

## The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson

Directed by Clyde Bruckman, Buster Keaton  
Written by Al Boasberg and Charlie Smith  
based on William Pittenger's 1863 novel, *The Great Locomotive Chase*

Producers by Buster Keaton, Joseph M. Schenck  
Cinematography by Bert Haines, Devereaux Jennings  
Film Editing by Buster Keaton and Sherman Kell  
Art Direction Fred Gabourie

Marion Mack.... Annabelle Lee  
Charles Smith .... Mr. Lee  
Richard Allen .... His Son  
Glen Cavender .... Captain  
Anderson  
Jim Farley .... General Thatcher  
Frederick Vroom....Southern  
General  
Joe Keaton....Union General  
Mike Donlin....Union General  
Tom Nawn .... Union General B  
Buster Keaton .... Johnnie Gray



Selected for the National Film  
Registry, 1989

**BUSTER KEATON** (Joseph Frank Keaton VI, 4 October 1895, Piqua, Kansas—1 February 1966, Los Angeles, lung cancer) wrote about 30 films, directed nearly 50, and acted in more than 130, often playing himself. His first film role was in *The Butcher Boy* 1917; his last in Samuel Becket's *Film* 1966. Some of the others are *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* 1966, *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* 1965, *Beach Blanket Bingo* 1965, *Pajama Party* 1964, *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* 1963, *Limelight* 1952, *Sunset Blvd.* 1950, *Pardon My Berth Marks* 1940, *Palooka from Paducah* 1935, *What! No Beer?* 1933, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* 1928, *College* 1927, *Battling Butler* 1926, *Seven Chances* 1925, *The Navigator* 1924, *Sherlock, Jr.* 1924, *Our Hospitality* 1923, *Paleface* 1922, *Cops* 1922, *One Week* 1920. He won an honorary Academy Award in 1960.

**MARION MACK** (Joey Marion McCreery, 9 April 1902, Mammoth, Utah—1 May 1989, Costa Mesa, California) appeared in only five films: *The Great Chase* 1963, *The General*, *The Carnival Girl* 1926, *One of the Bravest* 1925, and *Mary of the Movies* 1923.

**JOSEPH M. SCHENCK** (25 December 1878, Rybinsk, Russia—22 October 1961, Beverly Hills, a stroke) was one of Hollywood's legendary producers. He produced all of Keaton's great films (through *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*). Some others of his 90 films were *As You Like It* (1936), *Under Two Flags* (1936), *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* (1933), *Rain* (1932), *Indiscreet*

January 12, 2010: XX:1  
THE GENERAL 1927 (75 minutes)



(1931), *Camille* (1927), *The Duchess of Buffalo* (1926), *Go West* (1925), *The Frozen North* (1922), *My Wife's Relations* (1922), *The Paleface* (1922), *She Loves and Lies* (1920), *Convict 13* (1920), *The Probation Wife* (1919), *Her Only Way* (1918), *Coney Island* (1917), *His Wedding Night* (1917), and *Panthea* (1917). He won an honorary Academy Award in 1953.

**CLYDE BRUCKMAN** (20 September 1894, San Bernardino, California— 4 January 1955, Hollywood, suicide) wrote the screenplays for about 60 lightweight films, the most recent of which was *Goof on the Roof* 1953. He directed 21 films, the last of them *Man on the Flying Trapeze* 1935. Some of the others were *Horses' Collars* 1935, *The Fatal Glass of Beer* 1933, *Everything's Rosie* 1931, *Leave 'Em Laughing* 1928, *Should Tall Men Marry?* 1927, *Love 'Em and Feed 'Em* 1927, *Cowboys Cry for It* 1925. "Clyde Bruckman was one of the best gag men in the business. When Keaton credited him for co-direction of one of his pictures, he was signed up by Harold Lloyd. In fact, he had no directorial experience at all, and the responsibility of his new job unnerved him. On top of this, marital troubles led him to drink. In 1955, Bruckman borrowed a gun from Keaton. After a meal in a Hollywood restaurant, which he was unable to pay for, he went to the rest room and shot himself." **Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By***

