

## City Lights (U) USA 1931

17 December 2018

DIRECTOR: **Charles Chaplin**

Running time: 87 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Charles Chaplin** (a tramp), **Virginia Cherrill** (a blind girl), **Florence Lee** (the blind girl's mother), **Harry Myers** (an eccentric millionaire), **Allan Garcia** (butler), **Hank Mann** (a prizefighter).

SCRIPT: **Charles Chaplin**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Gordon Pollock** and **Rollie Totheroh**. EDITING: **Charles Chaplin** and **Willard Nico**. MUSIC: **Charles Chaplin**.

By the end of the 1920s Chaplin had risen from being a contract player for Mack Sennett, through two highly lucrative contracts with the Essanay and Mutual companies, to becoming one of the founding partners of the United Artists distribution company. While his own productions became increasingly sporadic during the 1920s, their returns, nonetheless, proved more than equal to those of his associates, Griffith, Fairbanks and Pickford put together.

*City Lights* was Chaplin's first film after sound transformed Hollywood's working practices, introducing cumbersome equipment, differently trained performers and a new dialogue-centred aesthetic. It has a synchronised music track and some sound effects (notably a whistle that becomes stuck in the Tramp's throat), but where Chaplin's comedic language was concerned, balletic grace and visual suggestion, itself emphasised by editing and pantomimic action, were (and would remain) incompatible with the world of sound. Moreover, he feared the loss of the universal appeal that his films held, if he imposed a monolingual voice on his screen persona. And so, he determined to continue working as he had always done and pray that his public would follow him.

The film places the familiar tramp character in a more contemporary urban milieu than had formerly been the case. We see him asleep on a war memorial at the start, as the mayor makes a solemn speech, on a busy high street, and at a boxing match (a routine given an earlier outing in *The Champion* (1915), though with a far smaller crowd!) It is as if we have moved from the Dickensian poverty and pioneer Hollywood settings of his earlier films to

something more modern and threatening to his existence and challenging to his ingenuity, a feeling that would impose itself more strongly in his next production, *Modern Times*. What was true for the character was, of course, no less so for the artist.

The plot, which is driven by an elaborate *quid pro quo*, concerns a blind flower girl, who mistakes the Tramp for a wealthy man, and with whom he falls in love. The second strand deals with the fair-weather friendship between the Tramp and a suicidal millionaire, who only recognises him when the worse for drink. Chaplin tells in his autobiography of his difficulty with the scene depicting the birth of the former misunderstanding, namely how to convey to the audience why the girl believes the Tramp to be a millionaire. The solution, which involves his character using a rich man's limousine as a short cut through a busy street (she hears the car door shut behind him and the car move away), is as elegant as it is independent of the need for sound.

Shooting was prolonged (nearly two years, with thirty-nine feet of celluloid exposed for every foot of finished film) and troubled. In particular, Chaplin was painstaking and dissatisfied during filming of the key flower girl scenes, blaming his inexperienced star, Virginia Cherrill, whom he fired but later re-hired at a higher salary. His instinct in casting her, based on her ability to use her myopia to advantage, was vindicated by the results, however, and few of his scenes have drawn higher praise from the critics, who have on diverse occasions placed *City Lights* near the top of the cinematic pantheon.

**David Clare**