

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 118

### “The Lunatics Have Taken Charge of the Asylum”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The technology behind moving pictures, like automobiles, did not spring full blown from the mind of one inventor, but rather, developed gradually in several places, most notably France and the United States.

But the Great War placed a heavy burden on European economies, and in France, there was little time or money to spare on light entertainments. The situation was quite different in the United States, which was experiencing a wartime economic expansion without the burden of actually fighting a war. In that environment, the automobile industry boomed. As did the motion picture industry.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 118. The Lunatics Have Taken Charge of the Asylum.

We’re back in the United States today. There are actually *two* topics I want to consider: the motion picture industry and celebrity. I haven’t said much about motion pictures in Europe yet, even though Europe has been making them since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Remind me to discuss European cinema in a future episode, but today I want to talk about American cinema.

I also want to talk about the phenomenon of celebrity. Celebrity culture, which is pervasive in our time, was just getting going in the beginning of the twentieth century, and I’ve talked about a few figures who were early celebrities and the earliest examples of the phenomenon. Some of them are figures that seem highly unlikely candidates for superstardom in our time—I’m thinking of the opera singer Enrico Caruso or the ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. Others look more familiar to our modern eyes, like the athletes Jack Johnson and Jim Thorpe.

But if you’re going to talk about celebrity—any time in the century really, although particularly in the earlier part of the century—you have to talk about motion pictures. And if you talk about motion pictures and celebrity in the Great War era, there’s one name that’s absolutely

unavoidable. The man who is not only the most famous motion picture performer of the age, but the most famous human being on the planet.

Charles Spencer Chaplin was born in London on April 16, 1889. He was the son of Charles and Hannah Chaplin, who were music hall entertainers, considered at the time a disreputable profession. He was the middle son of three born to his mother, all with different fathers. Charles Sr. and Hannah never formally divorced, but he left her when young Charles was still small and provided the family no support. Hannah was unable to support a family and Charles was moved to a workhouse at the age of seven and would be placed in boarding schools for destitute children. When he was ten years old, his mother was placed in an asylum due to a mental illness, one that may have been brought on by syphilis, and Charles and his older brother Sydney were sent to live with the father they had barely known. Charles Sr. turned out to have a severe drinking problem, which led to his death from cirrhosis of the liver two years later.

This is about as awful a childhood as one might imagine, but the one bright spot in it was that his parents were connected to the world of music hall entertainments, and Charles himself would later credit his mother Hannah with instilling in him a sense that he had talent. He was performing in a boys' dancing group by the time he was ten, although his ability to make a living on the music hall stage was limited by his mother's insistence that he stay in school. When she became too ill to stop him, he quit school and pursued an ambition to become an actor. His talent was soon recognized and he was cast in stage plays, mostly in comic roles, in London and in tours around England.

His older brother Sydney had similar ambitions and similar talents and by 1906, he had joined the comedy troupe of Fred Karno, a London impresario. Karno's group were the premier comedy performers in Britain at the time, and in many ways their work laid the foundations of British comedy. Karno's group were known for their skits that played on the themes of authority figures subverted by lovable underdogs: prisoners outsmarting the warden, little guys beating the bully, that sort of thing. The troupe is credited with making the custard pie in the face a staple of British humor, pioneering pantomimed comic sketches with no dialogue, and developing the form of exaggerated physical comedy we now call "slapstick."

In short, although they didn't realize it at the time, the style of comedy Karno's comedians were developing was a perfect fit for the emerging technology of silent films.

When Charles Chaplin turned 18, Sydney recommended his younger brother to the troupe, which would soon also recruit a comic just a year younger than Charles Chaplin named Arthur Stanley Jefferson, better known by his stage name, Stan Laurel. But it was Charles Chaplin who became the headliner for the group. He toured America with Karno's group in 1911-12, and returned to the US for another tour in 1913.

