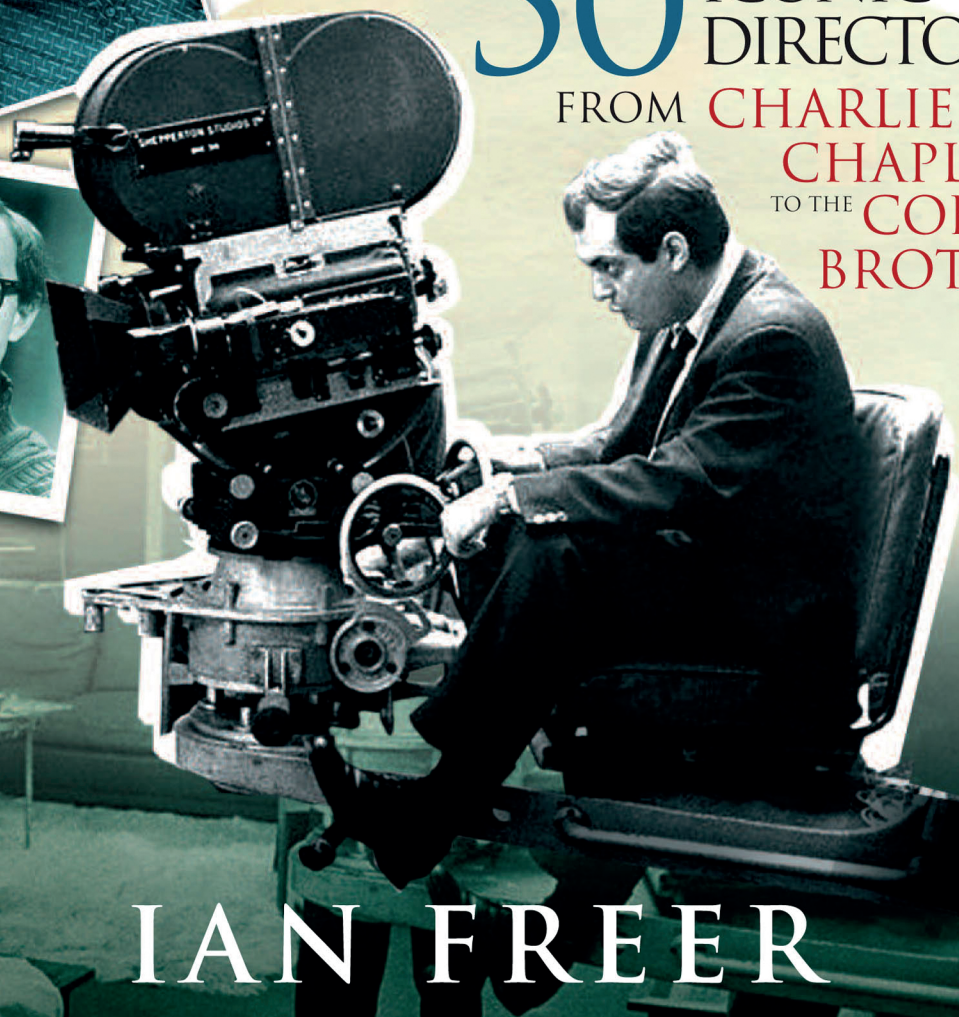


MOVIE MAKERS



50 ICONIC
DIRECTORS
FROM CHARLIE
CHAPLIN
TO THE COEN
BROTHERS



IAN FREER

Quercus
21 Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1A 2NS

