

SPITE MARRIAGE (1929)

Following the completion of *The Cameraman*, Buster Keaton's first production for M-G-M, studio management lost no time in getting another Keaton comedy into the pipeline. Everyone seemed to agree that *Cameraman* was a good picture—Thalberg thought it hilarious—but the time it took to make didn't reflect the contention that big studio efficiencies would bring the cost of a Keaton comedy into line with the studio's other star vehicles. Keaton, for his part, couldn't understand the institutional obsession with schedule and budgeting. "We didn't shoot by no schedule at all," he said of the old days. "We didn't know when we started whether we was goin' to have the camera up five weeks or ten weeks. And it didn't make any difference. We owned our own camera. We're not paying rent on anything. All our people are on weekly salary anyhow... We've just got two pictures a year to make and that's all there is to it."

The new story would have to be considerably cheaper to make than its predecessor. The solution was a backstage story about an actress who marries a besotted fan when jilted by her leading man. Compared to *The Cameraman*, the development process for *Spite Marriage* was streamlined. As with *The Cameraman*, screenwriter Richard Schayer was brought on to draft the final script, and production head Irving Thalberg stepped in to lend a firmer supervisory hand. A problem with the storyline for *Spite Marriage* was that it veered wildly off track in its third act, putting Buster and Trilby

(Dorothy Sebastian) together on a yacht, then stranding them on an island teeming with cannibals in a throwback to *The Navigator*. At first, Schayer was unable to fix this, although he did add a fire in the engine room as the motivation for abandoning ship. It was in the final draft of the script, okayed by Thalberg on November 7, 1928, that a solution finally appeared. As in *The Cameraman*, the girl's love interest saves himself at a time of danger, leaving it to Buster's character to actually rescue her. With the two of them now stranded alone on the ship, there was no longer any need for the scenes on the island, although an echo of *The Navigator* stubbornly remained.

Thalberg's reputation as a genius with story was well-earned, and the 134-page continuity would be the best-constructed script of Keaton's career. Thalberg passed supervision of *Spite Marriage* to his new brother-in-law, a former publicist named Lawrence Weingarten. Officially, Thalberg would still be the producer of *Spite Marriage*, but Larry Weingarten, uncredited, would handle the day-to-day responsibilities of the job.

Spite Marriage began filming in the midst of the most sweeping flu epidemic the state had seen since 1918. The company spent eleven days in a theater interior on M-G-M's Stage 14, working around the illnesses of both Keaton and actor Edward Earle, who was playing the caddish Lionel Denmore, Trilby Drew's leading man. In keeping with Thalberg's involvement, the picture emerged as more conventional and plot-driven than

most Keaton features, another *Battling Butler* rather than another *Sherlock Jr.* Now on the cusp of a talking picture career, Keaton was giving a talking picture performance. Knowing the film would be released with a synchronous musical score and sound effects, his character, Elmer, was speaking through intertitles as little as possible. There were routine delays while he and Sedgwick talked story and figured out physical business, and by the first of December they were already four days behind.

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