It was while he was on that 1913 tour that Charles Chaplin was offered a one-year contract by the New York Motion Picture Company, who thought a dash of the Karno style was just what

they needed for their Keystone Studios division. The company offered \$150 a week, a lavish salary for the time, equivalent to about US\$180,000 a year in our day. Keystone Studios produced comedy, most famously a series of films featuring the Keystone Cops, a troupe of seven bumbling, incompetent police officers. These shorts typically featured the titular cops jumping, falling, bulging their eyes and grabbing their hats, as well as calamitous attempts to pursue suspects on foot or by motorcar. Custard pie fights also feature prominently in these films.

But wait a minute. “The New York Motion Picture Company?” Maybe we should put a pin in Charlie Chaplin’s career right there and take a moment to examine the early motion picture business in the United States. The American inventor Thomas Edison is often credited with inventing motion pictures, although of course the idea of showing a series of hand-drawn pictures rapidly in order to create an illusion of movement, such as in a flip book, was already well understood before Edison came along. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, photographers had begun experimenting with taking a series of still photographs of a subject in movement, and then displaying them rapidly in a similar way.

Edison’s contribution lay in developing a practical technology for displaying a rapid sequence of still photographs to entertain a paying customer. His first breakthrough he called the Kinetoscope, developed in 1891. The Kinetoscope was a coin-operated machine. You put in a penny, looked into the machine through a pair of eyeholes, and it would display a short film for you. These were popular in penny arcades of the time, and for the benefit of you young people, a penny arcade was a place that housed a collection of machines that entertained you in some way or another after you inserted a coin, usually a penny, to pay for your entertainment. Penny arcades were of course the forerunners of video game arcades, but I suppose you young people don’t know what those are either.

I can actually remember watching films in Edison Kinetoscopes when I was a boy. I am so old....

The technology to project moving pictures from films onto large screens for an audience was developed by others, but Edison bought up the most advanced version, trademarked as the Vitascope, and marketed it under his own name. The first public showing of a motion picture with an Edison Vitascope was in New York City in 1896.

Early movies were shown in the theatres, in music halls and vaudeville houses. By the early twentieth century though, entrepreneurs began showing the increasingly popular entertainments in more intimate venues, often converted storefronts. One of the earliest of these was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and it called itself “The Nickelodeon,” a portmanteau of “nickel,” which is a nickname for the US five-cent coin, and *odeion*, which is a Greek word for an indoor theatre. Similar establishments began popping up all over, and they called themselves “nickelodeons” as well, because the price of admission was usually five cents.

Many of these early nickelodeons appeared in New York City, where there was also a sizeable community of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, many of whom were struggling to establish various kinds of storefront retail businesses in New York. Some of these Jewish-American small business owners were perceptive enough to get in on the ground floor of this emerging technology and made good money operating these nickelodeons.

The cinema boom created a demand for films to exhibit at the nickelodeon, and some of the most successful and ambitious of these nickelodeon owners made the jump to motion picture production. You will recognize some of their names, even today: William Fox, Louis B. Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, Adolph Zukor, and Harry, Albert, Samuel, and Jack, the Warner brothers.

Motion picture production in those days was centered around New York City, hence “The New York Motion Picture Company.” New York was not only the core market for motion pictures, but also the theatre capital of America, so it was where the most popular actors and performers were. Space is expensive in the city, though, and filming motion pictures takes a lot of space, so although there was some production in the city, most filmmaking actually took place in northern New Jersey. Edison was a trendsetter in this regard as well, making his own films in West Orange. Edison’s company alone would make over a thousand short films, and I’m not sure if anyone even knows how many films were made altogether during this period. Demand was high for new films, but old films were not considered worth preserving and the film stock of the time had a short shelf life, so sadly, most films from this period have not survived.

You probably already know this, but just for the sake of clarity, there was no suitable technology for recording and playing synchronized sound during this period, so all films were silent films. Typically, music was played when a film was shown, improvised music at first, although later, and with more lavish productions like *The Birth of a Nation*, which we talked about in episode 104, the film came with its own score already provided.

