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- 21 Thomas Edison, 'Motion Picture Caveat I', October 1888, reprinted in Gordon Hendricks, *The Edison Motion Picture Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 158.
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THE MAKING OF A COMIC STAR
Buster Keaton and *The Saphead* (1920)

IN 1920, AFTER THREE YEARS of supporting roles in Roscoe Arbuckle's short films, Buster Keaton appeared in *The Saphead*. The film is distinguished by the comedian's first feature film appearance, and by his last ever smile on screen. When Bertie, the saphead of the title, is confronted by his sister Rose with a newspaper article about his presence at a gambling club raided by the police the night before, a proud smile appears on his face. Bertie is happy about the bad reputation he is acquiring, because that, an advice book tells him, is the best way to impress the 'Modern Girl'. Anyone familiar with Keaton's work in the 1920s will appreciate the outstanding quality of Bertie's smile. Throughout the decade, and indeed during his later career, Keaton, on screen and off, was known as 'The Great Stone Face'.¹ What is the significance, then, of Keaton's smile in *The Saphead*? What does it reveal about Keaton's changing performance strategies, and about the historical moment at which Keaton made the transition from slapstick shorts to feature-length comic dramas and from supporting roles to starring roles?

Promoting Keaton: Joseph M. Schenck, Comique and *The Saphead*

Keaton entered the film industry after a long and distinguished career in vaudeville as the youngest member of the famous family act 'The Three Keatons'.² In spring 1917 Keaton started work at the new Comique studio in New York, a joint operation of vaudeville and film entrepreneur Joseph M. Schenck and former Keystone star Roscoe Arbuckle. Keaton appeared in fifteen of the twenty-one two-reelers that Arbuckle made for Comique.³ Due to his military service, which brought him to France during the last months of World War I, Keaton missed several productions between the autumn of 1918 and April 1919. Afterwards only three more Arbuckle/Keaton films were produced (the last of which, *The Garage*, was released in January 1920). In December 1919, Arbuckle started to make feature films at the Famous Players studio, and Keaton became the star attraction of Comique. However, at this point, Keaton was mostly seen in the trade press, fan magazines and newspaper reviews as an adjunct to Roscoe Arbuckle rather than as a performer and personality in his own right. Keaton's performance showed more restraint than that of his fellow comedians, and in particular contrasted sharply with that of his main rival at Comique, Arbuckle's brother-in-law Al St. John, who was known for his facial agility. Yet, Keaton did engage in a fair amount of mugging (exaggerated smiling, laughing

and crying directed at the camera). Both in terms of his public recognition and his acting style, then, Keaton in 1919 was far removed from the status and the distinctive identity he acquired in 1920.

Schenck bought Chaplin's former Lone Star studio in Los Angeles for the Keaton team, which included several people taken over from the Arbuckle group. The studio ran into problems soon after its opening in January 1920. During the first four months, only one two-reeler, *The High Sign*, was made at Comique (whereas Arbuckle had taken about six weeks for each of his shorts). When finally completed, the film was shelved because it did not satisfy Keaton's expectations for his first star vehicle, on which much of the success of the Keaton series of two-reelers depended.

The opportunity to appear in a full-length comedy arose in this context. Metro intended to make a film version of the stage hit *The New Henrietta* (a successful 1913 revival of Bronson Howard's classic *The Henrietta*), bringing in playwright and stage director Winchell Smith and producer John Golden, the men responsible for the revival. The film was to reunite the two stars of the 1913 production, William H. Crane and Douglas Fairbanks. Fairbanks' first film, *The Lamb* (1915), had been loosely based around the character of Bertie Van Alstyne, and was followed by a string of successes which by 1920 had made Fairbanks one of the top film stars.⁴ With Fairbanks tied up at United Artists, a substitute was needed. Keaton was chosen because of close links between Schenck and Metro. In January 1920, Metro had been taken over by Loew's, which was run by Joseph Schenck's brother Nicholas. While the film went into production in the spring of 1920, Metro was negotiating with Comique about the distribution of Keaton two-reelers. The film, being based on a stage hit and co-starring a Broadway legend, was going to be a prestige production with considerable popular appeal. Casting Keaton gave Joseph Schenck the perfect vehicle to launch his latest star and Metro the opportunity to advertise their new comedy series.⁵

Metro had assigned its chief scenarist, June Mathis, to the task of adapting the play for the screen. The first two scripts, still using the stage title *The Henrietta*, had been written in March and April before Keaton joined the production team.⁶ Keaton's involvement led to fundamental changes in the script. These resulted in a shift in emphasis away from the stage original and Crane, and towards Keaton and his distinctive interpretation of the role of Bertie Van Alstyne, signaled by the film's new title, *The Saphead*.

