

Excerpt From:
Buster Keaton's American Life
by Greg Lam

EXT. THEATRE - NIGHT

“The Navigator” is in lights on the marquee.

A long line of customers stream in, put their money down.

INT. MOVIE THEATRE

The crowd laughs at Buster, who has a small cannon which has gotten tangled and tied to his foot. Each time he moves, the cannon follows. He can't get out of its way.

INT. STUDIO OFFICES - DAY

JOE SCHENCK counts a pile of money. He turns to Buster, sitting on a couch next to him, and asks:

JOE

“So, Buster. What's next?”

Buster just turns and takes out a picture and hands it to Schenck. It's a framed portrait of him standing in front of a civil war era train engine. It is, of course, the train from “The General.”

EXT. ON LOCATION IN OREGON - DAY

Buster and MARION MACK (22), his leading lady in the film, are in the engine car of a locomotive which, in the movie, is running frantically from a Union train. Buster is in a gray Confederate uniform. He drives the train and motions to Marion to feed more wood into the furnace.

Marion takes a minuscule splinter of wood and feeds it into the furnace. Hardly enough to make a bit of difference.

Buster is incredulous. He plays along, finds an even smaller splinter and hands it to Marion. She puts that in, too.

After a beat, Buster starts choking Marion. Then he stops and starts kissing her.

While kissing her, he opens his eyes wide and suddenly breaks away from her. He yells.

TITLE

“Cut! Cut! Stop the camera! Stop the trains!”

Marion is bewildered. The train stops. So does a train on a parallel track which holds the cameras. A couple dozen crew men ride the two trains, operating cameras and equipment.

Panicked, Marion speaks to Buster, who stares out intensely.

TITLE

“Buster? What’s wrong? What happened?”

Buster points out into the distance.

All she sees is an open field.

From underneath a pile of wood, Buster pulls out a bat, a glove, and a baseball. He yells to his crew.

TITLE

“Break time!”

Buster leads his excited crew out to the field to play a game of baseball. Everyone swirls past Marion, who is exasperated.

TITLE

Shooting “The General” in Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Military music plays for the next few scenes - civil war battle anthems.

A formation of Oregon National Guard members stand in military formation while Buster, in a civil war uniform, paces and makes a speech like a war general.

TITLE

“So real it hurts!”

Buster gives a yell and the Guard members respond in unison.

Buster points his sword forward. The sword blade flies out of the hilt. Nevertheless, the Guard members march forward.

INT. CHANGING ROOM

The Guard members change into blue Union uniforms.

EXT. ON LOCATION IN OREGON

The Guard members march as Union soldiers from right to left on the screen.

INT. CHANGING ROOM

The Guard members change into gray Confederate uniforms.

EXT. ON LOCATION IN OREGON

The Guard members march as Confederate soldiers from left to right on the screen.

INT. CHANGING ROOM

The Guard members change into blue Union uniforms.

EXT. ON LOCATION IN OREGON

In a battle scene, the Guard members as Union soldiers fire from left to right on the screen.

INT. CHANGING ROOM

The Guard members change into gray Confederate uniforms.

EXT. ON LOCATION IN OREGON

In a battle scene, the Guard members as Confederate soldiers fire from right to left on the screen.

Buster strolls into the middle of the elaborate battle scene. Yells.

TITLE

“Cut!”

The Guard members stop shooting. Buster yells.

TITLE

“Ten hut!”

The Guard members stand at attention. Buster yells.

TITLE

“Company dismissed!”

The Guard members march away. Buster puffs his chest out proudly.

Joe Keaton, now 50 or so, walks to Buster, puts his arm around him. He’s dressed as a Union General. Buster speaks.

TITLE

“So, Pop. Do you think movies will last, now?”

Joe smiles, pats Buster on the shoulder.

TITLE

Meanwhile... in Hollywood.

INT. EXECUTIVE OFFICE - DAY

JOE SCHENCK (45) pores over rows of numbers written on a spreadsheet. On top is written “The General - Production Budget.”

On the sheet, columns are crossed off and written over repeatedly. Schenck tears at his hair in frustration. Joe turns to Lou Anger and says:

SCHENCK

“We have to get this budget under control.”

He grabs his coat and his hat and walks out of the office.

EXT. ROCK RIVER BRIDGE - DAY

Buster is shouting through a megaphone, setting up a shot.

