

## **An Interview with Hal Roach**

*Q: Could you tell us, Mr Roach, how old you are?*

**Hal Roach:** I am 98.

*Q: When did you get involved with the film business?*

**Hal Roach:** Well I started as an extra in the motion picture business in 1912, and from an extra to an actor to assistant director to a director to owning my own studio took only two years.

*Q: That must have been an exciting period?*

**Hal Roach:** Well, exciting it wasn't. It was a lotta work because I didn't know a thing about the motion picture business, and the motion pictures didn't know a thing about me. So I was making all kinds of pictures to find out what I could do best, and I ended up with comedy.

*Q: What attracted you to comedy?*

**Hal Roach:** Well the strangest thing is that while I was working in pictures as an actor, I never did work in a comedy. I never had anything to do with comedy 'til I started making them myself. And as soon as I started making the comedies myself I began to try to find out why people laughed and when they laughed and how much they could laugh.

*Q: You worked for Charlie Chaplin*

**Hal Roach:** Up to that point the most money I ever got was \$10 a day. But I made raised finance and made some pictures, and while we waited to get them sold, I went to work for Essanay, making pictures with the English comedians that Chaplin had under salary – not under contract. I made a one-reeler a week, for \$75 a week. And I never knew anybody got as much as money as that was at that time. That was a lotta money to earn, and so I was sort of a fat guy then.

*Q: What was it like, meeting Charlie Chaplin?*

**Hal Roach:** Meeting him was very good. But I never met till I got onto the little studio where he was working. That's where I was also going to work. It was the time of silent pictures, and our sets were ah next to each other. So I was introduced to him, and he told me that I had to go on location just before noon. And I said, "Well why do I have to do that?". He says, "Because I tell you you have to" and I said: "That is certainly enough reason for me to do it". Then I found out that if he went on location, the company had to pay for lunch for the whole bunch on location. So all these

Englishmen that were working for me, they wanted to eat for free too. So I did what he said. We'd go out and make one scene, then go to the cafeteria, and these English guys would fill a tray so full of food they could hardly carry it. I'm sure they ate no breakfast, and I'm sure they didn't have to eat any dinner when they got through with the luncheon that the studio paid for.

*Q: Were these English comedians part of the same Karno troop that came over with Chaplin?*

**Hal Roach:** Most of them, yes. One was Chaplin's brother, but I'm sure that they were all with Karno at one time or another.

*Q: What was your first studio like?*

**Hal Roach:** Well the first pictures I made, I had no studio. When I started making pictures for Pathe, I had a little studio across from the Mack Sennett studio in Edendale. Then space became available in this big downtown studio, The Bradbury Mansion. That's where Mary Pickford made one of her big pictures. She had moved out and there was room for me to move in. There were three or four companies making their pictures there. Very soon after that I was able to build my own a studio in Hollywood.

*Q: When you started your studio, did you try emulate Chaplin's style of comedy?*

**Hal Roach:** Chaplin's great advantage was the the group of Karno slapstick comedians who came with him the the US. In England in those days you had vaudeville and you had other kinds of theatres where they did acts. All the little towns in England had a theatre, this was before pictures, and Karno was the agent for all these people. The same clothes that Chaplin wore had been worn by other comedians 20-30-50 years ahead of the time that he used them. He never claimed that it was his own idea, you know, or stopped anybody from using a cane or a derby hat or things like that. I was working in the studio next to Chaplin and he came in to my set, four or five times a day, to talk to one of these other comedians and say, 'When so-and-so did so-and-so, how did he do it? Then he would do the same thing but do it in a different way.

*Q: How did you first see Stan Laurel?*

**Hal Roach:** I went to this vaudeville house on Main Street to see him and his wife in a show. I thought he was very funny, and I made a contract with him there. He came to the studio, we made a screen test with him. His eyes were very light grey and they didn't photograph well, so they all thought we couldn't use him. Then



Then panchromatic film came in and we made another test, that was much better so then we put him a in picture. He and Hardy were in 2 or 3 pictures together but not as a team until we made a picture called Putting Pants on Philip. While they didn't play a team they, they played well together and we knew that we had something special. That's when we started to be successful.

