



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 95=

The General

‘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 Carl Davis score

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

The General

Sun 1 Jan 12:10; Sun 29 Jan 15:10

The Leopard (Il gattopardo)

Sun 1 Jan 14:10; Thu 5 Jan 18:40; Fri 20 Jan 14:00

Sunset Boulevard

Sun 1 Jan 15:50; Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50

Metropolis

Sun 1 Jan 17:55 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator); Sun 15 Jan 14:40;
Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

L’avventura (The Adventure)

Sun 1 Jan 18:05; Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15

Touki-Bouki

Mon 2 Jan 13:40; Tue 31 Jan 17:40

The Red Shoes

Mon 2 Jan 13:50; Tue 24 Jan 18:05

Once Upon a Time in the West (C’era una volta il West)

Mon 2 Jan 15:20; Sat 7 Jan 17:15; Sun 15 Jan 16:15 BFI IMAX

Get Out

Mon 2 Jan 18:40; Fri 6 Jan 17:50

Pierrot le Fou

Tue 3 Jan 18:10; Wed 4 Jan 20:30; Thu 19 Jan 20:30

My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)

Tue 3 Jan 18:20; Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40

A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé)

Tue 3 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 20:30

Black Girl (La Noire de...)

Tue 3 Jan 20:30; Thu 12 Jan 18:15 (+ intro)

Ugetsu Monogatari

Tue 3 Jan 20:50; Tue 17 Jan 20:30

Madame de...

Wed 4 Jan 14:30; Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural
Programme Manager)

Yi Yi (A One and a Two...)

Wed 4 Jan 18:40; Sun 22 Jan 14:00 (+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film
Programmer, BFI Festivals)

The Shining

Fri 6 Jan 20:10; Tue 10 Jan 20:10; Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX

Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)

Sat 7 Jan 12:10; Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX

Tropical Malady (Sud pralad)

Sat 7 Jan 13:50; Mon 9 Jan 20:40

Histoire(s) du cinema

Sat 7 Jan 16:30

Blue Velvet

Sat 7 Jan 20:30; Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

Sátántangó

Sun 8 Jan 11:15; Sat 21 Jan 13:30

Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau)

Sun 8 Jan 14:45; Sat 21 Jan 17:00

Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)

Sun 8 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

Parasite (Gisaengchung)

Mon 9 Jan 17:50; Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée

Wed 11 Jan 20:30; Mon 23 Jan 18:10

A Matter of Life and Death

Thu 12 Jan 20:40; Sun 22 Jan 11:30

Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

Modern Times

Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian)

Mon 16 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:00

Imitation of Life

Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)

Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)

Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50

Andrei Rublev

Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

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