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OLD SILENT MOVIE

by

Marie Starr

A dizzy documentary depicting a day's "shooting"
at an OLD SILENT MOVIE studio. The year is 1922.
The place is Hollywood.

CHARACTERS

In the Order of Appearance

MR. SPRINKLESPRITZ	The Director
MISS BLOTTER	The Script Girl
IAN	The Assistant Director
FIRST ACTRESS/ also plays Old Lady	
SECOND ACTRESS/ also plays Make-Up	
ACTOR/ also plays Lion	
CARRIE	The Casting Director
LION'S AGENT	
ANDY	
JULIET	The Leading Lady
MICHAEL	The Cameraman
GUMBALL	A Mime, in the Jackie Coogan tradition
KEYSTONE KOP I	
KEYSTONE KOP II	

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Charlottesville, VA 22905

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THE STYLE OF OLD SILENT MOVIE

Old Silent Movie should recreate for today's young audiences not only the fun and frantic atmosphere that went into the making of one of America's classic art forms, but also the manner of its performance. Despite the seeming simplicity of dialogue and story line, it takes precision of timing and movement and a sense of style to make this dizzy documentary work.

In casting the play, I look for performers who can move. This kind of theatre is no place for clumsy bodies. If they haven't had movement or dance training we give it to them in the course of rehearsals. Comic effects depend on very precise and choreographed movement and split-second timing. The director must have a strong sense of the design of the movement.

The speaking, like the movement, requires precision and clarity. There are no throw-away lines. I work for diction and enunciation; the lines must be sharp and snappy. The choral speech, in particular, when several of the cast or all of them speak together, must be very clean.

The stylization of the production is carried through with the use of props and mime. Only a minimum of scenery and properties are used to keep the stage and the action uncluttered. Those props which are necessary to help the audience visualize the action--the rose, the make-up case, the mop and bucket, the Kops' foam-rubber-padded billy clubs--are real. Others, like the Casting Office telephone and Gumball's sword, are created through sound effects and mime. The stage is bare except for the piano and the prop tables. Much of the scenery, like the Lion's cage and the Casting Office window, is created by the bodies of the actors.

Ensemble playing is essential. All of the actors, except the Kops and Gumball, remain on stage all of the time. When they are not involved in dialogue or in helping create a piece of scenery, they provide music and sound effects, using the instruments laid out on the prop table. I have suggested the musical instruments and sound makers that worked for us--triangle, cymbal, snare drum, woodblocks, ratchet, kazoo, etc.--but the director may substitute other instruments or effects depending upon the resources of the group. The Commedia del'Arte, from which the style of the old silent movie is descended, is, after all, the "comedy of

skills," and the wise director will utilize all the skills within his or her company's command, whether musical, balletic, acrobatic, or otherwise.

Don't worry about trying to make the play make sense. These old comedy films were never supposed to make sense. Enjoy them, instead, for their superb nonsense.

As for the actors, once they have mastered the highly disciplined skills required for performing this kind of comedy, I find they never again want to work any other way.

Marie Starr



OLD SILENT MOVIE

Dialogue and Sound

Action

Company

(Whistle blast by Mr. Sprinklespitz)

YES, MR. SPRINKLESPITZ! YES,
MR. SPRINKLESPITZ! YES, YES,
YES, YES! YES, MR. SPRINKLE-
SPITZ! YES, MR. SPRINKLESPITZ!
YES, YES, YES, YES! YES, MR.
SPRINKLESPITZ! (etc.)

The stage is empty except for two tables upstage center to hold the props and musical instruments, and a piano to one side. From the back of the auditorium, the Company enters, chanting, in pecking order procession. First, Mr. Sprinklespitz, then Ian and Miss Blotter together. Ian carries a "Director's Chair" open and ready for any sudden sitting by Mr. Sprinklespitz. The rest of the cast, except for Keystone Kops and Gumball, follow, carrying costume bits, props and musical instruments. Michael brings up the rear, carrying a megaphone which he uses for comic business with the audience, using it as a telescope to survey children in the audience up close and individually, inverting it, etc. After about 30 seconds of this, while the company sets props and instruments on the table, Michael gives silent O.K. sign to Company.

Michael
GREAT AUDIENCE!

Turns again to audience.

My name is Michael. I'm the Cameraman in this play. It's called

"OLD SILENT MOVIE"!
(Cymbal crash)

(Speaking through Megaphone)

The time is the year 1922. The place is Hollywood. So--here we are, in what used to be a big old barn. Now it's a movie studio. The first thing we'll visit is the casting office.

