

C4 COVER STORY



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— Lauren Munev

This Little Tramp dons panties

Bivash Mukherjee

Who doesn't love the Little Tramp, beloved as Chop-o-lin in China? Charlie Chaplin described his creation as "a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow, always hopeful of romance and adventure."

Chaplin played the big-hearted, universally recognized character who triumphs over staggering odds in over 70 films that were a rage from Asia to the Americas, from Europe and Africa. And in the process, he warmed over a trillion hearts.

One of them is Lauren Munev, who gives Chaplin's master creation a completely new dimension — the tramp in women's underwear!

Says Munev: "Underneath the improvisation, the flirting, and the laughter is actually a woman ... It's an interesting psychological experiment: the audience fooled into seeing a man who is really a woman trying to create a 'whole person' who actually does exist, but who takes off the mustache before bedtime."

"I do think it's very daring personally (inside my own spirit), because crossing gender makes us think about ourselves as 'people,' without sex."

The 43-year-old Washington DC-based interactive artist started playing "the tramp" when a producer asked her to perform at the US Presidential Inaugural Ball 1997. And like Charlie, Munev simply focused on the simplest aspects — the clothing, the telltale walk ...

Munev came to China in May this year and visited Shanghai during the October National Day holidays when she performed at the Shanghai Pudong International Clown Festival. She was among around 100 performers who entertained outdoors at the Century Park and indoors at the Shanghai Oriental Arts Center.

At the end of the festival, she hit the streets of Shanghai along with videographer Michael Menes, who also is an award-winning artistic juggler of the new-vaudeville era.

Together, they took "the tramp" sightseeing on Shanghai's public transport. What started off as fun eventually may end up as a short



Lauren Munev (also above) is in tune with the little tramp.
— William Cornett

film with Chinese subtitles.

"Chaplin Returns to Shanghai" was shot over a couple of days, improvised on the spot since there was no script.

"The journey through the public byways was quite an adventure, an improvisational adventure, since neither the performer nor the videographer knew what would come next," says Munev.

Mennes merged with the crowd and trailed the tramp at Century Park, on the streets, subway stations, in a taxi and down the

cobblestone Duolun Road, when the movie fades into black and white as Munev meets the little master himself — a bronze statue.

With minimal dialogue, it comes close to being a silent film of the modern era and remains true to Chaplin's love of pantomime, albeit by necessity.

"I wouldn't talk to him (Mennes) when we were in public because I knew that my voice would be very weird for the people to hear, coming out of a Chaplin 'man.' So I would look at his eyes, hoping he

Shanghai connection

As Charlie Chaplin took the box-office by storm, equally intense was his desire to travel. On his Asian sojourns, he stopped over in Shanghai in 1936, and possibly earlier in 1931.

According to Ted Lu, a huge Chaplin fan who runs the Website www.discoverchaplins.com, the British-born Hollywood legend's most famous stay in China was during his 1936 world tour.

After completing "Modern Times," Chaplin went on a holiday to Hawaii with the film's leading lady Paulette Goddard (and her mother). Once there, he fancied Asia and headed to Japan, his favorite Oriental destination.

After staying there for a few days, he arrived in Shanghai on March 9, 1936.

In the evening, a reception was hosted in his honor by Hu Die, a famous Chinese actress. Also present on the occasion were Mei Lanfang, Peking Opera master and Chaplin's long-time friend, and a host of other celebrities. He mixed with the literary and artistic glitterati, including well-known directors and actors of the era such as Shi Dongshan, Han Langen and Liu Jiqun.

In Shanghai, "Chop-o-lin" visited cinemas and had a whirl at the Paramount ballroom and night club at Huashan and Beijing

roads. He shopped around the city and reportedly even had wanton at a snack shop.

The actor had booked a suite at the Peace Hotel but it is believed he spent the night on a ship on the Huangpu River, admiring Shanghai by night.

The party then went south to Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, where Chaplin apparently married Paulette Goddard, his third wife. The marriage was a well-kept secret until they divorced in June 1942, when the world learned they had been married for a good six years.

It is quite possible that Chaplin visited Shanghai earlier, in 1931 while on his first world tour that took him to Europe, Africa and Japan. The Astor Hotel on Huangpu Road claims Chaplin stayed in Room 404 in 1931 though there are no official records of that trip.

Not many know that Chaplin was an accomplished dancer, especially skilled at the tango. In 1936, he visited the Venus dance hall that gave him the idea for a new film, and the last movie that he directed, "Countess from Hong Kong," starring the versatile Marlon Brando.

It was Chaplin's first directorial effort in almost 10 years, and the first since 1923 in which he didn't star.

would read my thoughts."

With the breaking down of gender stereotypes today, the tramp has evolved into a universal symbol despite the apparent "male air" to him.

"He really does like women as can be seen in his movies ... He was a big flirt, was uncomfortable with overbearing men. But he also was a curious child, which doesn't have any gender at all, just the sense of wonder," says Munev.

She would try to "get into the feeling of a man who is childish, sweet, and curious, loves women, and dislikes overbearing people. These feelings would dictate how I responded in a situation ...

"I thought about this many times when I'd flirt with women, wondering if they realized that the Chaplin inside was a woman! Would the women be embarrassed that I was a woman underneath? Or would the men be embarrassed that the tramp was flirting with their wives, but was really a woman too?"

Chaplin's life and art continue to touch many people across the globe. There are Chaplin conferences that screen and debate his works, while little-known artists and performers sniff for a cue or two from the world's best-known entertainer. Through them, the tramp continues his journey into the next century.