The industry standard for one reel of film was one thousand feet. During this era, films were shown at a frame rate of 16 per second, so one reel ran for about fifteen minutes. (Later the standard frame rate would be increased fifty percent, to 24 per second, which would shorten the duration of a standard reel to around eleven minutes.) Films of this time were seldom longer than one or two reels, that is to say, fifteen to thirty minutes, and the nickelodeon would typically show several of them to a paying customer.

As filmmakers strove to compete for audience attention, films become more complex in the stories they attempted to tell, and the time soon came when even these short films needed someone to explain what was going on to the audience. Live narrators were used for this purpose at first, but they quickly gave way to intertitles, title cards inserted within the film that either gave the audience snippets of dialog or simply provided exposition in and between scenes, to help everyone keep abreast of what was going on.

The growth of this new entertainment medium was rapid, and the public appetite for new films became voracious. As I said in episode 104, D.W. Griffith is credited for shooting the first film in Hollywood, California in 1910. The film technology of the time demanded a lot of light. Filmmakers preferred to use sunlight whenever possible, and even scenes that were meant to be taking place indoors were filmed in stages with open roofs to allow sunlight. Now, if there was one thing they had in abundance in southern California, it was sunlight. So in the decade that followed, the US motion picture industry relocated itself from northern New Jersey to southern California.

And that brings us back around to Charles Chaplin. Although he signed with the New York Motion Picture Company, he relocated to southern California to begin his work. The New York Motion Picture Company, by the way, after a series of mergers would end up as a component of what we know today as Paramount Pictures Corporation.

Chaplin was assigned to the Keystone subsidiary, which made comedies. Keystone's producer was the 33-year old Mack Sennett. He was initially skeptical that the small, slight, and shy Charles Chaplin had any gift at all for comedy. He also thought the 24-year old Chaplin looked too young to be in pictures. For his part, Chaplin thought Keystone's comedies were crude and lacked style, but felt the new medium had potential.

Chaplin's first role in a motion picture was as a con artist in a one-reel film called *Making a Living*, which was released in February 1914 and also features a brief appearance by the Keystone Cops. In this film, Chaplin appears with a big mustache and a top hat and cane. This was apparently an effort to address Mack Sennett's concerns by making Chaplin look older.

Chaplin was not satisfied with the film, and in particular, he thought the director had cut out some of his best bits. For his next film, shot just a few days later and also released in February 1914, Chaplin took matters into his own hands. He modified his look. The mustache interfered with his ability to emote for the camera, he felt, so he trimmed it down to something much smaller. He exchanged the upscale top hat for a more humble bowler and deliberately dressed in a jacket that was too tight, pants that were too baggy, and shoes that were too big, creating the appearance of a man of modest means who wanted to appear dignified, but was forced by his circumstances into wearing clothes that were hand-me-downs, or perhaps picked out of trash cans.

Chaplin would later write in his autobiography that as soon as he put on this outfit, he got a sense of the character, who would come to be known as The Tramp, or sometimes, The Little Tramp, and would become Chaplin's on-screen persona. The Tramp was clearly a guy who had fallen on hard times. Perhaps he had once been somebody, or maybe he was just a nobody with pretensions. He was a hard luck case, but he never quit. Injustice infuriated him, and when he saw it, he would always intervene. The Tramp was also a hopeless romantic, frequently smitten.

He always seemed to think that if only he could win the love of the woman of his dreams, it would turn everything around. He never did, of course.

When you read Chaplin's own description of how quickly the character came to him in light of his own humble origins and staggering success, it's hard not to think that he and the character made such a good fit because there is more than a little of Charles Chaplin in *The Tramp*, and more than a little of *The Tramp* in Charles Chaplin.

