What People Laugh At
by Charlie Chaplin, 1918

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. . . Comedy moving pictures were an instant success because most of them showed policemen falling down coal holes, slipping into buckets of whitewash, falling off patrol wagons, and getting into all sorts of trouble. Here were men representing the dignity of the law, often very pompous themselves, being made ridiculous and undignified. The sight of their misfortunes at once struck the public funny bone twice as hard as if private citizens were going through like experience.

Even funnier than the man who has been made ridiculous, however, is the man who, having had something funny happens to him, refuses to admit that anything out of the way has happened, and attempts to maintain his dignity. Perhaps the best example is the intoxicated man who, though his tongue and walk give him away, attempts in a dignified manner to convince you that he is quite sober.

He is much funnier than the man who, wildly hilarious, is frankly drunk and doesn't care a whoop who knows it. Intoxicated characters on the stage are almost always "slightly tipsy" with an attempt at dignity, because theatrical managers have learned that this attempt at dignity is funny.

For that reason, all my pictures are built around the idea of getting me into trouble and so giving me the chance to be desperately serious in my attempt to appear as a normal little gentleman. That is why, no matter how desperate the predicament is, I am always very much in earnest about clutching my cane, straightening my derby hat, and fixing my tie, even though I have just landed on my head.

I am so sure of this point that I also incriminate the other characters in the picture. When I do this, I always aim for economy of means. By that I mean that when one incident can get two big, separate laughs, it is much better than two individual incidents. In *The Adventurer*, I accomplished this by first placing myself on a balcony, eating ice cream with a girl. On the floor directly underneath the balcony, I put a stout, dignified, well-dressed woman at a table. Then, while eating the ice cream, I let a piece drop off my spoon, slip through my baggy trousers, and drop from the balcony onto this woman's neck.

The first laugh came at my embarrassment over my own predicament. The second, and the much greater one, came when the ice cream landed on the woman's neck and she shrieked and started to dance around. Only one incident had been used, but it had got two people into trouble, and had also got tow big laughs.

Simple as this trick seems there were two real points of human nature involved in it. One was the delight the average person takes in seeing wealth and luxury in trouble. The other was the tendency of the human being to experience within himself the emotions he sees

on the stage or screen.

One of the things most quickly learned in theatrical work is that people as a whole get satisfaction from seeing the rich get the worst of things. The reason for this, of course, lies in the fact that nine tenths of the people in the world are poor, and secretly resent the wealth of the other tenth.

If I had dropped the ice cream, for example, on a scrub woman's neck, instead of getting laughs, sympathy would have been aroused for the woman. Also, because a scrub woman has no dignity to lose, that point would not have been funny. Dropping ice cream down a rich woman's neck, however, is, in the minds of the audience, just giving the rich what they deserve.

By saying that human beings experience the same emotions as the people in the incident they witness, I mean that --taking ice cream as an example --when the rich woman shivered the audience shivered with her. A thing that puts a person in an embarrassing predicament must always be perfectly familiar to an audience, or else the people will miss the point entirely. Knowing that ice cream is cold, the audience shivers. If something were used that the audience did not recognize at once, it would not be able to appreciate the point as well. On this same fact was based the throwing of custard pies in the early pictures. Everyone knew that custard pie is squashy, and so was able to appreciate how the actor felt when one landed on him.

Many persons have asked me where I got the idea for the type of the character I play. Well, all I can say is that it is a composite picture of many Englishmen I had seen in London during the year of my life in that city.

When the Keystone Film Company, with which I made my first pictures, asked me to leave Karno's *Night in and English Music Hall*, a pantomime in which I was playing, I was undecided as to what to do about the offer, principally because I did not know what kind of a comedy character I could play. Then, after a time, I thought of all the little Englishmen I had seen with small black mustaches, tight fitting clothes and bamboo canes, and I decided to model my make-up after these men.

Thinking of the cane was perhaps the best piece of luck I ever had. One reason is that the cane places me, in the minds of the audience, more quickly than anything else could. The other is that I have developed the cane until it has almost a comedy sense of its own. Often I find it curling itself around someone's leg, or rapping someone on the shoulder and getting a laugh from the audience almost without my knowing that I was directing its action . . .