*The Great Locomotive Chase* is a factual account by one of the participants in a cross-country train chase during the American Civil War. A band of Northern soldiers, led by a professional spy, James J. Andrews, masqueraded as Southern civilians and commandeered a Southern train, destroying telegraph wires key to the southern war effort as they headed north aboard the train. William A. Fuller, the conductor of the stolen train, pursued them—initially on foot, then in a handcar, and finally with a locomotive he discovered along the way. Assisted by men he recruited during the chase, Fuller reclaimed the train after the Northerners abandoned it. Keaton added two central features to this story: 1) a second train chase, in which the Northern soldiers chase Buster south after he recovers the stolen locomotive; and 2) a romantic plot that parallels the train chase, as Buster's love interest, Annabelle, is abducted and later rescued along with the train." **Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton*, Princeton, 1999.**

"*The General* was my pet. It was a page out of history, although I couldn't use the original finish. Walt Disney tried to do it later {as *The Great Locomotive Chase*}, but he couldn't use the real finish either. Because the Southerners took all eight of those guys and they hanged them." **Buster Keaton**

Asked years later why his Civil War depiction looked so much more authentic than *Gone With The Wind* Keaton replied: "They went to a novel; I went to the history books."

"I went to the original location, from Atlanta Georgia, up to Chattanooga, and the scenery didn't look very good. In fact, it looked terrible. The railroad tracks I couldn't use at all, because the Civil War trains were narrow-gauge. I had to have narrow-gauge, so I went to Oregon. And in Oregon, the whole state is honey-combed with narrow-gauge railways for all the lumber mills. So we got the rolling equipment, wheels and trucks, and we built the freight train and our passenger train, and we remodeled three locomotives. Luckily, the engines working on these lumber camps were all so doggone old that it was an easy job. . . . At that time they didn't pay much attention to numbers on engines—they named them all. That's why the main engine was called 'The General' and the



one I chased it with was 'Texas.'" **Buster Keaton, quoted in Tom Dardis, *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down***

"Film actor and director Jackie Chan extends Keaton's influence into the realm of Hong Kong action cinema: he acknowledges his debt to Keaton for many of his most dangerous stunts in almost every interview he gives. The roots of his affinity with Keaton originate in Chan's early childhood training in Peking opera, the most popular and well-known Chinese theater form.... Although Chan employs fast cutting in his fight sequences, shooting them in small segments, he studiously avoids cutting when he performs his most dangerous, Keaton-inspired stunts, retaining Keaton's practice of using long shots and long takes to prove that he actually performs his stunts. Moreover, Chan further emphasizes his physical virtuosity as a performer by frequently including up to three takes of the same stunt in rapid succession and including outtakes of his failed attempts at his stunts during the final credits of most of his films."

**Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton*, Princeton, 1999**

"He could tell his story by lifting an eyebrow. He could tell it by *not* lifting an eyebrow." Clyde Bruckman.

"What a raw deal they gave poor Buster," said Louise Brooks. "When his wife divorced him, Joe Schenck made sure that he didn't own his own films, so he could never resell them. They weren't his own property. Like Lloyd's or Chaplin's. He didn't have a cent. He lived in a magnificent house, on the same scale as a millionaire. But a millionaire's income comes in every year for ever. Poor Buster lived in a mansion with eight or nine servants on three thousand dollars

a week. Schenck was making money out of actors, out of films, out of stories. What did it matter to him or Sam Goldwyn if they lost two thousand to four thousand dollars a week in the big bridge games? Or went to the Clover Club and lost twenty thousand? They forced the actors, like Buster, to take part because the moment you haven't any dough you're through. You aren't brave any more. No actor could compete financially with a producer.

