

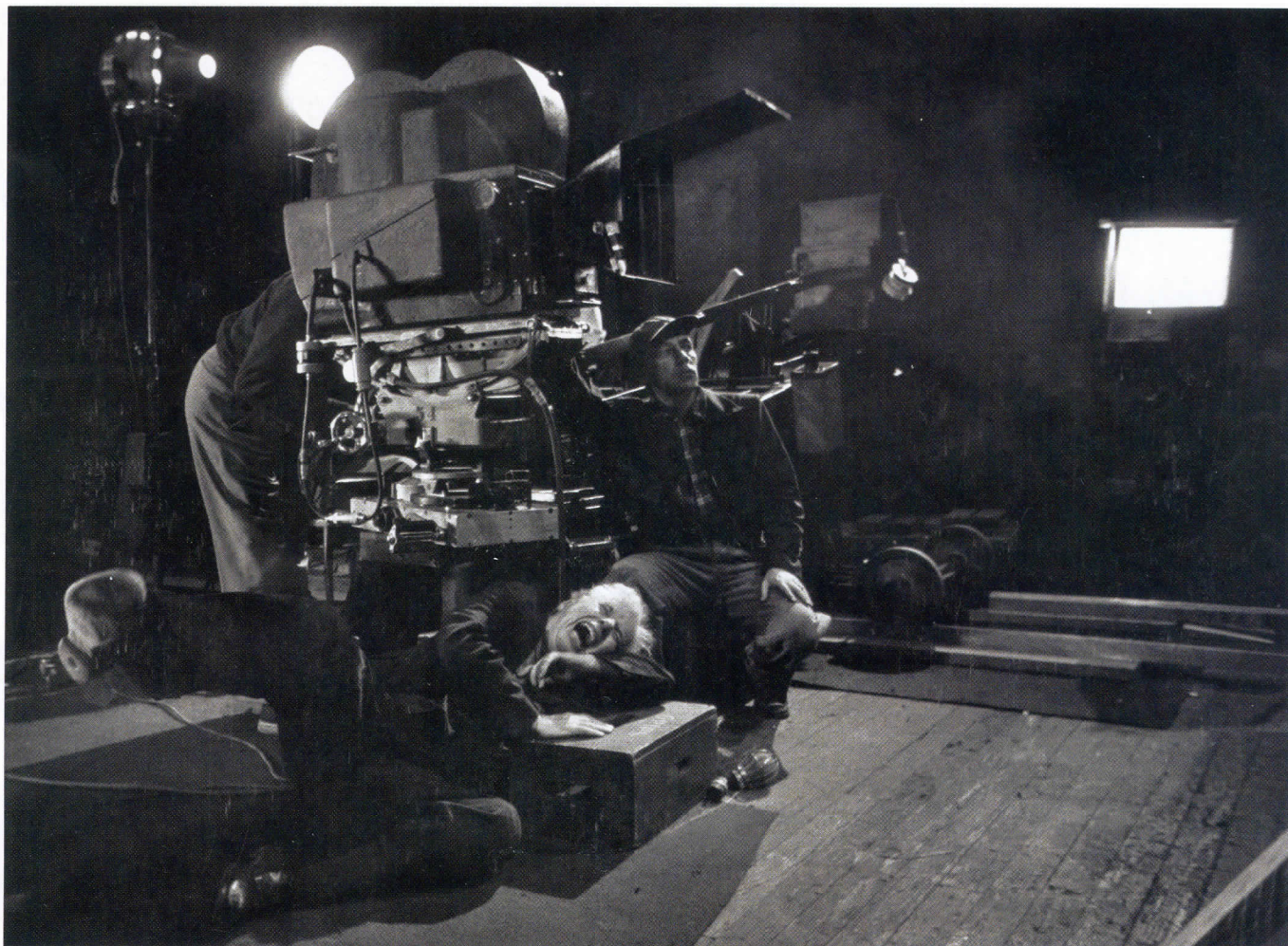
Below left: A rare image of photographer W. Eugene Smith, Leica in hand, together with comedian and filmmaker Charlie Chaplin, on the occasion of Smith's 1952 *Life* magazine shoot on the set of Chaplin's film *Limelight*. **Opposite, top:** Smith's shot of Chaplin the director rolling on the floor "in exaggerated glee," as *Life* phrased it, to show actors what he wants from them. **Opposite, bottom:** Chaplin the actor playing Calvero, the down-and-out comedian who is the central character in *Limelight*, in a Smith image *Life* chose not to publish.