*Q: What do you think it was about them that made them work so well together as a team?*

**Hal Roach:** Both of those men were the best actors I ever saw or ever knew. Well in the first place, one complemented the other. Now there was a lot of thought put into this thing. Bear this in mind. Those two guys could beat the hell out of the other, but as soon as anybody else hit one or the other, the other one was on his side. They never won a fight, but if some body else punched Laurel, Hardy was on them. And the audience knew that no matter what the hell they, they'd done, it wasn't gonna bad enough they would separate. I mean that they were so closely knit together that they were gonna stick together regard-less of what happened.

*Q: They also got laughs off each other, didn't they?*

**Hal Roach:** Yes. Where they were so good was, one of them would do a gag that's funny, and now you cut to the other and the reaction is another laugh; then you cut to the other guy and that was still another laugh. With Laurel it was the surprise of the thing, and Hardy was the indignant one.

*Q: Was Stan Laurel good at deciding what would work, to fix something?*

**Hal Roach:** Oh, oh yes, he was a big help in that. Very often he would decide that some gag wouldn't work. The writers would always go out on the set and see Stan and say "What do you think of this? You know, to get his opinion of the thing. If he said "I don't like it", then it was gone. If he liked it it was in. He was always keeping a keen interest in the picture.

*Q: When you began making sound films did the pace of the films have to change?*

**Hal Roach:** The big change that was very difficult was that laughter begets laughter. The more laughter you get, the the more other people that would never laugh ordinarily, would start laughing. Now if you got people laughing, you've gotta use something to stop 'em laughing so they can hear, the dialogue. That was very difficult at the start because you would have an important line, that had to do

with what's going on next, but they would be laughing and they didn't hear it. Luckily both ah Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy had been on the stage and they were used to dealing with this. Our biggest problem was the Our Gang kids, and we had to get two or three new kids with very good diction and they would carry the dialogue.

*Q: Was it hard to adjust to making sound pictures?*

**Hal Roach:** Well it was very difficult at the start. When I directed this first picture, I had to direct it for the microphone. We had one microphone, and they said 'No, that girl has gotta come here, we can't hear her. This guy is too loud, he's gotta be over there. Everything was done for the benefit of the microphone. The microphone didn't move, it stayed in one position. Well it was only three or four days before we began to move the the thing round. Then they had the trouble with the noise of the cameras and they had them in a big box until they made cameras that were more silent.

*Q: Did sound production require longer shooting periods for Laurel & Hardy pictures?*

**Hal Roach:** Laurel & Hardy pictures took four weeks weeks. That was for two-reelers. We would try them out on preview audiences before they were released. We would go to a theatre, sometimes Pasadena, sometimes down at Long Beach or sometimes right in town. We had cards that we gave out. The people come out and they would write down good, bad or whatever on the card. But our big thing was the laughter. If things were wrong you would know, right away. About half the time you would add something in that was all ready shot but you'd thought it wasn't funny enough, and you'd cut it out. And you'd put it back in. other times we'd make a couple of retakes and end up with one of the funniest pictures we ever made.

*Q: Why did Laurel & Hardy move into feature production?*

**Hal Roach:** They went into feature production because the double feature in the United States made it impossible for the theatres to use half hour comedy. All they could use was features. Where I made the mistake of my life, I should have made about 40 minute feature comedies, and I could have sold them as a second feature. But I wasn't smart enough to do that. So I went into making feature pictures.

*Q: That must have made them much more expensive.*

**Hal Roach:** Oh sure, I mean it cost five to ten times more to make a feature than it did to make two-reelers. Because with two-reelers, you just had to say 'By Laurel & Hardy', but with making comedies

with Laurel & Hardy in features, you had to have other kinds of things. A musical or another story to go with the Laurel and Hardy story in order to last for a feature length. They were never very successful with the feature pictures that they made. The strange thing is that one picture *Fra Diavolo*, didn't do any business in the United States, but it made millions abroad. I was amazed, I saw it in France, and when the songs came on the whole the audience sang along.

*Q: After all these years why do you think people still love Laurel & Hardy pictures?*

**Hal Roach:** Well I don't think anybody is making that kind of comedy now. But one thing I am certain about is, that people's ability to laugh and wanting to laugh is not a bit different today than it was 100 years ago. And they laugh at the same things. I laughed at Laurel & Hardy on TV the other night. They played *Wrong Again*, the one where they put the horse on the piano. Laurel says the guy wants us to put it on the piano. He says: rich people are entirely different from other people. Hardy agrees, if they want the horse on the piano, we will put it on the piano, you know. [LAUGHS] I don't want them to finish though sometimes.