On the same day (1 June 1920) that Comique contracted with Metro for the distribution of eight Keaton two-reelers, the distributor issued a press release to film magazines and daily newspapers across the country, focussing attention on their new star attraction and his simultaneous launch in full-length comic drama and slapstick two-reelers.⁷ As the first sustained publicity effort for Keaton as an independent comic star, the Metro publicity sheet explicitly placed Keaton at the intersection of two performance traditions. His 'chief claim to fame hitherto has been his ability to hurl custard pies and perform pat (sic) falls' in Roscoe Arbuckle's comedies and, before that, on the vaudeville stage. His twenty years of experience in physical comedy would now be complemented by the 'high comedy characterization' of Bertie 'the lamb' in *The Saphead*, 'being co-starred with William H. Crane at the head of a noteworthy cast.' His appearance in the film version of a Broadway comedy was not a final departure from low comedy, but a temporary separation, after which he would return to the kind of comedy he was known for with 'a series of laughing two-reelers' for Metro. After his promotion from the ranks of supporting players, Keaton would combine the comic spectacle of stage and screen slapstick with the rounded characterization of legitimate comedy. Metro's Keaton would be a respectable slapstick comedian associated with the comedy tradition of Broadway, an actor as well as a clown. Keaton's own brand of two-reel slapstick comedy would draw, it was implied,

on this tradition of quality, by injecting 'seriousness and depth into his acrobatics, and, most importantly, by leaving room for 'moments of stabilizing gravity'.

The meanings of restraint: slapstick, legitimate acting and the production of *The Saphead*

Originally referring to two flat pieces of wood joined together at one end, used to produce a loud slapping noise creating the impression of someone having been dealt a hard blow on stage, the term 'slapstick' came to cover various forms of violent comedy. To transform acts of willful maliciousness and intense pain into comedy, performers had to signal clearly that their actions were mere make-believe and constituted highly accomplished athletic routines. The actions' excess, their fantastic exaggeration, as well as performers' self-conscious address of the audience, were the most obvious indicators of their professional and ritualistic nature.⁸

Keaton had gained recognition for his ability to take spectacular falls and engage in acrobatic fights, first with his father on the vaudeville stage, then with Arbuckle and Al St. John in their Comique shorts. However, Keaton's performance skills were much more wide-ranging. On the variety stage he had performed monologues, parodies, impersonations and songs; the melodramas he appeared in as a child, and also Arbuckle's two-reelers, had demanded a fair amount of straight acting. Unlike slapstick, such acting was not supposed to draw attention to its physicality and athletic accomplishment. Instead, it sought to transparently project a fictional character, evoking an interior, psychological realm of desires and ambitions, as well as external character conflicts. Without acknowledging the audience, the reality of the performer's body was subsumed into the fictional character. To achieve this aim, the overall trend both in the legitimate theatre and, since about 1909, in dramatic films had been to deemphasize the performer's actual physical presence and activity; the actors restrained their movements so as to focus attention on subtle gestures and facial expressions that derived significance from their complex narrative context. Classical devices such as intertitles, close-ups and eyeline matches, for example, were used to convey mental processes and establish social relations. Thus they replaced, to some extent, the performer's actual physical activity. In particular, immobile faces shown in close shots served as blank screens onto which thoughts and emotions could be projected.⁹ In addition to concern about looks at the camera which destroyed the illusion of a self-contained fictional world, a key issue in discourses about screen acting throughout the teens and early twenties was the need for actors, especially those coming from the stage, to restrain their performance.¹⁰

Typically working in short film production where the rules and norms of dramatic features did not apply, slapstick comedians systematically transgressed both of the above stipulations. They frequently and self-consciously directed their performance to the camera, and they constantly drew attention to their bodies through exaggerated stunts, contorted faces and overanimated gestures. This performance style aimed for an immediate impact on the audience, either laughter or breathless amazement. Yet, their films usually also included quieter sections, where the dramatic situation was established or audience sympathy was evoked. Thus slapstick comedies shifted back and forth between delayed gratification and immediate emotional release, restrained and excessive physical activity, one seen as the norm, the other as its amusing and/or astonishing transgression.

When Keaton made *The Saphead*, the balance between these two performance modalities shifted in favour of legitimate acting. The film's stage origin, its complex narrative, the presence of William H. Crane and, most importantly, the objectives of Metro's promotional campaign encouraged him to make restraint the centrepiece of his impersonation of Bertie Van

Alstyne. Interestingly, against the explicit prescription of the script, Keaton decided to take the notion of restraint beyond the level of illusionistic acting, until his avoidance of facial expressions drew attention to itself as the clearest and most striking mark of his physical presence as a performer. Keaton's performance stood out both in those scenes where he engaged in traditional slapstick tumbling, that is an excess of activity, and in those where he acted straight, that is with an excess of restraint. In both cases, Crane, who represented the traditions and highest achievements of legitimate acting in stage comedies, served Keaton as a perfect foil.

