

“The Navigator”

By Yair Solan



Photos courtesy of Robert Arkus

“The Navigator” (1924) was Buster Keaton’s commercial breakthrough, the feature-length film that catapulted the comedian to the front rank of screen comedy. After graduating from shorts to features the previous year, “The Navigator” put Keaton firmly in the company of Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, delighting audiences with the novelty of a maritime setting which transposes his deadpan style to the high seas. A century on, owing to the film’s intricate mechanical gags, innovative underwater sequences, and memorable images of its star in nautical garb and diving gear, “The Navigator” remains among the most iconic comedies of the silent era.

Yet when Keaton and his staff began planning what would become his fourth independently produced feature, they found themselves out of ideas. Inspiration took the form of the 370-foot, 5,000-ton *Buford*, a decommissioned ocean liner headed for the scrap heap spotted by Keaton’s stalwart technical director, Fred Gabourie, while in San Francisco working on First National’s swashbuckler “The Sea Hawk” (1924). Keaton immediately purchased the ship and decided to center his next production on this immense prop.



The infamous Buford ship was renamed “The Navigator” and became home to the cast and crew during filming off Catalina Island in Southern California.

Employed for army transport between the United States and the Pacific two decades prior, the liner’s fictional route in the film echoes the *Buford*’s real history. Most infamously, however, in 1919 it was dubbed “the Soviet Ark” by the press when the U.S. government used the ship to deport over two hundred political dissidents targeted in the anti-communist Palmer Raids. Renamed the *Navigator* on screen, the *Buford* was transformed into a mobile film studio for a ten-week shoot off Catalina Island, equipped with two generators, an editing station and projection room, and 100,000 feet of film.

Keaton and his writers concocted a convoluted scenario that quickly establishes a simple comic premise. Following dramatic scenes of warring spies, mixed-up piers, and various intrigues, the rich spoiled naïf Rollo Treadway (Keaton) boards the wrong ship when embarking upon an ocean voyage and comes to be stranded on an abandoned liner set adrift in the Pacific. He soon discovers that he is not alone. The similarly pampered Betsy O'Brien (Kathryn McGuire) – Rollo's would-be sweetheart who earlier rejected his impulsive marriage proposal – has also made her way on board while searching for her kidnapped father, owner of the deserted vessel, and the two are now forced to fend for themselves as they wander into uncertain waters.

Unlike the film's elaborate set-up – by its comic logic, the spy plot is never picked up again – much of "The Navigator" is a string of vignettes, mirroring the boat's meandering journey. In one of the most ingeniously choreographed scenes in Keaton's oeuvre, the two unknowing shipmates narrowly miss each other repeatedly aboard the empty liner. This culminates in a dazzling long shot that reveals their movements across three decks, as the camera sits back and takes in this balletic display of inadvertent hide-and-seek before Rollo falls down an air vent and lands right next to Betsy – when his proposal of marriage is, once again, rebuffed.

Above all, "The Navigator" is a comedy of scale. Our heroes strive to bring the liner's industrial dimensions down to their size, endeavoring to cook for two what is meant for hundreds, Rollo ultimately furnishing the ship with an array of Rube Goldberg-like contraptions. Among the slapstick highlights is his tussle with a small but mighty cannon that becomes unfortunately tied to his ankle, anticipating the struggle with the locomotive's cannon in "The General" (1927). The wide-canvas comedy of "The Navigator" would be a direct influence on this later Keaton classic, and he frequently cited these two films as his personal favorites.

Unique in Keaton's run of features, most of "The Navigator" concentrates entirely on its two leads, who constitute a veritable comic double act. This puts the lie to the claim by some critics that the comedian invariably approached his leading lady as just another prop. A former dancer and Mack Sennett Bathing Beauty, Kathryn McGuire is the only actress who twice played opposite Keaton in his '20s features, appearing in the earlier "Sherlock Jr." (1924).