They are at the Rock River Bridge set. The bridge is about 50 yards long and wooden. Soldiers creep forward left to right across the river as the bridge is set on fire.

Schenck comes charging up to Buster, waving a copy of the budget at him. Buster shoos him away, calling to a stagehand and yelling instructions.

Schenck once again waves the budget in Buster’s face. Buster takes it, folds it once, twice, three times into a tiny packet, and then puts it away into his costume. Buster then shouts more commands to his crew.

Schenck once again tries to get Buster’s attention. Frustrated, Buster sits Schenck down in a crowd of spectators, local residents there to see this shot.

As Buster is occupied with Schenck, the action takes place.

A train comes onto the bridge from left to right. It reaches halfway across the bridge and then FALLS THROUGH the weakened bridge, crashing into the river.

The spectators applaud the spectacular shot.

Buster turns, sees that the action has already occurred, scratches his head.

Schenck takes out a piece of paper. He does some quick calculations.

Buster calls to a couple of cameramen. They salute and give a thumbs-up sign. Buster sighs with relief. He calls through his megaphone.

TITLE

“Cut!”

The soldiers and extras relax and head back to their quarters.

Schenck goes to talk to Buster. He shows him his calculations.

TITLE

“Do you realize that was the most expensive shot in the history of film?
What if it didn’t work?”

Buster shrugs Schenck off.

This makes Schenck even angrier. Buster tries to calm him.

TITLE

“Don’t worry, Joe. *The General* will be my best film yet.”

EXT. NEWSSTAND IN HOLLYWOOD - DAY

Joe Schenck buys a number of newspapers and scans for news about how *The General* will be received.

He scans down into the text of some stories.

The New York Times: “...not nearly as good as previous efforts...”

Variety: “...far from funny...”

Life: “...bad taste...”

Joe holds his head in disbelief.

TITLE

Meanwhile, on the home front.

INT. KEATON MANSION - BEDROOM HALL - NIGHT

Buster saunters into his wife’s bedroom, closing the door behind him.

After a moment, he is THROWN out of the room. The door slams shut behind him.

He gets up, tries the knob. The door is locked. He POUNDS on the door. He tries to shove it open. The door is too solid, and he goes rebounding to the ground.

He gives up trying to get in and YELLS through the door.

TITLE

“Alright, Natalie! I won’t bother you, anymore! But I’m not going without sex, you understand?”

Buster’s sons, JIMMY (5) and BOB (3) walk out of their bedroom in their pajamas, awakened by the noise. Buster gives them a little wave, and then YELLS through the bedroom again.

TITLE

“If I can’t get it here, I’ll go elsewhere!”

Buster turns, starts to walk away, and then remembers to shoo the kids back to bed.

INT. STAGE SET - DAY

The stage crew works on a large brick facade of a house.

Buster reads a copy of *Variety* while sitting besides Eddie Mannix. A headline asks: “Sound in Movies?” Buster speaks.

TITLE

“Say, Eddie. They say they’re going to have pictures with sound, too.”

A look of puzzlement crosses Eddie’s face. He speaks.

TITLE

“Sound in movies? It’ll never last.”

Buster puts down the magazine, a worried (or perhaps fascinated) look on his face.

Lou Anger enters, sees Buster. He comes by and taps him on the shoulder, speaking and pointing over his shoulder. Buster exits.

Lou sits where Buster was, picks up the *Variety*. Eddie points at the “Talkies” article. Lou shakes his head and speaks.

TITLE

“It’ll never last.”

INT. JOE SCHENCK’S OFFICE - DAY

Joe Schenck has his hand on Buster’s shoulder. Buster holds a letter he has just read.

The look on Buster's face speaks of shock and dismay. Joe speaks.

TITLE

"I'm sorry, Buster. I'm leaving to head Chaplin's new company."

He pats Buster on the shoulder. Buster drops the note on the ground and shuffles to the set.

The note is an official memo from Joe Schenck. The key words in it read: "...contract sold to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios..."

ON THE SET

Lou Anger and Eddie Mannix argue with a despondent Buster.

TITLE

"Don't do it, Buster. It's too dangerous!"

Buster waves them away. He walks to the set.

The set is the fallen facade of a front of a house, lying flat on the ground. The facade is made of solid brick and weighs several tons. There is one small window in it on what would be the second story height.

