

The Reception and Exhibition of Buster Keaton in Britain

by Christian Hayes

At the end of his life Buster Keaton experienced a surge of popularity; after thirty years his films were finally in fashion. At the 1965 Venice Film Festival, where a retrospective was being held, he received a twenty minute standing ovation.¹ It was this rediscovery of his films in the sixties that have led many of the silent shorts and features he made between 1920 and 1929 to be seen as classics and cemented Keaton's reputation as an iconic comic star. Yet Keaton himself admitted that it was 'all thirty years too late'.² As an example of how time affects the way in which films are perceived, this belated success contrasts greatly to how they were received upon their original release. Peter Krämer, documenting the formation of Keaton's dour on-screen persona through American sources, tells us that 'Keaton's masterpieces were not very successful commercially' and pins this directly on the bemused reaction of the critics to an actor who reveals no emotion.³ Since Krämer bases his argument upon American sources, I will therefore explore the extent of and reasoning behind Buster Keaton's popularity through an investigation of his reception and exhibition in Britain.

¹ Marion Meade, *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995) p. 301; Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By...* (London: Columbus Books, 1989) p.474

² Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By...*, p.474

³ Peter Krämer, 'The Making of a Comic Star: Buster Keaton and *The Saphead* (1920)' in Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer (eds.), *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004) p.287

The presence of Buster Keaton in the British trade press is a quiet one. *The Bioscope* routinely published reviews of his feature films, most of which were typically positive. For instance, *Our Hospitality* (1923) is described as ‘A really funny comedy of considerable originality both in subject matter and in treatment.’⁴ Yet such a review is complicated by a wider trend affecting the treatment of such comedies in the trade press. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik tell us that ‘there was a great deal of adverse criticism of slapstick comedy in the trade press during the late 1910s and early 1920s’ due to its ‘low cultural standing among the classes Hollywood was seeking to attract and maintain as a regular audience.’⁵ This suggests an inherent discrimination of slapstick comedy that came to fruition through one of two routes: either from the (middle-class) audience to the industry, or from the industry to the audience (as a whole).

A closer look at *The Bioscope* review of *Our Hospitality* reveals such a discrimination through its emphasises upon the more cultural qualities of the film, inadvertently submerging the fact that it is essentially a slapstick comedy. It states, ‘although extremely amusing, these quaint incidents are not too much exaggerated to possess, also, a flavour of genuine historical interest,’⁶ a reassurance that the film is of a cultural value that was not associated with slapstick cinema and that would hopefully resonate with a more sophisticated middle class audience. The review goes on to link the

⁴ *The Bioscope*, January 10 1924, p.43

⁵ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, ‘The Case of Silent Slapstick’ in Frank Krutnik (ed.), *Hollywood Comedians, The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003) p.57

⁶ *The Bioscope*, January 10 1924, p.43

climactic waterfall sequence with that of *Way Down East* (1920), a ‘prestige’ picture with the more ‘prestigious’ star, Lillian Gish, a comparison that is essentially misleading.

The Bioscope review for *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) describes it as ‘rich in absurdities, elaborately mounted, and guaranteed to amuse any class of audience’.⁷ This emphasis upon the film’s appeal to ‘any class of audience’ suggests that the industry was grouping audience demographics in terms of class rather than age or sex, for instance. Therefore an investigation of Buster Keaton’s popularity in the trade press is, I believe, misleading. If the industry, and therefore, the trade press, dealt with the audience in terms of age, there would most likely have been evidence of a greater desire for slapstick. Frederick Palmer tells us in his contemporary *Photoplay Plot Encyclopedia* that the ‘comedy producers’, and therefore the middle-classes, were ‘desirous of polite, plausible situation comedies, preferably founded upon an amusing situation that might very naturally occur in the life of almost any spectator.’⁸ Yet it is hard to believe that younger members of the audience would be interested in ‘polite, plausible situation comedies’ instead of the thrills of slapstick.

