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Puzzled Puss
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Buster Keaton: A Filmmaker's Life
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I knew Buster Keaton. I carried his ukulele to Grand Central Station, where he and my father, Bert Lahr, were boarding a train to Toronto to make a film called *Ten Girls Ago*. It was 1962; I was 21, old enough to know I was walking with two comedy legends. In my mind's eye, I can still see the platform and the waiting silver carriage. I remember my surprise at Keaton's gravelly voice and the swank black cigarette holder that seemed out of place in his rumpled forlorn face. There was mischief in their banter. These old vaudevillians were back on the road again, comrades in comic arms, doing what they had done from the beginning of their long peripatetic careers, surviving by their wits.

From the shot breakdown of the script Keaton and Dad figured, rightly as it turned out, that the film could never be completed. It didn't matter to them. Paydays were getting fewer and farther between. Keaton's stone face was now advertising Alka-Seltzer; Dad's bow-wow bluster was pitching Lay's Potato Chips. Down the decades showbusiness had morphed as radically as their bodies. Between them, they'd logged more than 120 years finding funny. By contrast, the film's star, Dion DiMucci, he of Dion and the Belmonts ('Run around Sue', 'The Wanderer') had been performing for five. They had come of age at the beginning of the 20th century; their kinetic low comedy incarnated its dynamism. Two generations later, the Republic was winded; manic hijinks had lost its prestige and its wallop. The demise of surreal mayhem had been hastened first in the early 1930s by the naturalism of talking pictures, then, twenty years later, by the even wordier TV sitcoms on even smaller screens. The emerging new comic style was called 'stand-up', a term whose very name suggested immobility.

Low comedy may have been lost by then to popular American entertainment, but it had been found as high art by the international theatrical avant-garde. The model for Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty turned out to be the Marx Brothers and their 'hymn to anarchy'. Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics and his call for actors to adopt the amazements of the fairground booth drew inspiration and example from Charlie Chaplin. ('In the contemporary theatre,' Meyerhold wrote, 'the comedian has been replaced by "the educated reader".') Brecht's Epic Theatre and his 'alienation effect' had their origins in the artificiality of the German cabaret clown Valentin. Even Samuel Beckett deconstructed the slapstick low comedians for his tragi-comic avatars. 'I never realised that I was doing anything but trying to make people laugh when I threw my custard pies and took my pratfalls,' Keaton said, but he starred in Beckett's movie *Film* (1965) nevertheless. For his part, in 1956, Lahr debuted Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* on Broadway.

In the spectacle they made of themselves, these clowns brought with them unexamined emotional baggage, which was part of their droll and poignant aura – a shadow which neither they nor the society they entertained could quite name. Their bewilderment took their capering beyond merriment into metaphor. In my father's case, his role as the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz* condensed both his stage prowess and his panic, and ensured his place in the nation's collective unconscious. Keaton's stoic stone face and the 24 hours of peerless silent comedy he built around it as actor, writer and director went even further. (His oeuvre includes thirteen features and more than thirty shorts.) Keaton had been on the stage longest, risen the highest, fallen the furthest, and, thanks to the medium of

film which preserved his artistry, left the most indelible legacy. 'He was,' Orson Welles said, 'as we're now beginning to realise, the greatest of all the clowns in the history of the cinema.'

Keaton's comic outline was as carefully judged as his pratfalls. On his first day in front of a camera, to separate himself from the other slapstick Merry Andrews, Keaton – 'The Boy Who Can't Be Damaged' as he was sometimes billed in vaudeville – chose a pork-pie hat, which he fortified to signal the same immutability. 'I took a good Stetson and cut it down, then I stiffened the brim with sugar water.' His comic formula was equally crisp and canny: 'Think slow, act fast,' he said. Books about him generally reverse that equation. Walter Kerr's *The Silent Clowns* (1975) tried to match Keaton's torrential invention with his own prolix showboating; Rudi Blesh's *Keaton* (1966) had the imprimatur of the master as well as his collaboration but no equivalent grace. Both Blesh's biography and Tom Dardis's *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down* (1979) are flat-footed.

