



DREAM PALACE

# The General

*Introduced by Stuart Brown, BFI Head of Programme and Acquisitions.*

‘The moment you give me a locomotive and things like that to play with, as a rule I find some way of getting laughs out of it,’ Buster Keaton is quoted as saying. Trains had often been used for gags in his previous films, *Our Hospitality* (1923) and *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) being notable examples.

*The General* was the culmination of Keaton’s fascination. But in order for the story to work, Keaton decided that the book’s emphasis on the Union spies had to change in the film to an emphasis on the lone engineer in pursuit. This change would have Keaton as the small man, the underdog, an individual who ultimately triumphs against supreme odds, the type of character Keaton enjoyed playing. The period setting, and the scale envisaged for its making, would inevitably make the film an expensive undertaking. Keaton’s contract with Joseph Schenck made the project possible. Schenck, recently elected to the presidency of United Artists, was the main shareholder in Buster Keaton Productions and decided that Keaton’s next film would be distributed by that company and not MGM, the previous distributor of Keaton’s films. According to one of Keaton’s biographers, Tom Dardis, Schenck’s decision to give Keaton additional funding for his next project was influenced by the company Keaton was now keeping. Chaplin, Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford, the founders and main shareholders in United Artists, all mounted their films on a lavish scale, so why not Keaton. After all, Keaton’s last film *Battling Butler* (1926) had been his most financially successful film, so an increased budget seemed a fair gamble.

While Bruckman, Al Boasberg, and Charles Smith began work on developing the scenario to suit Keaton’s character, Buster and his technical director, Fred Gabourie, began the search for locations. Keaton wanted the film to be as authentic as possible, so the first places they visited were the genuine localities where the original events had occurred. The actual train that had been stolen still existed, having been kept at the Chattanooga railroad station since the Civil War, and Keaton approached the railroad authorities for permission to use the train. At first they acquiesced, but in the face of local opposition to a re-enactment of a wartime episode that was still considered too sensitive, and when they also realised that the film would be a comedy, they withdrew their co-operation. Keaton was also disappointed with the local scenery: ‘It didn’t look very good. In fact, it looked terrible,’ he claimed, without being specific. The combination of ‘terrible’ scenery and the inability to use the actual train set off a search for more suitable terrain. In April of 1926, Keaton’s location manager, Bert Jackson, found a small railroad in the heart of Oregon’s lumber region around the small town of Cottage Grove that appeared to be appropriate. The Oregon, Pacific and Eastern Railroad, who owned the track, still owned vintage locomotives that would be perfect for filming, and the scenery also appeared to fit Keaton’s requirements. Keaton visited the site and decided it was perfect.

From the start the production seemed to be plagued by accidents. The company had brought their own field hospital with them, a facility that seemed to be in constant operation. Assistant director Harry Barnes was shot in the face with a blank charge, a brakeman had a foot run over by the wheel of one of the trains (for which the film company was successfully sued for negligence) and Keaton himself was knocked unconscious when standing too

close to a firing cannon. The biggest problem, however, was as a result of the number of fires that broke out during filming. Sparks from the wood-burning trains caused innumerable forest fires, most of which were small and easily dealt with (although damages still had to be paid), but at least one raged out of control. The smoke from such fires blackened the skies to the extent that filming had to be abandoned until the skies cleared, which often meant days of filming were lost.

The film was a box office flop and failed to recover its huge costs. A number of reasons have been put forward for this including the delay in the film's launch and the poor marketing of it by United Artists, particularly in comparison to the way Keaton's previous films had been handled by MGM. But probably the film was simply too ahead of its time, dealing with themes, and particularly a war, that audiences were just not ready for. *The General* is not in the more slapstick tradition of Keaton's earlier films; he did not provide what audiences expected of him. The humour and gags Keaton provided in *The General* were just more subtle than those to which audiences were accustomed. The failure of *The General* ultimately had an effect on Keaton's creative freedom. Joseph Schenck made a determined effort to curb Keaton's excesses, the budgets of his subsequent films consequently being reined in. Neither was Keaton ever allowed complete directorial control on any of his films again; his next director credits were not to be until 1938 with three Columbia shorts of that year. His next film following *The General*, *College* (1927), was more or less based on Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* (1925) and demonstrates how safe Schenck now wanted to play things.

*The General* is Buster Keaton's supreme achievement; possibly unique in the way it successfully interweaves spectacular drama and comedy. Others have attempted it but without any great success, the spectacle always drowning the attempted humour. But with *The General*, as David Robinson has said, 'you never feel that the story is simply an excuse for the comedy, or that the gags are a decoration planted on the story'. The dramatic and comedy elements gel perfectly. Not only does the film demonstrate that Keaton was a great comedian; he was also a great director. From a dramatic perspective, its recreation of the Civil War period, through Keaton's insistence on authenticity, is one of the most, if not *the* most, accurate and convincing depictions of both that era and the Civil War. It has even been compared to the Civil War photographs of Matthew Brady. Keaton's use of tracking shots in the film is also one of its notable features. Once the chase is underway, the camera seems to be constantly moving, a lot of the film being shot from either other trains or vehicles moving alongside the locomotives, and all achieved without disruption to the splendid compositions. Although Clyde Bruckman is credited as co-director on *The General*, and he is known to have been on the location, it is not really clear how involved he actually was in the day-to-day filming. But it cannot be denied that the driving force behind the film was Keaton. As for the comedy, the gags remain astounding in both their ingenuity and timing, and the sheer skill with which they are captured on film. As the *Daily Eagle*, that lone voice in the wilderness in 1927, had said, this is genius at work. It is not surprising that Keaton himself considered *The General* to be his best film. It is gratifying to know that Keaton lived long enough to see both his contribution to cinema and the place of *The General* within his canon receive long overdue acknowledgement. *The General* is not only a great silent comedy film, it is one of the great silent films.