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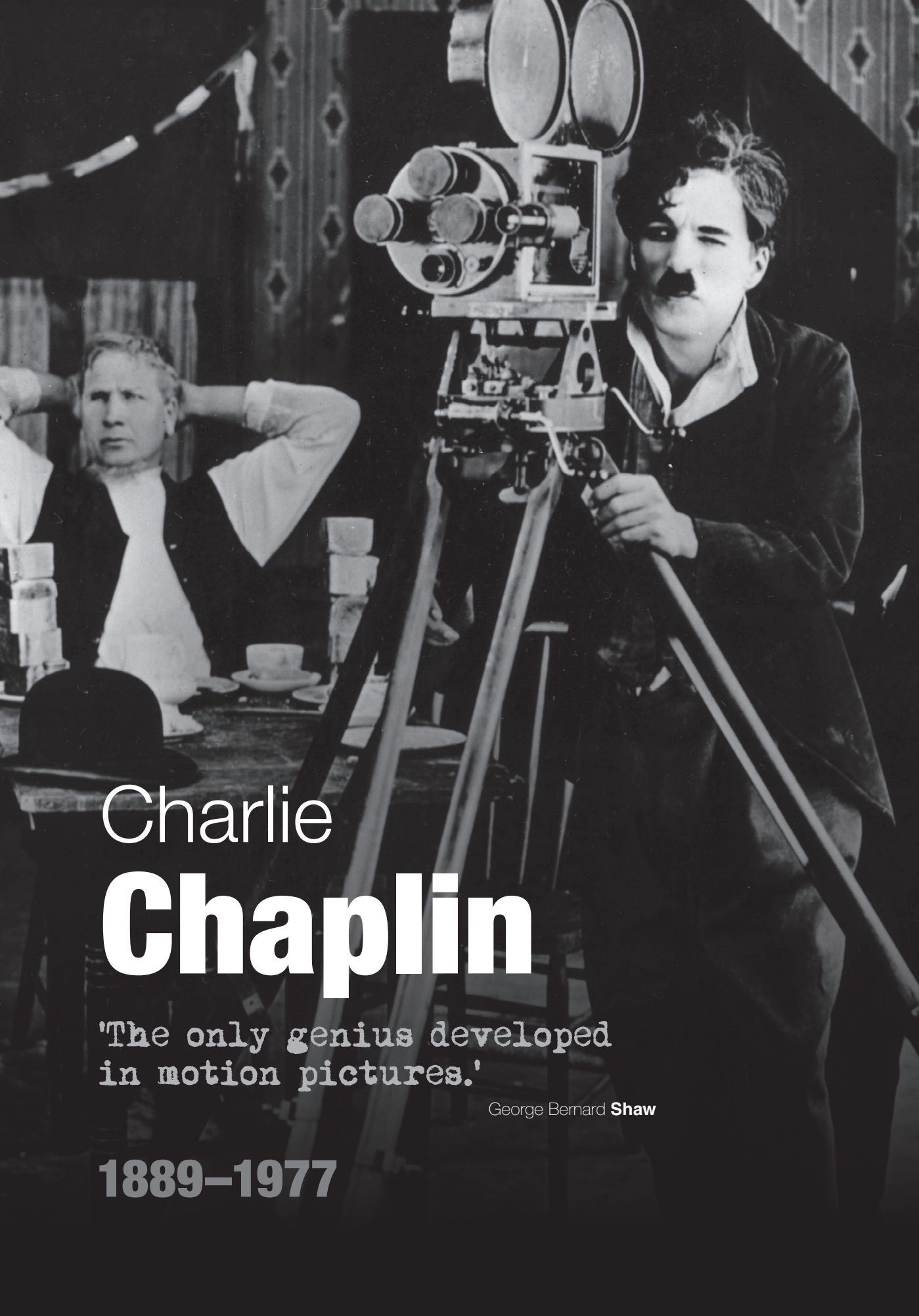
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Contents