After twenty-four years as a comedian on the legitimate stage, forty-two-year-old William H. Crane had found the role that he would be associated with for the rest of his life: Nicholas Van Alstyne, 'the lion of Wall Street', in Bronson Howard's *The Henrietta*. Opening at the Union Square Theater in New York in 1887, the play had been such a success that even twenty-five years later it was considered a property valuable enough for a major revival. Winchell Smith and Victor Mapes's updated version, *The New Henrietta*, co-starred Crane with Douglas Fairbanks, at the time one of the leading young comedians on Broadway. During the 1913-14 season, the play enjoyed a long run at the Knickerbocker Theatre in New York, and in the following year it went on the road.¹¹ In December 1915, Crane announced his retirement from the stage after the end of the *New Henrietta* tour, which was still going strong. In future, he would 'act only on special occasions'.¹² A few months later, the *New York Sun* reported that Crane, 'stage dean', had been honored at a special dinner, attended by 'stars of all professions', and recognized by a note from president Woodrow Wilson.¹³ Critics emphasized his exalted position in the theatrical profession, while noting the refinement of his comedy: He was 'one comedian who did his training in the library in place of in the gymnasium'. Both as an actor and a producer, he was said to have been involved only in plays that were 'sane, and, to his eternal credit, sanitary'.¹⁴

Crane represented a tradition of quality that was explicitly set against the verbally and physically aggressive performance of musical comedy and vaudeville. However, when Crane came out of retirement in the 1917-18 season, he appeared in a vaudeville playlet, which brought him closer to low-brow comic traditions. Apart from his limited role, the sheer presence of the legendary star was expected to appeal to audiences. This thought must have also occurred to Winchell Smith and John Golden, who, in 1920, wanted the seventy-five-year-old Crane for their film adaptation of *The New Henrietta*. Crane had already appeared in a film version of his stage hit *David Harum* in 1915, but he was not prepared for the radical turn this particular adaptation would take.¹⁵ 'And they made Bertie, the Lamb, a slapstick character', he complained in a newspaper interview in 1925: 'Mr. Keaton was never suited for the role and the result was terrible'.¹⁶

The original play highlighted Nicholas Van Alstyne's romance with one Mrs. Opdyke. This romance, which spans most of the play, is a counterpart to Bertie's relationship with Nick's ward Agnes. The play places Nick at the centre of his own love story and carefully intertwines the romances of father and son, as well as the themes of love and business. The first film script, dated March 1920, retains the play's dual focus.¹⁷ Nick's romance foregrounds his subjectivity, his desire for love and companionship. Given the pressures of his work on Wall Street, Nick is unable to properly guide his children. His daughter Rose has married a crook, whom Nick mistakenly grants his power of attorney; his interference with the romance of his son and his ward delays their happiness. Yet Mrs. Opdyke, whose insight into people's characters and emotions enables her to tell right from wrong, helps him to recognize and rectify his mistakes. His business is saved and the family unit reconstituted. In the classic theatrical tradition of New Comedy, the play ends with the reconciliation of father and son, and with two weddings.¹⁸

The narrative was reorganized once Keaton became involved, to foreground his part. Contrary to what one might expect, this was not done by adding slapstick material. The spectacular scenes of Bertie being violently initiated into the stock exchange fraternity by having his hat knocked off and being pushed around, and his subsequent acrobatically executed purchase of shares, which may seem typically Keaton, are extensively described in the script. They were possibly derived from Douglas Fairbanks's performance in the 1913 revival.¹⁹ Otherwise, Keaton's physical stunts are limited to two brief and isolated instances of comic tumbling, in which Bertie's confrontation with his angry father causes him to slide down the stairs on his backside, and to jump off a windowsill. The transformation of the script into a Keaton vehicle was mainly achieved through drastic cuts in Crane's part which subordinated Nick's previously dominant storyline to that of his son. With the removal of Mrs. Opdyke from the film, Nick's activities lost their driving force and over-arching goal, his storyline now lacking cohesion, and disintegrating into a series of largely disconnected scenes. Nick became a mere blocking figure. In the light of Crane's old age and his perceived status as a bulwark against vulgar comedy, one could see the generational conflict between the two main characters as enacting a cultural conflict between the two performers playing them. The film's shift of narrative focus from father to son thus mirrored and facilitated the transfer of comic stardom from a master of the old school to the representative of a new generation. On both levels, the improved status of the younger man was finally validated by the handshake of his elder.

The centrality of Bertie's (and thus Keaton's) shortcomings, ambitions, misfortunes and final triumph is already signaled by the film's title. The original title introduced and foregrounded the narrative complexities associated with the name Henrietta and its multiple referents in the story.²⁰ *The Saphead*, however, makes Bertie the focus of attention, and in introducing his comic stupidity, it poses a problem for the narrative to resolve. Calling Bertie a saphead builds expectations that he will overcome his shortcomings. Plot complications constitute an obstacle course which will allow, and indeed force, the ignorant, passive fool to encounter the world at large and act in it. In the process, Bertie gains, if not knowledge and insight, then at least tangible success and an improved social standing. In the end, Bertie's new status is confirmed by his grateful father, and symbolized most effectively by the marriage to Agnes and the fathering of twins.