Michael (cont.)

Movies need actors. Actors
need jobs.

Meet Carrie, our cheerful
casting director.
(Phone rings)

Carrie

Casting Office! Nothing today!
(Phone rings again)
Casting Office! Nothing today!

First Actress

(Stick on woodblock)
(Rachet)

"O ROMEO, ROMEO! WHEREFORE ART
THOU ROMEO?"

Carrie

Nothing today!
(Rachet)

First Actress

Oooooooooohhh!!! I wouldn't work
in your old movie if you paid me
a million dollars!

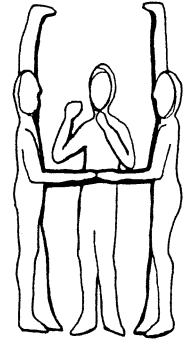
Actor

Good morning, lovely lady!

First Actress

Go jump in the lake!

He indicates a place downstage
where two actors (Andy and Lion's
Agent) form "Casting
Office with their
arms. Carrie stands
back of "window"
they create.



Carrie answers
phone with a chilled
voice that matches
her frozen smile.
Hangs up.

Hangs up.

She is slinky slick, overdone in
every way. Wears small, tight
"20's" hat and feather boa.
Knocks on window 3 times.
Carrie raises imaginary window
with a Zzzzaaap. Actress delivers
line with gestures, sobs, gives
her all.

Slams window shut.

Furious.

Snaps finger at closed window.
Turns, and is stalking out in
high dudgeon as Actor enters. He
is all foppish elegance as he
makes a sweeping bow and tips his
hat.

Actor is startled by her reply.
She exits. He goes, undaunted,

(Stick on woodblock)
(Rachet)

Actor
Good morning, lovely lady!

A lovely rose for a lovely,
lovely lady!

Carrie
Nothing today!
(Rachet)
(Rachet)
(Rachet)

Actor
Ah, well! Tomorrow is another
day!
(Police whistles)

Andy
Michael!! Can we take a break?

Lion's Agent
This is hard work!

Michael
(Whistle)
FREEZE!!

What is your pleasure? Waltz or
Minuet?

Andy, Lion's Agent and Carrie
Minuet!

to the fateful window, knocks
3 times. Carrie Zzzaaaps up
up window.

He goes into his act. Bow,
hat bit. Takes rose from his
lapel and hands it to Carrie.
Carrie coldly accepts rose,
smells it, and delivers her
usual.

Slams window shut. Actor immedi-
ately Zzzaaaps up window. Snatches
rose from a shocked Carrie.
He slams window shut. Replaces
rose in his lapel and speaks
to Audience.

He is his foppish self again. As
he exits, police whistles are
heard from back of auditorium as
Gumball runs frantically down the
aisle toward Michael. Gumball is
pursued by two equally frantic
Keystone Kops. As the three race
across the front of the auditorium
Andy and the Lion's Agent, still
holding their arms as the Casting
Office, call to Michael.

Blows his whistle. Yells at
Gumball and Kops. They stop on a
dime in mid-air. To Andy and
Lion's Agent, very courtly.

Michael

May I have this dance?

(Whistle)

ACTION!!

(Whistles)

In the meantime, it looks like our movie director is in trouble. Let's tune in.

Second Actress

Mr. Sprinklespitz! I will not go into that lion's cage!

(Cymbal)

Sprinklespitz

You will go into that lion's cage!

(Cowbell)

I repeat--you will go into that lion's cage!

(Cowbell)

Bows to Carrie. Miss Blotter goes to piano and plays four measures of Beethoven's Minuet in G. The four dance, and the rest of the Company la-la's and plays instruments along with piano. Gumball and the Kops unfreeze their heads long enough to do a double-take at the musical scene. Minuet concludes. Michael blows his whistle and yells. Andy and the Lion's Agent resume their posts as the Casting Office, reversing positions. Kops and Gumball resume their frantic chase. Gumball dives between Michael's legs. Kops follow him, spilling Michael to ground. Michael blows his whistle, Kops blow theirs, as trio chase off past Casting Office and out. Andy, Lion's Agent and Carrie stand at ease. Michael takes out handkerchief and wipes his brow.

The Second Actress, Kathy, wearing oversized dark glasses and scarf tied under her chin, carrying a make-up case, marches indignantly across the stage, followed by an equally indignant Director, Mr. Sprinklespitz. He is wearing his Director's beret and his usual dictatorial manner. Michael sneaks up on them, and, using the megaphone as an ear trumpet, he eavesdrops.

