Max Linder

(1883-1925)

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About Linder

As I have never seen a Max

Linder film, I cannot write anything about him. I have thus

reproduced here two separate articles. Suffice to say, Walter Kerr in

The Silent Clowns (see books page) rates him as a true pioneer of

film comedy (e.g. the joke of being unveiled on a statue used by

Keaton in The Goat and Chaplin in City Lights was first used by

Linder).

b. Gabriel-Maximilien

Leuvielle Dec 16 1883, Caverne, France. d. 1925.

At 17 he left high school to

study drama and soon after began an acting career on the Bordeaux

stage. He moved to Paris in 1904 and started playing supporting parts

in melodramas. In 1905 he embarked upon a parallel career in

Pathe films. For three years he spent his days in the film

studios and his evenings on the stage, using his real name in the

theater and the pseudonym Max Linder on the screen. By 1908 he had

given up the stage to concentrate on his increasingly successful

screen career. By 1910 he was an internationally popular comedian,

possibly the best-known screen comic on either side of the Atlantic

in the years before WW I. Typically playing a dapper dandy of the

idle class, he developed a style of slapstick silent screen comedy

that anticipated Mack Sennett and Chaplin and set the premises of the

genre for years to come. Ferdinand Zecca, Louis Gasnier, and Alberto

Capelani were among the directors of his earliest films.

By 1910, Linder was writing

and supervising, and from 1911 also directing, all his own films. His popularity was at its peak in 1914, when he was called to arms. Early

in the war he was a victim of gas poisoning and suffered a serious

breakdown. The injury was to have a lasting effect on his physical and mental well-being. He returned briefly to French films, but

finding his popularity vanishing, he accepted a bid from Essanay and

left for the US late in 1916. Continuous ill health hampered the American phase of Linder's career from the start. In mid-1917, after

only three films, he was felled by double pneumonia and spent nearly

a year recovering in a Swiss sanitarium. When he returned to the US

in 1921, he formed his own production unit, releasing through United

Artists. But after making only three more American films, including

the celebrated parody (of Fairbanks’ The Three Musketeers) The Three Must-Get-Theres, he returned to Europe, where he married the

daughter of a Paris restaurateur in 1923. Linder made two more film

appearances: one in France, the other in Austria, but realized his career was finished. In 1925 he entered a suicide pact with his wife.

Their bodies were discovered side by side in a Paris hotel. He

remained forgotten for years, until the 60s, when many of his old

films began turning up, affording film historians an opportunity to

evaluate his career and his contributions to the evolution of screen

comedy.

Biography from

Quinlan’s Film Comedy Actors

With his foxy brown eyes

matched by a like moustache, cane, elegant cutaway coat, silk cravat,

kid gloves and gleaming top hat, Max Linder could have been every

inch the French boulevardier who “walked along the Bois de

Boulogne with an independent air”--had not, in films, everything

gone wrong for him. Max Linder was France’s first great film

comedian. But not for him any kind of dress that smacked of the

circus clown. Max was always debonair, even in the face of disaster.

His early films in France, of which he made scores, are cameos of

catastrophe, little gems which work a variety of gags on a single

situation, such as taking a bath, getting dressed, or (quite often,

as the wolfish Max pursued his prey) chasing a damsel. He was

enormously popular in the early 1900s. And, had not war intervened,

he would perhaps have been happily entertaining continental audiences

into his sixties, competing with such upstarts as Jacques Tati and

Fernandei. Linder spent the early part of his life in America, where

his father had gone to plant vineyards. When the business failed the

family returned to France and Max completed his education there. He

was a natural athlete (once pole-vault champion of South West

France), an ability that was to stand him in good stead in the more

energetic of his comedy capers on screen. Leaving high school in

1901, he studied drama for two years before beginning a stage career

under his real name. But by 1905 he was playing minor film roles as

Max Linder, progressing to comic leads by 1907 and international fame

by 1910. His style of comedy somewhat foreshadowed that of Chaplin

(one of his greatest fans) and his dapper, disaster-prone dandy would

later prove a useful prototype for Charley Chase. These were the

golden years for Linder, who directed all his own work from 1911 to

1917. But the war changed everything. Linder not only received severe

shrapnel wounds but was the victim of serious gassing, which left him

with moods of black melancholia in between patches of inspiration.

With his work output and his popularity in France diminishing, a

partially recovered Linder accepted an offer to work in America in

1916. After three of a projected run of 12 two-reelers, however, his

health broke down again. Returning to the continent after a dire

battle with double pneumonia, the ailing Max entered a convalescent

home in Switzerland for a year. Refusing to retire despite continued

fragile health, Linder returned to America, formed his own production

company there and made three feature films which contain much of his

best work. The first, Seven Years Bad Luck, contains an extended

sequence involving a mirror with no glass which predates several such

scenes with other prominent American comedians, notably The Marx

Brothers in Duck Soup. The last of the three, The Three

Must-Get-Theres, a triumphant parody of Dumas’s famous

swashbuckler, contains sustained action tomfoolery which makes the

Richard Lester version 50 years later pale by comparison. But the

films were only moderately successful with American audiences and

Linder found trouble getting his work distributed. Disconsolate after

a deal with Samuel Goldwyn fell through, Max returned to France.

There was one more film here and one in Austria but the

once-confident Linder was becoming an increasingly forlorn figure.

There was talk of another film but Linder and his young wife entered

into a suicide pact and, a few weeks short of his 42nd birthday, were

found dead together in a Paris hotel. Fortunately, in later years his

daughter Maud launched a battle to bring his genius to a fresh

audience, resulting in two compilation films, Laugh With Max Linder

in 1963, and The Man in the Silk Hat 20 years later.

Filmography

Year Title

1905 La premiere sortie d'un collegien

1906 Le premier cigare d'un collegien

1906 Le poison

1906 Le pendu

1906 Les contrebandiers

1907 Idee d'apache

1907 Une mauvaise vie

1907 La mort d'un toreador

1907 Sganarelle

1907 La vie de Polichinelle

1907 Les debuts d'un patineur

1908 La rencontre imprevue

1908 Une conquete

1908 La tres moutarde

1909 Un mariage a l'americaine

1909 Le petit jeune homme

1909 See the picture!

1920 Le feu sacre

1921 Seven Years Bad Luck

1921 Be My Wife

1922 The Three Must-Get-Theres

1923 Au secours!

1924 Clown aus Liebe/Le roi du cirques (GB and US: Max, King of the Circus)