Keaton’s films, therefore, are the opposite to what this sophisticated audience was looking for. *The Bioscope* in its *Our Hospitality* review again tries to accommodate this desire for the plausible comedy by describing its incidents as ‘not too much exaggerated.’⁹ Yet William K. Everson tells us that his films ‘often extended into

⁷ *The Bioscope*, May 22 1924, p.39

⁸ Quoted in Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, ‘The Case of Silent Slapstick’ p.57

⁹ *The Bioscope*, January 10 1924, p.43

surrealism'¹⁰ and indeed, from Keaton playing every member of the cast and audience in *The Playhouse* (1921) to being chased down the street by a crowd of prospective wives in *Seven Chances* (1925), Keaton's cinema went firmly against the fashion of the times. One example of a film that was in fashion and, Everson suggests, the film to set the trend, was Ernst Lubitsch's *The Marriage Circle* (1923) of which he writes, 'with its European locale and its light-hearted treatment of marriage, divorce, and affairs...[it] caught on immediately with an audience that believed itself to be sophisticated.'¹¹ Here a crucial reasoning behind this preoccupation with class is suggested: that the audience are associating themselves with the sophistication portrayed on-screen.

This behaviour is illuminated by a revealing sociological study called *British Cinema and their Audiences* that was published in 1948, collating testimonials from readers of *Pictures and the Picturegoer* about their taste in films. It concluded that:

Film tastes depend *entirely* on education, education in the widest sense. Heritage, family, background, friends, and type and quality of school shape the early film taste. In addition of course, apart from the educational standards, the social status of the cinemagoer is important for a correct assessment of film preferences.¹²

¹⁰ William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) p.273

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.268

¹² J.P. Mayer, *British Cinema and their Audiences* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1948) p.151

That this study was published twenty years after Keaton's films and after these reviews from *The Bioscope* only serves to highlight the importance that was placed upon status and class in British society, but more importantly, it reveals that taste indicated class. This is perhaps the very reason for the negation of the unsophisticated.

By January 1927 this ideology had permeated *The Bioscope* so deeply that it led to the following negative review of *The General* (1926), now seen as Keaton's greatest film. It describes it as an 'Amusing comedy on quiet lines, rather long drawn out... [with] very little story...all the action takes place on the engine; the staging is therefore lacking in variety'¹³ but despite this, quite typically of *The Bioscope*, it classifies the film as an 'Excellent comedy for first class houses'¹⁴ in order to sell it as best it can, corresponding with what Everson calls 'a grudging praise'¹⁵ from the critics of Keaton's films. But the review also proves to be inaccurate, indicating a positioning of slapstick as second rate to the more 'serious' films of the time. It writes, 'Keaton has provided himself with a better acting part than he has since *Grandma's Boy*',¹⁶ a Harold Lloyd five-reeler, a film unconnected with Keaton. This mistake emphasises the disregard for Keaton as well as slapstick comedy more generally. Due to this disregarding, we therefore only gain an eclipsed view of Buster Keaton's popularity with audiences.

Perhaps even more telling of the disregarding of Buster Keaton at the time is the fact that no advertisements for his films were printed amongst the pages of *The Bioscope*,

¹³ *The Bioscope*, January 27 1927, p.37

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Everson, *American Silent Film* p.273

¹⁶ *The Bioscope*, January 27 1927, p.37

nor indeed, a single image of Keaton himself. The same can be said for the fan magazine *Pictures and Picturegoer*, and this would suggest a definite unpopularity of Keaton as a star. Even when Keaton marries Natalie Talmadge, sister of stars Constance and Norma, in May 1921,¹⁷ it remains unreported. However, *Picturegoer* is a magazine that had a readership primarily made up of women with an emphasis upon leading romantic stars as well as fashion and beauty, and when Everson tells us that, ‘Keaton, with his usually helpless and rather stupid heroines, undoubtedly alienated a large percentage of the female audience,’¹⁸ it is unsurprising that Keaton is not prominent within such a magazine. Therefore, if one was to solely look in the trade press for a picture of the reception of Buster Keaton and his films, one would certainly get a picture of Keaton as absent from the film scene at the time. However, looking at actual local exhibition of Keaton’s films provides us with a different picture.