Bertie is first introduced by an intertitle as 'his father's hope and pride', which, right from the start, foregrounds the social pressures eventually forcing him to transcend his comfortably passive existence. Agnes is first mentioned as 'the girl Bertie loved. He had confided this to his sister and his valet - but had never mentioned it to her'. Bertie's failure to communicate his love reflects his painful awareness that he lacks those qualities that define contemporary manhood. An advice book on courtship, *How To Win The Modern Girl*, tells him: 'The Modern Girl has no use for the old-fashioned man. She prefers sports to saints. Few girls now-a-days can resist a dashing, gambling, drinking devil'. While the opposition is couched in moral terms (saint vs. devil), what separates Bertie from the ideal of masculinity is decisive action. Accepting this ideal, Bertie starts playing the role of the good sport, forever in pursuit of a bad reputation, which leads him into the world of nightclubs and gambling dens obviously alien to him. He wins at roulette, yet never even understands that he is playing for money. Initially, his role-playing backfires. Agnes cries when she first learns of his nightclubbing, clearly preferring the idiotic saint to the dashing devil. Only after Bertie has unknowingly revealed his love does Agnes fully understand his behaviour. Yet, he fails to explain himself to his father who so strongly objects to his supposedly hedonistic life-style that he will not allow him to marry Agnes before he has proven his manhood in the world of business. Work, rather than leisure, is now defined as the sphere for manly activity.

This second call for action is again met with mechanical obedience. Without any real interest or knowledge, Bertie goes into business. Watson Flint, his father's broker, buys him a seat at the stock exchange. For Bertie, a seat at the stock exchange is merely a physical object, and he therefore finds the price of \$100,000 rather high. Yet he is willing to do whatever is necessary to satisfy his father, and thus be allowed to marry Agnes. When she indicates her willingness to marry him, even against the will of his father, he is eager to quickly bring about the ceremony, yet leaves all the arrangements to others. The wedding gets under way in his father's house only after Rose and Agnes have taken preparations in their own hands. Bertie's subsequent failure to defend himself against Mark's accusation that he is the father of an illegitimate child, constitutes the most dramatic instance of his complete inability to take appropriate action in crucial situations, and alienates him from his wife-to-be and his father.

Bertie's isolation can only be reversed when he finally realizes his potential for aggressive self-assertion during the climactic scene at the stock exchange. Although Bertie remains ignorant about what is really going on around him, Watson Flint uses his anger about people shouting 'Henrietta' to manipulate him into action. By vigorously defending his honour against those who seem to taunt him with the name of the woman who brought about his disgrace, he saves his father, and proves himself a man, a worthy son and suitor (and at the same time Keaton proves that his violent acrobatics are a socially useful skill after all). In the end, then, anger, athletic physicality and, of course, fatherhood, rather than hedonism, notoriety and business sense, are the cornerstones of Bertie's masculine identity.²¹

Keaton's deadpan performance departed radically from the characterization explicitly outlined in the script. Here, Bertie is highly expressive, 'smiles', 'grins', 'becomes quite happy', 'is delighted', and 'stands smiling happily' on many occasions. Of these, only two smiles survive in the film, remnants of a construction of Bertie's character which Keaton otherwise rejects. Keaton's conscious choice of a deadpan performance derived from an innovative view of Bertie as a person who does not properly connect with his surroundings, his failure to understand being paralleled by his failure to respond emotionally. Keaton's deadpan performance not only serves to characterize Bertie as an intellectually and emotionally retarded young man, but also highlights Keaton's own distance from the fiction, his irreducible and transgressive presence as a comedian in the universe of serious drama. With relatively few opportunities to dominate the screen with violent acrobatics, Keaton turned his straight characterization into an excessively restrained piece of acting and thus into an extended comic turn.

The opening credits end with an oval insert showing silhouettes of the two featured actors. This dissolves into a shot, which still belongs to the credit sequence, of the two shaking hands, with Crane also putting his hand on the comedian's shoulder as if to welcome him as an actor in the world of legitimate drama. The drama then begins with a set piece for Crane. In his Wall Street office, Nick meets an old friend from his prospecting days, bringing good news about their gold mine. Crane portrays the character's excitement with expansive gestures and plenty of movements across the room. Keaton's first appearance presents a sharp contrast. While heartily tucking into his breakfast, Keaton does not make any unnecessary movement, holding his body still and keeping his face completely inexpressive, thus indicating his detachment from his surroundings.

