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The Harold Lloyd Comedy Collection

DVD DISTRIBUTED BY NEW LINE HOME ENTERTAINMENT, 2005

Jennifer M. Bean

Our story begins in the Nebraskan Midwest. Our character is an energetic young man, neither too tall nor too short but altogether average. He dreams of a life on the stage, he performs in amateur drama competitions, and in 1913 he moves with his father to California, soon landing a job as an extra in the movies. Here he befriends an equally energetic Hal Roach who encourages the boy to try his luck at comedy. After joining Roach's fledgling company in 1915, and practicing his new craft in over 60 one-reel shorts as "Lonesome Luke" (a slavish imitation of Charlie Chaplin), Harold Lloyd rips off his moustache in 1917 and dons a pair of glasses. The rest, as they say, is history.

To date, however, the history we tell has been vague at best. Anyone can chatter on about Lloyd's capacious production schedule as "the glasses" character (tallying at least eighty shorts, twelve silent features, and another five shot with sound in the 1930s), or banter his name about as the most lucrative comedian of the jazz age. A few may even recall the unstable prop that blew up in the

comedian's right hand during a still shoot for *Haunted Spooks* in 1919, leaving him with three fingers and a prosthetic device. This biographical tidbit provides an altogether neat segue into tales of Lloyd's plucky nerve, marshalling additional astonishment for his notoriously dangerous climb up the side of a twelve-story building in the climactic finale of *Safety Last!* (1923). Such stories inevitably end by summing up Lloyd's remarkable capacity for "thrill" gags, for his daring-do, and unadulterated optimism. That such summations also end by way of comparisons, at once endless and merciless, wherein Lloyd comes up lacking the mimetic genius of Charlie Chaplin or the ingenuous imagination of Buster Keaton is par for the course. "Lloyd has been called a workman, a capable gagman, but never an artist," writes Leonard Maltin.¹ "Lloyd was a great comic of the surface," intones Gerald Mast, "with very little beneath . . . That [he] ever made it to the top of his profession (a profession that defies men to make it) is one of those American miracles which could not possibly happen, but did."²

As revealed in this remarkable seven-disc set, the miracle now makes perfect sense. The very quality of the prints testifies to Lloyd's care for his craft, the bulk of which he transferred to acetate safety stock in the early 1950s. UCLA's exquisitely talented technicians restored the rest. With Robert Israel and Carl Davis providing new scores—and the inclusion of a "special featurette" on Volume Two that offers an engaging and succinct discussion with the musicians—we could hardly ask for more. We do in fact get more, predominantly in the form of a bonus disc replete with archival galleries of stills, mini-bios of cast and crew, Lloyd's 3-D photographs from the 1950s, home videos at Lloyd's palatial Greenacres estate (shot on 35mm prints with synchronized sound!), several recorded speeches and radio broadcasts, as well as the more expected biographical portraits of Lloyd's career and family life. That the bonus disc also promises online interactive menus with "searchable video transcripts, photo gallery search, and other customizable features" may appeal to some, but this wider array of pleasures remains limited to those with PC operating systems. There are thirteen shorts, eleven silent features, and

four sound features collected here, each a fabulous, revelatory part of the miraculous whole. Missing are the feature-length films *Welcome Danger* (1929), Lloyd's notorious adventure into sound that was first shot as a silent and exists in both silent and sound versions, and the much later *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (1947, aka *Mad Wednesday*) which he made in conjunction with director Preston Sturges.

Not every part, of course, is representative of the whole, and one might quibble over the inclusion of certain shorts. If *High and Dizzy* (1920) showcases the comedian's exceptional capacity for drunken perambulations (all in the best of "spirits," of course), and if *From Hand to Mouth* (1919) deftly incorporates a hilarious chase scene with a marvelously purposeful twist, then *Billy Blazes, Esq.* (1919) is little more than a stereotypical spoof of a stereotypical western and even less by way of Lloyd's early performance style. That it takes five minutes of screen time (in a thirteen minute film) to introduce Harold is one thing; that his screen entrance is followed by a flurry of decidedly unfunny horse-chasing, pistol-shooting, girl-saving antics is another. Even so, a note of comic grace ends this otherwise tedious entry. An intertitle reveals that "three years have passed" at which point we spy our hero and heroine resting on a porch deck, surrounded by a bevy of small children: he plays tiddlywinks with a little boy; she brushes a girl's knotted hair; three other tots gather to chatter and twirl. Confronted with this "happy-ever-after" scene of family life, we believe that the joke is simply a matter of too many, too quickly. Five children. Three years. The math just doesn't add up. One's mind wanders to the realm of sexual reproduction, and the altogether illicit activities that realm entails. But such imaginings are merely a detour on the way to the perfectly timed punch line, which comes moments later when the kids' real "Mam and Pap" appear and take the children home.

