

Cops

By Randy Haberkamp

If you're looking for the perfect introduction to the joys of silent film's unique visual storytelling, whether for yourself or friends, "Cops" is a delightful jumping-off point.

Buster Keaton's career as part of a family vaudeville act began practically at birth, with those early years of pratfalls and a "stone-faced" response to his stunts in front of a live audience serving as an education in comic timing and construction. At the age of 22 he stumbled into filmmaking after an encounter with the 30-year-old filmmaking "veteran", Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and soon began making a series of comedy shorts with him. Three years later, Keaton began making films of his own, with "Cops" coming along two years later when Keaton was only 26. (It's easy to forget how young the creators of "old" film classics were!) Despite his theatrical roots, Keaton immediately fell in love with the camera and the technology of film, his childhood interest in engineering finding an outlet, giving his films an extremely cinematic and "modern" approach that makes them particularly effective decades later, particularly for younger viewers who haven't formed prejudices toward "old" movies.

"Cops" begins with the camera framing Keaton behind bars, seemingly in jail, talking to a young woman. A quick cut reveals that he is not in jail, but only at the gate of her father's mansion, with her rejection of him until he becomes "successful" setting him off on the quest that will comprise the rest of the film. Quite concisely, this composition and editing not only constructs the film's first surprise and laugh, but it also serves as a metaphor for his character's confined romantic and economic position. It further serves as a foreshadowing of the film's unusually dark, yet equally comical conclusion with what is surely one of the most specific and startlingly original title cards ever created. (Guess you'll have to watch it if you don't know!)

Throughout the film this construction continues, taking full advantage of composition, editing, performance, and use of locations and props as only cine-



"Old Stone Face" Buster Keaton in one of his most iconic movie scenes.

ma can. There is nothing stage bound about it. Keaton's characters have a strong moral fiber in all his films, making him much more sympathetic when life continues to thwart his efforts. In "Cops," Keaton carefully builds the audience's sympathy for his plight by creating inventive ways to show his cleverness and diligence, allowing us to forgive his keeping cash that doesn't belong to him by setting up the "theft" as revenge against a bad tipper. Additionally, the audience is allowed to reach the same erroneous conclusions as Keaton's character throughout, even though we have the truth of each situation revealed exclusively to us. Thus, we know the horse and wagon are not being sold as a misplaced sign has led us to believe, we know the family is moving rather than selling their belongings, and we know the man that Buster relieved of his cash is a cop! Buster the filmmaker lets us in on the joke even when his character isn't, and the tension continues to build with each new reveal.

While Keaton had taken over a block of the old Metro Studios bordered by Cahuenga, Lillian Way, Romaine and Cole in the heart of Hollywood in 1921, he, like many other filmmakers of the day, used much of Southern California as his backlot. Locations on the streets of Hollywood, downtown Los Angeles as well as mansion gates in Pasadena, are carefully documented and reconstructed in John Bengtson's meticulously researched "Silent Echoes: Discovering Early Hollywood Through the Films of Buster Keaton" and silentlocations.wordpress.com. While many of the sites and buildings are demolished or radically changed, it's fascinating to see

how Keaton's use of location was all about the necessary framework, allowing editing to re-engineer the locations to the story's requirements. While Keaton loved long shots with minimal close-ups to allow for uninterrupted real time to help build the laughs, his locations for this two-reel film (approximately 22 mins.) indicate he would strive for pragmatism, but also travel or go to great lengths to achieve the biggest laughs. The production values in this short film are as complex as any feature of the period.

If you look carefully, it's captured in "Cops" that even in 1922, crowds gathered to watch the often tedious spectacle of movies being made, as they can often be seen in the background or edges of the frame. In one shot, Keaton is in mid-scene working away with his wagon when a car passes by. His stopping and reacting to it indicates that this was "reality" imposing on his filmmaking, yet his maintaining character and choosing to use this take suggests he preferred the naturalness of it.

Hopefully the concise and marvelously constructed gem that is "Cops" will entice your further investigation of Keaton's silent film work (if you haven't discovered it already.) Further still I hope you will also reserve final judgment until you've searched and found screenings of his films in a theater with an audience, as they were designed to be seen. My own discovery of "Cops" and Keaton came when I purchased an 8mm print of it from Blackhawk Films at the age of 12, not because I had any insight into Keaton or the film, but because it was on sale and all that my lawn-mowing money could acquire. The memory of this fateful discovery inspires me to return to "Cops" occa-

sionally with great fondness, and I continue to marvel at its perfection, honestly earned laughs, and the unmistakable authorship of Buster Keaton.

Keaton's life after sound came in is often painted brutally, as he no longer had the control of his films he had during the silent era, and his personal life hit some rocky and difficult times. Though in 1930 Keaton faced being "washed up" at 35, the second half of his life was full, if not as successful, and he lived to see his silent films rediscovered and appreciated. Allowing these difficulties to overwhelm the final assessment is unfair, however, as the Keaton canon is an astounding accomplishment for one lifetime and "Cops" alone is a film classic comedians of any generation would love to have their name on. Buster Keaton, an American original, reminds us that the dream might not always be achieved, but there are bound to be some laughs along the way.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

As Managing Director of Preservation and Foundation Programs for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Randy Haberkamp directly oversees its Library, Archive, Nicholl Screenwriting Fellowship, Student Academy Awards, and Visual History Project. He received his Master's in Motion Picture Production from UCLA and worked for the CBS as Director of Specials and Feature Films. He founded The Silent Society that has presented and preserved silent films in Los Angeles for over 25 years.