When, in the film's climactic sequence, Bertie does learn to act vigorously in the world on his own behalf, Keaton's performance is again contrasted directly with Crane's. From his yachting trip, Nick returns to his office at a time when it is too late for him to do anything but wait for the final outcome of the trading at the stock exchange, the latest results of which are relayed to him by a ticker tape machine. Completely incapacitated, his emotions become the centre of attention. His anger and despair dominate the scene in the same way that his joy

provided a key to the film's opening. In dramatic terms, however, Bertie's actions at the stock exchange are decisive, and the narrative focus soon shifts to them. Occasional cuts to Nick's office showing his reactions serve to set Keaton's athletic performance against Crane's acting. At the beginning of the film, Keaton's deadpan poses a narrative problem (Bertie's unmanly passivity) which needs to be solved. Towards the end, his slapstick speciality brings about the resolution. Bertie's dramatic transformation from passive idiot to angry fighter, which establishes him as a worthy protagonist for the narrative and a worthy suitor and son in the social world of its fiction, is pure slapstick. Running, jumping, sliding across the stock exchange, his dress disintegrating and his body bruised, Bertie's buying spree is a long-awaited return of Keaton's violent acrobatics, a reminder of his extra-fictional status as a physical comedian.

The film's conclusion does not discard Keaton's restraint, which served to define the initial narrative problem. The final two scenes of the film bring father and son, Crane and Keaton, in direct contact. In the penultimate scene, Nick goes to his son's new house to make amends. With the father rushing to Bertie and enthusiastically thanking him for the rescue of his business, Bertie's success in the story is confirmed and his new social identity is established. At the same time, the scene mirrors the end of the credit sequence, and the handshake signalling Bertie's arrival in the world of adults as an equal to his father echoes the extra-fictional welcome Crane extends to the slapstick comedian Buster Keaton. While throughout most of the film, the narrative and the extra-fictional discourse are interwoven seamlessly by matching Keaton's performance to Bertie's character, the two levels are separated out and brought into conflict towards the end. The film's last scene, which moves ahead one year to show Bertie as an expectant father receiving the news about the birth of twins, would suggest that Bertie has changed fundamentally, that he has matured and at least partly overcome his intellectual and emotional retardation. Yet, Keaton's refusal to show any response undermines the narrative resolution and the normality of Bertie's status as a father. Keaton's deadpan contrasts sharply with the way Crane uses a little dance to express Nick's joy, and foregrounds Keaton's exceptional status as a comic performer.

Reviewing *The Saphead*: performance styles, trademarks and the success of Keaton's promotion

Contemporary critical responses indicate that the simplistic and potentially dehumanized identity of 'stoneface' Keaton contradicted basic assumptions of psychological realism in feature films, and of psychological 'normality' in everyday life. This issue was explicitly and complexly addressed in the reception of *The Saphead* in New York, the largest and most influential movie market in the United States. Reviewers were also debating the merits of the film's merging of performance styles and comic traditions, the cornerstone of the campaign to launch Keaton as a featured attraction. In particular, reviewers were concerned about the marginalization of William H. Crane, who was, after all, the better known and more highly regarded of the film's two co-stars.

Some, but by no means all, New York reviewers highlighted Crane's presence in the film, seeing and judging the film primarily in relation to its origins as a stage classic, to Crane's long stage career, and to the traditions of legitimate comedy. Severely criticizing Keaton, who was seen merely as an 'additional' player, the *New York American*, for example, stated that Crane had done 'the real acting' and had 'stood out' even though his role had been 'cut down and subordinated'.²² Critics still celebrated the sheer weight of Crane's reputation, his 'realism' and 'understanding', the nobility the old man could bestow upon the screen.²³ However, virtually all acknowledged in one way or another the datedness of play and actor, and the necessity

to introduce new elements. *Variety*'s positive comments on the film's stage origins, for example, were slightly defensive, claiming that, despite the 'modern interpretation', 'the plot remains the same'. Crane was referenced 'as a comedian of the old school', and the critic quickly added that this 'does not mean that his methods are old, because they are as up-to-the-minute as those of his younger colleague'. Clearly, the writer was at pains to avoid the impression of Crane as a mere relic of the past. Yet, in the context of critical remarks on the film's reliance on theatrical tableaux ('the sparsity of close-ups and the overplus of long shots'), Crane appeared highly anachronistic.²⁴ The *New York Times* welcomed the fact that he 'yields place . . . to the younger Keaton'. What made Keaton's performance so appropriate for screen comedy was precisely his restraint: Unlike Crane, with his dependence on the spoken word and grand gestures, Keaton was 'a pantomimist, as all true screen actors are, . . . definitely and subtly expressive'.²⁵