Keaton, who had only one day of formal education, was a man of few words, many of them mumbled. Even his own so-called autobiography, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (1960), co-written with Charles Samuels, bowdlerised the evocative sludge of his talk and his harrowing, sodden years in the wilderness. Keaton couldn't explain himself or his context. Words weren't his language; he spoke in action. In one of many piquant anecdotes in James Curtis's encyclopedic new biography, on hearing the thumps as Keaton repeatedly threw himself against their common office wall at Twentieth Century Fox, the film editor Gene Fowler stuck his head into Keaton's room. 'What are you doing?!' 'I'm writing,' Keaton replied.

Keaton didn't like to read books, but even in his teens, a star turn on the Orpheum vaudeville circuit, he'd mastered the art of reading an audience. As a hyperactive one-year-old, the first of three Keaton siblings, Buster had accidentally tottered on stage in 1896 and interrupted the tent show act of Joe and Myra Keaton. His lanky, brash, hot-tempered father was a high-kicking acrobat and blackfaced monologist; his diminutive mother sang and played the saxophone. 'He was always in the way of the stagehands, and after getting hurt several times the idea struck me to make him up in a counterpart of myself and just let him stand around,' Joe Keaton recalled. 'He made a hit and by the time he was three years of age we found that he was capable of doing an act all by himself.' Keaton's school was his father; the flips, shoulder rolls and pratfalls were learned from rough-housing with Dad. Myra called these sessions 'Buster's story hour'. While horsing around, father and son made the acrobatic discoveries from which they built the narrative for their sensational act. Before Buster's arrival in front of paying customers, the Keatons'

double act was going nowhere; afterwards, dressed as Joe's pint-sized mini-me in whiteface, fright wig, whiskers and slap shoes, Buster's knockabout carry-on was the family's ticket to the big time. The Three Keatons became a star attraction. Buster's first billing, according to Curtis's super-sleuthing, was at eleven months.

By the time he was five, to get around legal protocol preventing the theatrical exploitation of children, Buster was advertised as 'the smallest real comedian'. ('The law didn't say a word about taking me by the nape of the neck and throwing me through a piece of scenery,' Keaton said later.) His name got top billing, with 'assisted by Joe and Myra Keaton' underneath in smaller type. As the set-piece of probably the roughest act in vaudeville – 'Keeps the audience roaring from the moment he is dragged on stage until his exit hanging to his father's leg,' a critic in New York wrote – Buster was earning his own pay cheque and his own theatrical star. 'Keep Your Eye on the Kid' ballyhooed ads for their act, which raised the idea of child abuse to the level of art. 'My father used to carry me on stage and drop me,' Keaton said. 'After explaining to the audience that I liked it, he would pick me up and throw me at a piece of scenery. Sometimes knocking the scenery down with me and sometimes not. He would often throw me as far as thirty feet.'

Advertised in the early days as 'the human mop', Joe literally wiped the floor with his son, who had suitcase handles sewn on the back of his jacket for better heaving. Over the years, as Keaton got bigger and the improvised violence more furious, Buster was dropped into the orchestra and once hurled over the New Haven footlights at obstreperous Yalies in the front row, breaking a student's nose.

Another time, one of Joe's flying kicks left Buster unconscious for eighteen hours. 'Neither mom nor pop was demonstrative,' Keaton said. He didn't have much of a childhood, except for a couple of months' lay-off each year at their Michigan family retreat. 'The old man would never let us out of work. I wanted to go to school, and he wouldn't let me.' The stage was Keaton's on the job training not just for comedy but for life. His preternatural passivity and the face that became its emblem were beaten into him. 'If something tickled me and I started to grin, the old man would hiss, "Face, Face!" That meant freeze the puss. The longer I held it, why, if we got a laugh the blank pan or the puzzled puss would double it.' Keaton went on: 'He kept after me, never let up, and in a few years it was automatic. Then when I'd step on stage or in front of a camera, I *couldn't* smile.' The vaudeville routine was far more gruelling than a modern public can understand: two or three shows a day, shifting cities two or three times a week, staying on the road for as many as 48 weeks a year.