Introduction	4	Federico Fellini	99
		Satyajit Ray	103
D.W. Griffith	6	Robert Altman	106
Cecil B. DeMille	10	Sam Peckinpah	109
Michael Curtiz	13	Stanley Kubrick	113
Charlie Chaplin	16	Sergio Leone	118
Fritz Lang	20	Jean-Luc Godard	121
John Ford	24	François Truffaut	125
Jean Renoir	28	Roman Polanski	129
Josef von Sternberg	32	Woody Allen	132
Howard Hawks	35	Ridley Scott	136
Frank Capra	39	Francis Ford Coppola	139
Sergei Eisenstein	42	Bernardo Bertolucci	143
George Cukor	47	Krzysztof Kieślowski	146
Alfred Hitchcock	50	Werner Herzog	149
Luis Buñuel	55	Martin Scorsese	153
Walt Disney	58	George Lucas	157
William Wyler	62	David Lynch	160
Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger	65	Steven Spielberg	164
John Huston	69	Pedro Almodóvar	169
Roberto Rossellini	72	Joel and Ethan Coen	172
Billy Wilder	75	Spike Lee	176
David Lean	79	Tim Burton	179
Elia Kazan	83	Peter Jackson	182
Akira Kurosawa	86	Quentin Tarantino	186
Orson Welles	90	Index of Must-see Movies	190
Ingmar Bergman	94	Index of Directors	192



Charlie **Chaplin**

'The only genius developed
in motion pictures.'

George Bernard **Shaw**

1889–1977

Film folklore has it that Charlie Chaplin

once came third in a Charlie Chaplin lookalike contest. The anecdote, while probably apocryphal, speaks volumes about how sharply defined the Chaplin image was and that the persona belonged to the public as much as it belonged to the filmmaker. At the start of the 20th century, when cinema was in its infancy, Chaplin became its first globally recognized brand, popularizing and legitimizing the burgeoning medium. By 1916 his salary of US\$10,000 a week made him the highest-paid actor in the world. The industry surrounding him – Chaplin dolls, dance crazes, songs and cocktails – was mind-boggling, and he counted such luminaries as George Bernard Shaw, Marcel Proust and Sigmund Freud among his admirers. No one did more to establish cinema on the cultural landscape than Charlie Chaplin.

However, Chaplin's skill as a filmmaker is debatable. He never really exploited the possibilities of the form to the full, using the camera simply to document the pantomime in his silent films and subsequently floundering in the talkie era. He is also often criticized for introducing a strain of sentimentality into American cinema from which, some argue, it has never recovered. But the fact remains: he elevated silent comedy from knockabout farce into something more engaging and emotional. He was also the first, and possibly last, person to control every aspect of the filmmaking process – starring in, writing, directing, producing, editing and scoring his own pictures – and so blazing a trail for every actor-writer-director that followed.

STREET LIFE

The depiction of street life that populates much of Chaplin's work has its roots in his impoverished childhood. He was born on 18 April 1889 in London, growing up in state-sponsored poorhouses, orphanages and on the streets after his father deserted the family when he was two years old. Both Chaplin's parents were entertainers, and as a child he began to work regularly in music hall, the British equivalent of vaudeville, touring with dance troupe the Flying Lancaster Lads and playing small roles in London's West End.

His big break came when, aged 17, he joined the successful Fred Karno Company, which toured both Britain and abroad. During his seven-year stint with Karno, Chaplin honed the athletic prowess, impeccable timing and endless invention that became his stock-in-trade, but, perhaps more importantly, Karno took Chaplin to America, where he was spotted by comedy impresario Mack Sennett. In 1913 he joined Sennett's Keystone Company. Following his inconsequential debut, *Making a Living*, Chaplin's second film,



Kid Auto Races in Venice (1914), introduced many key elements of his future success. Wearing baggy pants – borrowed from silent star Roscoe Fatty Arbuckle – oversized shoes, an ill-fitting jacket, a bowler hat, a cane and Sennett's fake moustache trimmed to toothbrush size, Chaplin established the iconic tramp figure that captured the world's imagination: a gentleman reimaged as the salt of the earth.

After 12 films lending support to established comics Chaplin took the reins of *Caught in the Rain* in 1914 and began writing, directing and starring in a run of movies, applying and refining the stagecraft he learned with Karno for film. After joining the Essanay Company in 1915 Chaplin began a meteoric rise in popularity, defining his persona – the small man with a big

heart who ridicules and triumphs over pompous authority figures – in films such as *The Tramp* (1915). By now Chaplin could afford to be more discerning, making fewer films but with an increasing attention to detail and quality.

'All I need to make a comedy is a park, a policeman and a pretty girl.'

