

SHERLOCK JR. (1924)

The impetus for *Sherlock Jr.* was almost certainly *Merton of the Movies*, a sharp satire of the picture business that opened on Broadway in November 1922. Buster Keaton was instantly drawn to the character of Merton Gill, a small-town boob who dreams of Hollywood stardom, and he openly said he wanted to play the part on screen. The sticking point was that the show's star, Glenn Hunter, was under contract to Famous Players, and it was widely assumed that Paramount would have the inside track on any deal for the film rights.

Under the working title *The Misfit*, the Keaton picture took shape as the story of a projection machine operator, again a small town hero, who goes to Hollywood to make his fortune and becomes a millionaire-producer. There were scenes of Mertonish poignancy, and appearing opposite Keaton would be Kathryn McGuire, formerly of the Mack Sennett studio. Soon, he was forced to abandon the idea of bringing his character to Hollywood, and a new device had to be found to set the action in motion. In desperation, he returned to a setup similar to the modern story in *Three Ages*: Two suitors for the same girl, one good and one bad. Due to the chicanery of his rival, Buster is unjustly accused of theft and ordered from the house. He must solve the crime to redeem himself, sparking a burlesque of the detective genre most recently

exploited by John Barrymore in *Sherlock Holmes*. In fact, it was courtesy of the Barrymore release that the film acquired its permanent title.

“I think the reason we started off on that story,” Keaton remarked, “is because I had one of the best cameramen in the picture business, Elgin Lessley. He originally was with Sennett. Now I laid out a few of these tricks; [and] some of these tricks I knew from the stage. I seldom did camera tricks. I tried to do the real illusion. (I have done an awful lot of camera tricks too, as far as that goes.) But I laid out some of those gags. And the technical man that builds the sets, I showed him how I have to get them built for the things I had to do. [When] we got that batch of stuff together, [Lessley] said, ‘You can’t do it and tell a legitimate story, because there are illusions and some of them are clown gags, some Houdini, some Ching Ling Foo. It’s got to come in a dream. To get what we’re after, you’ve got to be a projectionist in a projecting room in the little local small-town motion picture theater, and go to sleep after you’ve got the picture started. Once you fall asleep, you visualize yourself as one of the important characters in the picture you’re showing. [You] go down out of that projection room, go right down, and then walk up onto the screen and become a part of it. Now you tell your whole story.’

“And all I had to round out was that I was in trouble at the start of the picture with my girl’s father. He thought I stole his watch. Well, on the screen I became the world’s

greatest detective to solve this mystery... I was a son-of-a-gun, the world's greatest detective. No matter how they tried to surround me and kill me or get me, I got out of it." Putting Buster into the movie itself and having him interact with all the characters on screen--as well as the conventions of filmmaking--would be Lessley's department. "That was the reason for making the whole picture. Just that one situation: that a motion picture projectionist in a theater goes to sleep and visualizes himself getting mixed up with the characters on the screen. All right, then my job was to transform those characters on the screen into [the projectionist's] characters at home, and then I've got my plot."

THE ELECTRIC HOUSE (1922)

With his writing staff down to two, Keaton opted to return to *The Electric House*, a two-reeler he was making when he fractured an ankle. "We shelved everything I had shot on it," he said in 1958, "and then later on... I remade the picture." The task of working out a fully-automated house fell to Fred Gabourie, whose independent scenic shop was on the Keaton studio property. Gabourie must have started with a laundry list of mechanized conveniences, and may even have suggested a few of his own. The setup was simple enough, an accidental mix-up of degrees at the commencement exercises of a state university. The Dean (Joe Roberts) announces that he needs a

technician to electrify his house, and the ideal man for the job presents a diploma in Cosmetics and Manicuring.

The interior sets, fabricated at the studio, were built to reflect the general look and dimensions of the house the Keatons were currently renting in Hollywood. Its treacherous staircase was reworked from scratch. An electrified bookcase was wired to select and dispense books with a retractable arm that extended six feet into the room. Virginia's suite was tricked out with a mechanized Murphy bed and a traveling bathtub that rolled along on tracks. Sliding doors opened and closed on command. A pool table in the library was served by a conveyor that recovered and re-racked the balls automatically. The swimming pool out back instantly drained and refilled with the yank of a lever. The kitchen was equipped to wash and shelve dishes with a minimum of human intervention. And the dining room was serviced by a model train routed through the kitchen and out onto the table, where it would pause and deliver servings at each individual setting. *The Electric House* was the quintessential Keaton invention, a tinkerer's paradise in which every contrivance was blessed with the potential for comedy should anything go wrong.

THE HIGH SIGN (1921)

Made at the Henry Lehrman studio in Culver City, *The High Sign* was Buster Keaton's first solo directing job, an opportunity afforded him by Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. It took shape slowly. The loosely worked-out story was of Buster's own devising, and the crew would be Roscoe's own, otherwise on hiatus while the star was out of town. But Keaton wasn't ready to start just yet, and he waited until Arbuckle's return to select a leading lady. One of the girls they jointly interviewed was Bartine Burkett, a twenty-one year old actress working for Eddie Cline as one of the Fox Sunshine Comedy Girls. A native of Robeline, Louisiana, she had been in pictures since 1916 and met studio manager Lou Anger's principal qualification for the job in that she came cheap.

Filming of *The High Sign* got under way the week of January 12, 1920, but since two other companies were already sharing the Lehrman studio in Arbuckle's absence, Keaton and his crew were forced out onto location, principally along the Venice oceanfront and, to make his entrance, Redondo Beach, where, appropriately, he was thrown off a passing train. Buster sees a want ad for a boy to run a shooting gallery. ("Must be expert shot to attract crowd.") He applies for the job, but the business is really a front for a gang of Black Handers called the Blinking Buzzards. And, presently, he finds himself recruited as both bodyguard and assassin of their current extortion target, the town miser August Nickelnurser. Throughout it all, the gang members give

each other the high sign—hands crossed at the nose, fingers outstretched to symbolize the wingspread of a bird.

Keaton seemed to enjoy the intricate process of making the movie, ensuring that each gag, no matter how outlandish, served the logical development of the story. “Even at this time,” he later explained, “the moving picture comedy was getting to be more legitimate, logical, and consistent, and the people were more human and less like the heroes of the comic strips. They were beginning to put things on the screen because they arose from the situation, as in stage plays, and not because they were supposed to be independently funny or because certain properties that could be used happened to be at hand.”

But as work progressed on *The High Sign*, Keaton grew increasingly convinced the film was no good. Never before had he directed without Arbuckle present. There were, of course, others to bounce ideas off, but there wasn't the deep well of experience that came from having worked both sides of the camera as Roscoe had. When the picture was finished, Keaton wanted it shelved. Lou Anger, who had \$12,000 of the company's money tied up in it, at least wanted to see how it would play in front of an audience. They took it out, but Keaton already knew he needed a stronger debut to put his new series over. And so *The High Sign* was held from release for more than a year.

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