

Document Citation

Title	Forever Buster: Buster Keaton centennial tribute
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Castro Theatre</i>
Date	1995
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Keaton, Buster (1895-1966), Piqua, Kansas, United States
Film Subjects	College, Horne, James W., 1927 Spite marriage, Sedgwick, Edward, 1929 The cameraman, Sedgwick, Edward, 1928 Battling Butler, Keaton, Buster, 1926 Go west, Keaton, Buster, 1925 Seven chances, Keaton, Buster, 1925 The Navigator, Keaton, Buster, 1924 Our hospitality, Keaton, Buster, 1923 The saphead, Blaché, Herbert, 1920 Steamboat Bill, Jr., Reisner, Charles F., 1928 Three ages, Keaton, Buster, 1923

The General, Keaton, Buster, 1927

Sherlock, Jr., Keaton, Buster, 1924

THURSDAY ■ JULY 14

FOREVER BUSTER: Buster Keaton Centennial Tribute

The Castro Theatre is proud to present this tribute to one of the cinema's greatest artists. Born during a cyclone (or so family legend goes) 100 years ago, Joseph "Buster" Keaton (1895 - 1966) began entertaining audiences at the age of three and, nearly thirty years after his death, his legend continues to grow. Sublimely funny, Keaton's extraordinary physical comedy still has the power to awe. Even in our jaded era of special effects when everything seems possible, Keaton's stunts will take your breath away. But the brilliant physicality is not all there is to Keaton. James Agee wrote: "With the humor, the craftsmanship and the action there was often, besides, a fine, still and sometimes dreamlike beauty...Those who care for Keaton cannot care mildly."

We will present eleven programs of shorts and features, all from the silent era. Robert Vaughn and Jon Mirsalis will provide live musical accompaniment for many of the films. Shows indicated with an asterisk (*) will be accompanied by Robert Vaughn on the Mighty Wurlitzer organ. Shows indicated by a double asterisk (**) will be accompanied by Jon Mirsalis on the piano. All other shows will be accompanied by a musical soundtrack provided with the print. Special thanks to Tim Lanza of the Rohauer Collection, and Turner Entertainment.

Unless otherwise indicated, Keaton was the director or co-director of all the films in our series. All prints are 35mm. This series is being presented in association with the Pacific Film Archive.



FRIDAY - SATURDAY ■ JULY 15-16

The Navigator

Fri: 8:20* / Sat: 2:45, 5:30* 8:20* Keaton considered *The Navigator* his personal favorite and it was also his biggest box office success. Pampered rich kids Buster and Kathryn McGuire find themselves alone and adrift on an abandoned ocean liner in the middle of the Atlantic and in a classically comical fashion must figure out how to survive. (1924)

MONDAY ■ JULY 18

Our Hospitality

7:30** Buster is a hillbilly heir who returns from the city to claim his inheritance as the last of the McKays. Unfortunately his legacy also seems to include a long-standing blood-feud with the Canfield family who live in the next hollow. And the only hatchet the Canfields want to bury would be right in his neck. Naturally, the girl he falls for on the train ride home turns out to be a Canfield. Keaton's second feature, it was set in the early 1800s and its memorable bits include: an obstacle-strewn train ride, a wild chase through the hills, and a daring rescue at a waterfall. (1923)

Neighbors / My Wife's Relations / The Love Nest

9:00 Neighbors – Buster once again proves that the course of true love will brook no impediment as he courts a girl in the tenement next door. He displays his usual nimble nonchalance as he scales telephone poles, swings from clotheslines and balances on teetering boards in his efforts to reach his inamorata. (1921) **My Wife's Relations** – Buster ends up accidentally married to an Irish lass (don't ask) and must come to terms with her burly brothers and an unstable marital bed. (1922) **The Love Nest** – A sea-going farce with a love-sick Buster on a whaling ship whose captain makes Ahab look like Captain Crunch. (1923)

TUESDAY ■ JULY 19

The Three Ages

7:30** Keaton's first feature length comedy is actually more like three separate shorts intercut into an inspired parody of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*. Jumping between the Stone Age, Ancient Rome and the Roaring '20s we watch as Buster battles Wallace Beery for the hand of Margaret Leahy. A special highlight is a chariot race in a blizzard that neatly skewers *Ben-Hur*. (1921)

