

A LIFE IN THE FARCE – LANE

By Glenn Mitchell

Mention the name *'Lupino Lane'* to anyone nowadays and, if it means anything at all (probably unlikely with people under 70), it will be as the original star of the stage musical *Me and My Girl*, with its hit song *The Lambeth Walk*. Only a few may be aware that several years earlier he had been a significant name in American silent film comedy. Lane had left behind this part of his career even during the 1930s, and in the subsequent decades those films became difficult to find and were in many instances considered lost. This DVD release demonstrates how that sad situation has since improved.

Lane began life in 1892 as Henry William George Lupino, part of the theatrical Lupino family that had formed an integral part of British show business since the arrival of Italian émigré Georgius Luppino (note the original double 'p'), a political refugee and amateur puppeteer, in the mid-17th century. Known originally as Harry Lupino, his name was changed during childhood to please his great-aunt, actress and theatre proprietor Sara Lane, who wanted her surname to survive – and with the implication that a sizeable legacy would result. The conversion of his family name to a forename was a means of pacifying other older relatives, for whom being a Lupino was a matter of considerable pride; in the end, the only legacy was the creation of a double-barrelled surname for his son, comedian and actor-manager Lauri Lupino Lane, which still continues in the family.



Photo courtesy of Mark Newell



The youngster acquired the nickname *'Nipper'* and was billed as *'Master Nipper Lupino Lane'* in pantomime and elsewhere. He came to dislike *'Nipper'* in full and preferred to be known privately as *'Nip'*. Lane used this as a character name when playing small-boy roles in adult life, as in the self-penned *'Nip and Nunky'* sketches he recorded in 1920 with Harry Roxbury playing his put-upon uncle, and again with brother Wallace Lupino as *'Nunky'* a decade later. His remarkable elasticity of body was owed to the practice of *'cricking'*, whereby an infant performer's legs were pulled

hard and far apart so that the ligaments would 'pop', freeing the joints to facilitate his performing the widest of splits then to draw himself up again using only leg power. This was consolidated by hours spent lying flat on the floor, legs extended wide to form a 'T'. As was family custom, he was thoroughly trained in all aspects of comedy, both physical and verbal; this, followed by decades of experience, enabled Lane to write a book that may be considered a true masterclass, *How to Become a Comedian*, published by Frederick Muller in 1945 and extending into at least three editions.



By 1915, Lane was already a comparative veteran, appearing at London's Empire Theatre in the revue *Watch Your Step* and – with the song *That Charlie Chaplin Walk* – impersonating an old music-hall friend who had recently become a sensation in moving pictures. Lane performed in the show at night while spending the daytime taking up his own movie opportunity in a series produced by 'John Bull Films' for release through Davison's Film Agency. Lane later recalled the company name as having been the 'O.G. Film Company' but it seems instead to have been the existing Ec-Ko partnership that had made films with Fred Evans (a comedian better known as 'Pimple'), involving the brothers Egbert and the Kellino family. James Dillon White's 1955 biography of Lane, *Born to Star*, states that these were shot around the Clapham Park area of South London (very much part of the music-hall residential district) without an official permit, requiring the unit always to keep one person handy to stall any passing policeman who might question their actions. The first in this series, a now-missing one-reeler called *His Cooling Courtship*, drew extravagant (and, in parallel to the 'John Bull' brand, patriotic) praise from trade journal *The Cinema* on 16th September 1915:

Will there be a Lupino Lane cult amongst comedy devotees of the film? If the public appreciate photo-play humour from a new point of view, then undoubtedly a new comedy star has arisen ... The living comedian can make laughter easy, because of a word or a mere sound. What Lupino Lane has done, ably helped by his producer, is to translate to a film the power the voice can give to an actor. His gestures, movements, every slightest twitch of his body, expresses the humour he wishes to convey. Lupino Lane's actions speak, and speak funnily. Lupino Lane has introduced a new form of laughter making on the film, and it is British all the time.