SMITH ON SET

In a previously unknown and unpublished essay, W. Eugene Smith writes about shooting Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight* for *Life* magazine — offering rare insights into the legendary photojournalist's working methods and artistic torment.

An American Photo Exclusive



FEW PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE HELD IN such high esteem as W. Eugene Smith. Smith's admirers are hardly a cult of personality, though. The man was famously fractious, fighting his editors at *Life* and other magazines for every inch of ground — in both his photographs (do not crop) and the magazine layouts in which they appeared from the late 1930s through the early 1970s (today's photographers would die for that kind of space). But if Smith's petulance was fueled in part by substance abuse, it was mostly due to his unwillingness to compromise his art — the art of photojournalism — in the interest of brevity or propriety.

Smith rarely committed his thoughts about photography to paper, at least formally. In 1952, though, *Life* assigned him to shoot the production of Charlie Chaplin's most famous talkie, *Limelight*, and shortly after completing the task, Smith sat down and wrote an essay about the experience of working on the great comedian's set. The essay never appeared in print, and here, through a special arrangement with Smith's estate, *American Photo*

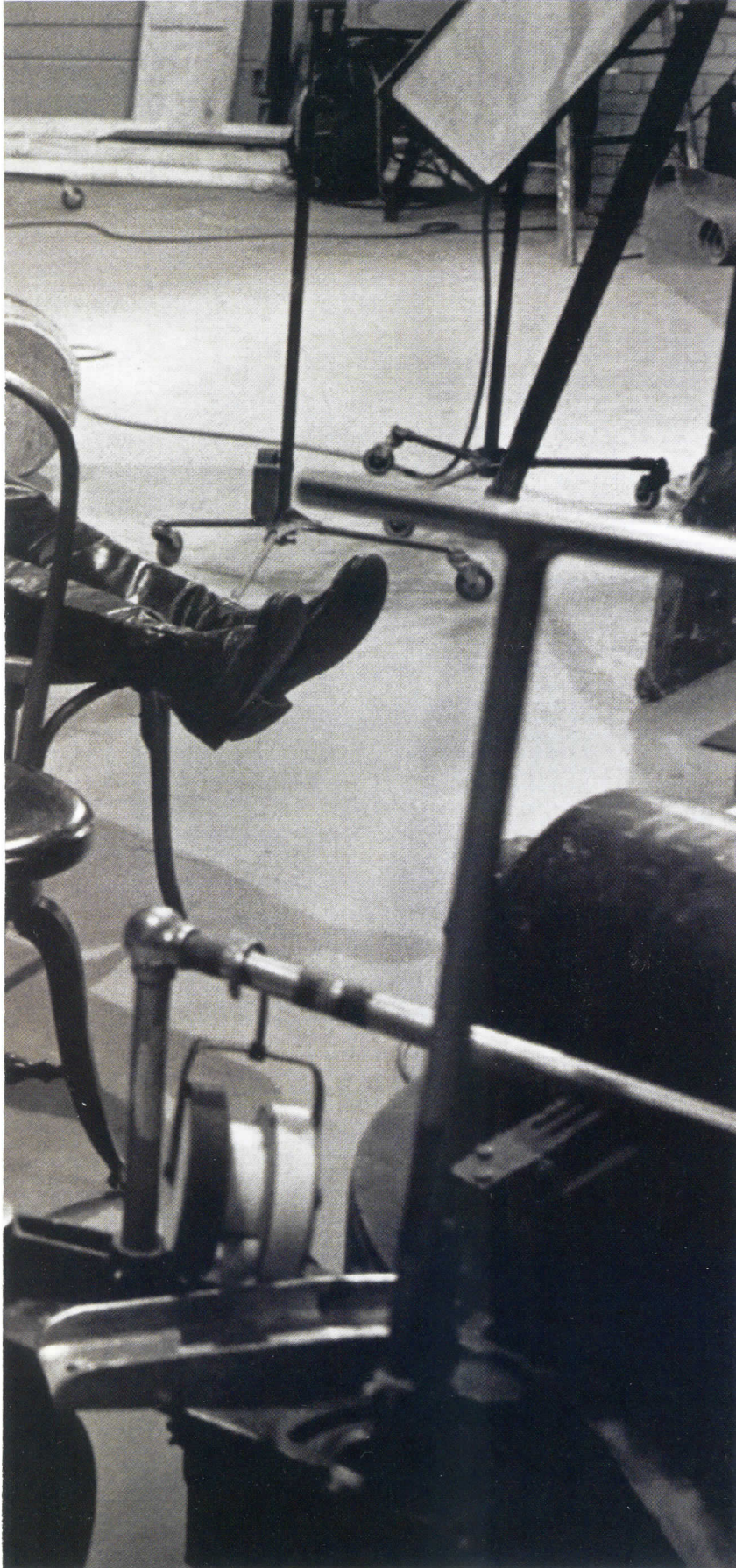


his face hard to read due to shrapnel wounds sustained during his unrelenting coverage of World War II. As you'll see in his essay, he viewed his coverage of *Limelight* as a flop. Yet isn't a willingness to admit failure the mark of a true artist? — *Russell Hart*

publishes it for the first time, along with several images *Life* chose not to publish.