This reversal of expectations, a clever play with the ambiguity latent in any image, anticipates an array of gags shimmering through the films to come, their reappearance a key to the consistent whole. To be sure, most commentators on Lloyd will mention the opening "switch image" in *Safety Last!*. We see

Harold behind bars, a loop hanging behind him as he sadly waves goodbye to his mother. We think he is preparing for his execution. And then the switch. The camera pulls back, revealing a change in perspective: Harold is actually in a train station preparing to board. The trickery enabled by an altered camera angle is certainly good stuff, but this collection reveals a panache for far simpler ingenuity wherein the camera's perspective moves not at all. My favorite may be a scene in *The Kid Brother* (1927) when the runt-like Harold hides from his bullying siblings in a field, his back toward the camera, picking flowers. Since the film has established Harold's character's shy sensitivity in front of The Girl (Jobyna Ralston), and since she appears bent over alongside their targeted opponent, his brothers opt not to tackle him. But as they disappear off screen, The Girl-figure moves: the dress draping her backside slips to reveal a goat merrily munching clover in the field. What is good about this gag is made even better when considered in relation to the broader motifs of the film that establish a relationship between Harold and clothing—his father's favorite shirt to be exact—in the gloriously funny opening scene. The errant shirt ends up in a tree that Harold, alas, cannot reach. Once again ingenuity prevails: he throws a pile of his rival's newly washed clothes to the uppermost branches, at which point his rival climbs high to branches that bend under his weight, thus lowering the aforementioned shirt and its fellow garments safely to Harold's arms.

Woven densely into the fabric of these films, clothing motifs recurrently prevail. I am tempted to call it a bit of costume wizardry—ubiquitous, yet subtle. To describe the fantastically ominous witchlike hat and black cloak that transform Harold into a "dangerous lunatic" at the end of *Dr. Jack* (1922) (a performance that prescribes a healthy dose of excitement for "the sick-little-well-girl"), or the gargantuan shoes he inherits from his brutish friend Colosso (John Aasen) in *Why Worry?* (1923) and say the flop-footed strutting that follows looks fairly funny, would only be begging the point. For the point is not Harold's capacity to embody the bizarre, the grotesque, or the eccentric—to become an outsized figure of mythical proportions akin to Chaplin's

Tramp or Keaton's Stoneface. The point is rather that the allegedly one-dimensional "Glasses Character"—the all-American go-getter; the meek who inherits the earth; the adolescent of optimistic platitudes—is anything but simple, and far from secure or stable.

Nor is he necessarily well dressed, no matter how hard he tries. One cannot help but laugh when Harold's freshly basted suit unravels at the Fall Frolics scene in *The Freshman* (1925), generating mayhem for the hapless lad as he loses first one sleeve, then a shirt-waist, and ultimately his pants while co-eds dance around him in increasingly gay mockery. The gag heightens to loud pitch, carefully choreographed, dazzling in its intricacy, and entirely memorable. Equally intricate is the thickening motif of what it means to be sartorially challenged, a theme introduced in the film when Harold first meets The Girl and she offers to sew a detached button back on his college sweater. As she leans over him with needle and thread, the camera cuts to a close shot of his jacket as Harold slyly wields a pair of scissors and removes the remaining two buttons.

Unlike Lloyd's contemporary, the whimsical-comedian-turned-swashbuckler, Douglas Fairbanks, Harold earnestly tried to keep most of his clothes on. Bare chests were hardly his thing, and the baring of butts a buffoonery he sought to avoid. In fact, as the commentary for *The Freshman* recalls (delightfully presented by Leonard Maltin, Richard Correll, and Richard W. Bann), Lloyd initially chose to keep his pants in place during the Fall Frolics gag-sequence, considering their loss a depraved fall into comic cliché. But a trial screening with audiences revealed the cliché a must—so he reshot the scene accordingly, *sans* pantaloons. When Walter Kerr, in his well-known study *The Silent Clowns*, typed Lloyd "the Virtuous American," he meant this in the most general sense of the term: "virtue" meaning morally unambiguous, an unfaltering observance of the standards of right conduct, and an industrious diligence to boot.³ This definition of the term surely encompasses Lloyd's characters—the stuttering tailor's apprentice and aspiring writer; the contagiously merry country medicine man; the good-hearted runt; the overly eager college co-ed—each of whom embody the upright pluck so cherished in the

American rags-to-riches mythos. We have forgotten, however, that the etymology of virtue originally refers to a celestial order of things, to a more luminary event or being. It may be this meaning of the term that resonates in what we now call a virtuoso—the particularly gifted, the miraculously unique.

