



Hollywood's Two Authentic Geniuses

BY JEFF KURTTI

The influence of Walt Disney on artists and filmmakers is familiar. Osamu Tezuka (often called “The Godfather of Anime”), Marvel Comics’ Stan Lee, Tim Burton, Maurice Sendak, Steven Spielberg, and John Lasseter (as well as generations of filmmakers in every discipline of the animated form) all cite the fundamental influence of Walt Disney on their lives and work.

Walt Disney himself had a similarly towering creative and professional influence throughout his career: Charles Chaplin. “Although Disney proved to be forward-thinking with regard to sound and later groundbreaking cinematic technologies,” Dr. Kathy Merlock Jackson of Wesleyan University observes, “his greatest influence was rooted firmly in the past: Charlie Chaplin, the master of the silent era.”

Charles Spencer “Charlie” Chaplin (1889–1977) was an English movie actor,

director, and composer, best known for his work during the era of silent film. Before the end of World War I, he was the most famous film star in the world. His signature role was that of “The Little Tramp,” which he first played in 1914. To this day, the image of the little man with the toothbrush mustache, clad in baggy pants and a bowler hat and swinging a bamboo cane, remains iconographic in popular culture.

Like most moviegoers of the early 20th century, Walt Disney was a Chaplin fan, but as a teenager, Walt began to take a more studious interest in the comic’s films—and to imitate the screen star. “When he got interested in the film business, theatre, you know, [it was] imitating Charlie Chaplin, who was his idol,” Roy O. Disney recalled.

In Kansas City, Walt even took his impersonation public, entering theatre-sponsored look-alike contests, wearing

his father’s oversize derby, pants, and work shoes, and sporting a false mustache. Walt’s sister Ruth Disney Beecher remembered, “Roy got wind that Walt was going to be on amateur night somewhere—he never told us—and so we all hurried and got down to the theater a little ways away, and sure enough, he was acting Charlie Chaplin. According to us, he was the best—but he didn’t win the prize!”

Ruth felt that her brother’s love of Chaplin revealed his ambition. “In Chicago, Walt acquired his first motion picture camera. He would set it up in the alley and film himself doing Charlie Chaplin routines,” she said.

As Walt’s filmmaking career evolved, he returned to the ideas and persona of his idol again and again. In the creation of Mickey Mouse, Walt asserted that “We wanted something appealing, and we thought of a tiny bit of a mouse that would have something of the wistfulness of Chaplin—a little fellow trying to do the best he could.” It was this delicate balance of humor and pathos to which Walt would return time and again as a storytelling imperative.

In return, the worldwide appeal of Walt’s mouse was not lost on Chaplin himself, who became a great fan of Mickey: it has been widely reported that Chaplin demanded that his 1931 feature *City Lights* be preceded by a Mickey Mouse short subject.

In the creation of his animated films, Walt famously performed scenes and business for his animation staff so that they would have a keen understanding of the result he desired. Animator and director Ward Kimball recalled, “Walt was a great admirer of Chaplin. He was always showing us how Chaplin did a certain gag. We thought Walt was just as good as Chaplin. Of course, if you asked Walt to do any acting, he’d get a little self-conscious, but when he would get carried away with a story or gag situation and start imitating something, he was just as great as Chaplin.”

As for Chaplin himself, he wrote and directed most of his films, and by 1916 he was also producing them. “Chaplin

“[Walt] Disney and Charlie Chaplin are the only two authentic geniuses that Hollywood ever spawned.”

FRANK RASKY, TORONTO STAR WEEKLY

was a brilliant entrepreneur,” columnist Jason Cochran observes. “He assumed control over his own movies as early as 1918, and like Walt Disney would two decades later, he took the audacious step of expanding film shorts into full-length motion pictures. He was one of four performers who founded United Artists, taking ownership of his work from distributors and money men and pretty much establishing what we know as modern Hollywood.”

With Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith, Chaplin co-founded United Artists in 1919, at the same time as the Chaplin Studios complex was completed in the heart of Hollywood. Walt found much to admire in Chaplin’s style and substance as a studio head, and emulated his business practices wherever applicable to his own (as he did with good friend and independent producer Samuel Goldwyn). Soon, Walt and his longtime idol were professional colleagues and social friends.

From June 1932 to May 1937, Walt distributed his films through Chaplin’s United Artists, and was often referred to as a “producing partner” of that organization.

At the time *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was being made, Chaplin offered Walt and Roy perhaps the most valuable assistance in their careers: the guidance of his experience as an independent producer, including not only his erudite advice, but access to his ledgers from the international release of *Modern Times*, which was invaluable in negotiating terms with Disney’s new distribution company, RKO Radio Pictures. “Your records have been our Bible,” Walt wrote to Chaplin, “without them we would have been as sheep in a den of wolves.” Chaplin sent a wire to Walt on the night of the *Snow White* premiere, “AM CONVINCED ALL OUR



FONDEST HOPES WILL BE REALIZED TONIGHT.”

In 1941, Walt joined Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Orson Welles, Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick, Alexander Korda, and Walter Wanger to form The Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers. This organization was formed to advance the interests of independent producers, and to challenge the anti-competitive practices of the seven major film studios (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Columbia Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Universal Studios, RKO, 20th Century-Fox and Warner Bros.) that controlled the entire pipeline of motion picture production, distribution, and exhibition. Ultimately, their effort contributed to *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, which ordered the major Hollywood film studios to sell their theater chains, and to eliminate certain anti-competitive practices—effectively bringing an end to the studio system.

As Walt embarked on the reclamation of his leading role in the Animation field in the 1950s, he still kept the lessons of Chaplin in mind. After the lukewarm reaction to *Alice In Wonderland*, Walt blamed a “lack of heart”—the pathos that he had seen Chaplin work with so often. “Without that heart, you see, I don’t think anything will laugh,” Walt reflected. “In other words, with any laugh, there must

be a tear somewhere. I believe in that. The thing with Chaplin, is his pathos, you know? That’s it. That is humor, I think.”

Even late in his career, as Walt embarked on what would become a new series of eccentric live-action comedies, the influence of Chaplin and the other great silent comics was never far away.

He said, “I love to build these comedies because I was a great fan of Chaplin, of Lloyd, I loved those things. They’re not being done today. So, in effect, that’s what I’m doing. *The Absent-Minded Professor* is in effect, like a very good [Harold] Lloyd or Chaplin picture. It’s more like a Lloyd picture because Lloyd always had these kind of situations. Chaplin was more the individual. I love to do those and I want to do more of them.”

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