KINOKINO

A KING IN NEW YORK (1957)

Directed by Charlie Chaplin

WEDNESDAY November 11th 7PM

SATURDAY November 14th 2pm / 7pm



In September 1952, Charlie Chaplin sailed for London with his family and a re-entry permit good for a year. Two days out, the Attorney General announced that if he ever came back he would be held for questioning on his politics and his morals. Chaplin never contested it. Four years later he built Manhattan on a soundstage outside London, since the real one was closed to him, and made a comedy that slipped through the back door, about an immigrant who came through the front.

King Shahdov escapes a revolution and lands in New York, where the first thing America does is take his fingerprints. Chaplin knew the routine firsthand; when federal marshals fingerprinted him in 1944, the photographers had been invited. Then the King learns his prime minister has run off with his fortune. Broke in a luxury hotel, he accepts an invitation to a society dinner and finds himself on live television; there are cameras in the décor and a commercial between courses. Soon he's selling deodorant on the air and getting a face-lift to stay marketable. Critics in 1957 called it cheap shots at a fad. Anyone who has watched a nuisance streamer ambush a stranger for clicks will recognize the setup: the unwitting mark, the hidden lens, an audience paying for his embarrassment.

Then the King befriends a ten-year-old (Chaplin's son Michael) whose parents are wanted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the cameras turn political. HUAC subpoenaed Chaplin in 1947 and never called him; here he finally gets his hearing, and he comes prepared. In a series about cons, this is the one where everybody is selling, including the people asking the questions. A loyalty hearing staged for the newsreels is rage bait with a gavel.

In March 1972 it was quietly booked into a small theater in Ohio; a month later Chaplin flew in for an honorary Oscar, his first visit in twenty years. Even then the reviews were mixed: too raw for 1957, dated by 1972. Chaplin's last starring role has been waiting for an audience that would get the joke. Maybe that's us.