Charlie **Chaplin**

The Rink (1916), *Easy Street*, *The Cure*, *The Immigrant* and *The Adventurer* (all from 1917) were brilliant exercises in physical comedy, but they also showcased Chaplin's desire to shift between pratfalls and pathos, humour and heartbreak. This approach reached its zenith with *The Kid*, his first full-length feature, in 1921. The story of Charlie raising an abandoned child pulled firmly on the public's heartstrings, and the result was a huge box-office success.

THE GOLD RUSH

He signed with the Mutual Film Corporation (1916–18) and First National (1918–23), but in 1919 Chaplin co-founded his own creative haven, United Artists, with director D.W. Griffith and actors Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. After directing *A Woman of Paris*, the only silent film of his in which he did not appear, Chaplin hit pay dirt in 1925 with *The Gold Rush*, in which he turns prospector looking for riches in Alaska. *The Gold Rush* is the perfect synthesis of comedy and emotion, and it features many of Chaplin's greatest routines, including the bread-roll dance, and a rare strand of darkness – a starving accomplice imagines Chaplin as a succulent chicken – all told with a tender poetry.

The Gold Rush was followed by *The Circus* (1928), for which he won an honorary Academy Award in 1927 – Chaplin never won a regular Oscar – then *City Lights* (1931), a charming picture in which Chaplin falls for a blind flower girl. Although it was made after the advent of sound Chaplin insisted that *City Lights* be made without dialogue, with sound effects and his own

THE LADIES AND THE TRAMP

As well as for political controversy Chaplin also courted attention for his personal life, in particular his penchant for younger brides. His first two wives – film extra Mildred Harris and aspiring actress Lita Grey – were both 16 when Chaplin married them in 1918 and 1924 respectively. Following a bitter divorce from Grey, Chaplin married his then co-star Paulette Goddard secretly at sea in 1933, although the marriage was not revealed until 1936 following the release of *Modern Times*. Chaplin finally settled down with his fourth marriage, to Oona O'Neill, daughter of playwright Eugene O'Neill, in 1943. Despite her father's disapproval – she was 18, and Chaplin was 54 – the pair remained together until his death in 1977.

THE CHAPLIN LEGACY

Chaplin is an enduring icon, and he has entered popular culture in countless ways. In 1992 Richard Attenborough made the heartfelt biopic *Chaplin* with Robert Downey Jr in the title role. Films as diverse as *La Strada*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *Benny and Joon* – Johnny Depp replicating *The Gold Rush*'s bread-roll ballet – have all paid homage. Chaplin also made his mark outside film. During the 1950s he was a touchstone for the Beats, Jack Kerouac proclaiming that he went on the road because he wanted to be like Chaplin's hobo. From 1981 to 1987 IBM used the tramp figure to advertise and humanize its foray into personal computers. However, perhaps the most bizarre tribute comes from Spain, where a comedic form of bullfighting is known as *charlotada*, derived from the Spanish Charlot, or Charlie.

score, including the song 'Smile', his only concessions to the new innovation. *City Lights*, against all industry expectations, was a huge hit, and five years later Chaplin once again eschewed dialogue in *Modern Times*, a warning against the advances of mechanization that included some of Chaplin's most visually interesting and sustained comedy.