'Sweet Jesus, our act!' Keaton recalled of their vaudeville glory days. 'What a beautiful thing it had been. That beautiful timing we had – beautiful to see, beautiful to do. The sound of the laughs, solid, right there where you knew they would be.' But, by 1917, Keaton had grown into a handsome, lithe young man, and Joe had grown into a full-blown abusive alcoholic. 'Not like the old man anymore. Mad most of the time, and could look at you as if he didn't know you' Keaton said. 'When I smelled whiskey across the stage, I got braced ... There were times when it was him or me, but we had to keep it funny.'

On 8 January 1917 Keaton finally called it quits with his father and with the act. By mid-January he was in New York with an offer to star on Broadway in *The Passing Show of 1917* at $250 a week (his weekly cut with The Three Keatons was $300, about $10,000 in today's money). Two days before rehearsals began, at the suggestion of an old vaudeville friend who was working at Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle's Comique Studios on 48th Street in Manhattan, where a new two-reeler was about to start filming, Keaton went along to do a bit in *The Butcher Boy*, which he shot in one take. 'From the first day on I hadn't a doubt that I was going to love working in the movies. I did not even ask what I'd be paid to work in Arbuckle's slapstick comedies. I didn't much care,' Keaton said. He went on: 'I'd fallen in love with the movies – with the cameras, with the rushes, the action, the slam-bang – with all of it.' Keaton broke his Broadway contract and signed on at $40 a week to act in the 'flickers', as Joe Keaton dismissed the new-fangled medium. 'I had no more idea than anyone else at the time what the growth of pictures was to be. One feature of the films did appeal to me and that was that it would mean staying in one place for a while. I had been travelling on the road for over twenty years.'

After three Arbuckle two-reelers, Keaton had been raised to $100 a week; by then he was Arbuckle's boon companion and his assistant director. (By 1920, when Arbuckle moved to Paramount, Keaton took over the Comique company, which was renamed Buster Keaton Productions, in a contract which paid him $1000 a week for eight two-reelers a year, as well as 25 per cent of the profits.) The motion picture camera turned the world into Keaton's playpen. 'The camera allowed you to show your audience the real thing,' he said, 'real trains, horses and wagons, snowstorms, floods. Nothing you could stand on, feel, or see was beyond the range of the camera.' For Keaton, a film location was a field day: 'You only had to turn me loose on the set and I'd have material in two minutes, because I'd been doing it all my life. I turned out to be Arbuckle's whole writing staff for gags.'

By the time he directed and starred in his first independent two-reeler, the ingenious *One Week* (1920), slapstick comedy was holding up a funhouse mirror to the central discombobulating fact of the new century: industrial momentum. 'Prosperity never before imagined,' Henry Adams wrote in 1907, 'power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid.' Motion pictures – 24 projected frames a second which gave the illusion of movement – were themselves a wonder whose spell was cast by speed; and speed was what the slapstick cinematic chase both celebrated and satirised. Of all the great silent clowns, no one was swifter than Keaton. Over the next decade, he sprinted from a swarm of eager brides and an avalanche of boulders (*Seven Chances*), from an entire police force (*Cops*), and from three hundred head of cattle stampeding down a Los Angeles main street (*Go West*). He sometimes even found himself an extension of engines, propelled on the cattle guard of a locomotive (*The General*), a paddle wheel (*Day Dreams*) or the handlebars of a runaway motorcycle (*Sherlock Jr*). At a certain speed all things disintegrate, but Keaton's grace note and his good news was that he somehow remained intact. His popularity was immediate, 'the key to the big money vaults' as one early trade ad boasted to distributors.

Keaton's antics trapped something more than moolah, however, something harder to see amid the hurly-burly of America's competitive sweepstakes: the melancholy behind the striving. Keaton, as James Agee wrote, 'carried a face as still and sad as a daguerreotype through some of the most preposterously ingenious and visually satisfying physical comedy ever invented'. Comedy was best, according to Keaton, when it aroused the audience's curiosity, which included, in his case, the collision of improbable event with his opaque personality. 'If the audience wanted to feel sorry for me, that was up to them,' he said. 'I didn't ask for it in action.'