The Butcher Boy / The Bell Boy / Backstage / The Cook

9:00 The legendary Fatty Arbuckle lured Keaton from the backstages of Broadway theatres to the backlots of Hollywood studios. How fortunate for us. This program of shorts includes Buster's first appearance in **The Butcher Boy** (1917). Already a consummate physical comedian on stage and vaudeville, in these early two-reeler\$ we see how Keaton refined his art for the camera. **The Bell Boy** (1918), **Back Stage** (1919), **The Cook** (1918)

WEDNESDAY ■ JULY 20

Seven Chances

2:20, 5:00, 7:40** If he doesn't get hitched by 7:00 pm, Buster will lose a \$7,000,000 inheritance. When his sweetheart refuses, he begins proposing, with increasing desperation, to everyone in a skirt, including a Scotsman. Meanwhile a veritable army of would-be brides learn of Buster's predicament and pursue him *en masse* through the tumbling boulders of a landslide. (1925)

Cops / The Goat / Convict 13

3:40, 6:20, 9:00 Cops– The most famous of Keaton's shorts, *Cops* is essentially just one long chase with Buster fleeing what appears to be the entire New York City police department after he accidentally disrupting a police parade. (1922) **Convict 13** Buster's plan to bust out of Death Row disguised as a prison guard backfires when the inmates riot and go after the guards. Oops. (1920) **The Goat** – A case of mistaken identity leads to a merry chase. Taken for Deadeye Dan, Public Enemy, Buster is again on the run. (1921)

SUNDAY ■ JULY 16

Steamboat Bill, Jr.

1:50* 4:40* 7:30* Buster stars as the effete son of a two-fisted riverboat captain who falls for a rival captain's daughter. Set on the Mississippi but filmed in the Sacramento Delta, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* climaxes with one of Keaton's most astonishing stunts (which in itself says a great deal); he runs from a building and while standing in the street, the two story facade crashes down around him but he passes unscathed through an open window. It was not a fake wall. Directed by Charles Riesner. (1927)

The Boat / The Playhouse / The Scarecrow

3:20, 6:10, 9:00 The Boat – Ranking right up there with his feature-length comedies, *The Boat* charts just how many things can go wrong when Buster builds and boat and attempts to sail away with his family. (1921) **The Playhouse** – This brilliantly dreamlike comedy about a vaudeville house has Keaton playing all the parts. Simultaneously he's the audience, all eight musicians in a minstrel show, the actors and even a performing monkey. (1921) **The Scarecrow** – Buster's bachelor pad is a gadget filled wonder lacking only the touch of a woman. (1920)

MONDAY ■ JULY 17

College

7:30** When wimpy freshman Buster falls for a pretty coed who has eyes only for jocks, he proceeds to try out for every sport in sight. Though he doesn't make the team, his newly gained skills turn out to be of great value as he broad jumps, hurdles and pole vaults his way to the rescue when the campus masher puts the moves on his girl. Directed by James Horne. (1927)

Coney Island / The Garage / Goodnight Nurse / The Hayseed

9:00 This program of four shorts from Buster's comic apprenticeship with Fatty Arbuckle showcase Keaton's emerging comic persona. From the beginning Arbuckle recalled that Keaton "lived in the camera." **Coney Island** (1917), **The Garage** (1919), **Goodnight Nurse** (1918), **The Hayseed** (1918)



Electric House / One Week / High Sign

Fri: 7:00, 9:45 / Sat: 1:20, 4:10, 7:00, 9:45 **Electric House** – Buster learns not to look a gift house in the mouth when he's showing off his gadget-ridden model home to a real estate tycoon. (1922) **One Week** – Buster has more house problems in this intricately constructed farce, as Buster and his new bride try to assemble a prefab house in just one week. (1920) **High Sign** – With a plot that sounds more noir than slapstick, *High Sign* features Keaton as a hit-man hired by a secret society to whack a small town miser. Not to worry though, there are laughs aplenty. (1920)



SUNDAY ■ JULY 9

The Cameraman

3:40; 7:10* Keaton's first film for MGM, *The Cameraman* is a tour-de-force with Buster displaying his trademark reckless abandon as a struggling newsreel cameraman trying to land a job and impress a girl. If only that monkey hadn't stolen his footage of the Chinatown Tong War. "Along the way we are treated to sublime Buster Bits: a one-man baseball game, acrobatic competitions with mass transportation, and a change into a bathing suit in, to say the least, straitened circumstances." – *William Nestruck*. Directed by Edward Sedgwick. (1928)