For many years, Chaplin had refused *Life's* reporters access to his movie sets. But he was well aware of Smith's work for the magazine, which by that time included his "Country Doctor," "Spanish Village" and "Nurse Midwife" stories — work that essentially defined the modern photo essay. Not only did Chaplin grant Smith weeks of total access, but he reportedly was so anxious to please the photographer that he wouldn't strike a set until he was sure Smith had his pictures. "He just keeps doing the scene over and over again, waiting for [Smith] to smile," complained Chaplin's associate director, as quoted in Jim Hughes' definitive biography of Smith, *W. Eugene Smith: Shadow & Substance*. Smith could be dour,





Smith had weeks of unprecedented access to Chaplin's set, as he says in his essay (below) — but the comedian was out sick for one of them. As *Life* wrote: "Resting between takes, Chaplin, dressed in animal-trainer clothes, slumps amid a litter of props and light stands. This uncharacteristic show of fatigue was the beginning of a virus infection, which suspended shooting for a week."

*March 17, 1952,
by W. Eugene Smith:*

An artist whose work intrudes into the creative life of another artist is faced with a perplexing choice. To intrude enough to properly interpret, to translate, necessitates (at least when time is limited) a forcing of the situation in a way that might be damaging to the thin, intangible creative thread of the other artist. Yet not to do this is certainly frustrating and damaging to the depth and success of the interpretation by the intruding artist. Especially if the two artists are of the involvement, and the emotional and mental makeup, of Charlie Chaplin and W. Eugene Smith.

It was his movie, and I was the intruder who had arrived so late into the situation that I was unable to establish the right understanding between us to make it more possible for me to properly function. I simply could not bring myself to properly (or improperly) invade the privacy of this artist when he was at his most revealing involvement with his creation. It was at this time — a moment, a direction, so intimate and fragile — I was most in struggle with the fear I would work a degree of destruction to his creation. This I had too much respect for Chaplin to chance, and not enough arrogance to ignore.

His respect for my work helped me to approach as closely as I did, but that, to me, was only a starting point. If I had been able to translate the story on my terms, with my knowledge of the situation and what could have been said, it might not have been a failure. As it is, I think it to be one of my poorest, and because of this, I am even more repulsed by the "success" of it. However, my grief to the contrary, the experience of working with Chaplin, of watching him at work, was wonderful and valuable.

The number of rolls used on any of my stories is nobody's business, for unless the thinking and the way

of developing a journalistic story is understood thoroughly by outsiders, they will misinterpret. If a writer says that he wrote 26 versions of his last chapter, it is interpreted as showing what a diligent, careful, hardworking perfectionist he is. With a photographer, it merely is interpreted as showing that if you take enough pictures, some are bound to be good!

When I am charged with doing a story, I must produce certain situations I know are necessary for the story. In the beginning I might photograph these, even though I am not happy (even before taking) with the situation as it might stand; but I do this to get them under my belt. Then I keep on searching for a better way to make the same point. Perhaps I will make another variation, will keep on searching, photographing the same point many times, discarding the thought of having to use the poorer interpretation each time I am able to lock up a better version. It might work otherwise, that I might be reasonably satisfied with the first version at the time of taking and not follow it with other variations of the same, although I might continue to think and be observant along the same line. I even chart the day's shooting, marking after each subject: impossible, poor, fair or passable, with no higher marking than passable. I will then work to eliminate those with a rating lower than passable and, if possible, improve the passable.

At the same time I make another breakdown, very similar perhaps to an author's outline for a play, so I can start fitting the photographs into the form the story will eventually take, with the depth and roundness that is a fair balance of interpretation. This outline also undergoes constant revision as I gain more and more understanding of my theme, my subject. I try first, in any story, to study and learn of my subject, regardless of what I might feel I already know of the situation, stalling as long

Opposite: Smith's photographs of Chaplin doing his own makeup for the semi-autobiographical role of *Limelight's* main character, Calvero, whose personae in the film include a clown (top) and an animal trainer (bottom). **Below:** A Smith shot of Chaplin inspecting clips of 35mm movie film — essentially the same format in which Smith was shooting, only half-frame rather than full-frame. This image wasn't used in the final *Life* magazine story.



