

BRISTOL'S FIRST SLAPSTICK SILENT COMEDY FESTIVAL was a triumphant demonstration of how much can still be achieved with passion, dedication and massive gifts of good will and friendship. Even with the contributions of a number of generous sponsors, the festival's budget, in comparison with any ordinary event of the kind, was a pretty short shoestring.

No-one seeing the outcome could have guessed at the financial struggles. From the start the festival established its character and style, combining faultlessly structured, highly professional shows with a distinctive, relaxed intimate atmosphere that felt more like partying than cinema-going. The films, of course, sampling some of the most brilliant comedy ever put on screen, helped a lot in setting the tone. The personal quality of the festival was primarily established by the on-stage hosts: Peter Lord (of Aardman Animations, *Wallace and Gromit* and *Chicken Run* fame) presented the inaugural show, while the presiding genius during the remainder of the festival was Paul Merton, who was inexhaustible, personally presenting no less than five performances. At the major gala event in the Colston Hall, "Paul Merton's Silent Clowns", Chris Serle acted as master of ceremonies.



Paul Merton's dedication to the festival - the idea was first mooted when he visited Bristol Silents three years ago to present a Buster Keaton programme - is inspired by his own passion for silent movies and a genuine sense of mission in wanting to bring them to modern audiences. He wrote in *The Times*, "When a virgin audience, never having seen a silent comedy before, sees one on a big screen they are invariably shocked just how funny it is. Without being checked by dialogue, the laughter can roll and build, with the ingenious beautiful sight gags, the wonderful compositions, the whole magic of cinema. It is a kind of comedy that challenges the imagination. With no dialogue to help us, we have to concentrate on the pictures and what they tell us. Maybe the reward is bigger precisely because we put more into it."

This belief was certainly confirmed by the response of the festival audiences. Every show at the Watershed Media Centre was fully sold out, with disappointed enthusiasts waiting at the box office in the hope of returns. There was a special reward for those of us who have worked a lot with the revival of silent films and golden age comedy: this kind of historic show usually attracts the dedicated, know-it-all film buffs, but "Slapstick" attracted regular folks, including a lot of children, who just wanted a good time - which is exactly what these films were meant for.

And there was no doubt that everyone was having a good time. Paul Merton said that there were times when he was torn between watching the screen, and enjoying the sea of happy faces - the children above all rocking with laughter at the unaccustomed spectacle of grown-ups making fools of themselves.



At the festival, the music was under the direction of Neil Brand, whose special genius for improvisational piano accompaniment has earned him a world-wide reputation (for the last two years he has conducted master classes in Italy for film accompanists). At the festival, his work was seen at its most accomplished in his music for Buster Keaton's 1927 comedy masterpiece *The General*. In addition, commissioned by Paul Merton, he had arranged a score for ten-piece orchestra for one of the finest silent shorts made by Laurel and Hardy before they found their on-screen voices, the anarchic *You're Darn Tootin'*. The audience joined in, and tore calico or paper at the appropriate moment to provide the sound effects for the mass trouser-ripping climax.



An entirely innovatory musical thrill was the a capella accompaniment to two films - the Buster Keaton compilation *Buster Keaton di Corsa* and Chris Daniels & Don Fairservice's tribute, *Silent Clowns* - provided by The Matinee Idles - a group which reunited three members of the 70s-80s group "Darts", Griff Fender, Den Hegarty and Pikey Butler, joined by Paul McGann and the wonderful Debbie Charles from the MJs.

Audiences made the joyful rediscovery of a lot of forgotten names whose comedy proved wholly alive and sparkling on the Bristol screens. As well as films by the Big Three of silent comedy - Charles Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton - they were introduced to npw-forgotten but still brilliant comics like Charlie Chase, Harry Langdon, Max Davidson, Snub Pollard, Billy Bevan, Ford Sterling, Mabel Normand, Lupino Lane and Monty Banks, and the phenomenal infant comedienne, Baby Peggy Montgomery. The only survivor of this great comedy generation, Baby Peggy (today better known as a successful writer, under her adult name of Diana Serra Cary) had videoed a special address to the festival. With luck (and some imaginative sponsorship), might she be guest of honour at next year's festival?