The Globe cinema in Acton, local historian R.N.G. Rowlands tells us, ‘opened on Easter Sunday 1921’ and ‘made history as one of the first super-cinemas; with seating for 2,500 it was for a short time the biggest in Europe.’¹⁹ Its scale is signified by the description of the musical accompaniment: ‘A large and efficient orchestra accompanied “the big picture”, and organ music enriched the rest of the programme.’²⁰ It is very significant that this was *the* cinema to be at since this was the main cinema where Buster Keaton was shown. Apart from a brief record of the short *The Goat* (1921) being played

¹⁷ Meade, *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase*, p.108

¹⁸ Everson, *American Silent Film* p.271

¹⁹ R.N.G. Rowlands, *Acton from a to z* (London: London Borough of Ealing, 1997) p.21

²⁰ Ibid.

at The Crown, Acton, a smaller cinema, in 1922,²¹ and later simultaneous programming of Keaton's films at the Broadway Palladium in Ealing, it was The Globe that was the first to show Keaton's films and to continue regular screenings of them.

Indeed, 1924 was *the* year for Buster Keaton in Acton. The first film of his to be shown at The Globe was *Our Hospitality* which began on Monday May 19th 1924 and played all week as the main feature.²² The programme headlines 'Buster Keaton' in bold capital letters and the very printing of his name above the title suggests that Keaton was already known to the public by 1924. There is evidence enough to suggest that this showing of *Our Hospitality* was particularly successful since The Globe then goes on to play a new Buster Keaton short every other week from September for the next ten weeks: *The Electric House* (1922), *The Love Nest* (1923), *The Balloonatic* (1923), *The Frozen North* (1922) and *Daydreams* (1922).²³ The Globe would change its billing half way through the week, and Keaton's films would routinely fill the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday slots. Such programming suggests that the frequency of attendance was so high that it demanded a mid-week change of programme and therefore many people must have attended the Keaton screenings. The frequent screening of Keaton's shorts, however, may have merely been a lead up to *Sherlock Jr.*, the main feature that would play all week from December 8th 1924.²⁴ This also heralds the first time we see an image of Keaton as

²¹ *The Acton Gazette and Express*, Friday, July 14 1922

²² *Ibid.*, May 16 1924, p.3

²³ *Ibid.*, September 19, 1924, p.5; October 3, 1924, p.7; October 17, 1924, p.7; October 31, 1924, p.7; November 14, 1924, p.7

²⁴ *Ibid.*, December 5, 1924, p.7

part of the cinema advertisement in the newspaper, showing Keaton looking characteristically expressionless.²⁵ Also we find a headline within the newspaper text itself reading, ‘140 Laughs in 70 Minutes’, supposedly the amount of laughs that the film contains.²⁶

For the years following 1924, whenever Keaton’s films are released, they are played at The Globe. A year later *Seven Chances* plays for a week in November 1925 and at this point is the first time there is evidence of Keaton’s films being played simultaneously in adjacent boroughs.²⁷ From now on we know that the Broadway Palladium in Ealing maintained the same billing as The Globe, most likely due to an affiliation between the two cinemas, but also suggests that Keaton is popular enough to be played even more widely. Most interesting is the screening of *Go West* (1925) at The Globe in April 1926 since only a month later it returns to the screen as top billing ‘by special request’.²⁸ The fact that the audience called the film back for extra showings suggests a definite popularity of Keaton, a popularity that was not evident in the trade press. When *The General* plays in April 1927 it is also listed as playing at the Shepard’s Bush Pavillion, suggesting an even wider exhibition of Keaton around London.²⁹

It is therefore most likely that Keaton was more popular than the trade press would have you believe. It is possible that the denial of slapstick comedy had a very real

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ (*The Acton Gazette and Express* becomes:) *Acton Gazette and West London Post*, April 9, 1926, p.4

²⁸ Ibid., July 9, 1926, p.7

²⁹ Ibid., April 15, 1927, p.6

negative effect upon the reception of Keaton's films, and therefore Keaton as a star, in Britain. However a conflicting perspective arises when looking at patterns of exhibition of Keaton's films. It would appear as though Keaton's films nevertheless had a steady audience as is evident by the steady screening of his films at The Globe. Therefore even if Keaton's films were not fashionable they nevertheless managed to find an audience. Through the negation of slapstick in the trade press, any audience that slapstick may have had becomes hidden. A closer analysis of Keaton's reception in Britain would entail the uncovering of Keaton's audience through a look at box office and attendance figures of local screenings. Due to my findings of the frequent exhibition of Keaton's films, I am certain that through such an investigation a clearer picture of Buster Keaton's popularity would be revealed: that there was a larger audience for his films than other sources would have you believe.

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