

# One Week

By Daniel Eagan

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When Buster Keaton was drafted into the Army in 1918, he left behind a burgeoning film career that included co-starring roles in over a dozen shorts with Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. After serving in Europe during World War I, Keaton returned to the United States to learn that Arbuckle was leaving the Comique Film Corporation for Paramount, where he would be the first silent comedian to switch from shorts to features. Producer Joseph Schenck offered Comique to Keaton, working out a deal with Metro Pictures to release eight Keaton shorts a year.

Keaton not only took over the Comique studio, but got to use Arbuckle's old staff, including cinematographer Elgin Lessley and special effects wizard Fred Gabourie. They would remain with Keaton until he moved to MGM in 1929. The comedian then hired Eddie Cline as director. Cline had been with slapstick pioneer Mack Sennett as far back as 1912; more recently he had been making shorts with comedian Slim Summerville at Fox. He received co-directing credit for sixteen of Keaton's nineteen shorts, and while his creative input is unclear, he did helm some significant sound comedies, including the 1940 Registry title "The Bank Dick."

Making movies was a liberating process for Keaton. On stage he had to perform at his best eight times a week, but on film he only had to get a joke right once. (Furthermore, the "right" wasn't confined by the logic and physics of theater.) Few film performers of the time had as thorough a grounding in physical comedy as Keaton did. In addition, through his collaborations with Arbuckle he learned how to expand the scope and possibilities of material he had been using for years. Perhaps this was why he was disappointed with "The High Sign" (1921), his first completed short. While it had funny moments, it essentially transferred to the screen something that could have been performed just as easily on stage. Keaton was so upset he actually left Comique to take a lead role in the Metro production "The Saphead" before starting in on his next project.

Film historian Kevin Brownlow traced the plot for

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"One Week" to "Home Made" (1919), one in a series of sponsored films made under the umbrella title "Ford Educational Weekly." Both films concern the construction of a prefabricated house on a day-by-day basis. Keaton used the plot as the starting point for a series of mistakes, misunderstandings, and deliberate double-crosses. It was also an opportunity to stage jokes on a scale previously unavailable to him, one that encompassed a full-size house that he had built on an empty lot at Metro Studios.

In the story, a jealous boyfriend mislabels the crates holding the parts of a portable house given to Keaton and his new bride (played by Sybil Seely) as a wedding present. Following the printed instructions leads to a surrealist's dream of a house, with canted angles, a too-small roof, and a door to nowhere on the second floor. The characters could have come from an old Arbuckle short, especially "Handy Hank," played by an unidentified actor who was similar in looks and style to Arbuckle's nephew Al St. John.

But Keaton directed in a markedly different manner than his mentor. He was a patient storyteller, willing to set up jokes early in the film that wouldn't pay off until much later. One small example: The short opens with a calendar shot for Monday the 9th, an

insignificant date until Friday rolls around. Keaton restricts views of the house he is building until it is finished, focusing on construction gags that give viewers little glimpses of the disasters awaiting. He is also careful to show how his jokes work so that he doesn't trick and therefore disappoint his audience.

Many of the gags in "One Week" would reappear throughout his movies, reworked, refined, sometimes just copied. At one point a wall of the house falls onto Keaton, who is saved only because of an open second-story window. It was a gag he resurrected from the Arbuckle short "Back Stage" (1919), and one he would stage even more memorably in "Steamboat Bill, Jr." (1928). In an early scene he takes a fall from the handlebars of a motorcycle, something he would film again in "Sherlock Jr." (1924, a Registry title). "One Week" also includes astounding stunts that few performers would ever attempt, like a two-story fall onto his back.

"One Week" doesn't just parody the do-it-yourself ethos of the home mechanic, it extends logic to a degree that is both hilarious and deeply satisfying. If by chance you built your house on the equivalent of a giant turntable, then a gale-force wind will start it spinning like a top. To get inside, you will then be forced, as Keaton is at one point, to somehow match your house's velocity in order to dive through a moving target of a window.

The equanimity with which Keaton solves his problems is one of the most appealing aspects of "One Week." He may be momentarily puzzled or chagrined, but he doesn't ask for explanations or sympathy, not even when his ingenious solutions backfire. The film received excellent reviews when it was released after Labor Day, with one paper calling it "the comedy sensation of the year." In a sense, Keaton had trained all his life for this moment, and the success of "One Week" vindicated his approach to comedy. In his subsequent shorts he began assembling a stock company, including Joe Roberts (seen briefly here in a bit with a piano) as the heavy and Seely as the ingénue in two more films (she would be replaced by Virginia Fox).

He also began considering the feature-length format, which he tried on an experimental basis with "Three Ages" (1923).

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

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