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BUSTER KEATON AND
THE RACE AGAINST TIME, OR
WHERE HAVE ALL THE COMEDIANS GONE?

by Raymond Rohauer

These notes are for the program of the National Film Theatre in London which is presenting "The Films of Buster Keaton" beginning January 16th, 1968.

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The Buster Keaton season at the National Film Theatre, like the Harry Langdon season last year, should carry a somber warning as well as a sense of delight. The institutions and individuals who are working to preserve our film heritage are very small in number compared in the many thousands who constitute the continuously captivated audiences for the work [and play] of such original clowns as Keaton, Langdon, Chaplin, Lloyd and other less well-known but equally inventive artists. The English music hall tradition provides a possibly mere receptive predisposition to knockabout comedic "gags" and I am delighted that this first complete series of Keaton films to be shown since their initial release will be taking place in London.

Some history of my involvement with Keaton and his films is in order, and might constitute an object lesson in the dangers of ignoring history.

In the summer of 1954, Buster Keaton approached me for advice and aid in saving his films. I was at the time managing the Society of Cinema Arts in Los Angeles, California — the most popular showcase for silent and sound screen classics, as well as documentary and experimental films in the United States. Keaton had heard of my reputation for gathering silent films and restoring them for exhibition. He had a number of his films, and knew they would be destroyed since the nitrate film was badly decomposed. He knew they had value, but was equally concerned because they were taking up space in his garage! Long an admirer of his work, I was delighted to help, since I knew the quality of the films and was certain of their widespread reception and eventual commercial value. The only troubling aspect was the seeming diffidence of Keaton himself, concerned but very off-hand.

The following day, I went to Keaton's house. There were original prints of THE NAVIGATOR, SHERLOCK, JR., GO WEST, STEAMBOAT BILL, JR., COLLEGE, and some of the best two-reel shorts, such as THE BOAT and THE PLAYHOUSE. . . and true enough, nitrate prints in a deplorable state. Keaton, living in obviously reduced circumstances, seemed defeated. The films seemed almost an embarrassing reminder of his former eminence. I couldn't help feeling that under the outward diffidence was a desire for recognition, not of himself, but of the intrinsic merit of the films. In later years this was confirmed. Keaton's life was in his films, and he always felt shy and was uncommunicative in personal dealings. At that second meeting, Keaton made it clear that he did not own the films, and in fact had no knowledge of rights of ownership or title that might be in effect.

Obviously, the first step was to preserve what films were at hand. I arranged for the immediate transfer to safety stock of the films in Keaton's garage. The difficult question of ownership rights was still to be pursued. This entanglement would mean many years of research.

I will never forget the excitement of that day: Keaton working like mad to personally load his car with all the films to take them to a lab for transferal. Little by little, as my own funds permitted, the films were copied — over a third of these great comedies saved. Some time later, word came that a number of the Keaton films had been found in one of his former homes in Beverly Hills, then occupied by the actor James Mason. I urged Keaton to go there and ask for their return, but in Mason's absence this was refused. I have since asked James Mason to amplify this incident, and in a recent letter he said that on his return he heard of the request and, in his words, "A dilemma presented itself. Should I make a respectful humane gesture towards this great artist? Or should I guarantee the preservation of the films? I knew that Keaton could not use the films to his personal advantage and that he did not command facilities for preserving them. Anyway, right or wrong, I chose [to donate the films to] the Academy." In retrospect, this was a sensible action on Mason's part -- subsequently the Academy turned the films over to me -- but at the time somewhat humiliating for Keaton. Later, Mason did meet Keaton, and according to Mason, "talked about his films, only from the point of appreciation."

The procedures in clearing rights and copyrights was a long and involved one. Keaton knew little or nothing of the legalities of such matters. I insisted that he discuss the films with Joseph M. Schenck, the man who first established Keaton as a star, and who guided his career for many years. Schenck's terminal illness precluded my visiting him, but I felt that Keaton, who had once been his son-in-law, would be a better choice. Unfortunately, Mr. Schenck's physical deterioration was such that Buster was never sure he was recognized, though he reported that Schenck had smiled at him. This avenue, perhaps the most important key to the ownership of the Keaton films, seemed closed.

I then took Keaton to see Schenck's attorneys. After many meetings, in which I used Keaton himself to establish authority, a corporation was established that, with associate trusteeship, was to once again give Buster Keaton control of his own films.

The reestablishment of Keaton the artist was complicated by the rehabilitation of Keaton the man. In 1956 Keaton suffered a violent throat hemorrhage, due to excessive drinking, and lapsed into a coma, near death. After many blood transfusions and partial recovery, he was given the choice of living, or dying if he touched alcohol. He chose life, and until the day of his death in 1966 never, to my knowledge, drank.

That Keaton recovered some measure of comfortable living was in some part due to his being hired as technical adviser for the film, THE BUSTER KEATON STORY [1957]. The film was not good, not true -- but Keaton was paid well, and took consolation only in that. In the meantime, our joint work in assembling prints and negatives continued, and the complete record on film of Keaton's career began to emerge.

I arranged for the commercial release in Germany of Buster's masterpiece, THE GENERAL, with Buster in attendance. The German public, almost completely unaware of Keaton previously, was ecstatic.

We found an Austrian locomotive, similar to the American Civil War engine of the film's title, and it was used to promote the film all over Germany, with Buster and the press in attendance. He was beginning to warm to the adulation of the new audiences for his film, though the "great stone face" was still the mask presented to the world.

The year 1963 saw the proper culmination of all our efforts. At the Venice Film Festival that year, Keaton was honored by professionals from all over the world. A twenty minute standing ovation reduced him to tears, virtually the only uncontrolled emotion I had ever seen him express. I have a sequence of pictures from the Venice tribute which documents minute by minute the events of that day, and I am moved every time I look at them. When Buster Keaton died, February 1, 1966, it was with dignity, his films restored to him, his life in order. And with the world's praise once again, the moving image of one of the most inventive actors, an acrobat and comedian, was preserved and could go on delighting future generations.

The mass of fact, anecdote, and of course my personal closeness to Keaton, will all be contained in my book "BUSTER: The Films of Buster Keaton" to be published in 1968. (Arrangements for international publication are being made by Darien House, Inc., of New York City.) The films, shorts and features, will be presented chronologically, with accurate cast lists, credits and notes on each. Many of the famous gags will be illustrated with sequential frame enlargements, and stills will be used from each film. Additionally, personal photographs and anecdotes will be used in abundance. The distinguished drama critic of The New York Times, Mr. Walter Kerr, will write the foreword to the book; he plans to review and comment on each film, appraising each historically as well as with a view to its effect today. The full story of Buster Keaton through his films will, I hope, be a unique document and a model of the kind of film book that should be available to the public as well as to historians.

I am appreciative of the honor to Keaton in the scheduling of the films of Buster Keaton at the National Film Theatre.* The year 'round activity of the NFT is a model that should be emulated in many countries. The preservation of our film heritage is a goal that should involve many more institutions and individuals, for much has been irretrievably lost, more film is in present danger and the body of saved film should be guarded zealously, with proper respect for ownership and copyright as the most tangible tribute to the great artists who so fragily survive only on tiny strips of film.

*The films of Buster Keaton are wholly controlled by Leopold Friedman, trustee, and Raymond Rohauer, and are shown at the National Film Theatre by special arrangement.