

## **SEVEN CHANCES** (1925)

*Seven Chances* was a film Buster Keaton never wanted to make. A Broadway stage hit from 1916, its principal character stands to inherit a fortune if he is married by the age of thirty—and he is due to turn thirty the following day. There is no steady girlfriend, not even one on the horizon, and no real inclination to solicit one. Written by Roi Cooper Megrue (*It Pays To Advertise*), the show drew mixed notices, its undisputed highspot being actor-playwright Frank Craven's droll performance as Megrue's hero, a self-confessed woman hater by the name of Jimmie Shannon. "[It] was not a good story for me," Keaton explained. "That was bought by someone and sold to Joe Schenck without us knowin' it. As a rule, Schenck never knew when I was shooting' or what I was shootin'. He just went to the preview. But somebody sold him this show that was done by Belasco a few years before... And he buys this thing for me and it's no good for me at all."

Keaton considered the property a waste of money—the material was thin, the characters bloodless, the laughs dependent solely upon dialogue. It was, he said, "the type of unbelievable farce I don't like." Having never meddled before in the making of the Keaton pictures, Schenck's actions left his star comedian bewildered. Could Schenck have been responding to the drop in revenues for *Sherlock Jr.*? Or cost over-runs on *The Navigator*? Schenck never offered an explanation, and Keaton, apparently, never asked. For the role of Mary Jones, Jimmie's girl, Buster selected Ruth

Dwyer, who was attracting notice in a romantic comedy titled *The Reckless Age* opposite Reginald Denny.

Filming began on September 16, 1924, with the film's prologue, a courtship exterior stretching over four seasons, shot in Technicolor, making it the only remnant of a plan to shoot the entire movie that way. Upon learning that he stands to inherit \$7 million if he is married by seven o'clock on the evening of his twenty-seventh birthday, Jimmie Shannon races to the home of his longtime girlfriend. Of course, botches his proposal to Mary, who angrily stalks off. Now he must find somebody else to marry, and fast.

Keaton and his writers jettisoned a tedious first act in its entirety, translating Shannon's increasingly desperate search for a wife into purely visual terms. "When you've got spots in there where you can do things in action without dialogue," he said, "you should take advantage of it... First instructions with the new writers we were getting from Broadway; see, everything with them was based on a joke, funny saying, people shouting. But we'd tell our story, our plot with our characters, and we talk when necessary. But we don't go out of our way to talk. Let's see how much material we can get where dialogue is not needed."

The play *Seven Chances* lacked a strong finish, and by turning the story into one clear progression to an inevitable chase--which grew to constitute the entire third act of the

picture—Keaton firmly and indelibly moved it from the cloistered realm of the stage to the limitless expanse of the big screen.

## **HARD LUCK** (1921)

Buster Keaton began shooting *Hard Luck*, his sixth picture for Metro release, on November 29, 1920. Since he grew up deflecting the audience's sympathies in vaudeville, it seemed only natural for him to do the same on screen. And by draining any hint of sentiment from the action, he gave *Hard Luck* an astringent quality rare among comedies of the day. "I started out in that picture—because I was down in spirit and heart and everything—to do away with myself. So I set out to commit suicide. There were about six gags in there that were pips."

Buster's luck changes when he's embraced by the members of a country club who think he's a daring explorer on a hunt to collect armadillos for a museum. Virginia Fox, his relatively new leading lady, tells him to take a horse from the stable, and the middle of the story, with the fox trailing along behind him and Joe Roberts as a bandit called Lizard Lip Luke, took care of itself. The strong finish for *Hard Luck*, the brainchild of Eddie Cline, was also the most improbable one Keaton ever put on screen, the sort of absurdist conceit he'd later shun as untenable in features. He later remembered it as the biggest laugh he ever got.

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