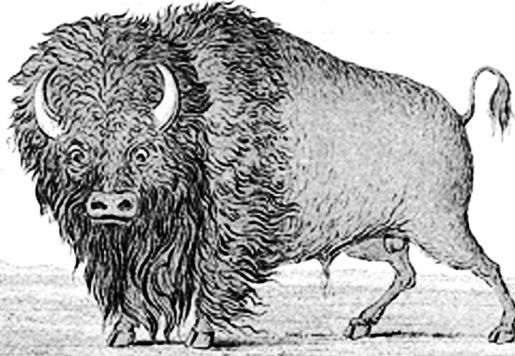


THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson



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, *The General* 1927 *Battling Butler* 1926, *Seven Chances* 1925, *The Navigator* 1924, *Our Hospitality* 1923, *Paleface* 1922, *Cops* 1922, *One Week* 1920. Honorary Academy Award in 1960.



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* (1931), *The General* (1927), *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*.

ELGIN LESSLEY was cinematographer on 50 films (he was uncredited on nearly half of them). He worked on 30 films with Keaton, among them *The Cameraman* (1928), *Go West* (1925), *The Navigator* (1924), and *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924). **CHARLES REISNER** (14 March 1887, Minneapolis,

SHERLOCK, JR. (1924) 44 min
 Buster Keaton....Sherlock,
 Jr./Projectionist
 Kathryn McGuire....The girl
 Joe Keaton....Her father
 Erwin Connelly....The butler/handyman
 Ward Crane....The sheik/villain
 Jane Connelly....The mother
 George Davis....Conspirator

Directed by Buster Keaton
 Written by Clyde Bruckman, Jean C. Havez, Joseph A. Mitchell
 Produced by Joseph M. Schenck and Buster Keaton
 Cinematography by Byron Houck and Elgin Lessley
 Edited by Buster Keaton

STEAMBOAT BILL, JR. (1928) 71 min
 Buster Keaton....William Canfield Jr.
 Tom McGuire....John James King
 Ernest Torrence....William Canfield Sr
 Tom Lewis....Tom Carter (the sailor)
 Marion Byron....Marion King
 Joe Keaton....Barber

Directed by Charles Reisner and Buster Keaton
 Story by Carl Harbaugh
 Produced by Joseph M. Schenck
 Cinematography by Bert Haines and Devereaux Jennings
 Edited by Sherman Kell

Minnesota—24 September 1962, La Jolla, California) directed 56 films, the last of which was *Traveling Saleswoman* 1950. Some of the others were *The Cobra Strikes* 1948, *Lost in a Harem* 1944, *Alex in Wonderland* 1940, *Flying High* 1931, *Oh What a Nurse!*, 1926, and *Happy Daze* 1919. **DEVEREAUX JENNINGS** (22 September 1884, Utah—12 March 1952, Hollywood) shot 82 films, the last of which was *Born to the West* 1937. Some of the others were *Manhattan Parade* 1932, *The Public Enemy* 1931, *Dumbbells in Ermine* 1930, *The General* 1927, *Children of Jazz* 1923, *The Sting of the Lash* 1921, *Treat 'Em Rough* 1919, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* 1917, and *Matrimony* 1915. **BERT HAINES** and **BYRON HOUCK** are each credited on four other films as cinematographer: Haines on *College* 1927, *The General* 1927, *Battling Butler* 1926 and *Go West* 1925, and Houk on *His Private Life* 1926, *Fighting Dude* 1925, *Seven Chances* 1925, and *The Navigator* 1924.

PHILIP CARLI, pianist for tonight's screening, began accompanying silent films at the age of 13, with a solo piano performance for Lon Chaney's 1923 version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* at his junior high school in California. He has toured extensively as a film accompanist throughout North America and Europe, performing at such venues as Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Gallery in Washington, DC, the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal, the National Film Theatre in London, and the Berlin International Film Festival. He is the staff accompanist for the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and performs annually at several film festivals in the United States as well as at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Italy. He has recorded piano accompaniments to over fifty films for video release by the Library of Congress, a number of film and video companies, and for broadcast on the American Movie Classics and the Turner Classic Movies cable channels.

From Buster Keaton's Sherlock Jr. Edited by Andrew Horton. Cambridge U Press 1997

Keaton's face is not expressionless. It is, rather, *unsmiling* (Keaton says he learned very early in his vaudeville career that he got more laughs if he did not smile), giving the impression that he is reflecting on something in his mind. "Think slow, act fast," Keaton writes in his autobiography with reference to his way of doing comedy. And it is certainly true that one of the basic elements of Keaton's comic genius is the tension between his fast and agile actions (one critic compared his body to a "coiled spring") and his motionless, inward-reflecting gaze.

Keaton began making his own two-reelers by 1920, and already in 1921 critics were beginning to tag him the "Great Stone Face." Of course silent comedy, as we shall discuss further, celebrates comic actions, including all the slapstick physical actions that involve every part of the body. Keaton certainly had the body of a trained acrobat, and was able to do incredible stunts by himself without a double. But it is important that as early as 1921 it was his unsmiling face, his sad-eyed glance, his elegant youth, and his vulnerable expression that became something of a trademark for critics and audiences alike.

Daniel Moews has observed that the Keaton hero is "the reversal of the American ideal: he is a hero through no intention of his own."

Keaton is also "American" to the degree that he is not the Tramp, the outsider, the outcast, the one who, like Chaplin at the end of so many of his films—short and feature length—waddles down a road, his back to the camera, alone. Despite his questioning of himself or American middle-class domesticity, or both, as he scratches his head at the end of *Sherlock Jr.*, the boy is still with his girl while holding down a job...in the movies.

