

THEIR MARRIAGE CAUSED OUTRAGE BUT IT WAS A...

Match made to last

When a 53-year-old Charlie Chaplin met 17-year-old Oona O'Neill, he was already in disgrace in Hollywood. However, as Steve O'Brien reveals, they would go on to spend a happy 33 years together



For Oona O'Neill, the attraction was instant. "Just met Charlie Chaplin," the 17-year-old cooed to a friend in 1942. "What blue eyes he has!" The youngest daughter of that titan of American theatre Eugene O'Neill may have been a mere teen at the time she met the sapphire-eyed movie star, yet she had already notched up a string of older lovers, including Orson Welles, J.D. Salinger and the cartoonist Peter Arno. But there was something about this 5ft 5in charmer that was different. Later,



Joan Barry with her daughter Carol Ann, who she claimed was Charlie Chaplin's daughter, despite blood tests telling a different story.

cynics would scoff at the marriage between the 18-year-old Oona and the 53-year-old Chaplin (O'Neill was his fourth wife), yet the couple would remain happily together for the next 33 years.

At the time Chaplin met O'Neill, his public reputation was in the gutter. For much of the previous two years he'd been having an on-off affair with an aspiring actress by the name of Joan Barry, but when Chaplin called it off, Barry's behaviour became increasingly erratic, at one point breaking into her former lover's home. It was only ➤

when she turned up once again, this time three months pregnant and claiming that Chaplin was the father, that the press' interest piqued – suddenly Charlie's name was screaming from every front page in the land. "I was pilloried, excoriated and vilified," the actor wrote in his autobiography.

In the midst of this tumult, Chaplin was busying himself with a planned adaptation of Paul Vincent Carroll's 1937 play *Shadow and Substance*. He'd originally eyed Barry for the lead role of Brigid, but with his former lover out of the picture, the search was on for a replacement. Then, one day in 1942, Chaplin received a call from a casting agent, Mina Wallace, suggesting a client of hers who she thought would be perfect for Brigid.

"She's had a little theatrical experience in summer stock in the east," the agent told him. "You'd better take a film test of her and find out for yourself. Or, better still, come to my house for dinner and I'll have her here."

Chaplin arrived at Wallace's house to find O'Neill sitting alone by the fire. "I became aware of a luminous beauty," Chaplin recalled in his autobiography, "with a sequestered charm and a gentleness that was most appealing."

Chaplin had no idea of O'Neill's age (she had just turned 17) until Wallace mentioned it later in the evening. "My heart sank," he later wrote. "Although the part called for someone young, the character was extremely complex and would require an older and more experienced actress."

Eventually, though, through getting to know Oona over the coming months, he became persuaded that, despite her youth, she was a good fit for

Charlie and Oona Chaplin with six of their eight children, Geraldine, Eugene, Victoria, Annette, Josephine and Michael, at London airport in 1961.



Brigid. He was taken, he later recalled, by her "humour and tolerance", and the two fell deeply in love.

TROUBLED TIMES

But as Chaplin was basking in their romantic glow, the Joan Barry scandal wouldn't go away. The eventual paternity test confirmed that Chaplin wasn't the father, yet a court decided otherwise and the actor was forced to pay child support until the girl's 21st birthday.

In addition, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who had an intense dislike of Chaplin due to his political affiliations with various left-leaning organisations,

embarked on an elaborate smear campaign. This culminated in the FBI naming the actor in four indictments related to Barry, including violating the 1910 White Slave Traffic Act (or Mann Act), which prohibited forced prostitution and 'debauchery'. (Chaplin was later acquitted in court.)

The press' coverage became so toxic that, when it came to the wedding, the couple arranged for Louella Parsons, whom they knew they could count on to give a sympathetic write-up, to cover it exclusively for Hearst newspapers.

Charlie and Oona were married on June 16, 1943 in the small Californian city of Carpinteria, leasing a house in Santa Barbara for their eight-week honeymoon.

"In spite of the occasional depression," Chaplin wrote, "those two months in Santa Barbara were poignantly romantic."

Sadly, for Oona, the marriage finished off what little relationship she had with the father who had walked out of the family home when she was a baby. Eugene O'Neill was just one year older than his new son-in-law, and was so outraged by their relationship that he disinherited his daughter and the two never spoke again.

Chaplin never made *Shadow and Substance*, instead pouring all his energies into the serial killer comedy *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). And Oona, as a new bride, abandoned her plans to become an actress.

MOVING ON

The couple welcomed their first child, Geraldine, in 1944, with another seven following over the next 18 years. The Chaplins' lives suffered a major upset in 1952 when Charlie's visa was revoked due to his supposed communist sympathies, as well as, in US Attorney General James P. McGranery's words, "making statements that would indicate a leering, sneering attitude toward a country whose hospitality has enriched him."

In solidarity, Oona renounced her American citizenship and the two moved to Corsier-sur-Vevey in Switzerland where they spent the next 25 years in a stunning, white-bricked mansion overlooking Lake Geneva.

Charlie Chaplin died at the age of 88 on Christmas Day 1977. Oona, devastated by his death, spent the rest of her life as a virtual recluse. She died of pancreatic cancer in 1991 aged just 66. She was laid to rest next to Charlie in the village cemetery.

In the story of Charlie Chaplin, Oona O'Neill remains something of an enigma. She agreed to few interviews in her lifetime and, though she was a prolific diarist and letter writer, her final will decreed that all her writings should be destroyed for fear of one day being published. However, in 1960, during one of the only interviews she ever gave, her love for her husband was palpable: "He is my world," she said proudly. "I've never seen or lived anything else."

DID YOU KNOW?

Charlie and Oona's eldest daughter Geraldine is an actress, and played her own grandmother in 1992's biopic *Chaplin*.

