Chaplin: His Life and Art by David Robinson

Of the many books about Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977), among them the Tramps own charming but evasive 1964 autobiography, this magisterial volume does by far the best job of detailing and analyzing his genius as a filmmaker. Chaplin's widow allowed David Robinson to examine their personal archives in Switzerland, and he makes good use of this access in his meticulous descriptions of the movies that created the legend, including City Lights and Modern Times. Robinson is less interested in Chaplin's tumultuous personal life, skating rather lightly over the lawsuits and scandals that plagued his later years in the United States. No matter: Chaplin lovers will find their understanding of his films enhanced; those unfamiliar with his artistry will learn why an actor-director whose greatest work was done before 1940 remains a key figure in the history of motion pictures.

My Personal Review:
David Robinson has written the definitive biography of Charlie Chaplin. It is largely the basis for the movie "Chaplin" because it was authorized by the legend himself and thoroughly explores his life to a greater extent than his autobiography. It is truly a moving and informative work.

Robinson begins his chronology of Chaplin's life in his childhood. He was largely orphaned by his alcoholic father and was only allowed to spend time with his mother while she was mentally healthy. It was through a failed performance of his mother than he got his first taste of acting as a child. From this point, he would devote almost all of the rest of his 87 years to entertainment. In his youth, he specialized in the stage productions which entertained England. He got his first taste of America on one of these traveling tours. On a later tour, he was offered a contract by an American film company. Chaplin agreed to honor his stage contract before beginning his film career.

The book documents with reasonably precise details the process of each film he released in addition to one the public never saw and the final project he never started. Through this filmography, we see the development of "the tramp" character. With each film, the character moves closer to the final product we know.
Chaplin's personal life is well documented. Unlike the autobiography all four wives are addressed, even the one Chaplin was not very fond of discussing. The fact that his first two wives were young is not avoided. However, it must be put in perspective that people did marry and have babies a lot sooner in those days. It is only unique in Chaplin's case because the husband/father is famous and much older. Despite his work for America during war time and a professed love for the country, the slanderous allegations of McCarthyism, also known as the 1950’s witch hunt for communists, forced him to finish his life away from the country he loved. Truly the red scare is made to be a more terrible embarrassment to America by this result.

Today's cinematic audience has little appreciation for the roots of the art form. Charlie Chaplin was a revolutionary and founding father in the film industry. Reading about his life is only a step in appreciating his brilliant work.

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