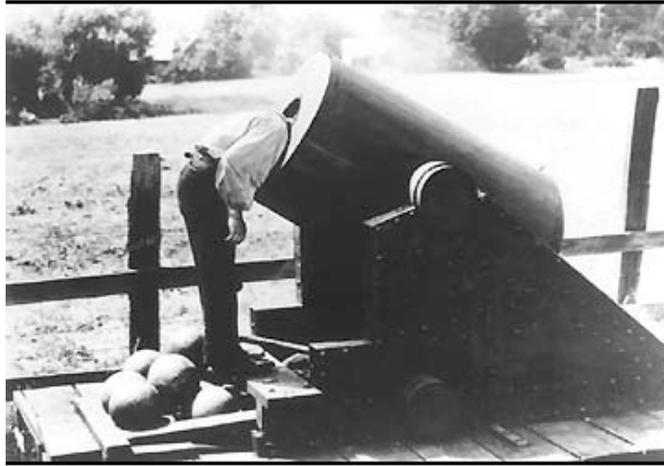
Poor little Buster with his three thousand dollars a week, trying to live like a millionaire. It was impossible. So they broke him." **Louise Brooks, in Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By***

"I think Joe Schenck was the first old turtle Darwin saw when the *Beagle* anchored off the Galapagos—certainly not a cuddly 'father figure' for Keaton. Anyhow Buster, like Peter Pan, didn't want a father. He had his magic world of film production and his house rigged like a Douglas Fairbanks set—or Peter Pan's ship." **Louise Brooks**

In 1928, Keaton made the worst mistake of his life: he signed a contract with MGM "despite the urgent warnings of Chaplin and Lloyd and his own misgivings." The salary was good—\$3000 a week—but MGM squelched the improvisatory methods he'd used on all his great films. They assigned 22 writers to *The Cameraman*. He had marital troubles, began drinking heavily, and suffered more and more under studio control. MGM fired him in 1933. The next decade was grim: booze, illness, failure. His first marriage broke up and he married a nurse who helped him dry out. His third marriage was in 1940, when he was 45. Eleanor was a 21-year-old dancer and they were happily married until his death. Gradually he got cameo roles, such as the bridge scene in *Sunset Boulevard* and his brief appearance in Chaplin's *Limelight*, their only film together. James Agee's 1949 article, "Comedy's Greatest Era" did much to revive interest in Keaton.

"In retrospect, Buster Keaton was probably the best comedy director in the business. Chaplin's use of film was pedestrian by comparison." Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By*, 1968.

"Rather to his bewilderment, Keaton found himself elevated from near-oblivion to a position of equality with—or even superiority to—Chaplin in the pantheon of film comedians, a critical estimation that still holds good. 'Keaton,' stated Andres Sarris, 'is now generally acknowledged as the superior director and inventor of visual forms. There are those who would go further and claim Keaton as pure cinema as opposed to Chaplin's theatrical cinema.' ...The climax of Keaton's return to fame came at the 1965 Venice



Film Festival, where *Film*, a 22-minute short written for him by Samuel Beckett, was premiered. Later that day, at the evening gala, Keaton was given a standing ovation of unparalleled fervor. He was touched and delighted, but told Lotte Eisner afterwards, 'Sure it's great—but it's all 30 years too late.' He continued working to within 3 months of his death, although there were now far more offers than he could fulfill." ***World Film Directors I*, 1987**

"I was a veteran before I went into pictures. I was twenty-one years old by then. I made my first picture when I was 25. Pacing—for fast action you cut things closer than normal. For a dramatic scene, you lengthen them out a little bit more. Once we've seen the scene on the screen, we know what to do. We get in the cutting room and run down to where the action is. There—as he goes out the door, rip it. That's it. Give him the next shot. Get it down to where he's just coming through the door. Get the two spliced together. . . .