Keaton's centrality to the film was noted in most reviews, yet opinions about his performance differed radically. The most damning judgement came from the *New York Morning Post* which found Keaton 'downright stupid and inane'. Bertie comes across as a 'simpleton' who is both 'a menace' and 'a bore'. In this critic's view, Keaton's restraint merely proved he was not doing his job properly, causing the film to fall flat.²⁶ Equally, for the *New York American* Keaton's 'constant mournfulness', while initially amusing, became 'tremendously monotonous'.²⁷ Yet another critic, who basically liked his performance, nevertheless doubted that 'Mr. Keaton is an artist who can depict human emotions'.²⁸

However, most reviews accepted and even celebrated Keaton's performance because it suited the character of Bertie, who, according to *Photoplay*, 'has always presented a problem' for actors:

He either has to be made such a fool that the authorities would never have permitted him to roam the streets at large, and get his laughs by being a fool, or he has to be played as a reasonably normal, but quite irresponsible youth, and run the risk of being dismissed as neither funny nor interesting.²⁹

Keaton solved this problem, as the *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser* noted, by emphasizing Bertie's essential stupidity to such a degree that his performance became an ironic comment on it: 'Buster Keaton is not the only feeble-minded hero we have seen in the movies, but he is the first who has admitted it and taken no end of pleasure and merriment from his task'.³⁰ Here, Keaton's restraint is perceived as an indication of his professional fun, and not of his personal moroseness.

Keaton's second major contribution to the film was seen to be his physical comedy. Even the very critical reviewers of the *New York Post* and the *New York American* admitted that the climactic scene at the stock exchange 'is funny in its low comedy way', containing 'some highly ludicrous bits of business'.³¹ For the *New York Journal*, this scene was 'largely responsible for the entire picture's sense of enjoyment'.³² The *New York Herald* fit Keaton in the tradition of Fairbanks's spectacular stage and film performances, noting that he 'becomes a human rocket at the finish almost as well as Doug could have'.³³ On the whole, critics accepted the violence and 'nonsense' of slapstick sequences as effective comic entertainment, even if they cited the film's failure to achieve the realism and expressiveness of the legitimate stage.

Obviously, the film was judged according to two different standards, one applying to the sequences of physical comedy, the other to the drama.³⁴ The *New York Times* saw *The Saphead* as a precariously balanced union of fundamentally different concerns: 'the picture is really a two-reel comedy stretched and padded to fill some 5,000 feet of film, but its scenes that count

are so full of fun that the spectator does not mind the story stuff'.³⁵ Story material was seen to be added to comic spectacle, potentially getting in the way of continuous enjoyment. Other critics, focussing on Crane and the legitimate tradition, approached the film differently, implying that comedy sequences were inserted into an otherwise perfectly respectable, if somewhat old-fashioned, narrative. All agreed that the film was a hybrid, resulting from the presence of Keaton and Crane, who, in their respective careers up to this point, had come to embody different comic traditions.

Whereas Crane and his followers saw his association with, and intermittent displacement by, a slapstick clown as potentially degrading, Keaton's admirers saw his teaming with the famous Broadway comedian as a new and very promising career departure from slapstick to 'the more human field of straight comedy'.³⁶ Genuine stardom could only be achieved in the field of feature-length comedy, and depended on a restrained performance style. The hierarchical organisation of comic forms and the sense of Keaton's upward mobility was highlighted by the *New York Journal*: Keaton 'rises to fine comedy heights here, and points distinctly to the fact that he is a player of promise as a legitimate comedian'.³⁷ This critical response indicates the success of Metro's promotional strategy. Yet the many criticisms of the film, especially of Keaton himself and his excessive restraint, indicated how difficult a fusion, how fragile a balancing act Keaton's rise to stardom was.

Following the release of *The Saphead* in February 1921, the first extensive articles dealing with Keaton's screen work and off-screen life were published. Elizabeth Peltret's biographical sketch 'Poor Child', for example, highlighted the possibility that Keaton's deadpan performance on screen expressed his personal sadness. 'He has a settled look of sadness, as tho [sic] from a secret sorrow', she wrote, speculating that this sadness might be attributed to the fact that '(b)eing laughed at is a serious proposition'.³⁸ By May 1921, when a flurry of publicity surrounded Keaton's marriage to Natalie Talmadge, his sadness had already been so firmly established as a fundamental personality trait in the press that it now clashed with the normalized image of the comedian's private existence as a lover and husband (in the same way that Keaton's deadpan clashed with the normalization of Bertie's status as a husband and father at the end of *The Saphead*). A headline described Keaton as 'The Saddest Bridegroom in the World', and the fact that, on or off-screen, he never smiled, was seen as a unique feature of Keaton's personality, separating him from the rest of humanity, and creating a distance between him and his wife.³⁹

