



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Steamboat Bill, Jr.

Steamboat Bill, Jr., like *The Cameraman*, displays a mastery of *mise-en-cadre* which no other comedies have equalled. The difficulty lies in choosing only a few illustrations from a film in which every important shot so persuades our eyes of its seemingly effortless aptness. There are, as always, the spectacular moments: think of Buster, poised like a statue, apparently pondering something else amid all the silence, as the building lands on all sides of him; think of Buster, his feet clawing the earth to which the rest of him is virtually parallel, leaning into a cyclone. As always at such moments, Keaton knows that what the actor is up to is so extraordinary that the camera must record it from a proper distance and without comment. But at least for me, it's in moments less intrinsically compelling, moments that would otherwise serve only the needs of exposition, that Keaton's camera eye asserts its power most tellingly.

The plot requires, for example, Buster to discover that the girl he loved back East is a native of his own River Junction. Since Keaton seldom resists the chance to exploit the peculiarly filmic capacity for turning the most ordinary locale into the site of discovery, he places the crucial encounter in a barber's shop, where the identical white cloths that cover all customers set off faces with particular clarity, and where fixed equidistant chairs allow for all manner of spatial redefinition by means of camera placement. Buster occupies his chair at the left of the frame, the girl hers at the right; each sits with head lowered, each faces right. On and on they sit, oblivious of each other, as two barbers administer to them. Then one barber reverses the position of the girl's chair: at last they are face to face. But their eyes remain lowered; what's more, the new position even increases the distance between their faces. Yet we know that, late or soon, one or the other of them must lift an eye. The absurdity of their common unconsciousness assumes dramatic tension. Distinctions between gag and plot and visual composition are effaced.

Later, Buster arrives on a visit to his imprisoned father. Ernest Torrence, behind bars, writhing at the very sight of his own son, dominates the left foreground. In the middle ground, seen through the bars, stands the jailer, separating father and son in the depth of space precisely as in his professional function. In the background, framed in the doorway to the right, the light from outdoors setting him off with agonising clarity, stands a creature no father could acknowledge as his own: Buster in an ill-fitting work suit that dwarfs him utterly, an upturned umbrella looming above his head. Here once again the picture is the drama: with its three distinct planes so forcefully defined by the foreground bars and background wall, the shot exploits the depth of cinematic space as cannily as any in the Toland-Welles-Wyler canon.

Keaton takes pleasure in other kinds of pictures as well, as when the wind blows the bedridden Buster through town. Placed dead centre in the long-shot frame, sitting bolt upright in the bed that only a moment before seemed safely moored in a hospital, he finds himself the object of scrutiny on the part of an odd new audience: on either side of him bemused horses gaze from their stalls at the prodigy that has just manifested itself in their stable. Unlike the images in the barber's shop and jail, this lunatic version of a traditional Nativity performs no specific errand for Keaton's plot. It is merely ideal of its kind.

E. Rubinstein, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1975

STEAMBOAT BILL, JR.

Directed by: Chas. F. Reisner

©: Joseph M. Schenck

Production Company: Buster Keaton Productions

Distributed by: United Artists

Presented by: Joseph M. Schenck

Supervised by: Harry Brand

Assistant Director: Sandy Roth

Script/Titles: Carl Harbaugh

Photographed by: Dev Jennings, Bert Haines

Editor: J. Sherman Kell

Technical Director: Fred Gabourie

Assistant Technical Director: Sandy Roth

Stunt Double: Louise Keaton

Cast

Buster Keaton (*Willie Canfield Jr, 'Willie'*)

Ernest Torrence (*William Canfield Sr, 'Steamboat Bill'*)

Marion Byron (*Marion 'Kitty' King*)

Tom Lewis (*Tom Carter, the first mate*)

Tom McGuire (*John James King*)

USA 1928©

71 mins

With Carl Davis score

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**Persona**

Mon 17 May 14:30; Fri 28 May 21:00; Wed 2 Jun 18:10

(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

Mon 28 Jun 21:00

Touch of Evil

Tue 18 May 14:30; Mon 31 May 12:45; Sat 5 Jun 17:50;

Sun 20 Jun 18:15

The Tango Lesson

Tue 18 May 20:45; Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by

So Mayer, author of 'The Cinema of Sally Potter')

Citizen Kane

Wed 19 May 18:00; Sun 30 May 12:40; Mon 21 Jun 20:45

L'eclisse (The Eclipse)

Thu 20 May 14:15; Sat 5 Jun 12:10; Tue 15 Jun 17:50

La Haine

Thu 20 May 17:50; Sat 29 May 21:00; Wed 16 Jun 21:00;

Fri 18 Jun 20:40

The Last Picture Show (Director's Cut)

Fri 21 May 20:30; Mon 31 May 12:50; Mon 7 Jun 17:45

Steamboat Bill, Jr.

Sat 22 May 12:00; Thu 3 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:30

Raging Bull

Sat 22 May 14:40; Sun 30 May 15:30; Tue 1 Jun 17:30

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sat 22 May 21:00; Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30

The Big City (Mahanagar)

Sun 23 May 12:10; Wed 23 Jun 17:40

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Sun 23 May 15:20; Thu 24 Jun 17:40

The Night of the Hunter

Mon 24 May 14:30; Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15

(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

The Killers + pre-recorded intro by Imogen Sara Smith,

author of 'In Lonely Places: Film Noir beyond the City'

Tue 25 May 20:30; Tue 8 Jun 14:30; Wed 23 Jun 17:50

Alice in the Cities (Alice in den Städten)

Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 1 Jun 14:30; Fri 25 Jun 20:45

Eraserhead

Thu 27 May 18:20; Mon 14 Jun 21:00; Thu 24 Jun 21:10

Man Hunt

Fri 28 May 18:10; Sat 12 Jun 16:00; Tue 29 Jun 14:15

Sweet Smell of Success

Fri 4 Jun 15:00; Sun 13 Jun 15:45; Sat 26 Jun 11:40

The Man Who Wasn't There

Fri 4 Jun 17:50; Sun 27 Jun 18:20

The White Ribbon (Das weiße Band)

Sun 6 Jun 18:10; Sat 26 Jun 16:30

Le Doulos + pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau,

King's College London

Mon 7 Jun 14:15; Thu 17 Jun 20:45; Wed 30 Jun 17:45

Bitter Victory

Sun 20 Jun 13:00; Mon 28 Jun 17:55

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES**Ammonite**

From Mon 17 May

Sound of Metal

From Mon 17 May

Nomadland

From Mon 17 May

County Lines

From Fri 21 May

First Cow

From Fri 28 May

After Love

From Fri 4 Jun

Fargo

From Fri 11 Jun

The Reason I Jump

From Fri 18 Jun

Nashville

From Fri 25 Jun

Ultraviolence

From Sat 26 Jun

Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor

Janet Alder

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