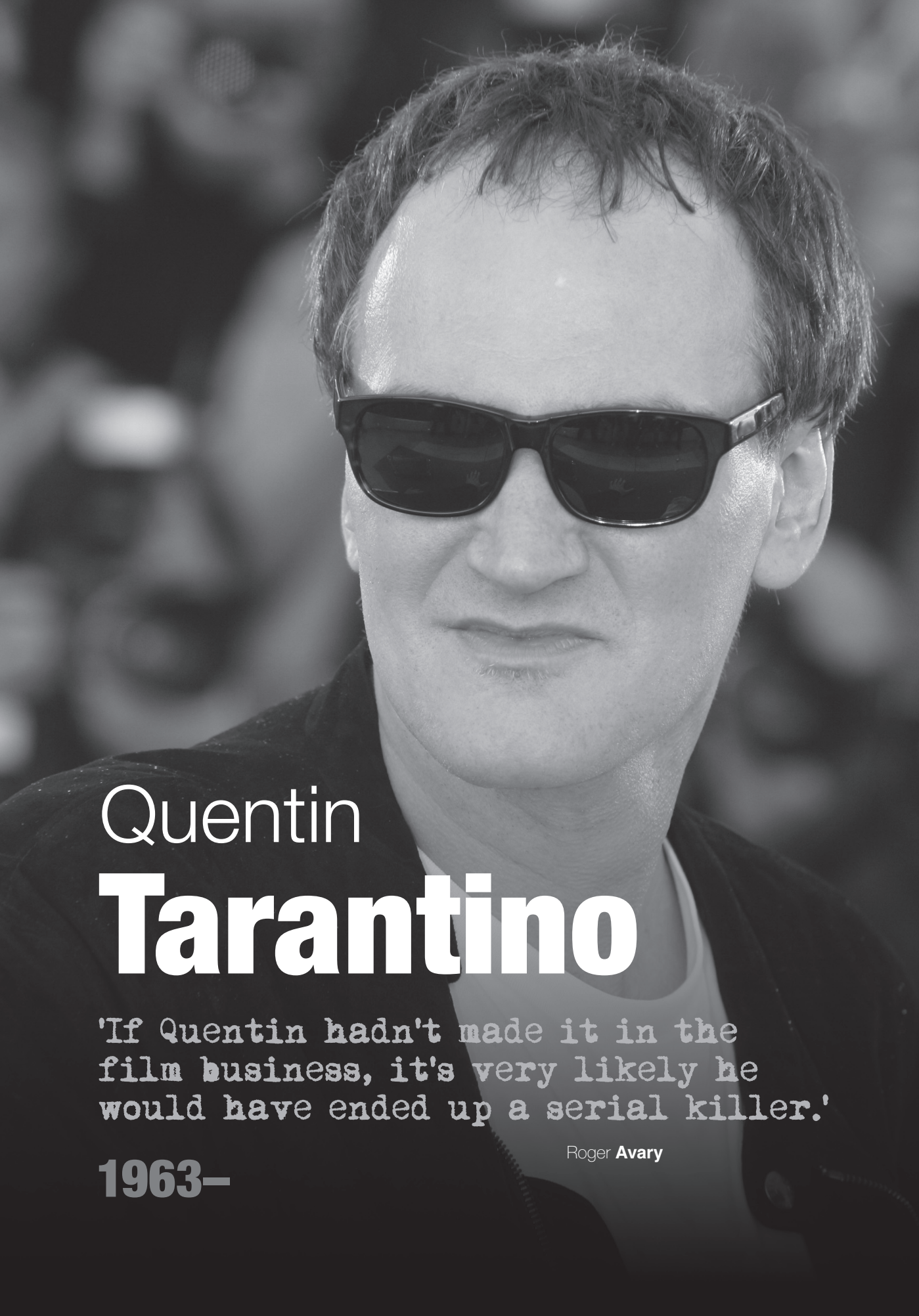
DARK TIMES

Chaplin resisted the technological advances of sound for 13 years, and when he finally embraced it the results lacked the consistency of his silent output. In *The Great Dictator* (1940) Chaplin played the dual role of a Jewish barber and fascist dictator Adenoid Hynkel in a pointed satire on Nazism. Five years later, in *Monsieur Verdoux*, based on an idea by Orson Welles, Chaplin assayed a sardonic mass murderer in a brilliant, if bitter, black comedy. *Limelight* (1952) was a kind of

summation of Chaplin's work, with him playing a has-been entertainer nursing a starlet (Claire Bloom) to success. It is doused in self-pity but does feature Chaplin sharing the screen with his great rival Buster Keaton.

This shift in tone may well have been down to the tumult in Chaplin's personal life. Even though he had lived in the USA for 42 years Chaplin had never become an American citizen. This fact, coupled with the increasingly politicized and pacifist messages in his movies, meant that he had come under increasing scrutiny and pressure from the political right. In 1952 the FBI put together a 2,000-page dossier on him and subpoenaed him to appear in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee to discuss alleged communist affiliations. Chaplin refused to appear, and, after he had set sail for the London premiere of *Limelight*, Attorney-General James McGranery revoked his re-entry visa until he agreed to submit himself to a full inquiry.

