

# SILENT MASTERPIECE

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

By 1921, British actor Charlie Chaplin was already one of Hollywood’s biggest film stars. He had appeared in 67 silent pictures — all but four of those were shorts and in 52 of those, he portrayed the character for which he became best-known: the Tramp.

But in 1921, Chaplin wrote and directed his first feature-length film, “The Kid.” In it, he played his lovable Tramp, sharing the spotlight with a 7-year-old boy.

“The Kid” was released in theaters on Feb. 6, 1921. It would be entered into the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry in 2011.

## ‘A PICTURE WITH A SMILE ... ’

Even as a Hollywood novice, Charlie Chaplin was a control freak. He wanted more control over the films in which he appeared and over characters he created.

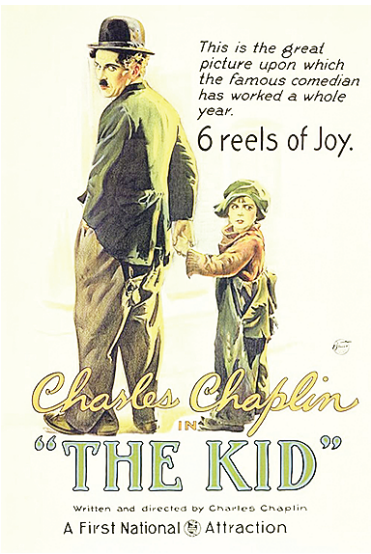
The first comedy short in which he was credited as the writer and director was only his 12th film, in April 1914. And it was the seventh in which he appeared as a lovable street resident, “the Tramp.”

By his second year in filmmaking, Chaplin owned his own production company. It didn’t take long for Chaplin to become one of Holly-

wood’s best-known — and most successful — filmmakers.

By 1920, Chaplin had appeared in a couple of feature-length films by other creators but wanted to make his own feature-length movie. He wrote an outline for a film about a baby abandoned by his destitute mother and is found and raised by the Tramp.

Chaplin’s contract called for nothing but his usual 2-reel short films. For the project he called “The Waif,” he renegotiated: He’d borrow \$500,000 to shoot a feature-length,



six-reel film. He’d get 50% of the box office revenue and, after five years, Chaplin would own the film outright.

Chaplin had a tendency to shoot without a working script and expected actors to ad-lib much of their parts. As a result, he shot more than 50 times the amount of film used in the final product.

Chaplin’s production unit shot for five months over a year’s span. Just as he finished shooting, his first wife, Mildred Harris, had sued for divorce and had tried to seize his assets — including the film.

Chaplin and his film editor smuggled the film negative out of California and edited “The Kid” in a hotel room in Salt Lake City.

A card at the start of the film served as a bit of a prologue, announcing to the audience they were about to see “A picture with a smile — and perhaps, a tear.”

“The reviews of my pictures have always been mixed,” Chaplin later wrote. “The one everybody praised was ‘The Kid’ — and then they went too far, talked about Shakespeare. Well, it *wasn’t* that!”

## THE MAKING OF ‘THE KID’

Chaplin drew upon his own childhood in London for the way “The Kid” portrayed a life of poverty and scrounging for food and money. The attic apartment where the characters live, for example: “This room was based to a large extent on the places in Lambeth and Kennington where Sydney and I had lived with our mother when we were children,” Chaplin wrote.

Life for the young Chaplin had been difficult. His father abandoned the family when he was an infant. His mother, a music hall singer, suffered mental issues was sent to an asylum. Young Charlie lived on the streets for a while and spent time in orphanages. One can tell this history was on Chaplin’s mind when the young mother in the film abandons her baby boy.

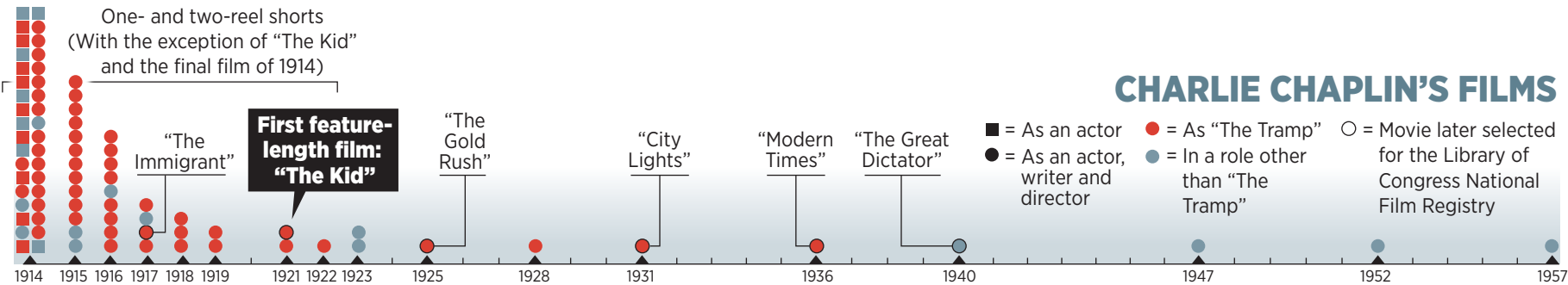
Chaplin cast 12-year-old Lita Grey to play the flirting angel in a dream sequence in the film. He hired her again in 1925 for his third feature film, “The Gold Rush.” However, the 15-year-old and the 35-year-old Chaplin began an affair. She became pregnant and dropped out of the film. Chaplin married her but divorced her two years and two children later.



Jackie Coogan played a small, uncredited role in Chaplin’s 1919 short, “A Day’s Pleasure.” Chaplin so impressed by the boy that he developed this film, in part, as a vehicle for Coogan. Coogan was hired at \$75 a week. For the first few weeks, Chaplin took Coogan to amusement parks and pony rides to help build a rapport with the boy.

“All children in some form or another have genius,” Chaplin wrote in his 1964 autobiography. “The trick is to bring it out in them. With Jackie it was easy. There were a few basic rules to learn in pantomime and Jackie very soon mastered them. He could apply emotion to the action and action to the emotion, and could repeat it time and time again without losing the effect of spontaneity.”

Throughout his career as a child movie star, his father managed his finances for him. After his father was killed in a car crash, Coogan’s mother remarried and, with her new husband, squandered Coogan’s money. In 1939, California passed the Coogan Bill to protect the finances of child actors. Coogan would go on to play Uncle Fester in “The Addams Family.”



Sources: “The New Biographical Dictionary of Film” by David Thomson, “The Movie Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained” by Dorling Kindersley, Internet Movie Database, American Film Institute, Library of Congress, CharlieChaplin.com, TheKid.Film.com, SilentLocations.com, the Numbers

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