

THE THREE AGES (1923)

In some ways, *Three Ages* was a feature in name only. Keaton, who said he had D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* in mind, described the concept in a 1958 interview: "What I did was just tell a single story of two fellows calling on a girl, and the mother likes one suitor and the father likes the other one. And in fighting over the girl and different situations we could get into. And finally winning her. But I told the story in three ages. I told it in the Stone Age, Roman Age, and Modern. In other words, I just show us calling on the girl, the two of us gettin' sore at each other because we were in each other's way. Then I went from the Stone Age to the Roman Age, did the same exact scene with the same people, only the setting was different and the costumes. And the same thing in the Modern Age. So every situation we just repeated in the three different ages." Griffith's picture was comprised of four interwoven stories, set in four different ages, exploring the theme of intolerance--social, religious, political. When the film failed at the box office, he was able to edit the Babylonian footage into a stand-alone feature called *The Fall of Babylon*, and similarly repurpose elements of the Modern Age story as *The Mother and the Law*--a shrewd commercial resurrection not lost on Keaton. "Cut the film apart," he said of *Three Ages*, "and then splice up the three periods, each one separately, and you will have three complete two-reel films."

Work on *Three Ages* began in January 1923. Keaton began by puzzling out the Modern Age story, which would then serve as the basis for the Stone Age and Roman

segments to come. A structure for the Modern Age emerged: Rivalry, Jealousy, Competition, Triumph. “The point of this comedy,” Keaton said, “was that love and the relations of man and woman had not changed since the dawn of time.”

THE BLACKSMITH (1922)

By alternating between two directors, Buster Keaton was able to pass from one film to the next with a minimum of delay. Upon completion of *The Play House*, he put Eddie Cline in charge of cutting the picture and began shooting *The Village Blacksmith* with director Mal St. Clair the next day. The new comedy was conceived as a parody of the Longfellow poem, which Buster used to recite on stage. As he works away at the forge and anvil, two schoolboys stop and watch from the street. Joe Roberts, the shop’s owner, comes ambling along, lunch pail in hand, and roughly shoves them aside. Meanwhile, a closer shot reveals that Buster, instead of hammering out horseshoes, is cooking himself breakfast.

The Village Blacksmith was a troubled collaboration, St. Clair preferring a slower tempo than Keaton, and while the film had some clever intervals, such as when Buster acts as shoe salesman to a persnickety horse, there were none of the big ideas audiences had come to expect of him, nor any particularly cinematic ones. When they completed the film in August 1921, Keaton and St. Clair came to an amicable parting of the ways.

The Village Blacksmith, retitled simply *The Blacksmith*, was previewed for James Quirk, the influential editor of *Photoplay*, and Quirk excoriated the picture in the magazine's January 1922 issue. It was by far the worst notice a Keaton comedy had ever received—and *Photoplay* was the top movie magazine of the day. The people at First National were alarmed, and Keaton knew he had to do something to salvage the picture. Judging from the changes he made, he decided there wasn't enough slapstick in the thing, and that too much of it played out within the confines of the blacksmith shop. He removed a tedious scene in which he got oily handprints all over actress Virginia Fox's white horse, and also moved the film outdoors with an inventive chase sequence.

"It's heartbreaking work, that's all I have to say," Keaton, in a black mood, said as he rested between shots. "We gave up trying to follow a script months ago, because the gags that looked funniest on paper flopped cold on the screen. Now we make up our laughs as we go along, and the going is tough!" *The Blacksmith* was finally released in July 1922—an entire year after the first scenes were made. And although it turned a respectable profit, Keaton regarded it as "a dud," an attitude he maintained for the rest of his life.

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