As an entrepreneur of the extraordinary, Keaton was almost all show and no tell: 'The average picture used 240 titles, and the most I ever used was 56.' Prose was no match for the poetics of gesture. The super sauce of Keaton's comic thrills was immediacy; his prowess had to be seen to be believed. 'For a real effect and to convince people that it's on the level, *do* it on the level,' Keaton once told Arbuckle. 'No faking.' He practised the authenticity he preached, doing all his own stunts. ('We get it in one shot, or we throw out the gag,' he often said about the riskiest of his daredevil antics.) Derring-do was his stock in trade: an ordinary man transformed by the pressure of events into a surreal body. In *Cops*, for instance, Keaton grabs the back of a passing trolley and seems to fly out of frame. When he springboards from one building to another in *The Three Ages* he mistimes the leap, dangling from a windowsill before falling, a miscue that fed an even bigger series

of sight gags as we see him catapulted through an awning, a firehouse and on to a departing fire truck. When a supporting wire broke while filming *Our Hospitality*, he was swept down a cascading river, almost drowning for the shot. Of all his prodigious physical feats, the most breathtaking is one where Keaton is standing still. In *Sherlock Jr,* a hurricane blows down the entire front of a house over Buster, who passes neatly through a window frame with only two inches' clearance on either side. ('Two extra women on the sidelines fainted and the cameramen turned their backs as they ground out the film,' Keaton recalled.) Amid the flying debris of the storm, his face pale and vacant as the moon, Buster remains confounded but indefatigable, a totem of ambivalent survival.

'I used to daydream an awful lot,' he said. 'I've done that so often in pictures. I could get carried away and visualise all the fairylands in the world.' The comedies have the surreal logic of being in a dream awake. Keaton mined the world around him for laughs, including the means of his own production. 'He began by calling direct attention to the camera – to its lens, to its frame, to the flat screen on which its images would be projected,' Walter Kerr wrote. Even in his first starring two-reeler, *One Week*, Keaton made film itself part of the joke. As Buster's new bride reaches out of the bath in their zany DIY house, a hand is suddenly put over the camera's intrusive artificial eye to preserve her 'privacy'. The laugh is about tact; but the design and the timing of the gag is another kind of tact, the fancy footwork of Keaton's clowning delivering the knockout punch.

Keaton's improvisational way of working left a lot to chance and to the unconscious. 'One thing we never did when making our silent comedies was put the story down on paper,' he said. 'That's the interesting thing about comedies. You never can tell how they are going to turn out or what they will be named until after they have been finished. Comedies are different from dramas. The detail has to be worked out as the filming of the story progresses.' In exploring the frontiers of the marvellous, sleights of cinematic hand became part of Keaton's arsenal.

In *Sherlock Jr*, for instance, as the eponymous projectionist dozes in his booth, double exposure allowed Keaton to conjure a doppelgänger, who emerges from Sherlock's body, rushes down the aisle, clambers over the orchestra pit and walks into the melodrama on screen, only to be thrown out of the story and back into the stalls by the screen villain. (Woody Allen appropriated the conceit in both *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and his short story 'The Kugelmass Episode', where the narrator, a professor of literature, finds himself trapped with Madame Bovary and visible to the novel's readers.) Keaton's films are filled with wonder at the camera's ability to mix fact with fantasy. In *The Playhouse* (1921), which could be

seen as a metaphor for Keaton's own obsessive enterprise, he replicates himself variously as the conductor, orchestra, actors, stagehands and audience. 'This fellow Keaton seems to be the whole show,' Buster complains in a title to the woman next to him, who, of course, is Buster in drag.