A description of *His Cooling Courtship* indicates that Lane was using his monocled aristocratic character familiar from later films. As an alternative, he was also still appearing as 'Nipper' – a young man rather than a child – as in the second one-reeler, *Nipper's Busy Holiday*, and in a surviving example, a 1916 two-reeler called *The Dummy*. Following stage work in England and the USA, Lane returned to the screen with the 'Homeland Comedies', released through Ideal in 1917-18. 'Homeland' had been established in 1915 by music-hall artists Jack Edge, Billy



Merson, Charles Austin, Teddie Gerard and Winifred Delvanti. At least some of these – the 'Kineature Komedies' – made use of a distortion lens (devised by Lane's friend, Jack Raines) to create effects which can be seen in the surviving examples, among them *Tripps and Tribunals* (1918), with Lane's character 'Mr. Butterbun' presiding over a tribunal for men seeking exemption from war service. (In a real-life contrast, the otherwise notably agile Lane was repeatedly turned down by the Army owing to an old ankle injury.) According to James Dillon White, Lane edited the films at home, filling his flat with the highly inflammable nitrate stock of the period and thus rendering the place uninsurable. Lane's wife, Violet Blythe, protested but was in time forced to hope for the best.

Lane's American film debut came about when impresario C.B. Cochran arranged for him to star in a New York production of *Afgar*, during which Lane was interviewed by William Fox and his associates who, having coldly agreed to a screen test, were impressed when Lane, turning to leave, walked straight into a cupboard. After making his test (with a cameraman borrowed from Pearl White, who had quit serials for Fox features), Lane was put to work with scenarist Ralph Spence. A trial two-reeler was made - presumably *A Lot About a Lottery*, reviewed by *Picture Show* in the spring of 1921 - and Lane was given a year's contract, to be fulfilled after a return to England. The first in his Fox series, *The Broker*, was released in March 1922, followed in August by *The Reporter*. Lane returned to his monocle-wearing aristocrat image ('Lord Lane'), echoing a common American misconception of Englishmen being effete. This was countered by a robust attitude (Lane became a close friend of cowboy star Tom Mix after responding to a practical joke by socking Mix on the jaw) and considerable acrobatic skills. When shooting a gag in which Lane was to mount a horse after vaulting over a fence, only to find the saddle fixed to a hitching post, director John G. Blystone wanted to use a stunt double; Lane insisted on doing the gag himself and thus boosted his reputation considerably. He was soon collaborating with Blystone on the scripts, which, again according to White, would be described by



studio manager Sol M. Wurtzel as 'lousy' while he was shaking with laughter. Lane's Fox comedies fared well in audience tests and he was soon promoted to five-reel features, but poor box-office returns saw Lane's departure after his second season. Two of Lane's Fox films exist at the Museum of Modern Art, a two-reeler called *The Pirate* (1922) and a five-reel feature, *A Friendly Husband* (1923).

A year after appearing in D.W. Griffith's 1924 film *Isn't Life Wonderful?*, Lane was starring in the two-reel comedies at Educational that form the heart of this DVD

release. They were produced by Jack White and directed variously by Norman Taurog, Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle (under his pseudonym of 'William Goodrich'), Charles Lamont, Mark Sandrich and, in time, 'Henry W. George', alias Lupino Lane. Wallace Lupino played either villain or sidekick, in addition to starring in his own series of 'Cameo Comedies' for Educational. The 'Lord Lane' character remained only for the first season. As Lane said in the July 1928 Picture-Play magazine, most star comics relied on a visual trademark and his had been an image of London's Piccadilly; aware that a comedian should appeal to any nationality, Lane discarded the too-obvious English trappings, retaining only a distinctive curl of hair over his forehead. The Educationals continued into talkies in 1929 and are described in greater detail elsewhere in this booklet. Their popularity at the time may be gauged by the appearance of a Lupino Lane strip in the British children's comic Film Fun. Lane himself proved popular in Hollywood when circumventing America's Prohibition laws by brewing his own English beer, which he dispensed for free to visitors to the pub – the 'Nip Inn' – which he had built in his back garden.