Buster stands in the window of the facade and gives a yell to a stagehand. The facade is slowly brought up to its upright position, the window fitting snugly around Buster. Buster gives a shrug to Eddie and Lou, as if to say: "See?"

A PRIEST comes onto the set. Lou and Eddie greet him, point Buster out to him. The Priest goes to Buster, gives him a kiss on the forehead. The Priest leads Lou and Eddie to a corner to pray.

Buster waves at them dismissively. He takes a piece of chalk, draws an "X" on the ground, and moves to the side.

The crew gets in place. The cameraman closes his eyes as he prepares to crank the film.

Stagehands, ready to topple the massive facade, share a flask of whiskey.

Other stagehands cross themselves.

The Priest, Eddie, and Lou pray in the corner.

Buster yells.

TITLE

"Action!"

Buster walks to the "X" he has drawn on the ground.

The Stagehands begin to topple the massive, brick facade and then duck out of sight. The facade tips slowly.

Buster stands straight and still, seemingly about to be crushed by the facade.

The facade falls, Buster narrowly passes through the space allowed by the small window, unharmed. His face, as always, gives no emotion.

The stagehands who are watching cheer.

Lou, Eddie and the Priest look up and see Buster alright. Lou and Eddie hug each other. The Priest looks straight up, mouths the words: "Thank you!"

Buster, joylessly, saunters off. He takes a flask from his pocket and takes a drink.

TITLE

The New Boss.

INT. LOUIS MAYER'S OFFICE - DAY

LOUIS B. MAYER (35), Powerful Vice President of MGM, sits behind an expensive desk. His name is on a gold nameplate.

Mayer has slick backed hair and wears very well tailored suits. He smokes a cigar and wafts thick bands of smoke across the room. His hand has very large and garish rings on his fingers. He reads a script.

Buster sits across from him, anxiously. Mayer speaks.

TITLE

"Your idea is sort of thin, isn't it?"

Buster shrugs and responds.

TITLE

"We always improvise the middles."

Mayer shakes his head. He speaks.

TITLE

"We have lots of money invested in you. We can't put you in something without a script."

Buster starts to speak but Mayer puts out his hand to stop him. Mayer speaks.

TITLE

“Trust us.”

EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREET - DAY

A crowd of people are straining to see the famous Buster Keaton.

They begin to shoot a scene of just him and Marcelaine Day, his leading lady, walking down the street.

Before they can get far, a fan jumps in camera range to shake Buster's hand. Crew members wrestle him away.

They try again. A truck rumbles by at the wrong moment.

They try again. A small child suddenly pops up and peers through the camera.

Frustrated, Buster throws his hat down and storms off.

INT. LOUIS B. MAYER'S OFFICE - DAY

A telegram is delivered to Mayer. When he reads it, he drops his cigar in his lap.

The telegram reads: “We're doing this my way.”

Anger flies across Mayer's face.

EXT. MAP

A plane flies from New York to Los Angeles.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING SET

Buster, on the top floor of a five story apartment building, waits.

ON THE FIRST FLOOR

The phone rings.

Buster races down all five flights of stairs, and past the first floor where the phone is into the basement.

INT. MOVIE THEATRE

An audience is enjoying *The Cameraman* greatly. Louis Mayer, standing with Buster in the back of the theatre, puts his arm around him and speaks proudly.

TITLE

“See what happens when you work from a script?”

Buster stares at him with profound contempt.

INT. KEATON MANSION - NIGHT

Buster, a little tipsy, leads a young lady to his bedroom.

They stop when they see Natalie, standing in the doorway of her bedroom, glaring at them.

Buster waves “hi” in a friendly fashion.

Natalie SLAMS the door.

Buster, used to this, leads the bewildered young lady into his bedroom.

EXT. AIRPLANE - DAY

A small plane makes its way across the sky.

INT. AIRPLANE

Buster sits both of his kids, Jim and Bob, in his lap. They are excited and happy as they look out the window. A GOVERNESS (50) sits nearby.

INT. SAN DIEGO AIRPORT

The Governess takes the kids to the bathroom. Buster calls out.

The kids run off, the governess follows after them.

They are met by a bunch of policemen. They flash a badge. They lead all three away.

30 MINUTES LATER

Buster, checking his watch, talks to the pilot and shrugs. They wait.

AN ATTENDANT comes to Buster and speaks.