Very often I hear a slight ripple at something I had not expected to be funny. At once I prick up my ears and ask myself why that particular thing got a laugh.

In a way, my going to see a movie is really the same as a merchant observing what

people are wearing or buying or doing. Anyone who caters to the public has got to keep his knowledge of “what people like" fresh and up to date.

In the same way that I watch people inside a theater to see when they laugh, I watch them everywhere to get material which they can laugh at.

I was passing a firehouse one day, for example, and heard a fire alarm ring in. I watched the men sliding down the pole, climbing onto the engine, and rushing off to the fire. At once a train of comic possibilities occurred to me. I saw myself sleeping in bed, oblivious to the clanging of the fire bell. This point would have a universal appeal, because everyone likes to sleep. I saw myself sliding down the pole, playing tricks with the fire horses, rescuing the heroine, falling off the fire engine as it turned a corner, and many other points along the same lines. I stored these points away in my mind and some time later, when I made *The Fireman*, I used every one of them. Yet if I had not watched the firehouse that day the possibilities in the character of a fireman might never have occurred to me.

Another time, I went up and down a moving staircase in a department store. I got to thinking how this could be utilized for a picture, and I finally made it the basis of *The Champion*, in which I, the small man, knocked out a big bruiser by having a horseshoe concealed in my glove. In another picture I sued an employment office as the foundation of the picture. In other words, it has paid me to be always alive to the comic possibilities of the people and the things I see in everyday life.

I was seated in a restaurant once, for example, when I suddenly noticed that a man a few yards away kept bowing and smiling, apparently at me. Thinking he wished to be friendly, I bowed and smiled back at him. As I did this, however, he suddenly scowled at me. I thought I had been mistaken in his intentions. The next minute, however, he smiled again. I bowed; but once more he scowled. I could not imagine why he was smiling and scowling until, looking over my shoulder, I saw he had been flirting with a pretty girl. My mistake made me laugh, and yet it was a natural one on my part. So when the opportunity came a few months ago to utilize such a scene in *A Dog's Life*, I made use of the incident.

Another point about the human being that I use a great deal is the liking of the average person for contrast and surprise in his entertainment. It is a matter of simple knowledge, of course, that the human likes to see the struggle between the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the successful and the unsuccessful. He likes to cry and he likes to laugh, all within the space of a very few moments. To the average person, contrast spells interest, and because it does I am constantly making use of it in my pictures.

If I am being chased by a policeman, I always make the policeman seem heavy and clumsy while, by crawling through his legs, I appear light and acrobatic. If I am being treated harshly, it is always a big man who is doing it; so that, by the contrast between big and little, I get the sympathy of the audience, and always I try to contrast my seriousness of a manner with the ridiculousness of the incident.

It is my luck, of course, that I am short, and so am able to make these contrasts without much difficulty. Everyone knows that the little fellow in trouble always gets the sympathy of the mob. Knowing that it is part of human nature to sympathize with the "underdog," I always accentuate my helplessness by drawing my shoulders in, drooping my lip pathetically and looking frightened. It is all part of the art of pantomime, of course. But if I were three inches taller it would be much more difficult to get the sympathy of the audience. I should then look big enough to take care of myself. As it is, the audience even while laughing at me is inclined to sympathize with me. As someone once said, it feels like "mothering me."

However, one has got to be careful to make the contrast clear enough. At the close of *A Dog's Life,* for example, I am supposed to be a farmer. Accordingly, I thought it might be funny for me to stand in a field, take one seed at a time from my vest pocket, and plant it by digging a hole with my finger. So I told one of my assistants to pick out a farm where this scene be could be taken.

Well, he picked out a nice farm; but I did not use it, for the simple reason that it was too small! It did not afford sufficient contrast for my absurd way of planting the seed. It might be slightly funny on a small farm, but done on a large one of about 600 acres, the scene [was hilarious] because of the contrast between my method of planting and the size of the farm.

On almost a par with contrast, I would put surprise.

Surprise has always seemed interesting to me because it is somewhat like news. Whenever I read the newspaper, I am always being surprised at what had happened in the world since yesterday. If, however, before I pick up the newspaper I knew exactly what was going to be in it, I should not be surprised, and therefore not so interested.