By May of 1914, Chaplin had persuaded Sennett to allow him to direct his own films. They were very popular. Chaplin made about one a week, and honed his comedy as he churned out the movies. When his contract was up for renewal in November, Chaplin asked for \$1000 a week. Sennett refused to pay that much, and Chaplin left Keystone, but another studio quickly signed him up for \$1,250 a week, which works out to an annual salary of about 1.5 million US dollars in our day, an unheard-of sum for an entertainer at that time.

Chaplin produced only 14 films in his second year, as he continued to refine his character and his comedy, focusing on fewer and longer films of higher quality. His income didn't suffer any for it. When his second contract expired, he asked for a staggering \$10,000 a week, and there was a studio ready to pay it. This made Chaplin perhaps the most highly paid individual of any profession anywhere in the world.

Back in his home country, some in the British press attacked the now 26-year old Chaplin for not fighting in the Great War. Chaplin told the press he would serve if drafted, but he never was. The British government came to his defense, pointing out that Chaplin was doing his country a greater service by earning his huge income and investing it in war bonds than he ever could have on the front lines.

Charles Chaplin had become not only the world's first movie star, but an international phenomenon. There were songs written about him, there were Little Tramp dolls, there were cartoons. Everyone went to costume parties dressed as The Tramp. America had become afflicted with "Chaplinitis," according to *Motion Picture Magazine*, and his name and image were familiar throughout the world. He would hugely influence both cinema and comedy for the rest of the twentieth century. He would also be a huge influence on animated films, which haven't come into their own yet, but when they do, they will draw on The Little Tramp for inspiration. Even Walt Disney would eventually confess that there was a bit of The Tramp in his signature creation, Mickey Mouse.

[silent film music]

And while we're on the subject of movies and since I already mentioned D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, now might be a good time to look at Griffith's follow-up project. *The Birth of a Nation* had been a film on a scale virtually unknown in the young industry, and its success made Griffith a very wealthy man. He doubled down for his next film. Released in 1916,

it would be as long as *The Birth of a Nation*, and even grander in scope and spectacle. It was called *Intolerance*. It is sometimes subtitled *A Sun Play of the Ages*, and at other times *Love's Struggle throughout the Ages*. Surprisingly, coming from the man who made *The Birth of a Nation*, it is a massive and multi-million dollar critique of intolerance.

It is sometimes said that Griffith made *Intolerance* as an act of atonement for making *The Birth of a Nation*. Not only is this not true, it gets the story exactly backward. Griffith made *Intolerance* as a rebuke to his critics, the NAACP and others, who attacked *The Birth of a Nation* for its racism and historical revisionism.

*Intolerance* is a complex film, hard to summarize. It tells four interwoven stories from four different periods of history: The Fall of Babylon in 539 BC, the persecution and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of the Huguenots in 1572, and a fictional story set in today's world. I should say the world of 1916.

Griffith spent over two million dollars making this film, and it shows. It features a huge cast, with thousands of extras, and intercuts its four stories to tell four parallel tales of the evils of intolerance. In the modern tale, greedy capitalists and puritanical do-gooders conspire to ruin the lives of a young working-class family. The ancient Babylon scenes are the most impressive, with a recreation of the walls of Babylon a hundred feet high and hundreds of extras milling through the ancient city. I particularly like the dance number. The cost of building the Babylon set alone is said to have been greater than the total cost of *The Birth of a Nation*.

The four stories draw to climaxes loaded with dramatic tension as only D.W. Griffith could do it, with cuts between a racing horse, racing chariots, and a race car racing a train. The fall of Babylon, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre are not prevented, but the race car helps prevent the execution of a young father for a crime he did not commit, so that's something. And then angels descend from the sky onto the battlefields of the Great War, causing it to end, and they turn into fields of flowers where children play.

And no, I am not making any of this up.

*Intolerance* was released to critical acclaim and...was not a commercial success. Honestly, it's hard even for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience to follow all four of the complicated storylines. I can't imagine what a 1916 audience would have made of it. It was a masterful accomplishment and would influence generations of filmmakers, but it also lost Griffith all the money he made on *The Birth of a Nation* and contributed to the financial collapse of its studio. D.W. Griffith will continue to make films, but he will never again achieve the level of commercial and artistic success he briefly enjoyed in 1915 and 1916, at the same time Charles Chaplin was rising to stardom.

