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A Quiet Clamor

MOVIE REVISIONISTS ARE having second thoughts about Charlie Chaplin. The Greatest Screen Comic is being nudged by Buster Keaton, whose reputation has mainly been hearsay.

Now he's being rediscovered, thanks to Keaton archivist Raymond Rohauer, whose series of classic Keaton films is now showing at the Cento Cedar Cinema. Go once and you'll go back.

Keaton had a cleaner approach to comedy than Chaplin, who gave into pathos (blind flower girls, orphans). Shy Buster avoided sentiment in the pure pursuit of laughs. Keaton kept a dry, flat comic tone his whole career. No matter what role, situation or film, he was always the same non-character. His cool wide-eyed style has kept him current, a deadpan comic for a deadpan age.

Keaton wasn't interested in making social points, like Chaplin, or in revealing the Human Comedy. He stays neutral. Unlike Chaplin, he doesn't call attention to moments, with little takes or gestures. He never cutes up a scene with "personality." Buster's too busy surviving disaster to bother with sweet and charming.

EVER-IMPLACABLE. KEATON is the quietest of silent comics. He never comments on the action or plays to you; he lets you discover him. He doesn't ask you to laugh, just to look — existential slapstick. Beckett loved him.

Keaton was a comic engineer whose movies click off like Rube Goldberg contraptions, one gag triggering another, which sets off another and another, everything happening with clear comic logic. The chaos is so *tidy*.

His stuff doesn't date, because it has no emotion. If a thing was funny in 1922, it's funny in 1982. What may surprise you about Keaton's movies is how much you'll laugh at them, easily and honestly, without feeling pushed by history.

It's a different kind of laughter than we know now, free of satiric overtones, social-political meaning, inside references. You're not laughing at issues, you're laughing at houses spinning around, rowboats sinking and trains running into themselves. It's spare and free-spirited. The humor speaks for itself.

KEATON'S GAGS COME at you as fresh as the first time you saw Monty Python: simple but shrewd. You marvel at the ingenuity of the ideas, their sublime precision, while laughing at the gags, which defy description or gravity.

Keaton is gravity itself — prim mouth, pale pantomime face, big sorrowful eyes which, in extreme moments of panic or pain, blink fast. He's always calm. We're the worried ones.

His gags are so dangerous, they're animated cartoons, but the stunts are real. His chase scenes put the Road Runner to shame. Stunts go past the physical (riding backwards on motorcycle bars) into the metaphysical (walking onto a screen).

Everything gets in his way, not that he's going anywhere. He seems to exist for trouble to find him, and each escape leads to worse trouble. Bears, sticky paper, everything attacks him, but he comes back for more — expecting the worst, not sure why he's singled out for all this random destruction. Keaton's not even fearless. Chaos is routine. He doesn't get even, or even get mad. He just wants to get out alive.