Chaplin feared he had lost the adoration of the American public, and he refused to return, settling instead in Switzerland. He made two final films, *A King in New York* (1957) and *The Countess from Hong Kong* (1966), both unsuccessful. Aged 83, Chaplin finally set foot back on American soil in 1972 to accept his second honorary Oscar, receiving one of the loudest and longest standing ovations in Academy Awards history. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1975, and he died from natural causes on Christmas Day 1977. Tributes poured in, perhaps the most touching being from Bob Hope: 'We were fortunate to live in his lifetime.'



Quentin

Tarantino

'If Quentin hadn't made it in the film business, it's very likely he would have ended up a serial killer.'

Roger Avary

1963-

Quentin Tarantino is the geek who inherited the earth. The video-shop worker who became cinema's boy wonder, Tarantino grabbed headlines and plaudits for his ability to turn the flotsam and jetsam of popular culture into compelling, almost arthouse fare.

In a mere five films he has created a unique style with fractured, achronological narratives, idiosyncratic and memorable dialogue – often about nothing to do with the plot – violence played for comedy as much as shock value and a telling use of forgotten actors and little-known pop songs. And let's not forget his foot fetish – close-ups of female feet abound in his work! Unlike the previous generation of filmmakers Quentin Tarantino didn't receive his training at film school; he served his apprenticeship watching films. Weaned on movies, television, comic books and rockabilly music, at the age of 22 Tarantino took a job at Californian movie-rental store Video Archives. As well as firing his imagination and providing an opportunity to make the short film *My Best Friend's Birthday* (1987), working in a video store also brought Tarantino into contact with various film-industry professionals who were struck by his knowledge and livewire energy. One such person was producer John Langley, a regular customer, who introduced Tarantino to fledgling producer Lawrence Bender. Their first project together would send a rocket through the film world.



LET'S GO TO WORK

Tarantino originally conceived *Reservoir Dogs*, the script for which he developed at a Sundance workshop, as a 16-mm low-budget (US\$35,000) heist movie. But when actor Harvey Keitel read the script and agreed to act as executive producer the film immediately gained kudos and credibility, leaping to a budget of US\$1.3 million and attracting a hot group of young actors, including Tim Roth, Steve Buscemi and Michael Madsen. The finished film, the story of the aftermath of a bloody jewel theft, was a shot in the arm for the entire film industry,

with Tarantino playing fast and loose with all kinds of conventions: it is a heist movie where you never actually see the heist; it is a film noir set in the blinding Californian sunshine; and it is a genre movie where the characters forget about the plot to discuss the hidden meaning in Madonna's lyrics, the ethics of tipping and 1970s cop shows.

Dogs also became notorious for its violence, especially the scene in which violent psychopath Mr White (Madsen) tortures a kidnapped cop, resulting in an ear being sliced off with a cut-throat razor to the soundtrack of Stealers Wheel's 'Stuck in the Middle With You'. The film subsequently had a huge cultural impact, changing the face of the American independent film scene, spawning floods of imitators and adding phrases and images to the cultural lexicon.

THE PRINCE OF PULP

On the back of *Reservoir Dogs* Hollywood began to snap up his back catalogue of screenplays, including *True Romance* (1993), directed by Tony Scott, and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), directed by Oliver Stone. Both films feature couples on the run and plenty of violence.

It was during an extended stay in Europe promoting *Reservoir Dogs* that Tarantino landed on the idea for his next project. An anthology of crime stories inspired by the lurid tales in dime-store magazines and hardboiled detective novels, *Pulp Fiction* (1994) once again breathed

'If I've made it a little easier for artists to work in violence, great! I've accomplished something.'

