

Film Review, George Orwell

Film Review

The Great Dictator; Prince of Wales, Gaumont Haymarket, Marble Arch Pavilion

France, 1918, Charlie Chaplin, in field grey and German steel helmet, is pulling the string of Big Bertha, falling down every time she fires. A little later, losing his way in the smoke screen, he finds himself attacking in the middle of the American infantry. Later he is in flight with a wounded staff officer, in an aeroplane which flies upside down for such lengths of time that Charlie is puzzled to know why his watch persists in standing up on the end of its chain. Finally, falling out of the aeroplane into a mud-hole, he loses his memory and is shut up in a mental home for twenty years, completely ignorant of what is happening in the world outside.

At this point the film really begins. Hynkel, Dictator of Tomania, who happens to be Charlie's double (Chaplin plays both parts) is directing an extra-special purge against the Jews at the moment when Charlie, his mind restored, escapes from the asylum and goes back to his little barber's shop in the Ghetto. There are some glorious scenes of fights against Storm Troopers which are not less, perhaps actually more moving because the tragedy of wrecked Jewish households is mixed up with the kind of humour that depends on mishaps with pails of whitewash and blows on the head with a frying-pan. But the best farcical interludes are those that take place in the Dictator's palace, especially in his scenes with his hated rival, Napaloni, Dictator of Bacteria. (Jack Oakie, in this part, has an even closer physical resemblance to Mussolini than Chaplin has to Hitler.)

There is a lovely moment at the supper table when Hynkel is so intent on outwitting Napaloni that he does not notice that he is ladling mustard on to his strawberries by mistake for cream. The invasion of Osterlich (Austria) is about to take place, and Charlie, who has been incarcerated for resisting the Storm Troopers, escapes from the concentration camp in a stolen uniform just at the moment when Hynkel is due to cross the frontier. He is mistaken for the Dictator and carried into the capital of the conquered country amid cheering crowds. The little Jewish barber finds himself raised upon an enormous rostrum, with serried ranks of Nazi dignitaries behind him and thousands of troops below, all waiting to hear his triumphal speech.

And here occurs the big moment of the film. Instead of making the speech that is expected of him, Charlie makes a powerful fighting speech in favour of democracy, tolerance, and common decency. It is really a tremendous speech, a sort of version of Lincoln's Gettysburg address done into Hollywood English, one of the strongest pieces of propaganda I have heard for a long time. It is, of course, understating the matter to say that it is out of tune with the rest of the film.

It has no connection with it whatever, except the sort of connection that exists in a dream—the kind of dream, for instance, in which you are Emperor of China at one moment and a dormouse the next. So completely is the thread broken that after that the story can go no further, and the film simply fades out, leaving it uncertain whether the speech takes effect or whether the Nazis on the platform detect the impostor and shoot him dead on the spot.

How good a film is this, simply as a film? I should be falsifying my own opinion if I did not admit that it has very great faults.

Although it is good at almost every level it exists at so many levels that it has no more unity than one finds, for instance, in a pantomime. Some of the early scenes are simply the old Chaplin of the two-reelers of thirty years ago, bowler hat, shuffling walk and all. The Ghetto scenes are sentimental comedy with a tendency to break into farce, the scenes between Hynkel and Napaloni are the lowest kind of slapstick, and mixed up with all this is a quite serious political "message." Chaplin never seems to have profited by certain modern advances of technique, so that all his films have a kind of jerkiness, an impression of being tied together with bits of string. Yet this film gets away with it. The hard-boiled audience of the press show to which I went laughed almost continuously and were visibly moved by the great speech at the end. What is Chaplin's peculiar gift? It is his power to stand for a sort of concentrated essence of the common man, for the ineradicable belief in decency that exists in the hearts of ordinary people, at any rate in the West.

We live in a period in which democracy is almost everywhere in retreat, supermen in control of three-quarters of the world, liberty explained away by sleek professors, Jew-baiting defended by pacifists. And yet everywhere, under the surface, the common man sticks obstinately to the beliefs that he derives from the Christian culture. The common man is wiser than the intellectuals, just as animals are wiser than men. Any intellectual can make you out a splendid "case" for smashing the German Trade Unions and torturing the Jews. But the common man, who has no intellect, only instinct and tradition, knows that "it isn't right." Anyone who has not lost his moral sense—and an education in Marxism and similar creeds consists largely in destroying your moral sense—knows that "it isn't right" to march into the houses of harmless little Jewish shopkeepers and set fire to their furniture. More than in any humorous trick, I believe, Chaplin's appeal lies in his power to reassert the fact, overlaid by Fascism and, ironically enough, by Socialism, that vox populi is vox Deil and giants are vermin.

No wonder that Hitler, from the moment he came to power, has banned Chaplin's films in Germany! The resemblance between the two men (almost twins, it is interesting to remember) is ludicrous, especially in the wooden movements of their arms. And no wonder that pro-Fascist writers of the type of Wyndham Lewis and Roy Campbell have always pursued Chaplin with such a peculiar venomous hatred! From the point of view of anyone who believes in supermen, it is a most disastrous accident that the greatest of all the supermen should be almost the double of an absurd little Jewish foundling with a tendency to fall into pails of whitewash. It is the sort of fact that ought to be kept dark. However, luckily, it can't be kept dark, and the allure of power politics will be a fraction weaker for every human being who sees this film.

If our Government had a little more imagination they would subsidize The Great Dictator heavily and would make every effort to get a few copies into Germany—a thing that ought not to be beyond human ingenuity. At present it is opening at three West End picture houses whose seats the majority of people cannot afford. But though it will probably get a mixed reception from the critics, I think it is safe to prophesy for it the nationwide success it deserves. Apart from Chaplin himself, Jack Oakie, Henry Daniell (as Goebbels), Maurice Moscovitch and the exceptionally attractive Paulette Goddard supply the best of the acting.

December 21, 1940

The End