TITLE

“Mr. Keaton? Your kids are at the police station.”

Buster's eyes grow wide in puzzlement.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Buster paces the room, ranting. His kids sit on a nearby couch, bored. An OFFICER listens to Buster rant.

TITLE

“How can a man kidnap his own sons?”

The OFFICER shrugs. Buster takes a drink from his flask.

Natalie enters. She is furious. Buster starts arguing but Natalie erupts in a torrent of words.

TITLE

“HOW DARE YOU take them on a dangerous plane how dare you take them away to Mexico for God's sake without MY PERMISSION how dare you try to kidnap corrupt take them away you horrible nothing COMEDIAN drunkard womanizer how dare you...”

Buster, stunned, just takes this abuse. Natalie, then YANKS the boys off the couch and takes them away.

The Officer pats Buster on the back, out of sympathy.

INT. MGM OFFICES

Drunk and enraged, Buster storms through the MGM offices, taking a swig every couple of steps. He passes by a STUDIO EXTRA (17), a fairly pretty girl but too plain to be a starlet, who is reading a magazine on a couch.

Buster backs up a couple of steps, talks to her.

TITLE

“Have you a date tonight?”

The Extra nods her head, no. Buster offers his hand. The girl takes it and they're off.

INT. KEATON MANSION HALLWAY - NIGHT

Buster takes the recalcitrant extra by the hand toward the bedroom. She's making rather nervous motions that she'd like to go.

Buster drags her into Natalie's bedroom.

INT. NATALIE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Buster opens up Natalie's bedroom closet. The befuddled girl's jaw drops.

The closet is filled with a wardrobe that would make Imelda Marcos' mouth water. Racks upon racks of coats and dresses, rows upon rows of shoes.

Buster speaks to the girl and indicates the clothing.

TITLE

“You want this?”

The girl can't react. Buster starts taking bags and stuffing them with shoes, handing these to the girl. He then takes the dresses off the racks and puts them on the girl's shoulders.

The Extra's brow furrows in confusion. The weight gets to be so heavy that she drops the dresses, falling at a pile at her feet.

Buster keeps throwing clothes at her.

EXT. MARINA - NIGHT

The Extra sits by the boat on a pair of suitcases with a huge pile of clothes at her feet. The boat is named “Slapstick”.

Buster argues with THE CAPTAIN. Buster exclaims.

TITLE

“What do you mean we need the owner's permission? I *am* the owner.”

The Captain pulls out a document. Zoom into the signature on the “Owner” line: “Natalie Keaton.” Buster scratches his head, looks at the girl. He turns to the captain and asks.

TITLE

“Well, can't we stay the night here?”

The Captain shrugs. Buster points at the baggage and all three start loading them aboard.

INT. SHIP CABIN - MORNING

The Extra is asleep on a couch or a cot. Buster is asleep on a pile of his wife's clothes on the floor. Suddenly light FLOODS the cabin, waking Buster and the girl.

In the doorway stands Natalie, flanked by Connie and Norma, her two sisters, and also two policemen. They glare at Buster and the girl.

TITLE

Divorce.

EXT. GATES OF KEATON MANSION - DAY

The gates close on Buster on what was formerly his house. He carries but a suitcase with him. He takes one blank look at Keaton Mansion and trudges off.

EXT. "LAND YACHT" IN MGM LOT

Buster enters his new house, a mobile home about the size of a train car parked in the MGM lot.

EXT. "LAND YACHT" IN MGM LOT - MORNING

Keaton exits his camper, yawns and stretches. A car and driver are waiting for him. He climbs in. The car makes a perfect U-turn across the street to where his studio is located, no more than 20 feet from his front door. The driver lets him out and he goes to work.

INT. "SPITE MARRIAGE" SET

Keaton, now dressed in a ludicrously exaggerated Civil War uniform, has huge bushy eyebrows and a beard pasted onto his face. He enters while technicians get the shot ready. Buster makes goo-goo eyes at DOROTHY SEBASTIAN (24) the gorgeous leading lady of "Spite Marriage." Dorothy returns fully Buster's flirting.

The set is that of a stage set. There is a painted backdrop of a house. There is an "audience" of extras watching a "play."

The DIRECTOR indicates in exaggerated pantomime that Buster is to come on stage, stand in the middle, and kiss Dorothy right before a backdrop falls on them both.