Lane appeared in several sound features, among them Warner Brothers' revue *The Show of Shows* (1929), Ernst Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* (1929), *Bride of the Regiment* (1930) and *Golden Dawn* (1930) before leaving the USA. Screen appearances in Britain include *No Lady* (1931), *A Southern Maid* (1933) and *The Deputy Drummer* (1935); he also directed several films, including *Maid of the Mountains* (1932), *Old Spanish Customers* (1932) and *Innocents of Chicago* (1932), which he also wrote and produced. Lane's stage success *Me and My Girl* - which he revived frequently for the rest of his life - was filmed in 1939 as *The Lambeth Walk*. He continued with stage, radio and television work up until the time of his death in 1959; one of his later TV appearances was among a panel of judges in an edition of the BBC's *Top Town* ('a friendly battle of entertainment'), transmitted on 10th December 1954.

Glenn Mitchell is well known for his alphabetical reference books on early screen comedy and as writer/presenter of popular arts programmes for radio. He is also a comedy scriptwriter, dramatist and illustrator. He has been involved with Kennington Bioscope's silent film screenings since the group's earliest days at London's Cinema Museum, where he has also conducted on-stage interviews.

THE EDUCATIONAL SHORTS

By Matthew Ross

Educational Pictures proved to be a perfect home for Lupino Lane in the late 1920s. Despite its name, the studio specialised in comedy two-reelers, proudly adding Lane to their line-up in 1925. He would go on to make 31 films for the company, beginning with *MAID IN MOROCCO*. Initially working under directors such as Charles Lamont, William Goodrich (Roscoe Arbuckle) and Norman Taurog, Lane obtained greater creative control as the series went on. From 1928, he directed the films himself under the pseudonym 'Henry W George' (inspired by his birth name).

The short films that resulted give an excellent cross-section through the comedy mind of Lupino Lane. Present are many of his favourite themes, including parody, prop comedy, double act routines and traditional elements of English pantomime, to say nothing of his trademark eye-popping acrobatics! The best of the shorts are a wonderful blend of his pantomime heritage with classic silent film comedy technique. Here's a run-down of what's on the disk...

HELLO SAILOR - 25 December 1927

Directed by Mark Sandrich. With Wallace Lupino, Minniella & Charlene Aber.

A major asset of the Lupino Lane comedies was his younger brother, Wallace Lupino. A versatile comedian in his own right, Wallace often played straight man and villain in the films. In *HELLO SAILOR* and several other films, the brothers practically co-star as a comedy team. Lane later said that "to perform a double act successfully, each performer has to study the other and now exactly how to behave. This is only possible with close association, and it means that there must be a close bond of comradeship and affection". It is clear that the two brothers had this in spades, and their almost telepathic comedy timing is a joy to behold.

Highlights of this snappy short include one of Lane's most famous gags, in which he runs 360 degrees around the inside of an arch! Close examination reveals assistance from a wire, but it remains an impressive physical feat nonetheless. The gag originated in his first short for Educational, *MAID IN MOROCCO* (1925) and he returned to it several times, including in his sound feature *NO LADY* (1931). Lane and Wallace also revisited the sailors double act in a British feature, *TRUST THE NAVY* (1935). Viewers may detect an influence of Harry Langdon and Vernon Dent in the opening scenes, with innocent bumbler Lane tagging along behind Wallace, constantly seeking his approval.

A Keatonesque touch is the use of identical twin leading ladies. Minniella and Charlene Aber performed in vaudeville as *The Aber Twins*, singing and dancing to their own violin accompaniment. Speaking of double acts, director Mark Sandrich later became most famous for directing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers vehicles, including *TOP HAT*.

