

## ARTS

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

# Reliving the thrill of a very adult terror

Of the more than 150 films in which Lon Chaney appeared, only four remain in complete condition, according to British-born filmmaker Kevin Brownlow. These are: *The Shock* (1923), *The Trap* (1922), *Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and *The Scarlet Car* (1917).

As for the rest, some are sufficiently watchable, some require restoration, but several have vanished without so much as a single frame remaining.

So, when Brownlow was conducting research for his forthcoming documentary *Lon Chaney: Man of a Thousand Faces*, he had to rely on the testimony of people who saw the films during their original theatrical releases in the 1920s. (Turner Classic Movies. Tuesday, October 24, at 8pm ET.)

It is strange to think of film as an ephemeral medium, wholly dependent on the recollections of surviving witnesses. Stranger still is that Chaney's performances created such an indelible impression that these filmmakers are able to reconstruct specific scenes from memory, 70-plus years later.

Many Chaney buffs have bored their listeners to tears with the lamentation that the actor should be remembered as more than just a scary face.

Brownlow, by contrast, has created an engrossing, persuasive case for Chaney, using a few film snippets interwoven with

well-crafted narration text. The film is narrated by actor Kenneth Branagh, who said in an interview: "In some ways, Chaney adopted [certain traits we now associate with] method actors. I think the way he approached parts that included physical deformity was certainly on a par with the kind of detail that Robert De Niro used when preparing for the role of Frankenstein."

To play a legless gangster in *The Penalty* (1920), Chaney strapped his legs into a narrow leather pouch so they were almost flat against his backside. He then hobbled around on his knees, causing so much pain that he could be filmed for only a few minutes at a time.

One Chaney aficionado says in the documentary: "Everyone insisted that Chaney was a con-tortionist, or double-jointed. It's not true. That's all acting." Or masochism.

Brownlow's documentary points out that some of Chaney's finest performances were in ordinary dramatic films such as *Tell It to the Marines* (1926), in which he invented the now stock role of the gruff but good-hearted marine sergeant (TCM Aired

documentary is Michael Blake, an eccentric make-up artist who has written three biographies on Chaney.

Explaining that Chaney was born to two deaf parents, Blake makes the alarming claim that "growing up in a deaf family was one of the best training grounds Chaney could have had [as an actor]", as this forced him at an early age to develop the exaggerated, malleable facial expressions so important to silent film.

Lon's great-grandson, Ron Chaney, explains further that Lon's

mother had developed rheumatism and could no longer communicate in sign language, so that she and her son communicated with their eyes.

The cult of Chaney would have us believe that no aspect of his life was entirely of this world. The documentary includes footage from a 1968 interview with the actor's son, the late Lon Chaney Jr. He says dramatically he was "born black and dead", and

goes on to explain that his father brought him back to life by plunging the new-born into the sub-zero waters of an Oklahoma winter.

These stories are almost pedestrian compared with the plots of some of Chaney's films. In *The Holy Three* (1930), he plays a ventriloquist named Echo, who allies himself with another carnival worker and a midget, to perpetrate a scam. The midget poses as a baby Echo poses as an old woman, and they use this as a ruse to smuggle jewels.

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In *The Unknown* (1927), he plays Alonzo the armless knife-thrower, who is in the employ of a Spanish circus. (Tuesday, October 31 at 3am ET.)

His act involves tossing the knives with his agile toes. But he has a secret: he really does have arms. He is a criminal fleeing the law, and his armlessness is a disguise to conceal his distinguishing mark: double thumbs.

He blackmails a surgeon into removing both arms to impress a girl (played by an extremely young Joan Crawford). He then realises he has done it for nothing, for she loves someone else: the circus strongman, of course.

Ray Bradbury, who participated in the documentary, attempts to explain the attraction of Chaney's disturbing characters: "He [always] played a victim of unrequited love. He tapped into fears we all have, that we have something grotesque the world will turn away from."

We enjoy the child-like thrill of being frightened by Chaney's monster makeup. But deep down, the deep and abiding insecurity Chaney evokes is a very adult terror after all.

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