"There was one big advantage in those days, when you owned your own studio, and you were the only company in there. The skeleton of your outfit—that's your technical man, your prop man, your head electrician—these people are all on salary with you for 52 weeks of the year. So if I'm sitting in the cutting room and the picture's been finished, and I want an extra shot, I can do it....That would cost me the gasoline of the car and the film...about two dollars and thirty-nine cents. You try that at any major studio today, and I'll tell you the least you could get that scene for would be around \$12,000." **Buster Keaton**

"After what must have been one of history's most agreeable childhoods, spent traveling with his family's knockabout act and learning the tricks of the comic trade on turn-of-the-century vaudeville stages, Buster Keaton as a young man entered the movies. First serving several apprentice years, he performed from 1917 through 1919 as a supporting actor with Fatty Arbuckle's Comique Film Corporation, and in 1920 as the leading actor in one Metro feature, *The Saphead*. Then, in the decade that followed, the last great golden-tinted years of the silent screen, he became both the star and principal creator of nineteen two-reelers and twelve feature-length films.

"Except for the last two features, produced under growing difficulties after Keaton had been contracted to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, these movies of the twenties are all independent Keaton creations. He and his crew in the Keaton Studio controlled every aspect of the films' making and were under no constraints to please anyone but themselves. They ended up pleasing not only themselves but a large contemporary audience, and, since the rediscovery of Keaton in the nineteen-sixties, a new and growing audience, which

still laughs in all the funny places.” Daniel Moews, *Keaton: The Silent Features Close Up*



“Few are those who know how to accomplish their mission in the rhythmic, architectural workings of a film. It is the editing—film’s golden key—that combines, comments on, and unifies all these elements. Can greater cinematic virtue be reached? Some have wanted to believe in the inferiority of Keaton as the “anti-virtuoso” in comparison with Chaplin, considering this a handicap, a sort of stigma, whereas we consider it a virtue that Keaton achieves comic effect through direct harmony with the tools, situations, and other means of production. Keaton is loaded with humanity—but a recent and wholly original humanity; a fashionable humanity if you will.

Much has been said about technique in films like *Metropolis* and *Napoléon*. No one ever talks about films like *College* [Keaton’s film after *The General*], and that is because the technical achievements are so indissolubly mixed with other elements that we aren’t even aware of them, just as we don’t give thought to the strength ratings of buildings for a house we are living in. The super-films serve as a lesson to technicians; Keaton’s films give lessons to reality itself, with or without the techniques of reality. **Luis Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal*. UCal 1995**

Few people know more about Keaton than **Ranjit Sandhu**, who helped us produce the Buffalo Film Seminars in our first two years at the Market Arcade. The best starting place for information about Keaton online is Ranjit’s article on *The General* on his website: <http://rjbuffalo.com/the-general.html>. The article also includes a lot of great graphics. Here is the bibliographical note Ranjit prepared for that article:

“Perhaps the best place to start learning about Keaton’s life and work is the web site operated by the [Damfinos — The International Buster Keaton Society](#). An impressive British-based web site is the [Blinking Buzzards](#). Another superb source is the three-part video by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill called *Buster Keaton: A Hard Act to Follow*, which was available on laserdisc and VHS from [HBO](#), but is now out of print. It is still available on DVD in the UK, but a

postproduction error resulted in the loss of all the identifying captions, which makes much of the story impossible to follow. An impressive article/interview is published as chapter 43 of Kevin Brownlow’s *The Parade’s Gone By...* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). The best books about Buster Keaton’s life are Oliver Lindsey Scott’s superb, seductive, and encyclopedic *Buster Keaton, the Little Iron Man* (New Zealand: privately printed [1995]), Rudi Blesh’s *Keaton* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), and Buster Keaton’s autobiography (as told to Charles Samuels), *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1960). The best book on Keaton’s work is Jim Kline’s *The Complete Films of Buster Keaton* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993). David Macleod’s *The Sound of Buster Keaton* (London: Buster Books, 1995), which deals only with the post-independence work, is also highly recommended. Daniel Moews’s *Keaton: The Silent Features Close Up* contains an invaluable final section entitled “Bibliographical and Filmographical Comments.” More recently, Eleanor Keaton and Jeffrey Vance published *Buster Keaton Remembered*, a lovely coffee-table book with fascinating text and never-before-published photos. And then when you begin to wonder about all the contradictions in the various accounts, a great remedy is Patty Tobias’s wonderful essay, “[The Buster Keaton Myths](#).” A charming and intensely researched booklet on the Actors’ Colony, which Buster’s father helped found just outside of Muskegon, Michigan, and where Buster had his happiest childhood memories, is Marc Okkonen and Ron Pesch’s *Buster Keaton and the Muskegon Connection: The Actors’ Colony at Bluffton, 1908–1938* (Muskegon: privately printed, 1995; available through the [Muskegon Mercantile](#)). Marion Meade, whose atrocious and offensively inaccurate book, *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase* (working title: *Quiet! The Tumultuous Life of Buster Keaton*), infuriated Keaton’s family and friends, has nonetheless done the world a service by making her wealth of research material, much of it unique, available at the [University of Iowa Libraries’ Special-Collections Department](#). Material on the making of *The General* can be found in some of the above items, but the best source is *The Day Buster Smiled* (Cottage Grove, Oregon: Cottage Grove Historical Society, 1998).”