Spite Marriage

2:00, 5:25, 9:00 In his last silent feature Keaton gives the Broadway theatre the same subversive treatment he gave to the world of film in *Sherlock Jr.* Buster is a stage-door Johnny whose repeated attempts to woo actress Dorothy Sebastian wreak the usual chaotic consequences. This often over-looked gem features some terrific set pieces. Directed by Edward Sedgwick. (1929)

Battling Butler

7:30** The most successful of Keaton's independent productions follows the misadventures of an effete millionaire (Keaton) who is mistaken for the heavyweight champ. From the backwoods of Kentucky to the boxing ring at Madison Square Garden, Buster must battle for the hand of Sally O'Neil. (1926)

The Saphead

9:00** The film that made Keaton a star, *The Saphead* finds Buster as the scion of a Wall Street lion, who is more interested in wooing a girl than making a killing. Unfortunately the lessons he studies in the manual "How to Win the Modern Girl" don't seem to work, and his father soon insists that he apply himself and get a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. Douglas Fairbanks suggested Keaton for the part, a part that Fairbanks had played on stage and in an earlier film version. Directed by Herbert Blache. (1921)

FRIDAY – SATURDAY ■ JULY 14 – 15

The General

Fri: 8:30* / Sat: 1:50, 5:10, 8:30* Lyric and comic and, by its very setting, tragic, *The General* ranks as one of the most authentic evocations of the Civil War on film, and one of the greatest comedies of all time. When a small band of Union soldiers penetrates far beyond Confederate lines to steal a locomotive, Buster sets off in hot pursuit. The title refers to the engine that figures prominently in one of the most harrowing and hilarious chase scenes ever filmed – in fact it takes up seven of the eight reels. – *Judy Bloch, PFA* (1926)

Sherlock Jr. with Hard Luck

Fri: 7:00; 10:00 / 3:40, 7:00; 10:15 Andrew Sarris called it Keaton's 8½, and in the end *Sherlock Jr.* will be Keaton's most enduring commentary on the art of the cinema, which has the power to make artists of us all. Buster plays a projectionist who dreams his way onto the screen and into a movie in which he resolves the conflicts of his own life...Much admired by the French Surrealists. The film is equally impressive acrobatics – offscreen, the hapless hero hoists himself on his own banana peel, but onscreen he can ride on the handlebars of a driverless motorcycle, make a boat out a car, and perform any number of cinematic miracles without special effects. – *Judy Bloch, PFA*. (1924) plus **Hard Luck** – This recently rediscovered short was Keaton's personal favorite. Unable to go on, Buster tries suicide, tries it again and tries yet again until he reaches an epiphany over a bottle of Scotch. (1921)



TUESDAY ■ JULY 18

Go West

7:30* Less acrobatic and frantic than Keaton's other films, *Go West* is no less entertaining. Buster plays a melancholy greenhorn named Friendless who's on his way to Arizona to become a cowboy. Along the way he befriends a heifer named Brown Eyes. Certainly one of cinema's oddest couples, Buster and Brown Eyes end up in Los Angeles. (1925)

Frozen North / The Blacksmith / The Paleface

9:00 **Frozen North** – One of Keaton's most surreal shorts in which he appears wearing a Canadian Mountie hat emerging into the wild Yukon by way of a subway kiosk. (1922) **The Blacksmith** – This parody of rural efficiency features Buster as a village smithy who applies assembly line techniques to the outfitting of horses. (1922) **The Paleface** – Thanks to asbestos underwear, Buster's absent minded entomologist is accepted as a minor god by rampaging Indians. (1921)



WEDNESDAY ■ JULY 19

College

2:10, 4:50, 7:30* When wimpy freshman Buster falls for a pretty coed who has eyes only for jocks, he proceeds to try out for every sport in sight. Though he doesn't make the team, his newly gained skills turn out to be of great value as he broad jumps, hurdles and pole vaults his way to the rescue when the campus masher puts the moves on his girl. Directed by James Horne. (1927)

Daydreams / The Balloonatic / The Haunted House

3:30, 6:15, 9:00 **Daydreams** – Buster tries to impress his girl back home with his big city exploits as financier, doctor and actor – positions which are a bit exaggerated, perhaps. (1922) **The Balloonatic** – Buster sails to new heights as he floats upwards in a hot air balloon. Drifting from the city to the country, he lands in time to save a fair maiden from a bear. (1923) **The Haunted House** – An accident with a pot of glue causes bank teller Buster to be accused of robbery and he's forced to take refuge in a spooky mansion. (1921)