Waves his arms wildly to emphasize his demands. As he makes his final on "lion's cage," his right arm

(Slide whistle)

MISS BLOTTER!!

Miss Blotter

Yes, Mr. Sprinklespitz!

Sprinklespitz

I have been robbed! Mugged!
Beaten! Bloody!

Miss Blotter

Oh, Mr. Sprinklespitz! Where does
it hurt?

Sprinklespitz

There! Look! Empty!
My megaphone! Stolen! Find it!
(Slide whistle)

Miss Blotter

Yes, Mr. Sprinklespitz. Ian!!
(Slide whistle)

Ian

Yes, Miss Blotter!
(Slide whistle)

Miss Blotter

There! Look!
(Slide whistle)

Ian, Miss Blotter

Empty!!
(Slide whistle)

locks in a straight out front extended position. He uses his left hand to retrieve the errant limb, bringing it back up to his face in three abrupt pulls. Facing his empty hand in shocked amazement, he does a double-take and bellows for Miss Blotter. The Second Actress stands quietly during the following scene.

She scurries to his side, clipboard in hand and pencil at the ready. She is always breathless, for very good reason. She runs the mile in 58 seconds a hundred times a day.

He always bellows. Uses empty hand for emphasis.

Reacts with larges gestures but does not touch Mr. Sprinklespitz.

Mr. Sprinklespitz indicates his empty hand.

Reacts "big" to all calls, orders, etc. Runs in a large circle, if close by, to make an entrance.

Pointing to Mr. S's empty hand.

Sprinklespitz

My megaphone! Stolen! Find it!
(Slide whistle)

Ian

Yes sir, Mr. Sprinklespitz!
Cast! Crew!

There! Look!

Ian, Miss Blotter,
Cast and Crew

Empty!!

Sprinklespitz

My megaphone! Stolen! Find it!
(Slide whistle)

Cast and Crew

Yes sir, Mr. Sprinklespitz!

Kathy

Mr. Sprinklespitz! I will not go
into that lion's cage with the
lion in it.
(Cymbal)

(Multiple sound effects)

Sprinklespitz

You will go into that lions cage
with the lion in it!
(Cowbell)

Kathy

No, Mr. Sprinklespitz! No! No!!
No!!!
(Cymbal)
(Multiple sound effects)

NOOOOOHHHHH!!!

All the cast, except Second
Actress, Andy, Lion's Agent and
Carrie, come running.

Ian points to Mr. S's empty hand.

They scuttle off, searching every-
where for the Megaphone but over-
looking Michael.

She leads a procession which
takes off in figure 8's, with
Sprinklespitz following, and
Miss Blotter and Ian after.

Kathy stops suddenly. Chain
collision.

Procession proceeds.

Kathy stops suddenly. Chain
collision. Kathy turns, faces
Mr. Sprinklespitz.

Sprinklespitz

What did you say?

OHHH!

Miss Blotter, Ian

She said "no" to Mr. Sprinklespitz!!

(Drum, cymbal, cowbell)

Kathy

I quit!

Sprinklespitz

You can't quit! You're fired!

Kathy

(Castanets, Guitar)

OLE!

(Drums, Cymbal)

I double quit.

Can't believe his ears.

Horrified.

Faints. Ian and Miss Blotter catch him, try to support him.

Shocked, look at each other.

Drop Mr. Sprinklespitz who falls to floor with a thud.

Starts off.

Recovering and sitting up.

Her reply is to whirl around, march menacingly up to the seated Mr. Sprinklespitz, place her make-up box on the floor, open it, take out a Spanish shawl, dance, twirl it in the air, and call out

She bends down and rapidly wraps said shawl around the head of her victim, ties it around his neck, completely covering his face. Then, as a final insult, she picks up the make-up box and whacks Mr. Sprinklespitz on the top of his head.

She turns and exits as Cast and Crew, pausing in their search for the megaphone to stare at Kathy, suddenly spot Michael with the megaphone.

Cast and Crew

Look! Michael has it.

Michael

Uh-oh....

Miss Blotter, IanCast and Crew

Michael! Back to the property room.

(Police whistles)

Kops

Ah hahh! Caught cha!

Kop I

Stop tryin'

Kop II

Tah sneak in

Kops

Da gate!

Castin' Office!