Contemporary reviews of Keaton's later features showed that the critical remarks about his gloomy and withdrawn personality in some reviews of *The Saphead* and in the articles about his wedding also applied to his sustained dramatic roles. When Keaton returned from slapstick two-reelers to feature film production in 1923, his deadpan performance became the object of increasing criticism. It was seen as a highly inappropriate response to the task of creating characters which were rounded and believable and could sustain audience interest for the duration of a feature. Consequently, Keaton's masterpieces were not very successful commercially, and his independent status was short-lived, with Keaton in 1928 becoming a mere contract actor at Loew's/MGM, without the creative control granted to him at Joseph Schenck's studio.⁴⁰

Notes

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- 1 Title of an important 1958 essay by Christopher Bishop (*Film Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 10–15) and a 1970 documentary on Keaton.
- 2 For information on Keaton's career see Rudi Blesh, *Keaton* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); Tom Dardis, *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1979); Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (New York: Da Capo, 1982). For release dates and other filmographic information, see Maryann Chach's filmography in Dardis's book, which is partly based on Sam Gill's Arbuckle filmography in David Yallop, *The Day the Laughter Stopped: The True Story of Fatty Arbuckle* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976).
- 3 There are doubts about *A Reckless Romeo*, which is usually listed in Keaton filmographies but actually seems to have been made by Arbuckle at Keystone in 1916, although it was the second Comique short released due to a special arrangement with his former studio. Cp. Gill's filmography in Yallop, op. cit., pp. 314–5.
- 4 See John C. Tibbets and James M. Welsh, *His Majesty the American: The Cinema of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.* (New York: Barnes, 1977).
- 5 On Schenck's complex business activities, see, for example, Alan Hynd, 'The Rise and Fall of Joseph Schenck', series of three articles in *Liberty Magazine*, 28 June 1941, 5 July 1941 and 12 July 1941. On Metro, see, for example, Jackson Schmidt, 'On the Road to MGM: A History of Metro Pictures Corporation, 1915–1920', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 19 (1982), pp. 46–52.
- 6 The scripts and a summary of the play on which they were based are contained in the MGM script collection at the University of Southern California (USC).
- 7 Clipping in Buster Keaton file, William Seymour Theatre Collection, Princeton University Library, Princeton. The date of the contract is mentioned in an internal MGM/Loew's report written by Katherine Barnes, which is contained in the MGM collection at USC.
- 8 For an account of the 'vaudeville aesthetic' by which slapstick performance was informed, see Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), Ch. 3.
- 9 Cp. Janet Staiger, 'The Eyes Are Really the Focus: Photoplay Acting and Film Form and Style', *Wide Angle*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1985), pp. 14–23; Roberta E. Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), Ch. 6.
- 10 See, for example, John Emerson and Anita Loos, *Breaking Into Movies* (New York: James A. McCann, 1921), Ch. III; Tamar Lane, *What's Wrong with the Movies* (Los Angeles: Waverly, 1923), pp. 137–41.
- 11 Cp. entry on Crane in *Who was Who in the Theatre* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1978).
- 12 Unidentified newspaper clipping, dated 26 December 1915, William H. Crane biographical clippings file, Harvard Theater Collection (HTC), Cambridge, MA.
- 13 *New York Sun*, 28 February 1916, unpaginated clipping, Crane file, HTC.
- 14 Unidentified clipping, dated 5 March 1916, Crane file, HTC.
- 15 *David Harum* (Famous Players, 1915, 5 reels). After *The Saphead*, Crane appeared in *Souls for Sale* (1923), *Three Wise Fools* (1923) and *True as Steel* (1924).
- 16 *Boston Sunday Globe*, 26 July 1925, unpaginated clipping, Crane file, HTC.
- 17 MGM script collection, USC.
- 18 On 'New Comedy' and its importance for the history of comedy on stage and screen see, for example, Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 163–86; David Grote, *The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition* (Hamden: Archon, 1983), pp. 17–55.
- 19 On Fairbanks' performance in the 1910s, see Tibbets and Welsh, op. cit., especially Chs. 1–3.
- 20 The Henrietta is a mine Nick co-owns with Jim Hardy, an old friend from Arizona who appears at the film's beginning to tell Nick that he has finally struck gold. Nick decides to put shares in the mining corporation on the market. At the same time, his son-in-law Mark, an unsuccessful stock broker, receives a letter from his old, now destitute love Henrietta, asking for help. When he ignores her request, she takes drastic measures: On her deathbed she sends a messenger with Mark's letters to Nick's house, asking him to take care of their child. Meanwhile, Bertie, who joins the nightlife wherever he can, asking him to take care of their child. Meanwhile, Bertie, who joins the nightlife wherever he can, asking him to take care of their child. Meanwhile, Bertie, who joins the nightlife wherever he can, asking him to take care of their child. Meanwhile, Bertie, who joins the nightlife wherever he can, asking him to take care of their child. Although he has never