

CHARLIE AT THE SYDNEY SHOW

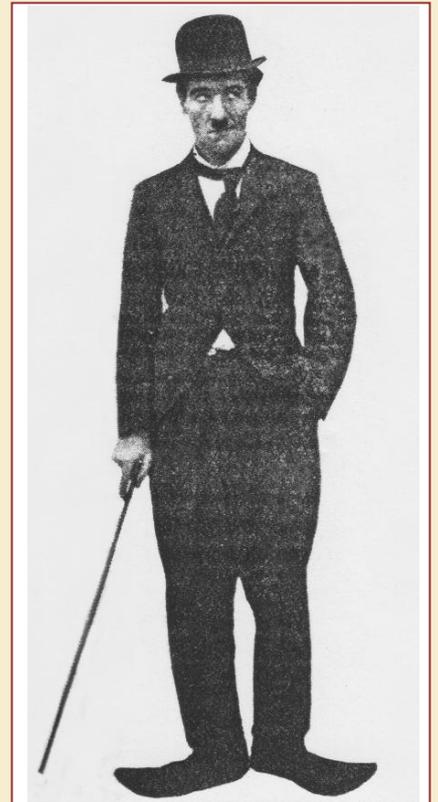
Year of release: 1916 • Scenario by Agnes Gavin, with additional material by Ern Vockler

In early 1915 emerging vaudeville comedian Ern Vockler,¹ then aged only 17, hit on the idea of doing Charlie Chaplin impersonations. The act, which he claims to have originated in Australia,² typically saw him billed as the "Charlie Chaplin of vaudeville" and its popularity with audiences around the country cemented his reputation as variety star over the next few years. Vockler's first known performance as the Hollywood star took place at the Princess Theatre, Sydney under the management of the Brennan-Fuller firm in March. He soon attracted the attention of Hugh D. McIntosh's Tivoli circuit and in August took the act on the road through southern New South Wales with Rickards Tivoli Entertainers. A publicity blurb published in Wagga Wagga's *Daily Advertiser* records the following: "All picture patrons know Charlie Chaplin, and his counterpart will be seen in the person of Ern Vockler, who introduces a pantomime absurdity that is a laugh from start to finish."³

After the Tivoli tour ended he found no shortage of work playing picture houses as well as appearing in vaudeville programmes. His first engagements appear to have been in regional New South Wales, however. In its 8 December 1915 edition, *Australian Variety* records:

Ernie Vockler, the original Australian Charlie Chaplin is touring several of the New South Wales towns and playing in conjunction with picture shows. In the day-time he goes around to the schools and in Chaplin make-up, gives out handbills. The country folk are real excited at this class of advertisement. Vockler does fifteen minutes of Chaplin fooling in his act, and he is a big drawing card (n. pag.).

The following year the *Sun* newspaper in Sydney noted that Vockler's impersonations had not gone unnoticed in Hollywood:



Ern Vockler as Charlie Chaplin
Theatre Magazine Mar. (1916), 35.

ERN VOCKLER,
The Australian Charlie Chaplin,
specially engaged by Hugh. D. McIntosh to
tour with Rickards Tivoli Entertainers,
working a ten minutes dumb specialty act—
a great success.
NOTE.—To whom it may concern:
I, Ern Vockler, wish to state that I was
the first in Australasia to do an impersona-
tion of the world-famous Charlie Chaplin.
I will forfeit £5 to anyone that can prove
otherwise.
Winner of the White City Competition,
1914, also Fuller Competition, 1915.

Mr. Ernest Vockler, the winner of the competition for the best imitator of Charlie Chaplin, has received, an autograph letter from the Great Man, expressing pleasure to hear that Mr. Vockler is well. The letter is on paper headed Charlie Chaplin Music Publishing Co., and bears a green shamrock in the middle, as if to indicate that Charlie Chaplin owes allegiance to Ould Olreland. One of these days Mr. Vockler may be able to sell that letter for untold wealth to the Mitchell Library. Perhaps.⁴

The Chaplin competition mentioned by the journalist appears to have been one of two events held in 1915 - one at Sydney's White City and the other by the Fullers' Theatres.⁵

Australian Variety 8 Sept. 1915, n. pag.

¹ Vockler was born Ernest Charles Vockler in Melbourne in 1897, the fourth youngest of 12 siblings. In 1917 he teamed up with his brother-in-law Ern Delavale to form the Delavale Brothers. As both men had the same given name, Vockler began using his middle name Charles. However, from 1923 onwards he was best known as Ike Delavale, named after the Irish/Jewish character he created in 1920 with Paul Stanhope and later featured in his own series of original revusicals.

² Vockler's claim to be the first person to impersonate Chaplin on the stage was made in *Australian Variety* in September 1915 (see above). This was likely in response to Raymond Longford's film *Ma Hogan's Boarder* which features another Chaplin impersonator, Charles Evans. Released in Sydney on 28 June 1915, that film's advertising routinely describes Evans as "the Australian Chaplin." Interestingly there is no record of Evans' presenting his Chaplin impersonations on stage in Australia either before the release of *Ma Hogan's Boarder* or after.

³ "The Strand: Opening Night." *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW) 23 Aug. 1915, 3.

⁴ "Chaplin to Vockler." *Sun* (Sydney) 9 July 1916, 19.

⁵ While no advertisements or accounts of either competition have yet been located, both are mentioned in the *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser* 30 November in 1915. For further details see Charles Delavale's biography ("Additional Quotations").