McGuire has more to do here, playing off Keaton's bumbling exploits and contributing comedy of her own, whether by socking him squarely in the head with a life preserver or scrambling across the deck on an eerie night aboard the cavernous liner. One gag went awry during filming – when setting a diver's helmet on Keaton while he smokes a cigarette, McGuire accidentally locked it, nearly suffocating him. Although reshot, we can still see his genuine look of distress in the film.

By far the most difficult footage to shoot was "The Navigator's" groundbreaking underwater sequences. Rollo's attempt to repair the damaged liner was filmed not in a studio tank but in Lake Tahoe, where the water was sufficiently clear but extremely frigid.



Kathryn McGuire is the only actress to play opposite Keaton in two features: "The Navigator" (1924) and "Sherlock, Jr." (1924). Photo courtesy of Robert Arkus

Outfitted in a deep-sea diving suit, Keaton could only venture underwater thirty minutes at a time. Two cameras were put in a wooden box with a glass plate, continually iced to avoid fogging. Keaton and his cameramen had to be constantly brought to the surface and revived with copious helpings of whiskey. Keaton's visual comedy is here taken to a subaquatic level: he is seen lumbering through the water, delicately placing a "men at work" sign on the ocean floor, grabbing a swordfish to joust with another. Slowed down in this watery abyss, his movements become uncanny; no wonder that surrealists like Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel were fans. One cut scene – "as good a sight gag as I ever had," Keaton later noted – was a cartoonish segment where he puts a starfish on his chest and acts as underwater traffic cop for a school of fish. Bombing in previews since it interrupts his efforts to save himself and the girl, Keaton removed it completely; as he recounted, "from that day on, I realized that my feature comedies would succeed best when the audience took the plot seriously enough to root for me."¹



Buster Keaton's "The Navigator" was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2018. Photo courtesy of Robert Arkus

At the climax, the hapless shipmates encounter a band of marauding island natives, a sea adventure trope and problematic relic of its time. Their chief is played by film pioneer Noble Johnson, who in the mid-1910s was the president and co-founder of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, a short-lived African-American studio specializing in uplifting dramas with black casts. In Hollywood, however, as with many actors of color in this period, Johnson was typecast in stereotypical roles and often as a villain, most notably as the Chief of Skull Island in "King Kong" (1933). During the climactic battle, Betsy is taken captive and only freed once Rollo frightens the natives by emerging in his diving suit like a creature from the deep.

The actor-director Donald Crisp was hired to direct such dramatic moments, but as Keaton recalled, "he turned gagman overnight," adding comic business to what was meant to be treated seriously; Crisp was promptly let go and his scenes reshot.²

What remains of Crisp's involvement is his visage in the grim portrait of a sea captain, which terrifies Rollo when it swings outside a porthole at night, and a generous co-director's credit.

As the natives overtake the ship, Rollo and Betsy escape in a swiftly sinking dinghy, clutching each other while descending underwater, which Keaton considered "the real end" of the film.³ Though he was not averse to dark endings, "The Navigator" concludes with a deus ex machina sleight-of-hand: a submarine surfaces from below the doomed pair, rescuing them at the last possible second – and in a final touch, when Betsy plants a kiss on a stunned Rollo, he collapses on the submarine's gearshift and sends it spinning out of control.

Just as his screen character learns to find his sea legs, Buster Keaton mines all the comic potential of this film's massive prop while developing a sense of what gags would work within the demands of feature-length narrative. An unabashed crowd pleaser, "The Navigator" was enthusiastically received, breaking box office records upon its release. When viewing this charming comedy today, we are seeing a singular performer and filmmaker in the midst of a creative hot streak, joyously operating at the top of his game.

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Sources:

- 1 Buster Keaton, with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960), 175-176.
- 2 Buster Keaton Interviews, ed. Kevin W. Sweeney (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 203.
- 3 Rudi Blesh, *Keaton* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 256.

"The Navigator" (1924) was inducted into the National Film Registry in 2018. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the Library of Congress. This essay was published by the Library of Congress in October 2022.