I not only plan for surprise in the general incidents of a picture, but I also try to vary my individual actions so that they, too, will come as a surprise. I always try to do the unexpected in a novel way. If I think an audience expects me to walk along the street while in a picture, I will suddenly jump on a car. If I want to attract a man's attention, instead of tapping him on the shoulder with my hand or calling to him, I hook my cane around his arm and gently pull him to me.

Figuring out what the audience expects, and then doing something different, is great fun to me. In one of my pictures, *The Immigrant*, the opening scene showed me leaning far over the side of a ship. Only my back could be seen and from the convulsive shudders of my shoulders it looked as though I was seasick. If I had been, it would have been a terrible mistake to show it in the picture. What I was doing was deliberately misleading the audience. Because, when I straighten up, I pulled a fish on the end of a line into view, and the audience saw that, instead of being seasick, I had been leaning over the side to catch the fish. It came as a total surprise and got a roar of laughter.

There is such a thing, however, as too funny. There are some plays and pictures at which the audience laughs so much and so heartily that it becomes exhausted and tired. To make an audience roar is the ambition of many actors, but I prefer to spread the laughs out. It is much better when there is a continual ripple of amusement, with one or two big "stomach laughs," than when an audience "explodes" every minute or two.

People often ask me if all my ideas work out, and if it is easy to make a funny picture. I sometimes wish they could follow the whole process of getting the idea, working out the characters, taking the film, editing and arranging it.

I am often appalled at the amount of film I have to make in getting a single picture. I have taken as much as 60,000 feet in order to get the 2,000 feet seen by the public. It would take about twenty hours to run off 60,000 feet seen by the public. It would take about twenty hours to run off 60,000 feet on the screen! Yet that amount must be taken to present forty minutes of picture.

Sometimes, when I find that, though I have worked hard over and idea, it has not yet taken final shape in my head, and is therefore not ready to be filmed, I at once dropped it and try something else. I do not believe in wasting too much time on something that will not work out. I do believe in concentrating all your energies upon the thing you are doing, but if you can't put it across, after having done your best, try something else for a time, and then come back to your original scheme if you still have faith in it. That is the way I have always worked.

In my work I don't trust anyone's sense of humor, but my own. There have been times when the people around the studio have screamed at certain scenes while the picture was in the making and yet I have discarded those scenes because they did not strike me as being funny enough. It isn't because I think I am so much smarter than those around me. It is simply because I am the one who gets all the blame or credit for the picture. I can’t insert a title in a picture, for instance, and say: “People, I don’t blame you for not laughing. I didn’t think this was funny myself, but the fellows around me told me it was and so I let it go.”

Here is another point that makes it difficult for me to trust the judgment of those around me. My cameraman and other assistants are so used to me that they don’t laugh very much at what I do in rehearsal. If I make a mistake, however, then they laugh. And I, not realizing perhaps that I have made a mistake, am likely to think the scene is funny. I didn’t get on to this point until I asked some of them one day why they had laughed at a bit of business that I did not think was amusing. When they told me they had laughed because I had done something wrong, I saw how they might mislead me. So not I am glad they don’t always laugh at my stuff.

One of the things I have to be most careful about is not to overdo a thing, or to stress too much any particular point. I could kill laughs more quickly by overdoing something than by any other method. If I made too much of my peculiar walk, if I were too rough in turning people upside down, if I went to excess in anything at all, it would be bad for the

picture. Restraint is a great word, not only for actors but also for everybody to remember. Restraint of tempers, appetites, desires, bad habits, and so on, is a mighty good thing to cultivate.

One of the reasons I hated the early comedies in which I played was because there wouldn't be much "restrain" in hurling custard pies! One or two custard pies are funny, perhaps: but when nothing but custard pies is used to get laughs, the picture becomes monotonous. Perhaps I do not always succeed by my methods, but I would a thousand times rather get a laugh through something clever and original than through slapstick and horseplay.

There is no mystery connected with "making people laugh." All I have ever done is to keep my eyes open and my brain alert for any facts or incidents that I could use in my business. I have studied human nature, because without knowledge of it I could not do my work. And, as I said at the very beginning of this article, knowledge of human nature is at the foundation of almost all success.