During Sydney's 1916 Royal Easter Show (18-26 April), emerging vaudeville comedian Ernie Vockler worked his Chaplin act in front of, and sometimes interacting with, attendees who may or may not have been aware that the performances were being filmed by **J. F. Gavin**. The footage was edited into a 2,000 ft, two-reel comedy film called *Charlie at the Sydney Show*. A copy of the film, which survives almost in its entirety, is held by the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). Comedian **Arthur Tauchert**, who later becomes a household name in Australia as Bill in the 1919 silent classic *The Sentimental Bloke* makes a cameo, possibly his first appearance on film. The NFSA catalogue records:

The plot of this comic short film involves Australian Charlie Chaplin impersonator, Ern Vockler, playing the role of Charlie, who is visiting the Sydney Show. Episodes for Charlie include chases with a couple of larrikins, encounters at various side-show acts, and a visit to the stables, where he chats enthusiastically with the female riders and mounts a prize winning hack. There appears to be a sub-plot involving a man and a woman who are also visiting the show. The man has his pocket picked by two larrikins, one of whom is Arthur Tauchert. Charlie spoils the plot, and eventually the man's money is returned. After performing in an assortment of steeplechases, Charlie drives off with the couple in an Overland motor car (Title No 9133)



Scenes from the film.

The film was given its debut exhibition at Waddington's Glaciarium, located adjacent to Central Railway Station, on Monday 15 May.⁶ A preview published in the *Sun* a week earlier records that Vockler had been "doing the Chaplin stunt outside Waddington's Grand Theatre in Pitt-street for the last ten months."⁷ As *Charlie at the Sydney Show* premiered on the Waddington's circuit it is possible that the company was involved with the making of the film in some way.

GRAND and GLACIARIUM
(PITT STREET, opp. Royal Arcade). (CENTRAL RAILWAY).

AN EXCEPTIONALLY FINE LASKY COMEDY-DRAMA.
 A SEQUEL TO "CHIMMIE FADDEN," WHO TOOK SYDNEY BY STORM.

"Chimmie Fadden Out West."

All roads lead to Rome—sure. But all roads will lead to Waddington's to view the screamingly funny comedy, "Chimmie Fadden Out West." It's a sequel to "Chimmie Fadden," which took Sydney by storm just lately, and will cause the sequel to be welcomed with the utmost delight on the Waddington Circuit.

Also at the Grand, Chaplin in "The Champion."

AND AT THE GLACIARIUM, WADDINGTON'S IMPERSONATOR OF CHAPLIN, ERN VOCKLER, IN

"Charlie at the Sydney Show."

Were you with Charlie at the Show? Come to the Glaciarium and see. Over 3000 visitors were snapped in various parts of this latest and mirth-provoking comedy by J. F. Gavin.

Sunday Times (Sydney) 14 May 1916, 16.

Newspaper advertising for the *Charlie at the Sydney Show* typically asked readers if they were there. Some additional details were also provided, including the fact that some 3,000 visitors to the show were filmed during the making of the comedy. For its *Brisbane Courier* season the publicity reads: "Were you there? Charlie was! That is Ern Vockler

⁶ The NFSA catalogue, the *Internet Movie Database* and *Wikipedia* all record 20 May as its release date. The advertisement above contradicts those claims.

⁷ "Imitating Chaplin." *Sun* (Sydney) 7 May 1916, 20.

was. Charlie's cleverest imitator, and he's a scream. See Charlie and the Boxing Lady! See Charlie and the Confidence Men! See Charlie as a bold, bad pirate after the girls!"⁸

While reviews of the film are scarce, a critic from Melbourne's *Punch* provides some insight into its reception by critics prior to being released in that city:

At a private screening of *Charlie at the Sydney Show*, given by the Famous Feature Films Co., Sydney, in Waddington's Globe Theatre, Eric [sic] Vockler, "the Australian Chaplin," and John F. Gavin (producer of the film) both scored decided successes. Mr. Gavin had unearthed a comedian of undoubted talent, who, with only slightly more experience in "Movie" acting, will soon eclipse the majority of the efforts, of comedians playing in imported films, and even aspire to be the equal of the great Charlie Chaplin himself. Mr. Gavin is to be congratulated on giving the public a decided novelty in films, and also on the extraordinarily heavy bookings he had already received for the exhibition of the picture in the N.S.W. shows. The scenario, which contains many humorous situations is by Agnes Gavin, whilst the photography by Alf Moulton is quite equal to anything yet screened in Sydney.⁹

- 1916:** Waddington's Glacarium, Sydney; 15 May -
- 25 min; black and white; silent (2 reels / 2,000 ft)
- **Dir.** J. F. Gavin; **Prod.** Famous Films Company; **Dir of Ph.** Alf Moulton.
- **Cast** incl. Ern Vockler, Arthur Tauchert.

SEE ALSO:

Ike Delavale (aka **Ern Vockler**) • **John Gavin**

FURTHER REFERENCE:

"*Charlie at the Sydney Show*." *Wikipedia*.

"*Charlie at the Sydney Show*." *National Film and Sound Archive*.

"*Charlie Chaplin at the Sydney Show?*" *Anzac Sight and Sound*.¹⁰ [Includes 3 minutes of footage from the film]

Pike, Andrew, and Ross Cooper. *Australian Film 1900-1977*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, in assoc. with the Australian Film Institute, 1980.



Call (Perth) 11 June 1920, 4.

⁸ *Brisbane Courier* 28 July 1916, 2.

⁹ "The Movies." *Punch* (Melbourne) 18 May 1916, 11.

¹⁰ The *Anzac Sight and Sound* website records that "Ern Vockler's earliest appearance as the 'Charles Chaplin of Vaudeville' was at Goulburn, New South Wales, during August 1915." He had actually performed the act at the Princess Theatre, Sydney, as early as March that year (see above).