Quentin **Tarantino**

New York Film Festival an audience member fainted during the scene where a hypodermic needle is plunged into Uma Thurman's chest. The film was also heavily criticized for its foul language, in particular the constant use of racial slurs. But it remains a rich, funny, thrilling tapestry of the LA underworld, fuelled by a dazzling array of quotations from other films as well as scenes that have subsequently been parodied in their own right – John Travolta and Uma Thurman's twist, for example. *Pulp Fiction* also revealed another string to Tarantino's bow, that of his skill in casting out-of-favour actors – Travolta and Bruce Willis both received career revivals on the back of it.

Tarantino won both the Palme d'Or at Cannes and an Oscar for Best Screenplay, and the movie earned US\$200 million at the box office. He became an ever-present figure on the film scene, acting in cameos, co-directing anthology film *Four Rooms* (1995) and setting up a production and distribution company. For his long-awaited follow-up to *Pulp Fiction* he directed his first adaptation, *Jackie Brown* (1997), based on the Elmore Leonard crime novel *Rum Punch*. Those expecting a repeat of the fireworks of *Pulp Fiction* were disappointed. More subdued in both its gore and filmmaking style, *Jackie Brown* is a slow-moving, absorbing

new life into stock genre situations – the gangster taking out the mobster's wife, the boxer who has to take a fall, the assassin taking care of a hit. This he does by adding reality checks – famously a discussion about the European names of McDonald's products – criss-crossing the stories in a non-linear fashion and building up suspense, surprise, irony and tension.

Once again the film's violence caused controversy: at a showing at the

SMALL-SCREEN TARANTINO

For a high-profile movie director Tarantino has never been afraid to revel in his love of television by making episodes of his favourite shows. He has directed episodes of *ER* and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, which included a live interment reminiscent of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*. He was slated to direct an episode of *The X-Files*, but not being a member of the Directors Guild of America he was prevented from doing so. However, the episode had been written with Tarantino in mind so has little in common with the tone and style of the rest of the series. As a performer he has appeared in *Alias*, hosted *Saturday Night Live* and was a judge on *American Idol*.

character study, and it once again showcased Tarantino's deftness with forgotten talents by casting Pam Grier and Robert Forster.

EXPLOITATION KING

Apart from the occasional foray into – poorly received – acting Tarantino took a break from both filmmaking and public life, firing rumours of writer's block. He returned with *Kill Bill*, a bloody valentine to the kung fu films he had wallowed in at Video Archives. The story, written with Uma Thurman in mind after the two had met up at the 2000 Academy Awards, follows a bride left for

dead on her wedding day who swears violent revenge on her attackers. After the film grew in ambition and budget, production studio Miramax took the unusual decision to release the film in two parts – *Vol. 1* (2003) and *Vol. 2* (2004) – a move that generated mountains of hype and column inches. *Vol. 1* is a riot of Tarantino chutzpah and brilliantly choreographed violence – the final bloodbath was turned black and white by the censors to tone down the impact – whereas *Vol. 2* slows the action down for more considered character moments.

For his most recent film, *Grindhouse* (2007), a double-bill feature directed by Tarantino and friend Robert Rodriguez, Tarantino continued to pay homage to Z-grade entertainments. Tarantino's talk-driven episode, 'Death Proof', stars Kurt Russell as Stuntman Mike, a crazed killer who gets his kicks by mowing women down in a black Chevrolet Nova. The experiment failed to communicate with audiences, however, with many patrons leaving after Rodriguez's 'Planet Terror' section. Tarantino's effort was subsequently released in its own right, but its commercial failure highlights an interesting crossroads in his career: if audiences have tired of his glorious revivals of film history, where does he go next?

TARANTINO'S UNIVERSE

Tarantino often litters his films with characters, events, companies and brand names that work across his entire fictional universe.

Michael Madsen's character in *Reservoir Dogs*, Vic Vega, is the brother of *Pulp Fiction*'s Vincent Vega, played by John Travolta. Alabama, the heroine of *True Romance*, is name-checked in *Reservoir Dogs*. Cigarette brand Red Apple, fast-food joint Big Kahuna Burger and Fruit Brute – a real discontinued cereal – crop up in numerous Tarantino films.