[silent film music]

Back in episode 39, I had talked about the career of ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky during the years he worked with—and lived with—the impresario Sergei Diaghilev. Their personal and professional relationships broke off in 1913 when Nijinsky suddenly married Romola Pulszky, a young Hungarian from a minor noble family. Diaghilev's internationally celebrated ballet company, the Ballets Russes, went on with the 1914 season. Mikhail Fokine, the choreographer who had quit the company when Nijinsky began choreographing his own ballets, returned, and the vacancy that the break with Nijinsky had created in the dance company and in his personal life Diaghilev filled with Leonid Masyn, or Leonide Massine, as they called him in France.

The teenaged Massine could not dance at Nijinsky's level and Fokine was forced to simplify some of the choreography for the Ballets Russes' new principal male dancer. But Massine was young and energetic, reputedly handsome and charming, which was enough to keep the audiences happy. The 1914 season appeared to be headed for commercial success, even if the ballets weren't quite the artistic success of seasons past. But then the war began. International touring of the sort that had maintained the company's solvency and its reputation was now impossible. The French economy was hard hit, meaning there was not much money to be made even in Paris.

But if times were tough for Diaghilev and his company, they were tougher for Vaslav Nijinsky and his new wife. Nijinsky had never been paid for his time with the Ballet Russes. He'd simply been supported by Diaghilev. He had no savings, and seemingly not much skill with financial matters. He and Romola were living a much humbler lifestyle than he had grown accustomed to with Diaghilev.

But he was still the greatest ballet dancer in the world, wasn't he? Well, maybe, but opportunities for great ballet dancers were few after the war began. There just weren't that many ballet companies. He made inquiries of some and got nowhere. He applied for an exemption from conscription, which would have allowed him to return to Russia, and perhaps even find his way back into the Imperial Ballet. But the Russian government turned down his request, which meant he could not return to Russia without endangering his career as a dancer.

He did get an offer from the Paris Opera, but the position wouldn't be available until 1915. Romola was now pregnant, and Nijinsky needed an income sooner than that. His fortunes seemed to change when English theatre magnate Alfred Butt offered him a contract for Nijinsky and his ballet company to dance for two months at the Palace Theatre in London for £1000 per week, beginning in March 1914. He sent for his sister Bronislava and her husband—they were both ballet dancers—and invited them to leave Diaghilev and join his company. They came at once, only to discover that their London opening was just weeks away and Vaslav's ballet company existed only in his mind.

We've already seen that Nijinsky wasn't much for organizing or managing, and his people skills were terrible. His sister Bronislava stepped into the breach and helped pull everything together



for him, but they managed to have a ballet program ready to go on opening night. But Vaslav complained of headaches and exhaustion. He came down with a fever. No doubt some of this was stress related, and perhaps early symptoms of the mental illness he would later develop. In the third week of their run, Nijinsky failed to dance three days running, claiming to be ill, but under the terms of the contract, that was sufficient to allow cancellation, and Alfred Butt canceled the contract.

By April of 1914, Vaslav was very stressed and Romola was very pregnant. They were staying at a spa in the Austrian Alps when an offer came from the King of Spain. The daughter of the American ambassador in Madrid, Belle Willard, was marrying Kermit Roosevelt, the son of the former US President, and the King was offering Nijinsky \$3,000 to dance at their reception. That was too good an offer to refuse, and Nijinsky took it. His father-in-law accompanied him on the train ride to Madrid, apparently because Nijinsky was deemed too moody and distraught to travel alone, but they made the trip and Nijinsky danced at the wedding.