Buster pays no attention to the director and stares at Dorothy. The Director pats Buster on the shoulder and takes his Director's chair. He calls through his megaphone.

TITLE

"Action!"

The Director and the crew stare at the action with a exaggerated motion.

Buster goes through the motions, kisses Dorothy, and has the backdrop fall on them both.

The Director yells.

TITLE

"Cut! Perfect! 15 minute break!"

Buster and Dorothy extricate themselves from the backdrop. They walk, in an elaborately casual manner, out the door.

EXT. MGM LOT - MORNING

Keaton leads Dorothy into his waiting car. He talks to his driver.

TITLE

“Home. And step on it!”

The car makes a perfect U-turn across the street to where the land yacht is located. The driver lets them out and Buster leads Dorothy into the land yacht.

After a moment or two, the whole camper starts rocking back and forth, back and forth.

INT. LOUIS B. MAYER'S OFFICE - DAY

Buster is sitting across from Louis Mayer. Buster speaks.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE MOVIE, A VOICE IS HEARD.

From now on the movie will be a “Talkie.” We hear the sound of people speaking synchronized to their lips as we are accustomed to.

BUSTER

Sound?

The sound of Buster's voice is an absolute shock. It's deep, mournful, not at all fitting his persona.

BUSTER

You want to put sound in my pictures?

MAYER

Yes I do, Buster. It's the wave of the future. The boys already have a few scripts in mind for you.

Mayer wafts clouds of menacing smoke at Buster from his cigar.

BUSTER

Look, Mr. Mayer. If you let me have control, then I'll give you a sound movie to be proud of. I have ideas on how to do it. But if you let everyone get their hands on the picture it'll be as much of a muddle as the last one-

MAYER

My decision is final, Buster. Trust me.

Cut to:

INT. STAGE SET

Buster is wearing a cartoonish uniform with wildly exaggerated baggy pants. His face is alarmingly made up as a sad clown. A gaggle of hula girls are in the background, hanging on his every word.

When he sings, it's in a very accomplished baritone.

BUSTER

(Sings)

You start out freezing,
You let your elbows sag and your bootsies drag, as if you had a jag.
It's free and easy.

Brave men, slave men, one foot in the grave men,
Grab yourself a partner now.
Show girls, slow girls, never had a role girls,
Here's your only chance and how.

If it please-y,
While the music plays, you can dance for days to this lazy craze,
It's free and easy.

They all dance and the music plays on. The music plays in the background of then next few scenes.

INT. MAYER'S OFFICE

Buster stands at Louis B. Mayer's desk, pleading.

BUSTER

...it's how I did all my best movies. If I have to work from a script you might as well just hire anyone.

MAYER

Mr. Keaton. Our policy is: In all matters, the producer's word is final.
You must ask Mr. Thalberg.

INT. BAR

Buster sits behind three or four empty beer glasses.

INT. THALBERG'S OFFICE

Buster stands at IRVING THALBERG's (40) desk, pleading. Irving is a thin, pale man who wears glasses and has a quiet demeanor.

BUSTER

You can't be serious about this, Irving. I always do my own stunts.

THALBERG

We have too much money invested in you, Buster. We can't risk you getting hurt.

BUSTER

Stuntmen don't get laughs.

THALBERG

The order comes from the top, Buster. That's the way it's going to be.

EXT. ON THE SET - DAY

A stuntman dressed as Buster rides off a pier and into the water. Buster grumbles to Lou Anger.

BUSTER

A child could do that stunt, Lou. What are they afraid of?

INT. THALBERG'S OFFICE

Buster paces back and forth across the room, tossing around a script.

BUSTER

...worst piece of crap you've given me yet. No one could make this work, not even Chaplin.

THALBERG

You doubt the skills of our writers, Buster?

BUSTER

There are too many of them. They're cramming in one clever thing after another... too many cooks. There's no place for character, for tone. And they're begging the audience for sympathy. I never did that. It doesn't work for me. Want to know why I never smiled in films? Because it was funnier, that's why.

THALBERG

It works for Chaplin.

BUSTER

Fine, but I'm not him. Stop trying to turn me into him.

INT. FREE AND EASY SET

CLOSE UP on Buster in sad clown make-up. He finishes the song.

BUSTER

(sings)

It's free and easy....!!!

He stops and frowns at the screen.