Document Citation

Title	**The American comedy: The General**
Author(s)	Christopher J. Warren
Source	*Wadsworth Atheneum*
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The General, Keaton, Buster, 1927

The American Comedy

The General
~~United Artists~~
Directed by Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton
1927; 76 min.

Cast		Credits	
Johnnie Gray	Buster Keaton	Producer	Joseph M. Schenck
Annabelle Lee	Marion Mack	Directors	Clyde Bruckman, Buster Keaton
Annabelle's Father	Charles Smith		
Annabelle's Brother	Frank Barnes	Screenplay	Al Boasberg, Charles Smith
Captain Anderson	Glen Cavender		
General Thatcher	Frederick Vroom	Photography	Bert Haines, J.D. Jennings
Southern General	Joe Keaton		

Notes
The golden era of comedy, which lasted from 1912 to about 1930, was a particularly creative period that produced many great silent clowns of the screen. But there were four special comedians who towered above all the rest, mostly because they brought to their comic routines an extra dimension of pathos and poetry: Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, and Buster Keaton. Each of them created lasting characters who were distinctive and appealing -- Chaplin's tramp, Lloyd's all-American boy, Langdon's innocent lamb. Buster Keaton's character, however, was probably the most elusive and the least understood. His great stone face and stiff attitude made him appear cold and emotionless. He wore uninteresting clothing (unlike Chaplin's baggy pants and Lloyd's tight-fitting suits, that were extensions of their roles). Keaton did not play for sentiment as did the other three. Yet beneath the solemnity there lurked a hidden nature that came to the surface not through any facial expression (there was none), but through his physical reactions to improbable situations. He usually portrayed a fiercely energetic individual who had pride, courage, ingenuity and persistence. His character, which seemed at first to be monotonous and unapproachable, was really a tightly controlled personality of great determination. His routines were brilliant masterpieces of acrobatics and timing. He always emerged from disaster, unsmiling but triumphant by means of pluck and luck.

His best film, The General, is also less typical of the silent period. While it is filled with great pantomime and visual comedy, it is slower paced, its gags are deliberately spaced, and there is far more substance to its story. Fortunately, the story is so good on its own, and is so well handled, that the reduced comedy content is amply compensated for. The plot is based on an actual incident of the Civil War, when Union army saboteurs hijacked a Confederate train for the purpose of causing havoc and wrecking the South's communication and supply lines. Walt Disney made an excellent straight adventure film of this tale in 1956 called, appropriately, The Great Locomotive Chase, with Fess Parker and Jeffrey Hunter. But in The General (the name of the pinched locomotive), Keaton used the story merely as a framework for some of his greatest routines. He shot the film along the old narrow-gauge railway lines in Oregon, thereby giving the picture the appearance of an authentic period drama. He used less than fifty title cards (most of which appear as exposition at the beginning) which allow for less visual interruption, and which properly permit the actions to carry the story. Silent comedies frequently built their plots around a chase, but no other film ever sustained a chase for so long, so successfully, or with such expert intermingling of genuine thrills and hilarious comic situations. The film runs for eight reels, seven of which are devoted to the chase -- first Buster chasing the spies, then the spies chasing Buster.

Keaton's films are also noteworthy in their treatment of women, and The General is a prize example. Most heroes, particularly Chaplin, treated their heroines with dignity and respect, in order to create and develop pathos. Keaton used them as comic foils, almost props. His lady love, Annabelle, is beautiful and appealing, but incredibly dumb. Some of the best scenes concern him extracting himself from disasters that she has gracefully involved him. Yet he loves her through it all. Andrew Sarris in The American Cinema cites the scene in which he strangles her in mock exasperation at another of her stupid antics and then kisses her as one of the great examples of heterosexual love in all of cinema. Keaton also gives her one of silent film's most beautiful composition shots -- the view of Annabelle as a cameo through the cigar-burned hole in the tablecloth.

Wadsworth Atheneum
The American Cinema: A Survey 1896-1976
Supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts

Other scenes are equally beautiful, full, and powerful by turns. The sequence of Keaton doing battle with the cannon is justly famous. The manuevering of moving boxcars are timed perfectly, as is the scene where Buster removes the errant rail beam while still in motion. The climactic battle scene is staged with the scope and the power of Matthew Brady photographs, and are the equal of the scenes in Griffith's The Birth of a Nation. Yet Keaton weaves the comedy so expertly that two great armies merely serve as straight men. This sequence also contains what is considered the funniest single moment in silent comedy, as well as what must be the most expensive gag in movie history: the Union officer ordering the trainload of soldiers across the burning trestle, secure in the knowledge of his authority that the bridge will hold.

Keaton's reputation and fame live on in his films, though there was tragedy and failure after The General. His good friend and co-director, Clyde Bruckman, could find little work in talking pictures. Some years later he borrowed Keaton's gun and killed himself in a restaurant in Hollywood. Keaton himself could not adjust his exceptional talent to talkies. Despite occasional appearances for sentimental purposes in Sunset Boulevard, It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, he never again regained his success and magnitism. Both men were unaware that their greatest success, The General, is still studied and enjoyed the world over as an enduring masterpiece of screen comedy.

Notes by Christopher J. Warren
CONMEN