Max Linder Dies in The War

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This is not the title of his new film to be shown tonight. It is the tragic and heroic epilogue to his brief, cheerful day.

I see him again, Max Linder, like we saw him one evening at the beginning of the summer, a few days before the war, with his usual morning suit, with his usual top hat, his usual smile, on the back of a donkey, tied to a train passing through the white, snowy landscapes of Upper Engadin: a small figure of the shadow theatre, a vision of the magic lantern, a black ‘silhouette’, cut-out from the white backdrop of the alpine landscape. Those absurd and impossible situations were his great ideas. And they were ideas that went beyond the usual comedy of comic actors of the cinema, the Tartufinis, the Cretinettis, the Beoncellis. His comedy was humorous, full of wit, cold, composed, self-controlled. A deadpan humour that drew the most comical contrast from his proper gentleman's attire and from the natural mixing of realistic and precise scenic elements with the most outlandish escapades and the most absurd and preposterous situations. In this way, his success was more than just a theatrical or cinematic success. It was an artistic success.

Max Linder was talked about as a great comic actor, an authentic artist of laughter—and not just by the wider public, but even by that segment of the audience with the most refined tastes and customs. And no one ever heard him say a line! But he had a style. He created a genre, served as a model, and his imitators abound. Both a comedy writer and an actor, he wrote and directed his films himself and acted in them. As a result, the subject and the performer were always marvellously in tune because they stem from humorous observations about men and life that come from the same concave or convex mirror, in which life and men were at the same time faithfully reproduced and grotesquely deformed.

His success had been sudden. In just a few years the nom de guerre Max Linder had become famous throughout the entire world because the entire world laughed when it saw him looking so serious, composed, elegant, reserved, and sober, all while enduring the most adventurous and imaginative hardships with a smile that was at the same time foolish and astute. This smile revealed two rows of perfectly white teeth and gave his extremely and extraordinarily expressive physiognomy the air of a cunning and mischievous 'good little boy,' an air of a serious and well-behaved rascal,
who, the more serious he was, the more people laughed, and the more well-behaved he was, he was all the more impudent. His first and last name had a Teutonic air that made some people think he was German. In reality, he was French—very French—a typical cutup, a characteristic ‘silhouette’, even a representative figure. In the end, he was Parisian, very Parisian. A Parisian of the boulevard and the sidewalks, a hero of the street, the cinematic reincarnation of the Parisian urchin all-grown-up: he was Gavroche in tails and a white tie. The quips of Gavroche find their equivalent in the gestures of Max Linder. On the lips of both figures—Victor Hugo’s classic character and the popular Pathé actor—the smile was the same: both with a special air, a unique way of making fun of people. And because people, without realizing it, love being made fun of, Max Linder’s smile made its way around the world in a new film every two weeks.

A mediocre actor playing minor roles in minor theatres in Paris, he looked to the cinema to round out his meagre salary. And at the cinema, he was a revelation. After a few years, they say he was earning 100,000, or even 200,000 lira a year. The irresistible humour of his films made them popular, highly anticipated, and sought-after everywhere. Even very serious, sombre, and dignified people who do not go to the cinema would go there on evenings when the thin ‘silhouette’ of Max Linder appeared on the bill. Despite having to produce two films a month, his comic imagination never tired. In some films, he reached a classic perfection through a classic simplicity. He knew how to make something out of nothing. He knew how to use one eye-roll to express more than a hundred words could. He knew how to ask for and give nothing more and nothing less what the cinema can give or get.

And he went, like all good Frenchmen, to the war—to his great country’s desperate and heroic war. And he must certainly have gone there smiling, like at a rehearsal for a new film, with his usual morning suit, with his usual top hat, his usual smile. And today, a brief bit of news from Berlin announces that Max Linder died on the battlefield. For announcements from Berlin, there is no differentiation: destroying the Reims Cathedral and killing Max Linder are actions that Berlin’s news would boast about equally. Cathedral or comic actor—it doesn’t really matter. What matters is taking something away from France, something that the others do not have: either one of its great beauties, or one of its small smiles.

A small smile that we will not see again. Or rather, since the art of cinema actors is safeguarded for at least a few years from that total oblivion which condemns the art of theatre artist as soon as that artist disappears from the boards where he triumphed. We will find that smile again in a few days when the news of his death will prompt the re-screening of Max Linder’s
old films. And we will find that smile again with an emotional shudder as we think about the fact that that smile met death. Because Max Linder must have gone up against even death with a smile. That good boy must have thought that benign destiny would have permitted him, after so many comical films, to also complete his heroic film.

In modern war, in this horrible, anonymous bloodbath, an unseen soldier kills another soldier whom he does not see. And the bullet—which no one knows where it came from—does not know where it is going. But if it were possible, in the evening when the battle had ceased, to find there in the enemy trenches the appropriate targets, and if the German soldier that killed Max Linder without realizing it could find his victim down there—elegant, proper, smiling even in death—I am certain that that soldier would regret not having fired one less shot. Perhaps the night before, in the tent, exhausted from the completed battle, and ready for the one that was going to start, in the horror of war and of death, the anonymous sniper that killed Max Linder will have wistfully remembered with nostalgia the tranquil evenings of peace when, next to his Gretchen, in a village of Silesia or of Brandenburg, in the warm movie theatre, he saw Max Linder with his usual morning suit, with his usual top hat, his usual smile, riding on the back of a donkey behind a train passing through the snow, a small figure of the shadow theatre, a vision of the magic lantern, a black ‘silhouette’, cut-out from the white backdrop of the alpine landscape.

And perhaps as a result, there would also be a German capable of regretting having killed a Frenchman.

‘Max Linder muore alla guerra’, La Tribuna, (1 October 1914), p. 3. Translated by Siobhan Quinlan.

Notes

1. [Editors’ note. At the end of September 1914, rumours had spread that the famous French comedic actor, Max Linder, had died on the front. It was soon determined that the news was false and the actor had only been injured, thanks to an interview with the actor published in La Tribuna on 10 October.

2. [Editors’ note. Name of three comic characters from the 1910s. Tartufini was the name of an Italian character played by Charles Prince for Pathé (and known as Rigadin in France). Cretinetti and Beoncelli were the characters played by André Deed for Itala Film and Pathé (known in French as Boireau.)

3. [Editors’ note. Gavroche is young street urchin in Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables.]