actually met her, this apparent connection helps Mark to set him up as the addressee of the dying Henrietta's letters, and thus as the father of her child. Because Mark, who would like to have Nick's commissions, has asked Rose to put in a word for him, Nick puts him in charge of the sale of Henrietta's shares when he leaves on his trip after the disrupted wedding. Knowing that he has not much time left before his play will be uncovered, Mark manipulates the price of the Henrietta shares so that he will be able to make a fortune, ruining Nick in the process. When Bertie, spending his time at the stock exchange because he was told to go into business, hears men shouting 'Henrietta', the name that brought him disaster, he naturally wants to shut them up. Nick's regular broker Watson Flint, who has realized what Mark is trying to do, tells Bertie that he can silence people by saying 'I take it' to everyone who utters the offensive name, which is precisely what he does. The share price recovers and Nick's business is saved.
- 21 It is possible to see *The Saphead* as a comedian comedy, which foregrounds the comedian's performance as a spectacular attraction in its own right, while at the same time narrativizing it as the expression of the comic character's unresolved personality which the film's story works to normalize. Keaton's deadpan signals the comedian's distance from the dramatic task of convincingly characterizing Bertie, and Bertie's passivity in turn appears as a refusal to fulfill the role of protagonist. In the end, these tensions are partially resolved through Bertie's decisive action at the stock exchange and his social integration through paternal acceptance, marriage and fatherhood. While I partially go along with this generic analysis, I do not believe that Keaton brought a well-known pre-established comic persona to the film – which is a requirement for comedian comedy – and instead used the film precisely to define such a persona and to develop an appropriate performance style. On comedian comedy, see Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981); Frank Krutnik, 'The Clown-Prints of Comedy', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 4–5 (July–October 1984), pp. 50–59; Peter Krämer, 'Derailing the Honeymoon Express: Comicality and Narrative Closure in Buster Keaton's *The Blacksmith*', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 23 (Spring 1989), pp. 101–16.
- 22 *New York American*, 17 February 1921, unpaginated clipping in scrapbook MWEZ x n.c.18,201, Billy Rose Theatre Collection (BRTC), New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, New York. This piece was probably written by the theatre critic, whereas an earlier positive review focusing on Keaton and mentioning Crane only once is likely to have been penned by a regular film critic or derived from a press release (*New York American*, 14 February, 1921).
- 23 *New York Evening Telegram*, 14 February 1921, unpaginated clipping, MWEZ x n.c.18,201, BRTC. Similarly, the involvement of Winchell Smith, the writer and stage director, was frequently mentioned, emphasizing the film's links to a tradition of quality in the theatre.
- 24 *Variety*, 18 February 1921, p. 40.
- 25 *New York Times*, 14 February 1921, p. 12:2.
- 26 *New York Morning Post*, 15 February 1921, MWEZ n.c.18,201, BRTC.
- 27 *New York American*, 17 February 1921, *ibid.*
- 28 Unidentified clipping, *ibid.*
- 29 *Photoplay*, May 1921, unpaginated clipping, Kevin Brownlow's personal collection.
- 30 *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, 14 February 1921, MWEZ n.c.18,201, BRTC.
- 31 *New York Post*, 15 February 1921; *New York American*, 17 February 1921, *ibid.*
- 32 *New York Journal*, 14 February 1921, *ibid.*
- 33 *New York Herald*, 14 February 1921, *ibid.* Others simply, and approvingly, called Keaton's performance 'slapstick' or 'nonsense' designed to make people laugh. See *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, 14 February 1921, *ibid.*; 'Buster Keaton's Nonsense Keeps You Chuckling', *New York Daily News*, 14 February 1921, *ibid.* Here these terms were used neutrally, if not positively; for the *New York Herald*, however, 'slapstick' had negative connotations.
- 34 A hint at what was at stake in this differentiation was given by the *New York Evening Mail* when it pointed out that Keaton's role and actions were basically childlike and, in their childish innocence, 'guaranteed inoffensive'. The possibility of offense, as well as slapstick's particular appeal, were related to those members of the audience who had not yet reached, and those who had gone beyond, the seriousness of maturity: 'grandma and all the children can be taken in perfect safety.' The realistic drama, which framed this infantile entertainment, however, was addressed to adults, dealing with their more mature concerns, which dominated in the end: 'as he (Bertie) winds up with a wedding and two children, it must be presumed that he is no longer a child.' (*New York Evening Mail*, 15 February 1921, *ibid.*)
- 35 *New York Times*, 14 February 1921, p. 12:2.
- 36 *New York Daily News*, 15 February 1921, MWEZ n.c.18,201, BRTC.
- 37 *New York Journal*, 14 February 1921, *ibid.*
- 38 Elizabeth Peltret, 'Poor Child', *Motion Picture Classic*, March 1921, pp. 64, 96–7.
- 39 Unidentified clipping in Buster Keaton file, Daniel Blum Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin at Madison; cp. for example Willis Goldbeck, 'Only three Weeks', *Motion Picture Magazine*, October 1921, pp. 28–9, 87.
- 40 Dardis, op. cit., pp. 109–56.