



LOOKING BACK WITH JAMES BLACK

INTERIM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Alley's Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for over thirty years as a member of the Resident Acting Company and a frequent director. During the season he curated as Interim Artistic Director, we are delighted to present a series of essays from him about his career and his memories of the Alley.

Iris In

As a young teen, in the school library, I came across a copy of Walter Kerr's essential pictorial history of the great silent screen comedians, *The Silent Clowns*. The picture of Charlie Chaplin on its cover mesmerized me, as did the other striking images inside. I'm not sure why. I had never seen a Chaplin film before and I had no reference for the other performers described in Kerr's elegant prose. I had heard of Buster Keaton, but certainly not Harold Lloyd or Harry Langdon. My knowledge of the history of classic film comedy was limited to television viewings of the Three Stooges, Abbott and Costello and Jerry Lewis.

But there was a humanity in these images, along with Kerr's description of sequences in the films, that grabbed me. That the characters they played were misfits, underdogs and outcasts must have been appealing as well. Never good enough to make the team or get the girl, yet on occasion (though never intentionally) they would score the winning goal or save the damsel from ne'er-do-wells. Maybe it was that combined with the brevity of their careers; the reigns of these kings (save one) would last little more than a decade, before they were quickly deposed by a new technology - sound - and soon forgotten.

Little could I have imagined then that a Silent Clown, once removed, would be the foundation for one of my most cherished Alley memories.

Over the desk in my home office, as I write this, hang three vintage movie stills, framed with mounted autographs: Charlie Chaplin, Harry Langdon and Buster Keaton. An Italian three sheet poster of Chaplin's *Limelight* hangs in our living room. My obsession with these comedians grew exponentially from that first library encounter. In the days before streaming video and DVDs, the ability to see these films was next to impossible and that only added to their mystery and allure. I was mowing lawns and saving my money to buy 8mm film prints of Chaplin's *Easy Street* and Keaton's *The Blacksmith*. The dupes of faded, well-worn copies cost \$49.99 for ten to twelve minutes of silent film that I would project onto a bedsheet thumbtacked to the wall of my darkened bedroom. Later, Chaplin's feature film catalogue would be one of the first released on the new VHS format. I was the first in the neighborhood to buy a VCR.

Title Card: "1991"

The late summer, early fall of '91 was a time of several simultaneous, extraordinary events but none more profound and life changing than the birth of my amazing daughter, Bonnie. Professionally, things were prosperous as well. I had been cast here at the Alley in a supporting role in the Feydeau farce

A Flea in Her Ear and shortly after signing my contract, another actor in the show had to drop out. I was asked if I would be interested in taking over the lead, the double role of Chandebise, the businessman having “issues” at home with his wife, and his drunken doppelganger, the hotel bellboy, Poche. I agreed immediately, excited at the thought of partaking in some slapstick comedy. I prepared a list of “drunk” routines I needed to review, starting with the Chaplin short *One A.M.*, 1916.

And incredibly, by a staggering coincidence, at this same time, the theatre booked a special limited engagement of *Le Cirque Invisible*, a two person magical “circus” that featured juggling, acrobatics, tightrope walking, beautiful costumes that would transform into exotic and fantastical creatures, and best of all, sublime clowning. All performed by the husband and wife team of Jean Baptiste Thierree and Victoria Chaplin.

Yes, Charlie’s daughter.

The Feydeau farce was in rehearsal while *Le Cirque* performed on the Hubbard and I would occasionally see Victoria backstage. Her resemblance to her father was striking with her small stature and large brown eyes. She had also inherited her father’s physical grace and sense of comic timing. Watching her perform was breathtaking and surreal. And for me, deeply moving.

Back in rehearsal as the drunken bellboy, it was suggested that I “do something” with an open back chair—a battle royale between man and inanimate object. I slowly developed a series of moves that started with me sitting in the chair and resting my elbow on the back. My elbow would slip and I would find my upper torso sticking thru the back of the chair. I would eventually wind up on the floor and wrestle my way out of the chair, removing it like a pair of pants, and finish with a backwards somersault that left the chair sitting upright and empty and me flat on the floor. I had a strong beginning and a finish, but no middle.



Top Photo: Charlie Chaplin in *The Tramp*, 1915.

Bottom Photo: Peter Webster and James Black in *A Flea In Her Ear*. Photo by Jim Caldwell.

But what if? Dare we ask? Maybe Victoria would come down to rehearsal and give us a hand? We asked. She agreed.

So, one unforgettable and outrageously mind-blowing afternoon, before the rest of the cast was called, I rehearsed a comedy sequence with Victoria Chaplin, daughter of Charlie. The room was filled with as many different chairs as could be found for further inspiration. I showed her what I had developed and she quietly walked around the rehearsal hall looking at the assorted chairs we had assembled.

“Daddy liked to do this” she said, putting her right arm thru the backs of three bent wood chairs and three more on the left arm, wearing them like a jacket. With the legs sticking up in the air she suddenly became

a porcupine. "Your Dad did that in *Behind the Screen*, 1916," I thought to myself, not daring to say it aloud. I was determined to be a fellow performer, not a fan boy. She then picked up a folding chair and wrestled with it for a moment. I bit the inside of my mouth. "A Day's Pleasure, 1919," screamed in my head.

"No, your chair is right," she said, the tip of her forefinger in her mouth in contemplation, looking for all the world like her father at the end of *City Lights*, 1931.

The rest is a blur. For the next thirty minutes we talked and tried various moves. We eventually landed on a very Chaplinesque visual of me stuck thru the chair, tipped over on its back and walking on my hands while the chairs two back legs drug on the floor, like a sand crab crawling in his shell. We had our middle. Victoria left with an invite to sit in on a *Flea* run-through in the rehearsal hall the following week. I sat in stunned silent awe of what had just taken place. "Daddy liked to do this," hung in the air.

The Invisible Circus packed up and left town before *Flea* went into performance so Victoria never got to see the chair routine that she helped hone, and how it regularly brought down the house. She did however attend the rehearsal run-through in the hall that naturally felt forced and self-conscious in her presence. I don't think she laughed once.

When we finished, I toweled off the flop sweat and sheepishly went up to her to apologize for the performance she had just witnessed and thank her for her help. She was smiling that distinctive Chaplin smile that I had seen on her father's face for years in countless films and stills. But before I could say anything, she sent me tumbling back into my darkened teenage bedroom with, what remains to this day, the greatest compliment I have ever received from anyone about anything-

"You're a clown," she said. Charlie's daughter called me a clown.

Iris Out.



Photo: James Black (center) with Kimberly King, John Feltch, Charles Sanders, and Peter Webster in *A Flea in Her Ear*. Photo by Jim Caldwell.

My daughter, Bonnie, is 27 now and a budding screenwriter/filmmaker in Los Angeles. When I first visited her in her new town, she took me on a tour that culminated with a stop at my Mecca, Chaplin's old red brick bungalow movie studios that still stands on Sunset Blvd. It felt appropriate that she was the one who had delivered me there.

Though I won't be passing on to her a legacy as monumental as Charlie left Victoria, my daughter has my eyes and apparently the same gene that demands she be the teller of the story and not just a listener. I'm proud.

The Humans tells a deeply moving story about a father and his daughters. It continues the long tradition of the family dramas as quintessential American theater. O'Neill, Williams, Hellman, Miller, Foote all knew that bloodlines equal plot lines. *The Humans* has since earned a position in this pantheon, not just by virtue of its 2016 Tony Award®, but by Karam's masterful ability to reveal the depth and breadth of the post-9/11, post-recession moment over one family's Thanksgiving dinner.