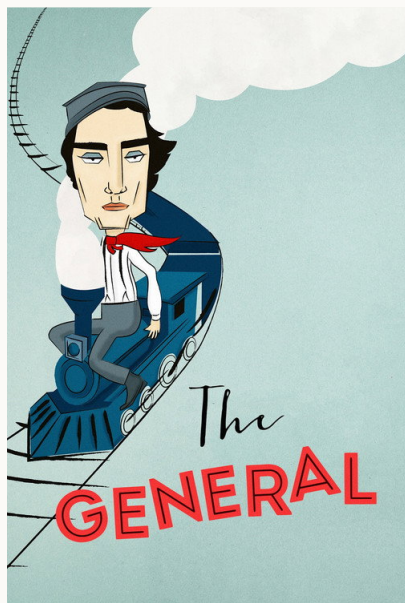




COMEDY · WAR · ROMANCE

The General

1926 · Directed by Buster Keaton

Silent Cinema

Comedy

War Film

In the American Civil War, a young Southern railroad engineer cares about two things above all: his locomotive and the woman he hopes to marry. When both are taken from him, he sets out after them alone. A comic adventure built almost entirely on a single long chase.

DIRECTOR	Buster Keaton
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YEAR	1926
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RUNTIME	1h 19m (79 min)
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COUNTRY	USA
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GENRES	Comedy, War, Romance
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CAST	Buster Keaton, Marion Mack, Glen Cavender, Jim Farley, Frederick Vroom
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IMDB	8.1 / 10 (104,099 votes)
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ROTTEN TOMATOES	92% (critics)
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TMDB SCORE	7.9 / 10 (1,469 votes)
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WHERE TO WATCH	Free: Search YouTube (restored / 4K)
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Free: [Search YouTube \(all versions\)](#)Free: [Search Internet Archive](#)

Stream (US): Amazon Prime Video, fuboTV, MGM+ Amazon Channel, Philo, MGM Plus, FlixFling, Cohen Media Amazon Channel, Amazon Prime Video with Ads

Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, FlixFling

Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, FlixFling

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 **The summit of silent screen comedy**

Buster Keaton's best-known feature is often named alongside Chaplin's best work as the peak of silent comedy. It turns one train chase into a whole film, with gags and story fused.

2 **Stunts that are real, not trickery**

Keaton, a former vaudeville acrobat, performs dangerous physical action in long, unbroken shots, using real trains and real locations. Watching it shows how much of early film spectacle was made in front of the camera.

3 **A model of film construction**

Almost every gag grows from the setup, the landscape and the machinery. Few films show so clearly how comedy, action and plot can be the same thing.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of late-silent Hollywood and the standard example of the comic chase as structure. It also marks the end of Keaton's most independent period as a filmmaker.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a piece of engineering: every joke comes from how machines, space and timing work.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- Keaton's face stays almost still while the world around him goes wrong; his body does the acting, and his reactions are small and precise.
- The camera often stays wide and still, letting actions develop within one shot, so you can see that the stunts are really happening.
- The locomotive is the film's real co-star. Notice how the train's direction, speed and layout organise both the geography and the jokes.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

How does a film get so much comedy out of a story in which the hero is never actually trying to be funny?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Silent comedy's golden age:** By the mid-1920s, feature-length comedy led by Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Keaton was big business. Shorts and slapstick were giving way to longer films that needed real stories.
- **Industry:** Keaton worked in his own studio, with producer Joseph Schenck distributing through United Artists. He had unusual control over budget, crew and shooting schedule, and spent heavily on authenticity.
- **Dominant styles:** Silent film was at technical maturity: location shooting, deep-focus-style long shots, and refined editing. Chase and last-minute-rescue structures, from Mack Sennett to D. W. Griffith, were familiar to audiences.
- **Source material:** The story draws on the real 1862 Andrews Raid, a Union attempt to steal a locomotive in Georgia, as told in a participant's memoir. Keaton shifts the sympathy to the Southern side.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Sherlock Jr. (1924)

Keaton's earlier feature refined the combination of precise stunt work and elaborate mechanical gags that *The General* then extends over a whole story.



TRADITION

Keystone slapstick and the comic chase

Mack Sennett's studio made the chase the basic structure of screen comedy. Keaton turns that rough energy into disciplined, story-driven film design.



FILM

Our Hospitality (1923)

Keaton's earlier period comedy already put a train, a historical setting and a set-piece chase at the centre of a feature.



THIS FILM

The General (1926)

NEW AT THE TIME *A comedy built like a historical action film: a single continuous pursuit, shot on location with real locomotives and a period look rather than studio gag sets.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in the prosperous mid-1920s, when American audiences were enjoying boom-time entertainment and Keaton, a star with his own studio, gambled on an expensive Civil War comedy.