To tease both the audience and the new medium, many of Keaton's sight gags – 'impossible gags' as he called them – use trompe l'oeil. Buster paints a hook on a wall, then hangs his pork-pie hat on it (*The High Sign*, 1921). Buster paddles a canoe on a swift current and spots a rabbit on the shore. To get closer, he hoiks up the canoe to his waist and walks towards it. He takes out a shotgun but, seeing the rabbit has babies, thinks better of it and continues paddling downstream (*The Balloonatic*, 1923). Pursued by thugs, Buster jumps headfirst through an old lady's belly and disappears (*Sherlock Jr*).

'When we made pictures, we ate, slept and dreamed them,' Keaton said. On screen and off, he lived in his own Superbia. 'Keaton at home was no different from Keaton in films,' his friend Louise Brooks wrote. He lived like a playful pasha. Money was no object and of no account. He took scant interest in business, in his celebrity, or latterly in his children. To please the regal whims of the actress Natalie Talmadge, whom he married in 1921, Keaton built one of Hollywood's most magnificent mansions: a two-storey five-bedroom Italianate villa which housed six servants, including a cook, butler, chauffeur and governess for their two sons. He had married into the serene and secure Talmadge matriarchy, ruled by their pragmatic mother, 'Peg', who used the house as her headquarters. 'There was never any "make, make, make" when he got home,' Brooks wrote, which 'left Buster in creative freedom'.

Keaton's home was another set on which he could cavort. 'He went about each project with the same adorable conviction of a good little boy doing a good thing in the best possible way,' Brooks said.

After the most idiotically inspired dives off the springboard into the pool, he would go to the patio to barbecue the most perfect steaks. Indoors in the living room, above a high balcony, it had pleased him to rig a red velvet curtain on which he could swing down across the room to the top of a grand piano. When ... he played thousand dollar bridge games against such combustible opponents as Sam Goldwyn, he was still having a grave good time, confident that he would win. And he always did.

Then, in June 1928, at the coaxing of his producer (and brother-in-law) Joe Schenck, Keaton closed down his independent production company and signed with MGM for an eye-watering $3000 a week. His comedy competition warned him against the deal. 'They'll warp your judgment,' Charlie Chaplin told him. Harold Lloyd was even more blunt: 'It's not your gang. You'll lose.' But Keaton was fiercely loyal to Schenck, who assured him that his brother, Nick, who ran the business side of MGM, would protect him. In his first two silent movies for MGM, *The Cameraman* and *Spite Marriage*, it looked briefly as if the new arrangement might work. Once Keaton started making sound movies, however, the game changed. 'In every picture it got tougher ... There were too many cooks. Everybody in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was in my gag department, including Irving Thalberg,' Keaton said. 'They were joke happy. They didn't look for action; they were looking for funny things to say. You just keep fighting that.' He had lost his leverage. If he had bothered to read MGM's weasel-worded contract he would have known he was signing his artistic death warrant. 'Artist to be *consulted* as to opposite lead and secondary characters of importance,' it read. '*But producer's decision final*.'

All Keaton's comedies made money; but his 15:1 shooting ratio was just too wasteful and his process too inefficient for the Metro bean counters. 'You had to requisition a toothpick in triplicate,' he said. Instead of following his comic instincts, Keaton now had to follow a script; instead of a creative 'huddle system' in which, as he put it, 'We all get our heads together ... then we figure out what will come next,' he had to contend with executives who knew nothing about comedy but everything about the MGM business model. 'Under MGM's system each craftsman was beholden to the head of his department rather than to me,' Keaton said. He was no longer his own greatest invention but a corporate creation. He'd lost control of his comic persona and, even worse, his playfulness. Discovery was taken out of his process, and with it the joy of moviemaking.

On his own, Keaton had been an innovator; within the studio system, he was an employee. 'If they had known I was still essentially a slapstick comedian they would not have bought for me the sort of stories they did,' he said.