SWORD POINTS - 12 February 1928

Directed by Mark Sandrich. With Wallace Lupino, Jack Lloyd, Thelma Salter.



From 1927 onwards, parody became a recurrent theme in the Lane series. Juxtaposing his small, wide-eyed character with epic settings full of macho types provided great comic contrast and the resulting string of genre parodies (similar in spirit to many of Stan Laurel's films) include many of his best-loved shorts. Among the best are the BEN HUR-inspired ROAMING ROMEO and this spoof of Douglas

Fairbanks' THE THREE MUSKETEERS. Sending up Fairbanks had the additional bonus of allowing Lane to indulge in acrobatic stunts of his own. He repeated the homage later the same year in PIRATES BEWARE, his version of THE BLACK PIRATE.

Film Daily called SWORD POINTS "one of the neatest laugh numbers it has been our pleasure to see for many months". This positive reputation has survived to the present day, and it is perhaps Lane's most celebrated film. Incidentally, Fairbanks enjoyed the joke enough to be photographed on the set of the short.

FISTICUFFS - 28 October 1928

Directed by Henry W George (Lupino Lane). With Wallace Lupino, Ruth Eddings, Harry Dunkinson, Albert Austin, Art Rowlands, Tom Whiteley.

FISTICUFFS again features Lane in an incongruously macho setting, this time a tale of burly blacksmiths and boxing matches set in the 1830s.

Wallace Lupino gets to play a double role, as two different boxers! In real life, he had been an amateur boxer during his WW1 military career. FISTICUFFS also features some actors not usually seen in Lane's films. Playing the villainous squire is Art Rowlands, a familiar face in Mack Sennett comedies. The two boxing seconds in the fight climax are particularly of interest. Lane's aide is none other than Albert Austin, known today for his many appearances opposite Chaplin. Speaking of Chaplin, Lane pinches a sandwich gag from the recently completed THE CIRCUS; perhaps the idea came from Austin?

Wallace's boxing second is Tom Whiteley, an English actor who was a survivor of the Titanic disaster. Whiteley worked closely with Lane on lots of his Educational shorts, but usually in small roles. He is also present with Lane in some publicity photos taken on the set of FISTICUFFS to commemorate a visit by Photoplay editor Margaret Shute. The sets themselves stuck around the Educational lot long enough to be used in a 1931 comedy directed by Roscoe Arbuckle, WINDY RILEY GOES TO HOLLYWOOD.

There's a small amount of missing footage in the middle of this film. As well as cutting a promising door routine short, the gap also removes the plot point of Wallace being kidnapped by the squire's henchman so that he will forfeit the boxing match.

SUMMER SAPS - 17 March 1929

Directed by Henry W. George. With Wallace Lupino, Sybil Grove, Blanche Payson, Jackie Levine, Tom Whiteley.

SUMMER SAPS is an oxymoron: a noisy silent film! This tale of Lane's disastrous attempts to have a peaceful family holiday anticipates the arrival of sound, basing much of its comedy in frustration caused by noises. As a Brit who frequently toured seaside resorts with music hall acts and pantomimes, one senses that Lane wrenched much of SUMMER SAPS from his own painful memories of wet afternoons in tatty boarding houses!

The basic premise of the henpecked husband's family holiday was expanded into Lane's 1931 British feature NO LADY. Ironically, while SUMMER SAPS is a silent film with suggested sound elements, NO LADY is a sound film with large chunks of silent footage.

The Amazonian landlady in SUMMER SAPS is former policewoman Blanche Payson, who memorably menaced Buster Keaton in THREE AGES, and Laurel & Hardy in HELPMATES, BELOW ZERO and OUR WIFE.

GOOD NIGHT NURSE - 28 April 1929

Directed by Henry W George. With Wallace Lupino, Fay Holderness, Eleanor Frederick, Muriel Evans.



