

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

AUGUST 28, 2001 (IV): THE GENERAL (1927)

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.

The General 1927, 75 minutes

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
Buster Keaton Johnnie Gray

Directed by Clyde Bruckman, Buster Keaton
Written by Buster Keaton 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
Buster Keaton Productions
United Artists [us]
National Film Registry, 1989

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*, *Im a Bum* (1933), *Rain* (1932), *Indiscreet* (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 restroom and shot himself." Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By*.

JONATHAN BENJAMIN, who provides the music for this screening, completed his formal musical education in 1989 at the Shepherd School of Music, Rice University, where he graduated Magna Cum Laude with his Bachelor's and Master's of Music. A winner in the Leschetizky International Piano Competition, Jonathan became the Principal Pianist for the Houston Ballet Academy, where he remained until 1993. He has since worked in both the classical and jazz idioms, appearing regularly in many venues and has been a featured pianist for the silent movie series at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and later the American Museum of the Moving Image. He has performed at the last two International Ballet Competitions in the capacity of Competition Pianist. He currently freelances in the New York area.

"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 people know more about Keaton than RANJIT SANDHU, who has helped us produce the Buffalo Film Seminars since we started in Spring 2000. The best starting place for information about Keaton online is Ranjit's article on our website at the entry for *The General* (www.buffalofilmseminar.com). This 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, which can be found at <http://www.busterkeaton.com>. A British-based web site can be found at http://www.bigfoot.com/~blinking_buzzards. Another superb source is the three-volume video set 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 as a single cassette from Connoisseur/Academy Video in England in PAL-system VHS. 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 *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." Alan Schneider wrote a (self-deprecatingly) hilarious and touching description of his work with Keaton in an essay called "On Directing Film." Keaton, dismayed by what he thought was an insane script, was not his usual joking and laughing self on the set, but taciturn and subdued, giving Schneider that wrong impression that the somber attitude he had on screen was a carry-over from real life. This essay is included in Samuel Beckett's *Film: Complete Scenario / Illustrations / Production Shots* (New York: Grove Press/ Evergreen, 1969), and was later republished, with a few modifications, as "The Sam and Buster Show, 1964–1965," a chapter in Schneider's unfinished autobiography *Entrances: An American Director's Journey* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986). 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). 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).

To that we'd add Marion Meade's *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase* (NY Da Capo, 1997), which is not only a pretty good biography, but also includes an excellent 67-page filmography by Jack Dragga and some of Keaton's favorite recipes, including these two:

LOBSTER JOSEPH

This is Keaton's recipe for his all-time favorite dish, purloined over a period of years from a Parisian restaurant. Serve with bite-size boiled potatoes, green salad, and sourdough bread. Bread and potatoes are dunked in the sauce.

- 1 pint sour cream
- 1 square butter, ¼ pound
- 2 30-ounce cans solid pack tomatoes (unseasoned)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 4 medium lobsters (cooked)
- 1 ounce brandy
- 2 ounces sweet sherry

Melt butter. Blend in sour cream, add tomatoes (putting aside tomato juice). Combine sherry and brandy in separate pan. Burn out most of the alcohol and add to sauce. Add tomato juice as needed to desired consistency. Cut lobster into bite size and heat in sauce.

Fish fillets can be substituted for the lobster. Melt butter and quickly saute 1 pound fillets (sole is good). Remove to warm dish. Do not overcook. Add well-drained tomatoes to remaining butter, mixing and chopping with spoon. Add salt and pepper. When tomato-butter mixture is hot (but not boiling) mix in sour cream, a bit at a time. Add brandy and sherry, or white port. Mix well.

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. Join us next Tuesday, September 4th, for Louise Brooks in Georg Pabst's erotic masterpiece, "Pandora's Box". The film will be accompanied on electronic piano by the great Philip Carli, who gave such a stunning performance last year with "The Big Parade."