Il faudrait toutefois noter que les effets plastiques, la beauté de l'image ne sont pas forcément liés au comique. Le lent panoramique sur un paysage d'eau et d'arbres qui ouvre *Steamboat Bill Junior* débouche précisément sur l'inauguration d'un steamer flambant neuf, synonyme de ruine et d'exil pour le propriétaire du « Steamboat Bill », père de Keaton. Le camping et la séance de pêche sur les bords de la rivière ou dans le canoë de *Malec aéronaute* ne sont pas loin d'avoir le charme mélancolique des premières séquences du *Dernier round* : c'est dans un paysage automnal avec, encore, une rivière, mais noyée de brume comme le sont les champs et les collines, que commencent les malheurs (surmontés par la suite) de Keaton, et à cette séquence répond celle, toute de dureté, dans le décor strict du ring dont la lumière crue donne aux hommes des airs de gargouilles. Enfin, si l'on ne peut qualifier de mélancoliques les plus belles scènes (dynamiques au contraire) des *Lois de l'hospitalité* ou du *Mécano de la General*, l'accent est aussi souvent mis sur la beauté du paysage quand la victoire de l'homme est incertaine que lors des dernières séquences où l'homme triomphe, là de ses ennemis héréditaires, ici des Nordistes. Les deux films, dans leur ensemble, frappent par la splendeur de certaines images, vastes horizons sur lesquels se détachent montagnes, vallées, torrents ou rivière (avec, dans *Le Mécano*, le pont où basculent les Nordistes), et dans les deux films, les lignes que dessinent le train ou le personnage de Keaton dans le décor. A cette beauté des lieux s'ajoute une composition rigoureuse, avec récurrence et équilibre de certains thèmes visuels, souvent indépendante du rire que peuvent susciter certains gags et nullement liés au gag à répétition. De même, on ne peut dire que les séquences les plus spectaculaires de *Steamboat Bill Junior* et de *Fiancées en folie* soient uniquement comiques. Victime d'un typhon ou d'une masse de filles qui le poursuivent, Keaton y est le jeu d'éléments menaçants, lesquels, même s'ils se révèlent parfois être par la suite des planches de salut, en sont d'autant plus effrayants que l'image est saisissante.

Il est même, dans *Les Fiancées en folie*, des plans

qui engendrent vraiment la tristesse. Tels ceux où Keaton, ayant envoyé un dernier billet pour demander à celle qu'il aime de l'épouser, reçoit en réponse de petits bouts de papier (sa demande déchirée) et relève misérablement son col comme pour s'en protéger; ou Keaton, attendant seul, à l'église, un bouquet à la main. Cette dernière scène rappelle le retour de Buster après son mariage raté dans *Ce crétin de Malec*. Mais surtout cette histoire d'héritage qui attire une meute de fiancées évoque les films les plus noirs de Keaton, notamment *Les Parents de ma femme* où le mari, maltraité par sa belle-famille, croit toucher un héritage; lorsqu'il apprend qu'il n'en est rien, il ne lui reste que la fuite devant cette autre meute en furie. Il faut se souvenir aussi du début de *La Guigne de Malec*, avec les tentatives de suicide et ce dérivatif dérisoire qu'est l'alcool; et la fin des *Flics* où, exception rarissime dans l'œuvre, Keaton semble renoncer, après s'être battu en mettant en jeu toutes les ressources de son imagination; ou *Frigo, capitaine au long cours*, où Keaton et sa famille vont de naufrage en naufrage pour atterrir sur une grève inconnue, source d'inquiétude. Cette atmosphère n'est qu'occasionnelle dans l'œuvre de Keaton où elle joue plutôt, d'ordinaire, le rôle de cauchemar dont il se réveille tout heureux près de la fille qu'il aime, après avoir failli être pendu, puis assommé par un bagnard (*Malec, champion de golf*) ou consumé par les feux de l'enfer (*Malec et les fantômes*). Ce qui semblerait prouver que, malgré certains passages assez noirs, la réalité est en général plus reconfortante que le rêve où, comme dans *Grandeur et décadence*, on se laisse porter par son imagination au lieu de réagir selon ses possibilités, l'imagination devenant un moteur de l'action.

Que le but soit essentiellement de déchaîner le rire ou qu'au rire se mêle la gravité, il n'en demeure pas moins que c'est avant tout le personnage qui compte, le personnage qu'incarne Keaton. Ainsi le film-poursuite qui est un des classiques du comique nous le prouve bien. S'il arrive, dans *L'Épouwantail*, par exemple, que Keaton ait, au début, un allié, celui-ci passe rapidement à l'ennemi, et Buster se trouve