(Drum, Cowbell, Slide Whistle, Cymbal, to punctuate grab, kick,

Caught in the act, he tries to hide it behind his back.

Pointing a warning finger at Michael.

On his way to the property table, Michael tosses the megaphone to the still-seated Mr. Sprinklespitz, who catches it and hugs it like a lost child. Miss Blotter and Ian help Mr. Sprinklespitz up as Kops chase Gumball from back of auditorium again. Gumball races across the front, but Kops, instead of following him, stop and play a quick game of "patty cake." Gumball, realizing he isn't being followed, turns back to watch the game. He gets up close and whammo! Gumball is caught.

Andy and Lion's Agent, as Casting Office, having been at ease during the previous scenes, snap to attention as Kops point in their direction and kick Gumball in the seat of his trousers, aiming him in that direction.

(Brush on Cymbal, rhythmic tap)
(Phone rings)

Carrie

Casting Office! Nothing today!
(Phone rings)

Casting Office! Nothing today!
(Triangle)

(Stick on woodblock)
(Rachet)

Nothing today!
(Rachet)

(Cowbell)
(Two Drumbeats)

(Triangle)

(Stick on woodblock)

(Rachet)

(Slide Whistle descent)

Carrie

Nothing today! (Rachet)

As Gumball gets up, tidies up, and does a short, self-regenerating tap dance, Casting Office phone rings. Gumball ends his dance with a tip of his cap to the vanishing Kops.

Gumball has an idea! He takes three imaginary balls out of three imaginary pockets, goes to Casting Office and knocks three times. As window opens, he begins juggling.

Carrie slams window shut.

Disappointed, Gumball misses a ball which hits him on the head. Then the others drop to the ground. He retrieves balls, takes off cap, tucks balls inside cap and replaces cap. Pondering his next move, Gumball has another idea! He reaches under the side of his sweater and draws forth a sword. Fencing with an imaginary opponent, he then tests the sharpness of the blade, nicks his finger, then knocks on window three times.

Window opens. Gumball goes into sword-swallowing bit. Company, which has been watching his sword work, crouch down in unison with the sword's descent.

Window slams shut. Juliet enters into Casting Office. These two efforts plus the shock of the turndown cause the sword to get stuck.

Gumball

Aggggghhhhhh.....Aggggghhhhhh....

Struggling to pull the sword out.

Juliet

Ahhheeeeeooooooooohhhhhhhh.

Juliet's scream brings sword out, Company up, window open.

(Rachet; slide whistle back up)

Carrie

Nothing today!
(Rachet)

Window slams shut.

Juliet

You frightened me.

Gumball dances around waving sword, showing he is uninjured. He replaces sword under sweater. Now Gumball mimes, "Please don't be afraid of me. I'm really a very nice person." He does his tap dance, and at finish tips his cap to Juliet. He bows, offers arm to Juliet, and with a flourish escorts her to the window. Mimes how she should knock on window, then stands aside.

(Brush on Cymbal, rhythmic tap)

I'm afraid.

Shaking her head "no," backing away timidly.

(Stick on woodblock)
(Rachet)

Gumball thumps his chest, mimes he is not afraid, and knocks on window for her. Window opens. Gumball points to Juliet.

Carrie

Nothing today!

Before Juliet can speak.

Juliet

But, I need a job!

Pleading.

Carrie

Nothing today!
(Rachet)

Window slams shut.

Juliet takes out small change purse, opens it, looks inside, finds no money. Turns it upside down, shakes it. No money. Gumball investigates his pockets. No money either. They keep up this tableau as Movie Set upstage comes to life.

Sprinklespitz

Find an actress to go into the lion's cage, now! I repeat. Find an actress to go into the lion's cage, now!

Waving hands wildly as he yells at Ian. One hand never lets go of the megaphone.

Ian

Yes sir, Mr. Sprinklespitz!

Puzzled, he stays glued to the spot.

Cast and Crew

Casting Office, Ian!

They point to Casting Office.

Ian

Oh! Yeahhh...
(Slide Whistle)

Starting off, still carrying chair.

Cast and Crew

Ian! The chair! Mr. Sprinklespitz's chair!

Stopping on the proverbial dime, spins around, hurries to Michael to give him the chair, and then dashes to the Casting Office. Knocks on window. Window opens.

Ian

Oh! Yeahhh...
(Slide whistle)

(Stick on Woodblock)
(Ratchet)

Carrie! Actress! Lion's Cage!
Now!

Carrie

Nothing today!
(Ratchet)

Window slams shut.