**John Oliver, BFI National Archive**

The General

Directed by: Buster Keaton, Clyde Bruckman  
©: Joseph M. Schenck  
Production Company: Buster Keaton Productions  
Distributed by: United Artists  
Production Manager: Fred Gabourie  
Location Manager: Bert Jackson  
Script/Titles: Buster Keaton, Clyde Bruckman  
Adapted by: Al Boasberg, Charles Smith  
From the book The Great Locomotive Chase by: William Pittinger

Photographed by: Dev Jennings, Bert Haines  
Photography Assistant: Elmer Ellsworth  
Stills Photography: Byron S. Houck  
Lighting Effects: Denver Harmon  
Special Effects: Jack Little  
Editors: Sherman Kell, Harry Barnes, Buster Keaton  
Chief Mechanic: Fred Wright  
Wardrobe/Make-up: J.K. Pitcairn, Fred C. Ryle, Bennie Hubbel  
Technical Director: Frank Barnes

CAST

Buster Keaton (Johnnie Gray)  
Jackie Lowe, Jackie Hanlon  
(boys who follow Johnnie)  
Marion Mack (Annabelle Lee)  
Charles Smith (Mr Lee, Annabelle’s father)  
Frank Barnes (Annabelle’s brother)  
Frank Agney (recruiter)  
Frederick Vroom (Confederate general)  
Glen Cavender (Captain Anderson, chief spy)  
Ross McCutcheon, Charley Phillips, Jack Dempster, Red Thompson,  
Anthony Harvey, Ray Hanford, Tom Moran, Budd Fine, Jimmy Bryant,  
Al Hanson (raiders)  
Jim Farley (Union General Thatcher)  
Joe Keaton, Mike Donlin, Tom Nawn (Union officers)  
USA 1926©  
79 mins

With live piano accompaniment by Neil Brand

DREAM PALACE: THE FILMS THAT CINEMAS WERE BUILT FOR

Blow Out

Mon 17 May 17:45 (+ intro by Ben Roberts, BFI CEO); Tue 1 Jun 20:40

The General

Tue 18 May 18:10; Sat 29 May 12:45 (+ intro by Stuart Brown, BFI Head of Programme and Acquisitions)

The Shout + pre-recorded intro by Mark Jenkin

Wed 19 May 21:00; Thu 3 Jun

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Thu 20 May 17:30 (+ intro by Justin Johnson, BFI Lead Programmer); Thu 24 Jun 20:30

Footloose + pre-recorded intro by Francis Lee

Thu 20 May 20:45; Sat 29 May 18:00

Car Wash

Fri 21 May 18:00 (+ intro by Gurinder Chadha); Mon 31 May 18:50

David Byrne’s American Utopia

Fri 21 May 20:45 (+ intro by Tricia Tuttle, BFI Festival Director); Mon 14 Jun 18:00

Beginning + pre-recorded intro by Luca Guadagnino

Sat 22 May 11:30; Tue 22 Jun 20:30

Black Narcissus

Sat 22 May 14:20 (+ intro by Edgar Wright); Mon 7 Jun 17:50

The Wonders (Le meraviglie) + pre-recorded intro by Mark Cousins

Sat 22 May 15:15; Thu 3 Jun 20:30

Hair + pre-recorded intro by Kleber Mendonça Filho

Sat 22 May 20:30; Fri 28 May 17:45

Magnificent Obsession + Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Sun 23 May 15:45 (+ intro by Heather Stewart, BFI Creative Director); Sun 6 Jun 18:40

Beau Travail + pre-recorded intro by Kirsten Johnson

Sun 23 May 18:40; Sun 30 May 18:20

Mirror (Zerkalo) + pre-recorded intro by Malgorzata Szumowska

Mon 24 May 17:50; Wed 9 Jun 14:30

Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat) + pre-recorded intro by Chaitanya Tamhane

Mon 24 May 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:50

Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Bú sànn)

Wed 26 May 18:10 (+ intro by Peter Strickland); Wed 2 Jun 20:50

The Gleaners & I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + pre-recorded intro by Zhu Shengze

Thu 27 May 18:15; Fri 26 Jun 14:30

The Seventh Seal (Det sjunde inseglet)

Fri 28 May 20:50 (+ intro by Mike Williams, Editor Sight & Sound);

Wed 30 Jun 14:30

Broadcast News

Sun 30 May 15:40 (+ intro by Sarah Smith); Sat 19 Jun 20:20

The Elephant Man + pre-recorded intro by Prano Bailey-Bond

Tue 15 Jun 17:45; Sat 19 Jun 12:00

The Warriors

Mon 21 Jun 18:00 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia); Mon 28 Jun 14:30

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