By June 1914, Romola was ready to give birth. She and her husband stayed at the home of her mother and stepfather in Budapest. On June 19, she delivered a healthy baby girl who was named Kyra. The couple planned to stay only until Romola recovered, but the Great War forced a change of plans. When Austria-Hungary declared war on Russia, Vaslav Nijinsky, who was still legally a subject of the Russian Emperor, even though he hadn't been to Russia for years now, suddenly became an enemy alien. He was effectively under house arrest at his in-laws' house, unable to leave Hungary, and obliged to report to the Budapest Police once a week. Vaslav was unable to work and he and his family were entirely dependent on the support of his in-laws. The rest of 1914 was for Vaslav Nijinsky a period of gloom and depression.

Meanwhile, with bookings in Europe dwindling to nothing because of the war, Sergei Diaghilev was casting about, looking for ways to keep the Ballets Russes going. With Europe too preoccupied with its Great War, Diaghilev turned to the Great Neutral, the United States, and in October 1914 signed a lucrative contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City for an American tour in 1916. Diaghilev envisioned commissioning another ballet from Igor Stravinsky, to be premiered in America. But his choreographer, Mikhail Fokine, had returned to St. Petersburg when the war began and he wasn't interested in leaving.

But Diaghilev didn't give up. This American tour was too important to his company's reputation, not to mention its finances. Was there any possibility of a reconciliation with Vaslav Nijinsky? Diaghilev wrote to him. Nijinsky did not reply. Diaghilev sent a telegram inviting Nijinsky to a meeting; Nijinsky's reply telegram read simply CANNOT COME. Vaslav's communication skills were never very good and only gradually did it dawn on Diaghilev that this wasn't about Vaslav giving him the cold shoulder; it was about Vaslav being stuck in Hungary.

In early 1915, Vaslav's mood improved. He began to practice more enthusiastically and think seriously about dancing again. He also experimented with devising a system of written

choreographic notation that would allow him to record his own choreography. Hilariously, the Budapest Police got a look at Nijinsky's work and accused him of creating a secret code for espionage. They opened an investigation and brought the dancer in for questioning before becoming convinced that he was really doing what he said he was doing.

As for the Ballets Russes, the contract with the Metropolitan Opera did not require that Vaslav Nijinsky be one of the dancers, but he was a famous name, even in the United States, and the Americans pressured Diaghilev to bring him along. It took intervention from the US State Department, King Alfonso XIII of Spain and Pope Benedict XV, all applying pressure on the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef, but in early 1916, Nijinsky and his family were permitted to leave Austria-Hungary. They passed through neutral Switzerland, then on to France, then to America by ocean liner.

Waiting for them on the dock in New York City was none other than Sergei Diaghilev. It was the first time the former lovers met face to face in over two years. Diaghilev kissed Nijinsky on both cheeks, in the Russian fashion, and Nijinsky let him hold Kyra, but the relationship remained chilly. You see, with Romola's prodding, Vaslav had sued Diaghilev in a London court for back salary owed during the time he had danced for the Ballets Russes. The court had awarded Nijinsky half a million francs, but collecting the money from the elusive Diaghilev was another matter. Nijinsky told the Metropolitan Opera that he would dance for them, but not with the Ballets Russes, not unless Diaghilev paid up.

The Ballet Russes were already touring in the US when the Nijinskys arrived, a sixteen-city tour that was, well, underwhelming. Many of their signature works were too provocative for American audiences. *Afternoon of a Faun* had to have the sexuality toned down, and *Scheherezade's* implicit interracial sex was offensive to white Americans. Leonide Massine as the principal male dancer fell somewhat short of amazing. What the American audiences wanted was the famous Nijinsky.

Diaghilev had no choice. He paid up Nijinsky's back salary and offered \$1000 per performance in New York, once the company arrived there in April. Nijinsky hadn't danced in front of an audience for two years now, and had put on some weight, but he amazed American audiences from his first performance, and quickly found his groove, becoming a superstar once again. Most American critics praised him, although some sneered, finding his performances effeminate and unmanly. He was asked to perform at Cornelius Vanderbilt's mansion, and when he changed out of his costume afterward, discovered that his underpants had gone missing, presumably claimed as a souvenir by some wealthy New York socialite.