Lloyd's stunning virtuosity seeps into view when the "Virtuous American" character springs a leak, often at his moment of greatest triumph and apparently just rewards. After winning the big game for Tate College in *The Freshman*, for instance, Harold retreats to the locker room to read the congratulatory love-note from his sweetheart, during which time he leans against a shower handle and ends, thus, thoroughly doused. Likewise, when The Boy finally reaches the roof ledge of Devore's Department store in *Safety Last!*, he strides away with his girl in his arms, losing first one shoe and then the other in the sticky rooftop tar. In *Grandma's Boy* (1922), he first saves the town from a murderous tramp and then thwarts his rival in a fisticuff brawl, the success of which puffs him up enough to ask his girl to get married. When she nods a shy "yes," he gallantly sweeps her up in his arms and carries her away—into a stream, that is, where they slip and end submerged.

These slippery endings hint at a long tradition of film slapstick, most notoriously the madcap Keystone comedies which often end when bodies soar off piers into lakes and oceans, plunge head first into fountains, buckets, and wells, or slowly sink, as in *The Rounders* (1914), to dark watery depths. Even earlier, in the Lumière Brothers's *L'Arroseur Arrosé* (1895), water is paramount in what has often been called the first comic film, if not the first narrative film proper. The comedy begins when a young boy steps on a gardener's hose. As the man leans down to inspect the nozzle, the boy releases his foot and the sprayer is sprayed. This simple impish prank reminds us that comedy, at its best, challenges adult authority and allows the child room to play, especially when play is opposed to productive work. The uncontrollable release of the spray built up in that hose also recalls something of the sexual energy underlying comedy's finest traditions, which also seeps through Lloyd's ostensibly productive boy-hero in pleasurably innocuous, but always telling, ways.

One flawless sequence in *Girl Shy* (1924), Lloyd's first independent production after parting ways with Roach, commands particular attention. The scene begins as Harold drifts in a rowboat, sighing over a box of Acme dog biscuits (a totemic souvenir from his first meeting with The Girl, and The Girl's dog) and sees his beloved's reflection in the calm surface of the lake. Of course the audience knows that The Girl has walked onto the bridge and is leaning over the edge sighing with her Cracker Jack box clutched tight in her hand (her souvenir from the first meeting with The Boy). But neither character recognizes the presence of the other. Harold takes the reflection of her face as a projected mirror of his thoughts; lost in her own thoughts, The Girl walks away. The dramatic suspense of the missed moment tightens as The Girl exits the bridge and then stumbles, falling onto a raft that clumsily sails into his side. From melodramatic suspense to slapstick pratfall, the scene now shifts to shy sentimentality, even as the natural world turns coyly sensuous. On dry ground, "girl shy" Harold labors towards conversation. His stutter gets in his way as does a litter of piglets suckling at their mother's teats. Moving The Girl away from any semblance of suckling, he leans against a sapling that oozes on his hand. He inadvertently wipes the sap on his pants. He nervously seeks a safer spot for chatting. Sitting down seems wise, so as she rests on a tree trunk, he collapses on a rock, which the audience sees is not a rock at all but rather a large turtle. Finally at ease, The Boy gazes into her eyes as the tortoise carries him slowly towards the murky depths.

Lloyd never shouts about the sensuous. It rather leaks, bubbles, shimmers and sprays through and across the surface of things. Because he so loudly voices the platitudes of romance and the secure recognition of the couple—"LET'S GET MARRIED" reads the final intertitle for *Grandma's Boy*—it is sometimes hard to hear what is flooding everywhere beneath. The miracle ultimately revealed to us in this collection is a figure in which the sentimental *and* the sexual, the dramatic *and* the comic, the innocent victim *and* the sly trickster, the certainty of direction *and* the aimless quality of spray, seamlessly merge in what appears, at first glance, to be a rather simply

dressed kind of fellow, the most average of Nebraskan guys.

NOTES

1. Leonard Maltin, *The Great Movie Comedians* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1982), 47.
2. Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 149–50.
3. Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), 190–202.

Discovering Cinema: Learning to Talk & Movies Dream in Color (2003–2004)

DVD DISTRIBUTED BY FLICKER ALLEY, 2007

Joshua Yumibe

Having worked on the history of color in silent film for a number of years and being much indebted to the preservation work of Eric Lange and Serge Bromberg's Lobster Films, I am happy to comment on their two-disc DVD documentary released by Jeffery Masino's Flicker Alley, *Discovering Cinema: Learning to Talk & Movies Dream in Color* (2007). Lange directed and Bromberg produced these two richly illustrated and researched documentaries for the French Histoire television channel