Lon Chaney (1883-1930)

One of the greatest film actors of all time, Chaney is best remembered for his roles in the two great Universal Studios horror epics, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera (1925)*. These two films set the tone for Universal's films of the 1930s.

Both of Chaney's parents were deaf mutes. Chaney himself had perfectly normal hearing, but his first language was sign language, the language with which his parents communicated to him through the first five years of his life. He did not learn to speak until he was five years old and went to school. Thus, from birth Chaney learned to mime; to use his hands, body and facial expressions to communicate. These were the skills he brought to the silent cinema and of which he had almost no equal (with the possible exception of the great Chaplin).

Chaney was noted for playing crippled or deformed characters. Whether the character was good, (but misunderstood) or evil (but still misunderstood), Chaney always gave each character a universal humanity with which audiences could identify. His characters almost always love a beautiful woman who cannot or will not return his love. This is the universal theme of unrequited love that pervades Chaney's work. The young woman almost always loves another man who has a normal body and face. In most of his films, Chaney dies tragically at the end, unloved.

Not only was Lon Chaney one of the greatest actors in silent era Hollywood, he was also nicknamed "The Man of a Thousand Faces" because he was the undisputed master of make-up. He is considered the father of horror film make-up design and greatest of all Hollywood make-up designers. Chaney did all his own make-up work alone, completely unassisted (this is unheard of today).

Chaney's famous make-up kit is now on display in a Hollywood museum.

Chaney added to the mystery surrounding himself by avoiding publicity. He once said "Between movies, Lon Chaney does not exist".

His son, Lon Chaney, Jr., would also become a very important horror film movie star who played the parts of Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the Mummy and most famously, The Wolf Man, Larry Talbot.