote in the storied career of a man best remembered as an acting pioneer, it forced Chaplin to spend the last 15 years of his career working as an artist in exile, and the shifting viewpoints of Chaplin were instrumental in forcing people to evaluate the way in which they viewed celebrities, as well as what it means to be entertained. Indeed, it is impossible to substantiate the belief that Chaplin’s later films are poorer in quality than his earlier ones, yet the public largely rejected his later directorial efforts. In the end, it must be acknowledged that, more than any other figure who had come before him, the public was aware of Chaplin’s personal life in ways that were often upsetting and inconsistent with the persona effected through his films. Due to the way Chaplin was vilified, relatively little is known about the final chapter of Chaplin’s life, and one of the prevailing tensions concerning Chaplin is the way in which he is incredibly famous on the one hand but also a particularly mysterious and even unknown figure on the other hand. After Chaplin’s body was stolen from his grave, Kenneth Schuyler Lynn pointed out that “the image of his empty gravesite came to symbolize his historic elusiveness, as a person no less than as a performer.”

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Paula Daniels:

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