#### **Roger Ebert (May 31, 1997):**

Buster Keaton was not the Great Stone Face so much as a man who kept his composure in the center of chaos. Other silent actors might mug to get a point across, but Keaton remained observant and collected. That’s one reason his best movies have aged better than those of his rival, Charlie Chaplin. He seems like a modern visitor to the world of the silent clowns.

Consider an opening sequence in “The General” (1927), his masterpiece about a Southern railway engineer who has “only two loves in his life” -- his locomotive and the beautiful Annabelle Lee. Early in the film, Keaton, dressed in his Sunday best, walks to his girl’s house. He is unaware that two small boys are following him, marching in lockstep--and that following them is Annabelle Lee herself (Marion Mack).

He arrives at her door. She watches unobserved. He

polishes his shoes on the backs of his pants legs, and then knocks, pauses, looks about, and sees her standing right behind him. This moment would have inspired an overacted double-take from many other silent comedians. Keaton plays it with his face registering merely heightened interest.

They go inside. He sits next to her on the sofa. He becomes aware that the boys have followed them in. His face reflects slight unhappiness. He rises, puts on his hat as if to leave and opens the door, displaying such courtesy you would think the boys were his guests. The boys walk out and he closes the door on them.

He is not a man playing for laughs, but a man absorbed in a call on the most important person in his life. That's why it's funny. That's also why the movie's most famous shot works--the one where, rejected by his girl, he sits disconsolately on the drive-rod of the big engine. As it begins to move, it lifts him up and down, but he does not notice, because he thinks only of Annabelle Lee.

This series of shots establishes his character as a man who takes himself seriously, and that is the note he will sound all through the film. We don't laugh at Keaton, but identify with him.

"The General" is an epic of silent comedy, one of the most expensive films of its time, including an accurate historical recreation of a Civil War episode, hundreds of extras, dangerous stunt sequences, and an actual locomotive falling from a burning bridge into a gorge far below. It was inspired by a real event; the screenplay was based on the book "The Great Locomotive Chase," written by William Pittenger, the engineer who was involved.

As the film opens, war has been declared and Johnny Gray (Keaton) has been turned down by a rebel enlisting officer (he is more valuable as an engineer, although nobody explains that to him). "I don't want you to speak to me again until you are in uniform," Annabelle declares. Time passes. Johnny is the engineer of the General, a Southern locomotive. The train is stolen by Union spies, and Johnny chases it on foot, by sidecar, by bicycle and finally with another locomotive, the Texas. Then the two sides switch trains, and the chase continues in reverse. Annabelle was a passenger on the stolen train, becomes a prisoner of the Union troops, is rescued by Johnny and rides with him during the climactic chase scenes that end with the famous shot of the Texas falling into the gorge (where, it is said, its rusted hulk remains to this day).

It would seem logically difficult to have much of a chase involving trains, since they must remain on tracks, and so one must forever be behind the other one--right? Keaton defies logic with one ingenious silent comic sequence after

another, and it is important to note that he never used a double and did all of his own stunts, even very dangerous ones, with a calm acrobatic grace.