Instead, MGM repackaged 'Buster' as 'Elmer', transforming him at a stroke from dynamo to doofus. 'In the translation from Buster to Elmer,' Dana Stevens writes in *Camera Man*, 'Keaton's slightness of build became a pitiable masculinity; his stoic reserve turned into dull incomprehension; and his characters' heroic struggle to master the material conditions of their world (technology, the laws of physics, the elemental forces of weather) was reduced to mere clumsiness.'*

Faced with his character's lack of agency on screen and the lack of affection at home, Keaton retreated to his baseball (the 'MGM Lions'), his bungalow ('Keaton's Kennel') and his bottle (he averaged a bottle of whiskey a day). He was sometimes sozzled on set, and almost always off it. Louise Brooks recalled one drunken night at Keaton's Kennel when Buster took a baseball bat to the glass panes of his bookcases, a symbolic gesture she saw as 'trying to break out of his cage, escape to creation. But he never made it. He had lost his magic power over booze.'

In 1932, Natalie Keaton, who had long since banished Keaton to another wing of the mansion, divorced her alcoholic husband. Keaton lost his wife, his home and his children, whose surnames were legally changed to Talmadge. (He wasn't reunited with his sons for eight years.) 'About all I had left when my wife obtained an interlocutory decree on 8 August were my clothes and the third car,' he wrote. 'I did not even have a place to live.' Then in February 1933, when Louis B. Mayer gave him his cards 'for good and sufficient cause', Keaton was stripped of everything but his self-loathing. What followed were a few unmoored years of benders and breakdowns.

In 1940, Keaton Productions Inc. was dissolved; his life as a filmmaker was over. In the same year, the 21-year-old dancer Eleanor Norris became Keaton's third wife. (His second was a brief union with a nurse he'd met in rehab.) Keaton seemed to have outlived his art and his fame; but, at 44, he had found love. His life of emotional fulfilment had begun. 'I think I have had the happiest and luckiest of lives,' he said. 'Maybe this is because I never expected as much as I got. What I expected was hard knocks. I always expected to have to work hard. Maybe harder than other people because of my lack of education. And when the knocks came I felt it was no surprise,' he said. 'I find it impossible to feel sorry for myself. I count the years of defeat and grief and disappointment, and their percentage is so minute that it continually surprises and delights me.' Keaton began his fightback as a $100-a-week gag man and troubleshooter at MGM, working up comic business for others but no longer for himself. Only the advent of television in 1949 brought Keaton back as an actor.

In the following decades – he died of lung cancer in 1966 – Keaton put the memorable wreckage of his face in front of the camera in a few outstanding film cameos. He was the bridge-playing silent screen 'waxwork' in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*; the washed-up old vaudevillian in Charlie Chaplin's backstage melodrama *Limelight*; the symbolic solitary 'O' in Samuel Beckett's *Film*. (When Keaton suggested doing a pencil sharpening bit, the director,

Alan Schneider, said: 'We don't normally pad Beckett's material.' But Beckett's material *was* Keaton.) 'What I think it means is a man can keep away from everybody but he can't get away from himself,' Keaton said. Certainly, he couldn't.

He found ways of putting his saturnine slapstick in front of the paying customers. He had some good comic innings at the Cirque Medrano in Paris; and in the mid-1950s Paramount paid him $50,000 for the rights to make the sensationally inaccurate *The Buster Keaton Story*, enough for him to buy an ivy-covered farmhouse on a single acre in the San Fernando Valley – the 'ranch' as he called it – where he and Eleanor planted lemon, peach and apricot trees, made a vegetable garden, and lived among dogs, cats and a dozen Rhode Island Red chickens whose henhouse he built to resemble a schoolhouse with flagpole.

Old clowns, like old soldiers, don't die, they just fade away. But in Keaton's case, not without glory. In 1960, he was awarded an Academy Award for his lifetime's achievement. He lived long enough to see his films restored and his comic star resurgent. But his real accomplishment was to achieve gratitude. 'It would be ridiculous of me to complain,' he said. He had a life as well as a career: his ukulele, his animals, his gardening, his inventions – including a model railroad track he'd constructed that ran from his garage workshop to the kitchen to the backyard. Its cars transported snacks to the poolside guests, and the caboose carried Alka-Seltzer.

He remained playful, poetic and sweet. At the beginning of each day, Keaton would raise the flag in front of his henhouse, and lower it at night. 'The chickens seem to like it,' he said.