

COLLEGE (1927)

As Buster Keaton approached his second picture for United Artists, he was faced with an almost complete shift in his team of writers. With studio manager Lou Anger in New York and Joe Schenck assuming even greater responsibilities as chairman of United Artists with the November 1926 death of UA president Hiram Abrams, Keaton must have felt somewhat adrift, even as he had an idea for his next movie at the ready.

College pictures were in vogue. Mostly comedies or light romances, they radiated youthful energy and beauty, and served as sparkling showcases for new contract talent. More Americans than ever were attending colleges and universities, enrollment having risen 84% over the previous decade. Recent film hits included *The Plastic Age*, *Brown of Harvard*, *The Campus Flirt*, and *The Quarterback*. Most successful of all, of course, was *The Freshman*, which ideally suited Harold Lloyd's eager beaver and staked out territory to which Chaplin could never aspire. For Keaton, a college setting offered myriad opportunities for physical comedy, athletics suiting him and his unique style of slapstick better than any of his contemporaries. Moreover, a Keaton picture set on a college campus would virtually write itself.

With *The General* essentially finished, Keaton began assembling a new staff to help flesh out a story. In no particular order, he picked up Carl Harbaugh, a journeyman writer with a range of credits, most recently with Hal Roach and Mack Sennett, and

Bryan Foy, one of the Seven Little Foys of vaudeville fame who occasionally wrote and directed short comedies. Neither man was of much use to him, particularly Harbaugh. “He didn’t write nothing,” Keaton complained. “He was one of the most useless men I ever had on the scenario department. He wasn’t a good gag man; he wasn’t a good title writer; he wasn’t a good story constructionist.” Foy, who would go on to become a producer at Warner Bros., couldn’t have been much better. Still, as Keaton reasoned, “we had to put somebody’s name up that wrote ‘em.”

Around the same time, he took on a director named James W. Horne, whose essential background was in making serials, initially for Kalem, later on a freelance basis. Horne was skilled at grinding out footage on a tight schedule, a valuable quality in the mechanical world of chapter plays, where a single project might equal the length of three or four normal features, but of little advantage to Keaton, who adhered to only the vaguest of schedules. A clash between Keaton and Horne was inevitable, given the instinctive way Keaton developed and refined a scene. Keaton, in fact, found Horne to be “absolutely useless” on the picture, which soon acquired the utilitarian title *College*.

Lacking the support of a writers such as Jean Havez or Clyde Bruckman—his two favorite collaborators—Keaton was effectively left to write and direct *College* by himself. In casting the picture, he knew he would need certain types no matter which direction the story took—the mother, the girlfriend, the rival, the college dean. For the girl, he settled on Anne Cornwall, a no-nonsense brunette who had been in pictures almost as

long as he had, and who, at four-eleven, was even an inch shorter than Virginia Fox. The part of the mother went to veteran stage and screen actress Florence Turner, arguably the movies' first genuine star, while compact character actor Snitz Edwards returned to the Keaton studio in the role of the dean. For Jeff Brown, his student rival, Keaton wanted someone who was physically imposing as well as good looking, and chose Harold Goodwin, who was six-two, after a perfunctory interview. "I was called over to the studio," the actor remembered, "and they said, 'This is Mr. Keaton.' He says, 'Do you play ball?' I said, 'Yeah, I used to play at school.' He says, 'You'll do.'"

Filming began in Los Angeles on January 14, 1927 with the original UCLA campus on Vermont Avenue standing in for the fictional Clayton College. Buster is Ronald, a bookish high school student who is proclaimed "our most brilliant scholar" as he receives his diploma and an honor medal. He is then invited to speak to the graduating class on the subject of "The Curse of Athletics" while his cheap woolen suit shrinks from having been drenched in a rainstorm. Outside, Mary Haynes angrily delivers a lecture of her own. "Your speech was ridiculous," she tells him, rain pouring on them both. "Anyone prefers an athlete to a weak-knee'd teachers' pet." She then delivers the traditional Keaton ultimatum that typically sets the action in motion at the end of the first reel: "When you change your mind about athletics, then I'll change my mind about you!"

COPS (1922)

As with *The Paleface*, Buster Keaton's previous comedy, the making of *Cops* coincided with the construction of a fully-enclosed "dark" stage on the Keaton lot, encouraging a storyline that required no interiors. And, as was always the case with Keaton, the simplest concept yielded the best results. "You could write the whole plot on a postcard," he said. "We do the rest." What he envisioned was a pursuit through the streets of Los Angeles "just ducking cops in all directions. Just a common ordinary chase sequence." But it would all lead up to a powerful finish in which Buster was chased *en masse* by the city's entire police force. "Three-hundred and fifty [cops]," he said in a 1963 interview. "And it was because we could only find three hundred and fifty cop uniforms."

The logistics of such a shoot required pre-planning on a scale Keaton and his production team had never before attempted. Every gambit, every evasion had to be thought through in advance. Locations had to be selected, extras scheduled and costumed. No picking up a quick shot a block from the studio—too many moving parts to coordinate. He was always proud of the fact that he never worked from a script, but the paperwork needed to make *Cops* must have come awfully close to one. Even so, his organic method of working gave him plenty of leeway.

— James Curtis, *Buster Keaton: [A Filmmaker's Life](#)* (Knopf)