SMITH ON HIS CAMERAS

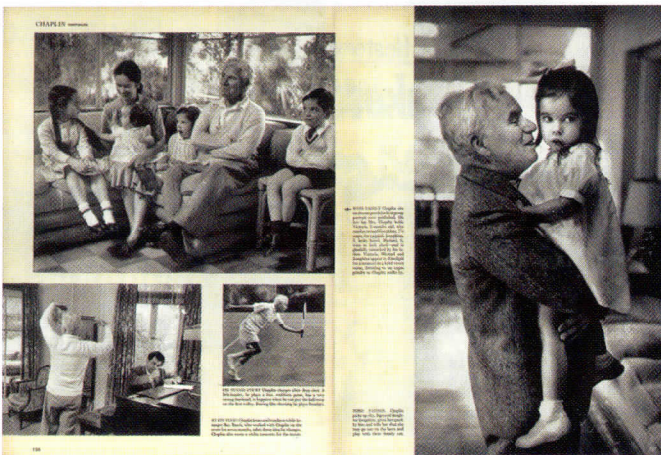
I used **six Leicas** as my basic equipment, with different focal-length lenses so that when held to one spot, I could reach out various distances for my photograph or secure different perspectives. One with **28mm extreme-wide-angle**, two with **35mm wide-angle** (the camera I used most frequently and almost exclusively in "Spanish Village" — the second camera being used so that I would not be caught without film at a crucial moment — later I loaded this second camera with an extremely high-speed film to use when the light was impossible for anything else); one with **50mm f/1.5**, the so-called normal lens; an **85mm f/2**; and a **135mm f/3.5**. Besides these I used a Foton rapid sequence camera for two days, for such performance numbers as the somersault and split. A 4x5 view camera for two overall production shots of the set. I made a couple of unimportant pictures with a Rolleiflex. However, 90 percent of my usual coverage is done with the Leica with the 35mm f/2.8 wide-angle lens.







Opposite: An elegantly composed Smith shot that *Life* didn't use in its story, perhaps because it was confusing: It shows a scene in the "backstage" of a theatre in the *Limelight* story itself, not on Chaplin's set. **Left:** Smith's photo essay on *Limelight* ran in the March 17, 1952 issue of *Life*, which also featured a story about the "prettiest showgirl on Broadway" and a diatribe on the demise of baseball by retired slugger Ty Cobb, who says of Red Sox sensation Ted Williams that "you cannot call him a great hitter." The *Limelight* story also included Smith's photographs of Chaplin's home life, as shown in a spread from the issue.



SMITH ON PRINTING

I, of course, also make my own prints, to be sure **my original intention** is carried out as far as is controllable. Many people, including photographers, think it is **folly of me to make my own prints** on my stories. To me it is no more a folly than the writer who makes a rough preliminary draft of a book, then turns it over to a technically efficient but untalented and uncreative secretary for putting into its final form. Or, in a less-clear way (unless one knows music), of the symphonic composer who sketches out the ideas and turns it over to someone else for orchestrating, which is **an integral part of the completing of the creative work** and is as personal as the basic work.

My prints are very personal and cannot be done by anyone else, even someone who works closely with me and might, to a degree, understand what I am after. Even then it can usually be no more than a synthetic likeness of what I would do. I have found it impossible, in most cases, to give even my own finished print as a guide and expect a satisfactory result.

as is possible in the making of my first photographs, or at least making the least-important ones first, hoping that I gain a greater and greater understanding before the key interpretational pictures are made. In fact, sometimes I say my photographs are made in the month or two months of noncamera work, with the final improvements only when I finally am working with the camera.

It is necessary to constantly think in terms of [the magazine] layout, and this might mean variations of the same point in way of vertical or horizontal, and that pictures that might counterpoint each other or be played off each other, will have richness of variety gained in many ways. I intrude as little as possible, rearrange as little as possible and seldom use flashes, trying to do it all as much as possible without physical or mechanical distraction. Thus the small cameras, fast film and lenses, and the light already available or [made usable] by merely lifting the light level of the rooms with floods.

As for Chaplin, what can I say that has not already been exaggerated by *Life*? He welcomed me where apparently he would not welcome most other photographers. I became very fond of him as a person as well. [I] was on the set from early morning to late at night. Many of the people on the set were very aware of my work and my reputation, and were most kind in their praise and in trying to be helpful. Only I was unhappy with the situation, for they were for the most part unaware of the struggle within myself and were sure everything would work out well. ♣