

There It Is

By Steve Massa

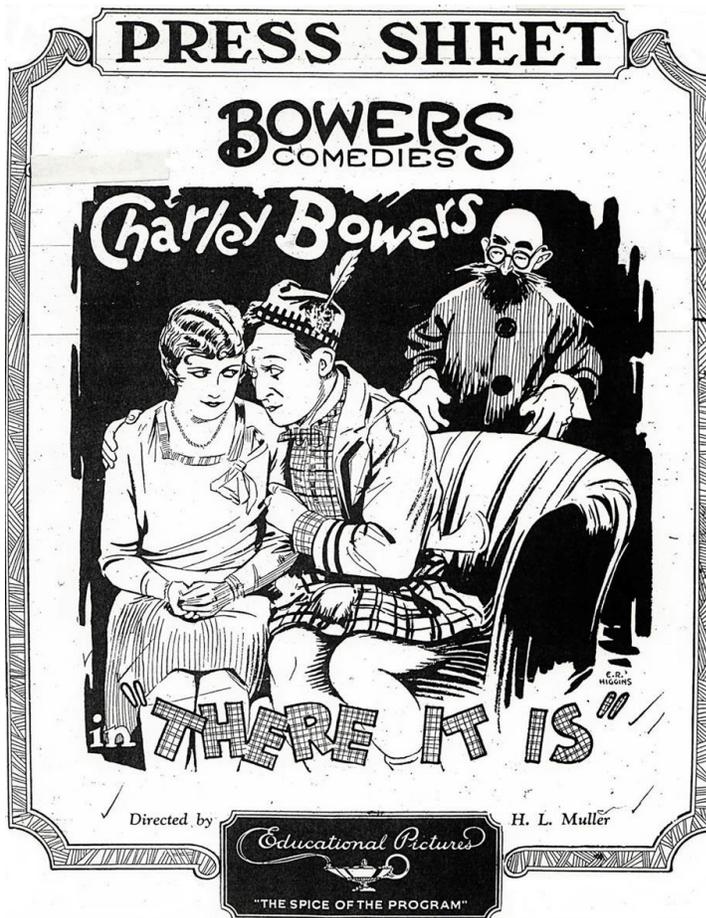
Odd occurrences are happening at the Frisbie Mansion – full-sized chickens instantly emerge from broken eggs, occupants disappear without a trace, and empty pants dance on top of dresser drawers – all caused by a mysterious fuzz-faced phantom who's haunting the place. These are just a few of the strange things that take place in "There It Is" (1925), but they're business as usual in the cinema of Charley Bowers.

A pioneer in the combination of live-action film and stop-action animation, shorts such as "There It Is," "Egged On" (1926), "A Wild Roomer" (1927), and "Say Ah-h" (1928) reveal Bowers to have been a direct heir of George Melies, making the impossible come true before our eyes – eggs hatch into miniature Model T's, a man-servant machine runs rampant down real city streets, and plant grow so fast they shoot up a farmer's pant leg and impale him in midair.

Given to tall tales off screen as well as on, Bowers spun stories of being kidnapped and raised in a circus where he walked the tightrope, in addition to touring in vaudeville and directing plays. What's definite is that he became a newspaper cartoonist for "The Chicago Star" and "The Chicago Tribune" and in 1916 got involved in early film animation. Based in New York with the rest of the American animation industry, Bowers, with partners such as Raoul Barre and on his own, made the animated adventures of the Katzenjammer Kids and Mutt & Jeff. By the mid-1920s he began experimenting with puppets and opened a new studio in Astoria, Long Island.

In 1926 he launched his series of live-action "Whirlwind Comedies" through FBO which featured his mysterious "Bowers Process," a highly sophisticated and fluid method of stop-action animation. With his collaborators H.L. Muller (co-director & cameraman) and Ted Sears (writer) Bowers created comedies that mixed the unbelievable with the everyday. Charley had himself as star, more often than not playing a wacky scientist or inventor who was busy finding the secret to making non-slip banana peels, creating shoes that would do his dancing for him, and discovering a chemical that would dissolve any solid material. As a performer Charley dressed in plaid shirts, baggy overalls, and looked like the love-child of Buster Keaton and Larry Semon – small, with the features of both, plus Buster's solemn demeanor.

The details of his "Bowers Process" were kept a secret, but the result is some of the most life-like stop-action characters ever seen on the screen. Charley's various puppet bugs, oysters, dogs, and other creatures display subtle gestures and human behavior light years ahead of the work being done at the same time by Ladislav Starewicz and Willis O'Brien. Bowers signed a contract with Educational Pictures in 1928 and moved his operations to Hollywood where he completed six more shorts.



"There It Is" was the first, and he continued his misadventures with animated fleas skating on a bald man's head, serving as janitor at an apartment building that would have been too surreal for Salvador Dali, and setting off for darkest Africa to search for the elusive Umbrella Bird.

Bower's heyday was brief; in three years he turned out sixteen of these little gems, but although popular and garnering critical attention for their novelty, the arrival of sound saw his output become sporadic. "It's a Bird" (1930) was his only sound effort equal to his silent shorts, and he mostly worked on puppet films such as "Pete Roleum and his Cousins" (1939) and "Mom and Pop" (1940). In 1941 he was struck by a debilitating illness and wasn't able to work again before his death in 1946. The good news is that after years of obscurity his films began resurfacing in the 1980s. More have turned up over the past few years and a high profile DVD release started the ball rolling on the re-examination of his work and unique vision.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

*Steve Massa is the author of *Lame Brains and Lunatics: The Good, The Bad, and The Forgotten of Silent Comedy*, and has organized film programs for the Museum of Modern Art, Library of Congress, Smithsonian, and the Pordenone Silent Film Festival. Steve has also contributed essays and commentary tracks to many comedy DVD sets.*