The train's obvious limitations provide him with ideas. An entire Southern retreat and Northern advance take place unnoticed behind him, while he chops wood. Two sight gags involve his puzzlement when rail cars he thought were behind him somehow reappear in front of him. He sets up the locations along the way, so that he can exploit them differently on the way back. One famous sequence involves a cannon on a flat car, which Keaton wants to fire at the other train. He lights the fuse and runs back to the locomotive, only to see that the cannon has slowly reversed itself and is now pointed straight at him.

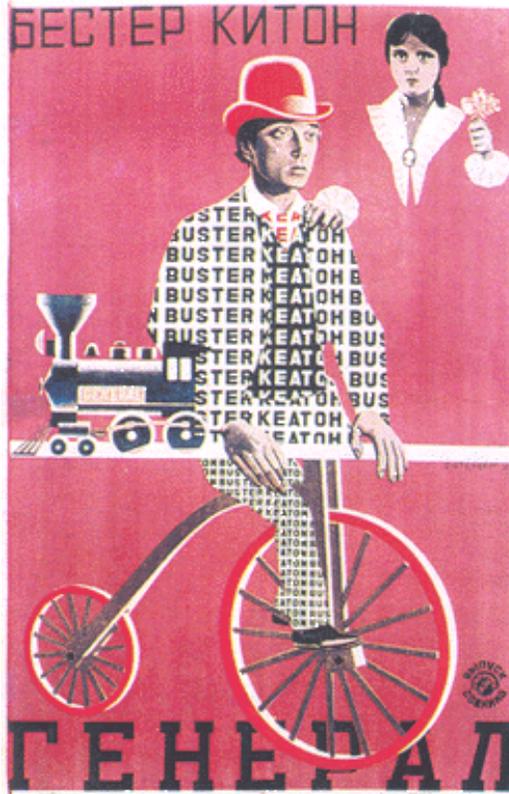
One inspiration builds into another: To shield himself from the cannonball, he runs forward and sits on the cow-catcher of the speeding Texas, with no one at the controls and a big railroad tie in his arms. The Union men throw another tie onto the tracks, and Keaton, with perfect aim and timing, knocks the second off by throwing the first. It's flawless and perfect, but consider how risky it is to sit on the front of a locomotive hoping one tie will knock another out of the way without either one smashing your brains out.

Between chase scenes, he blunders into a house where the Northern generals are planning their strategy, and rescues Annabelle Lee--but not before Keaton creates a perfect little cinematic joke. He is hiding under the dining table as the Northerners confer. One of them

burns a hole in the tablecloth with his cigar. Annabelle Lee is brought into the room, and we see Keaton's eye peering through the hole--and then there's a reverse shot of the girl, with Keaton using the hole in the cloth to create a "found" iris shot--one of those shots so beloved of Griffith, in which a circle is drawn around a key element on the screen.

"The General" was voted one of the 10 greatest films of all time in the authoritative Sight & Sound poll. Who knows if it is even Keaton's greatest? Others might choose "Steamboat Bill, Jr." (1928). His other classics include "Our Hospitality" (1923), "The Navigator" (1924), "Go West" (1925) and "The Cameraman" (1928), in which he played a would-be newsreel photographer who lucks into his career.

Born in 1897, the same year as the cinema, he grew up in a vaudeville family. As part of the act, he was literally thrown around the stage; like W.C. Fields, he learned his physical skills in a painful childhood apprenticeship. He started in films with Fatty Arbuckle in 1917 and directed his first shorts in 1920. In less than a decade, from 1920 to 1928, he created a body of work that stands beside Chaplin's (some would say above it), and he did it with fewer resources



because he was never as popular or well-funded as the Little Tramp.

