

'Chaplin' sticks close to the myth



JOHN MONAGHAN

"If you want to know me, watch my movies." This telling line, spoken by Robert Downey Jr. as Charlie Chaplin, sums up the new movie biography of the comic legend. If there really was truth in advertising, this would be featured on the posters.

Richard Attenborough's "Chaplin" nobly tries to depict its subject's life and work but rarely scrapes beneath the gloss of Chaplin's self-imposed myth. It boasts a surprisingly strong lead performance, but ultimately gets crushed beneath the director's heavy hand.

It introduces us to Chaplin the artist, but only amid the sappiest of Hollywood-style hokum. At age five, young Charlie walks onto a London stage and wins the audience with his singing and dancing. The unruly denizens of the peanut gallery, who threw debris at his mother just minutes ago, now toss coins.

Charlie moves from vaudeville

to the "flickers" hired by Keystone Kops creator Mack Sennett (Dan Aykroyd), and soon gathers a following. He begins to direct and becomes a perfectionist, shooting the simplest scenes countless times and working round-the-clock in the editing room.

His workaholic tendencies sabotage his private life. He marries a half dozen women during his stay in Hollywood, many of them half his age. The parade of women in and out of his life, among them the radiant Paulette Goddard, grows tiresome while important parts of his career, like the formation of United Artists, are only referred to in passing.

Meanwhile, the movie insists on having bad guys, so it trots out Nazis and McCarthy-era communist hunt hunters for Charlie to spar with.

J. Edgar Hoover is depicted, probably rightly so, as a chubby-cheeked demagogue who takes glee in getting dirt on Chaplin in the hope of deporting him back to England. Another scene finds a German director spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric at a Hollywood party, quite unlikely at a gathering teeming with Jewish moguls.

Director Attenborough ("Gandhi" and "Cry Freedom") and his trio of scriptwriters falter by sticking so close to their primary source: Chaplin's 1964 autobiography, written during his exile in Switzerland, which even in the movie is referred to as "vague." The film creates a fictional ghostwriter (Anthony Hopkins) who attempts to fill in the gaps in Charlie's selective memory.

One amusing scene plays myth against reality by showing the book version of the creation of The Tramp screen character, where glowing pieces of the now-famous costume magically leap into his hand. The reality is depicted as a last-minute scramble to find something to wear for a scene.

Otherwise, the filmmakers rely completely on the myth, usually backed by John Barry's overwrought musical score.

Robert Downey Jr., who has done little to distinguish himself in previous pictures, fills The Tramp's oversized shoes quite admirably. He really does look the part, even if he plays it so stoic-faced that we might think we're watching the Buster Keaton documentary by Denzel Washington, in the role of a lifetime. (At area theaters)

the incredible amount of lip-synching used here?

The film places famous faces among the supporting cast. Geraldine Chaplin, the subject's real-life daughter, is appropriately cast as Chaplin's mother, who spent years in a mental institution before moving to California to live with her son.

Kevin Kline, among my least favorite actors in movies today, has a great time portraying dashing Douglas Fairbanks and comes off rather charmingly. However, James Woods (as a prosecuting attorney), Hopkins and especially Aykroyd (who looks and acts more like John Candy with each new film) are only remotely convincing.

"Chaplin" is only truly entertaining at the end, when Charlie accepts a lifetime achievement award at the 1972 Academy Awards ceremony. Clips from "The Immigrant," "The Great Rush," "The Kid" and "The Great Dictator" flash again across the screen and we remember why the comedian's name shines on.

If you really want to know Chaplin, watch these classics. Stay away from this overblown and stiffly directed biography.



Look-alikes: Robert Downey Jr. is as close as he can get to looking the famous comedian in "Chaplin."

SCREEN SCENE

The week in films briefly noted: "Bram Stoker's Dracula" — Francis Ford Coppola has gotten a bad rap. Not since 1963 and "Dementia 13" has the director ventured into true horror. And for what it's worth, he does try to stay somewhat faithful to Stoker, using references to the book's diary entries, telegrams, and newspaper accounts whenever possible. Winona Ryder holds onto her English accent, Keanu Reeves doesn't, while Gary Oldman cleverly transforms from the raffish older Dracula to a sleek young European dandy in stovepipe hat and sunglasses. A must-see. (At area theaters)

"The Crying Game" — Irish writer/director Neil Jordan's stylish new thriller opens at a carnival, appropriate since it has more twists and turns than a roller coaster. It begins with an IRA

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brother, a general who wants to launch a new breed of war toys. No ordinary G.I. Joes, these radio-controlled tanks, helicopters and jets carry real explosives. Of course, it's up to Williams and friends to stop the ridget military in its tracks. Despite some clever touches (especially in set design and costumes), this is an embarrassment from start to finish. (At area theaters)

"Wild at Heart" — David Lynch's 1990 road movie, starring Nicholas Cage and Laura Dern as star-crossed lovers on the lam from a witch of a mother (Diane Ladd) is a wild and violent ride from start to finish, with substantial nods to "The Wizard of Oz" and Elvis. (Monday, Jan. 11, at the State Theater, 2115 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 961-5450 for information. Admission \$2.) — John Monaghan

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