

## THE NAVIGATOR (1924)

“It had always occurred to me that there was a good deal of comedy to be found under the sea,” Buster Keaton wrote in 1926, “and I ordered a regulation diving suit that weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. The only variation was that more glass was put into the front of the helmet. The face, even though it is not a smiling one, must be seen in comedy. That was the beginning of *The Navigator*. The story was built up from that diver’s suit.”

A character under the sea in a diver’s suit must be tethered to a ship of some kind—not just a thirty-five footer, but something of size—and Keaton credited writer Jean Havez with the idea of making it an ocean liner. “Well, we went to work right then and there and sez, ‘Now, what can we do with an ocean liner?’ [Someone] says, ‘Well, we can make a dead ship out of it. No lights aboard. No running water. Just afloat.’ How could we get it afloat? Well, we set out to figure out how to do that and how to write a story around it. Only to get a boy and a girl alone and adrift in the Pacific Ocean.” It was a natural, a real pip of a story. “Now you go back to your first part to establish your characters. Well, if I was a laborer or a poor guy, or something like that, it would be no hardship for me to be on that ocean liner. But if I started out with a Rolls Royce, a chauffeur, a footman, a valet, and a couple of cooks and [everyone] else to wait on me—and the same thing with the girl—in other words, the audience knows we were born

rich and never had to lift a finger to do anything. Now you turn those two people adrift on a dead ship, they're helpless.”

Getting the characters stranded on the ship together took some doing, and the setup, as usual for a Keaton picture, wasn't meant to be funny. Buster is Rollo Treadway, heir to the Treadway fortune—living proof that “every family tree must have its sap.” Rollo's girl (Kathryn McGuire again) rejects him after he's already purchased two tickets to Honolulu for the honeymoon. “So I tear up one ticket, put the other in my pocket, and I sez, ‘What time does it sail?’ [My butler] says, ‘Nine o'clock.’ I sez, ‘In the morning?’ He says, ‘Yeah.’ I sez, ‘It's too early, so I'll go aboard tonight.’

“All right. Now we went to the night shot, and we show the night watchman coming out with his punch clock. And I was supposed to go to Pier 2, and we see this watchman come up to punch at this pier. He slid the gate over on 12, but the gate hid the ‘1.’ And I see it from the car and I decide that's the ship. And I go out there and get on this ship. Oh, and here's your plot: We went to a bunch of men in a building overlooking the bay of San Francisco and looking down at the boat at the pier. [One of them] says, ‘That boat has just been bought by our enemies, this country that we're on the verge of going to war against. That ship will carry ammunition and supplies. It's up to us to see that she doesn't get there. Tonight, we'll go down there, we'll overcome the night watchman, or anybody else who gets in our way, throw her ropes off or cut them off,

set that boat adrift—the wind and tide will do the rest. It’s a cinch to go up against those rocks on the other side of the Golden Gate, and it’s a doomed ship.’ That’s the plot.”

## **THE BOAT** (1921)

A year after *One Week*, Buster Keaton returned to his love-struck couple from *One Week*, last seen walking off in the distance, the abject ruins of their do-it-yourself house in the foreground. Why not take these two characters, advance the calendar several years, and give them another project to tackle? Keaton welcomed Sybil Seely back into the fold and proceeded to create one of his strongest comedies, a fitting companion to the picture that first put him on the map.

The premise for the new two-reeler was even simpler than for *One Week*. Buster has built a boat in the basement of their house and is intent upon launching it. What follows is a panoply of comic destruction, a celebration of defective reasoning and, as the critic Gilbert Seldes would put it, “intense preoccupation.” In the film’s opening moments, Buster discovers his newly-completed craft is too big to fit through a rolling door, so he gets busy with a crowbar and chips away at the brick wall surrounding it. “The main thing that makes an audience laugh,” he said, “is that something happens to me that could have happened to them. But it didn’t—and they’re glad.”

The name on the ill-fated boat is DAMFINO, and like so many things in Keaton's work, it too can trace its lineage back to his early years, in this case to Muskegon. In 1914, a Chicago-based agent named Eddie Sawyer eased his boat in alongside Joe Roberts' dock, and the name painted on the bow was DAMFINO (as in answer to the question, "Where are we?"). Keaton always relished the name, and may have settled on the idea of a boat picture in order to use it.

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