"Keaton made you laugh, then think," Rudi Blesh wrote.

"The famous image of Keaton balancing on the handlebars of a riderless motorcycle, perfectly poised in a world of trouble, could be the central metaphor for his entire filmic career."

—Michael Goodwin

Consider a more recent example of Keaton's influence, the 1989 Academy Award-winning Best Foreign Film, Giuseppe Tornanoya's *Cinema Paradiso*. As the projection booth in the small Sicilian town cinema catches fire, the flames ignite the old movie images tacked to

the wall. Among the chosen few photos is one of Buster Keaton, staring out at us with his "great stone face," his eyes both innocent and knowing, and completely silent....With it, Tornanoya pays tribute to Buster Keaton as a great force in early cinema and particularly to *Sherlock Jr.*, the prototype for films about movie projectionists who mingle their dreams with those on celluloid and thus with the dreams of each audience member.

More recently, Johnny Depp has given a haunting performance in *Benny and Joon* (1993) as a Keaton-like figure in contemporary America who is able to win the attention and then the affection of a deeply troubled young woman, in large part by acting out a persona modeled on Keaton. There is even a large photo of Keaton early on in the film and a number of gag references. But most of all, what finally reaches Joon is the gaze—the clear-eyed innocence that appears to know and yet still wonder at experience and that does not judge or criticize or humiliate.

At the core of Keaton's transformation of the boy and his world is the film's exploration of the dream realm. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* was first published in 1900, the same time the motion picture was being invented and the movie camera was commonly designated "the dream machine" in recognition of the fact that it provided wish fulfillment, the dream's primary function. In "Keaton Through the Looking-Glass," Garrett Stewart argues that Keaton's films in general and *Sherlock Jr.* in particular analyze "film's abiding bond to dream." Stewart suggests that it is appropriate for the boy to fall asleep on the movie projector, because it then projects "the imposition of his own unconscious fantasies upon the preternaturally receptive plot of the film actually being shown to the theater audience," becoming a "true dream machine,"

from The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton. Robert Knopf. Princeton U Press 1999

[In *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, the cyclone and falling wall shots are famous]

Buster is revealed when the cyclone blows off three walls and the roof of the hospital. He is the only patient who has remained in bed, an ice-bag perched atop his head. As Buster attempts to flee toward the building behind the hospital, it collapses entirely. He retreats to his hospital bed and hides under the covers, but the cyclone now blows the bed down the street and into a stable. Buster raises his head, notes his new location and bed partners (several horses), and does a double-take. This scene establishes several actions and images

that Keaton repeats throughout the sequence.

First, the sequence establishes the recurring image of Buster passing through doors and windows. In this way, Keaton relies on a vaudevillian structure of repetition for cohesiveness. The cyclone blows him, still lying on his bed, into the stable through one door and, after Buster's double-take on the horses, the doors open again and Buster is blown out through a door on the far side of the barn. In both shots, Buster fits perfectly through the door, as if he were meant to be there, or as if the cyclone somehow had something in mind for him. The shots of Buster entering and exiting the barn on his bed place a heavy visual emphasis on the silhouette of the barn door opening....

From the barn, Buster, still lying on his bed, is blown in front of a three-story building. He tumbles from the bed as it stops in front of the building and seeks refuge under the bed, not a particularly safe place to wait out the storm. A man jumps from the third-story window onto the bed, drawing attention to the window while simultaneously disorienting Buster with the force of his jump. As Buster stands before the teetering wall rubbing his neck, the wall falls, yet he miraculously escapes injury: the window opening falls around him. The central shot in the sequence captures the entire action of the falling wall without a cut. Buster faces the camera full front; he is seen in a long shot standing about eighteen feet in front of the three-story building. The third story is an attic with a rectangular window opening. The camera captures all but the very top of the third story, so that the slanted angles of the roof point to the third-story window. The shot balances Buster and the window on the central vertical axis of the frame: Buster at the bottom of the frame and the window at the top of the frame. Buster shakes his head, trying to gain his equilibrium following the preceding action. Unaware that the wall is about to fall, he stands still, oblivious to the tilting wall as the winds of the cyclone appear to pull it away from the rest of the structure. The entire front wall falls toward the camera and directly on top of Buster, yet he escapes unharmed because he is standing directly under the descending window frame.

In this shot, Keaton far exceeds any reasonable demands for realism that the norms of classical Hollywood cinema would require. He easily could have constructed the same scene through editing.... Yet Keaton risked his life to produce this effect, which by classical standards was clearly excessive. Why?

By showing the wall fall in one shot, Keaton emphasized his own performance: his ability to calculate and execute this stunt as well as his bravery (some would say his foolishness) in performing it himself. The result is, quite literally, breath-taking. It completely transforms this simple vaudeville gag into an image that has become forever identified with Keaton: Buster as a round peg in a square hole, or, in this case, an almost square window frame. The falling-wall sequence repeats the image of Keaton passing through a window or door unharmed for the third time. This image is the central focus of the cyclone sequence, providing a sense of cohesiveness to Buster's seemingly endless series of narrow escapes.

"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."

"Buster, the great specialist in fighting sentimental infections of all kinds.... The technical achievements are so indissolubly mixed with other elements that we aren't even aware of them." Luis Buñuel, *Cahiers d'Art*, 1927

"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*.

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 helped us produce the Buffalo Film Seminars during our first six series. This Ranjit's bibliographical note on Keaton:

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.

Series tickets are available at reduced prices. Inquire at box office or concessions stand.



Join us next week, Tuesday September 7, Carole Lombard and William Powell in
Gregory La Cava's screwball comedy classic *My Man Godfrey* (1936)

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