Elaborate visual routines came even more to the fore in the films directed by Lane himself. Perhaps 'choreographed' is a more accurate term, as many of these films are more like slapstick ballet. GOOD NIGHT NURSE is a perfect example, a plotless but wonderfully intricate two-man physical comedy routine between the Lupino brothers.

Among the nurses are two ladies remembered from Hal Roach films. Fay Holderness is best known from Laurel & Hardy's HOG WILD, while Muriel Evans became Charley Chase's leading lady in his 1932-33 season.

BATTLING SISTERS - 2 June 1929

Directed by Henry W George. With Wallace Lupino, Betty Boyd, Maxine Jennings, Violet Blythe.

Another parody, this time aimed at war films (and especially THE BIG PARADE). There's a twist, however. Like Snub Pollard's YEARS TO COME (1922) and Clyde Cook's WHAT'S THE WORLD COMING TO? (1926), BATTLING SISTERS is a gender-bending comedy with male and female roles reversed. Set in the distant future of 1980(!) the world is at war, and while the women go out to fight, the emasculated men "tend the home-fires". Melodramatic scenes of enemy soldiers forcing their attentions on innocent young women are well and truly sent up, as villainous Wallace Lupino, (in drag) attempts to have his wicked way with Lane!

Leading lady Betty Boyd performed the same duties in Wallace Lupino's own starring films. Lane's wife, Violet Blythe, also appears among the soldiers.

JOY LAND - 21 July 1929

Directed by Henry W. George. With Wallace Lupino, Muriel Evans, Tom Whiteley, George Atterbury.

Lane always stated that one of his ambitions was to film a traditional English pantomime. Sadly, he never achieved that goal, but JOY LAND is perhaps as close in spirit as he ever got. A wonderful storybook fantasy of toys coming to life, the celebrated centrepiece of this short is an incredible routine of Lane and his pursuers popping in and out of trapdoors at lightning speed. Routines like this were one of his family's specialities on the stage; Lane later recalled going through 83 'traps' in 3 minutes during his 1926 pantomime ALADDIN. Also imported from pantomime is 'Bonzo the Dog'. Wearing the dog costume is George Atterbury, who had performed the part with Lane on the London stage. He became a close friend, living with the Lane family for many years. JOY LAND was Lupino Lane's last silent film.

FIRE PROOF - 8 September 1929

Directed by Charles Lamont. With Wallace Lupino, Betty Caldwell, Lorraine Riveiro, William McCall, George Atterbury.



Lane made four sound shorts for Educational. As with most silent comedians, the results were initially uneven. Reviewing the dialogue-heavy BUYING A GUN, Film Daily commented, "the action that made his comedies what they were in the silent days is almost entirely missing". FIRE PROOF marked a distinct improvement, with Motion Picture News noting that "the story not only gives this agile acrobat chance to do his stuff, but with sound he seems to be a more versatile being".

Indeed, FIRE PROOF wonderfully captures the spirit of Lane's silent comedies, transferring his sight gags and stunts to the new format with some creative use of sound along the way. The story of rival firemen is particularly reminiscent of his earlier film A HALF-PINT HERO (1927), and even includes the same antique fire engine. Look closely for another glimpse of George Atterbury, this time without his Bonzo costume! Lane addresses him by name just before he slides down the fireman's pole.

FIRE PROOF shows a lot of promise for the series of talkie shorts, so it is a great shame that Lane left Educational after just one more film. He was restless at the studio, hoping to make feature films; he was able to accomplish this when he returned to Britain in 1930. His greatest successes were still in front of him back in his home country, culminating in the hit stage show ME AND MY GIRL and a string of spin-offs. In the wake of this, his Educational comedies were largely forgotten. However, for modern audiences they are now the most accessible way of seeing this unique performer at work. They remain a fine legacy, worthy of wider exposure.

Matthew Ross is the editor of 'The Lost Laugh', a vintage comedy blog and e-zine (www.thelostlaugh.com), and is currently researching a book on Lupino Lane's career.