The tour was a success, and the Metropolitan Opera wanted the Ballets Russes back for a bigger tour: no less than 52 American cities for the 1916-17 season. Diaghilev was game; America was safer and more lucrative than Europe. But the Met had two conditions. They wanted a guarantee that Nijinsky would be the principal dancer, and they wanted someone other than Sergei

Diaghilev to manage the company. Diaghilev's dictatorial style didn't mesh with the Met's way of doing things. Diaghilev agreed to these terms, appointed Nijinsky manager of the company, and returned to Europe with Leonide Massine in tow. The handsome 20-year old Massine was drawing his own share of adoring female fans. Diaghilev had already lost one lover that way, and was determined not to lose another. As it would turn out, he would indeed lose Massine that way, but not for a few years yet.

This second tour did not go as well as the first. Whatever his gifts as a dancer, Nijinsky was no manager, and the complicated arrangements needed for so big a tour were beyond his ability. There was backstage chaos and the company lost money, but the performances were popular.

Nijinsky took an interest in motion pictures and he wanted to film the Ballet Russes to preserve the choreography, but unfortunately, Diaghilev continued to refuse to permit it. Diaghilev believed the jerky films of the time would make the dance company look ridiculous. It's an historical tragedy that no such films were made, so that we today could catch some glimpse of the magic.

Nijinsky was also a fan of Charles Chaplin, and in early 1917, when the Ballet Russes were performing in Los Angeles, he asked to come to Chaplin's studio and watch him make a picture. Chaplin was flattered and agreed, but he also felt intimidated. He regarded Nijinsky as a genius. By the way, these two men were both 27 years old at the time; Nijinsky is in fact just one month older. Chaplin felt that he couldn't possibly perform at his best with the great Nijinsky watching him, so he instructed the camera operators not to bother to load film into their cameras that day. And so Nijinsky came into the studio and watched enthralled as the great Charles Chaplin entertained him by pretending to make a movie.

There was virtually no ballet in the United States at this time, and no ballet companies. The Chicago Opera had tried to get an affiliate ballet company going in 1910, but that had fizzled out. No American had seen the Ballet Russes, except for those lucky few who had traveled to Europe to see the company there. There were no properly trained American dancers, no one steeped in the European tradition. But the Ballet Russes' two wartime tours of the United States are the first step toward a surprising development: Russian ballet is about to transplant itself into America, even as war and revolution wither it in its home country. But that is a story for another episode.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks to all of you for listening. I'd especially like to thank Richard for making a donation, and Peter for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron, or make a one-time donation, visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) for more information. And while you're there, check out the photograph I posted there, taken on the day Nijinsky met Chaplin.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we pick up the story thread from episode 115. In that episode, I left you hanging as Victoriano Huerta was on a

train headed for El Paso, Texas, presumably on his way to make his comeback in Mexico City. It's the Mexican Revolution, it's German intrigue, it's the Minister without Portfolio, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1919, Charles Chaplin and D.W. Griffith joined two more of the most successful American film actors of the time, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, to form their own motion picture studio. These highly successful artists chafed at interference in their creative decisions by the Hollywood business managers, so they pooled their resources to create United Artists, a studio intended to give first priority to artists and their creative visions. Each of the four held a 20% stake in the new company, with the final 20% held by William McAdoo, President Wilson's son-in-law and now former Treasury Secretary.

United Artists would ultimately merge with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1981. MGM itself is the product of studio mergers of Richard Rowland's Metro Pictures with the companies founded by Samuel Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer. This combined company would be dubbed MGM/UA Entertainment Company.

Richard Rowland, the head of Metro Pictures in 1919, famously remarked of the creation of United Artists that "[t]he lunatics have taken charge of the asylum." Rowland's quip has been frequently repeated and repurposed ever since.

[music: Closing War Theme]