Then the talkies came in, he made an ill-advised deal with MGM that ended his artistic independence, and the rest of his life was a long second act--so long that in the 1940s he was reduced to doing a live half-hour TV show in Los Angeles. But it was also long enough that his genius was rediscovered, and he made a crucial late work, Samuel Beckett's "Film" (1965), and was hailed with a retrospective at Venice shortly before his death in 1966.

Today I look at Keaton's works more often than any other silent films. They have such a graceful perfection, such a meshing of story, character and episode, that they unfold like music. Although they're filled with gags, you can rarely catch Keaton writing a scene around a gag; instead, the laughs emerge from the situation; he was "the still, small, suffering center of the hysteria of slapstick," wrote the critic Karen Jaehne. And in an age when special effects were in their infancy, and a "stunt" often meant actually doing on the screen what you appeared to be doing, Keaton was ambitious and fearless. He had a house collapse around him. He swung over a waterfall to rescue a woman he loved. He fell from trains. And always he did it in character, playing a solemn and thoughtful man who trusts in his own ingenuity.

"Charlie's tramp was a bum with a bum's philosophy," he once said. "Lovable as he was, he would steal if he got the chance. My little fellow was a workingman, and honest." That describes his characters, and

### **COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:**

Fritz Lang, *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse/The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* 1933

Albert Lewin, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 1945

Jules Dassin, *Night and the City* 1950

Charles Laughton, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955)

Kon Ichikawa, *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* 1956

Sam Peckinpah, *Ride the High Country* 1962

Costa-Gavras, *Z* 1969

Peter Yates, *The*

John Cassavetes, *A*

Stanley Kubrick, *The*

Wolfgang Petersen,

Federico Fellini,

Michael Mann,

**Contacts:** ...email

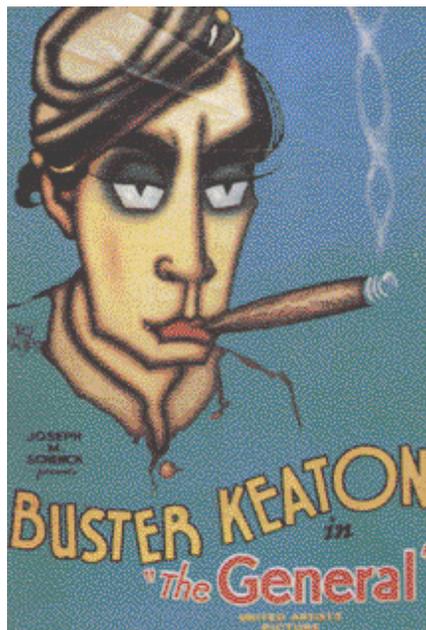
Jackson

annotations, links and

email informational

info on any film:

**The Buffalo Film  
Arts Center and  
from the Robert and**



it reflects their creator.

### **KEATON'S THE PLAYHOUSE (1921)**

In his article on *The General*, Ranjit Sandu mentions Keaton's 1921 film, *The Playhouse*, in the first six minutes of which Keaton manages to play 9 characters on stage at once reacting to one another. He also plays all members of the audience, the band and the conductor. Six years later French director Able Gance would bring down the house when his screen went to 9 adjacent images of Napoleon in a snowball fight, but Buster had done it earlier and far more convincingly: Gance's screen had 9 separate images, while Busters had 9 separate characters in the same shot at the same time. Ranjit's article explains how he did it. You can see it, and the rest of the 23-minute classic, at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3461801947432155594#>

### **PORKPIE HAT**

*Keaton's trademark hats were homemade. The first was created in 1917 for The Butcher Boy.*

1 Stetson hat, which has been cut down to size

3 heaping teaspoons granulated sugar

1 teacup warm water

Mix sugar and water. Wet the top and bottom of the brim . Smooth it out on a clean, hard surface. Allow to dry until still. "I did the early ones myself, always—and then I trained my wife," Keaton said.

*Friends of Eddie Coyle* 1973

*Woman Under the Influence* 1974

*Shining* 1980

*Das Boot* 1981

*Ginger & Fred*, 1985

*Collateral* 2004

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