- **Country and moment:** The film came out in the Jazz Age boom, about sixty years after the Civil War. The war was still part of living memory, with veterans' reunions and a strong popular nostalgia for it.
- **Historical source:** The story is based on the Great Locomotive Chase of 1862 and on a memoir by one of its participants. Keaton aimed at period accuracy in the look of the film, which was inspired by Civil War photographs.
- **Society and audience:** Audiences in 1926 were used to sentimental, heroic treatments of the Civil War and the South. The film was set within that tradition. It was not a hit with critics, who found it too long and serious for a comedy, and it did only modest business.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Keaton produced his films through his own unit, backed by producer Joseph Schenck, and had creative control. The General was very costly for a comedy, and its poor returns contributed to his later loss of independence when he moved to MGM in 1928.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** A short first act of setup, then a long pursuit that keeps escalating. The film is brisk at 79 minutes and rarely pauses.
- **Style:** Physical comedy and action rather than verbal wit. Gags are visual, set in wide shots, and usually built from several steps.
- **Format:** Silent, black and white, standard square-ish frame. Intertitles are sparse; the story is told mostly through images.
- **Performance:** Keaton's deadpan is understated and unsentimental. Expect little overt emoting and a lot of precise physical work.

- **Versions:** Many releases exist with different musical scores, since no single original score is credited. Picture quality varies, so choose a restored edition.
- **Tone:** Light and adventurous even in a war setting. The Civil War is backdrop, not the subject of serious drama.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

6+ SUGGESTED AGE

Official ratings range from U (GB, FR) to FSK 6 (DE), with no US rating; 6 fits the mild slapstick peril and a silent film's demands on attention.

Official ratings: US NR · UK U · Germany 6 · France U

- **Good for:** Inventive slapstick and daring stunts on real trains, a persistent hero, and a clear chase story that needs no dialogue. A great first silent film for children who enjoy physical comedy.
- **May unsettle, peril:** Comic chases involve moving trains, cannons and near misses. Stunts are real and spectacular but played for laughs, not horror.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Wartime setting with gunfire, soldiers and some battle scenes. Mostly bloodless and slapstick in tone, though people are shot and killed.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Presents the Confederate side as the sympathetic heroes and treats the Civil War as an adventure. Some stereotyped portrayals of the period.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Silent, black and white, with title cards to read. Younger children may need help following or may lose patience early on.
- **Explain first:** It is a silent film: there is no spoken dialogue, only music and written title cards, which you may want to read aloud to younger children.
- **Explain first:** It is set during the American Civil War, when the Northern and Southern states fought each other, partly over slavery.
- **Explain first:** Buster Keaton did his own stunts, so the dangerous-looking train action is real, not computer effects.

Talk about it after: *>Buster Keaton almost never smiles, yet the film is very funny. How does he make you laugh using only his actions and expressions?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as a story about competence: a man ignored by everyone else proves himself through persistence, ingenuity and an intimate understanding of a machine, while larger events of war swirl around him without his noticing.

THEMES

- **Man and machine:** Johnnie's bond with his locomotive is as emotionally real as his romance. Machines are not just props; they are partners, obstacles and the means of his self-expression.
- **Proving one's worth:** Rejected for enlistment, Johnnie must earn recognition by acts nobody asked of him. The film treats heroism as stubborn practicality, not bravado.
- **Innocence amid war:** Keaton's hero stumbles through the machinery of conflict with little sense of its stakes. The war becomes a comic landscape rather than a moral drama, which some viewers find troubling.
- **Competence and partnership:** Annabelle starts as a figure to be rescued, but the film allows her moments of initiative and misjudgment. The couple ends as a rough partnership, not a simple hero and prize.

Key scenes

The locomotive chase begins

Keaton shows the pursuit as a problem of mechanics: a handcar, a bicycle-like pump rail, and finally the engine itself. The shift of means sets the film's pattern of improvisation under pressure.

The cannon and the tracks

A single exchange between two trains turns on timing, geography and an unintended gag. It shows how Keaton makes cause and effect the engine of comedy and suspense.

The bridge and the Union locomotive

The film's most famous image is a real locomotive falling with a burning bridge, filmed as a large-scale spectacle and played as a payoff to the story. It is a landmark of practical effects on a vast scale.

The final kiss

The last moment resolves romance and military recognition in one comic gesture. It underlines the film's idea that the hero's two goals have been the same story all along.

Filmmaking

- **Camera and framing:** Keaton favours wide shots held long enough for action to unfold in full. The viewer sees the stunt and the space, which builds both suspense and trust that nothing is faked.
- **Physical performance:** Trained in vaudeville, Keaton does his own stunts, from climbing across moving trains to riding on the locomotive's moving parts. His calm face against dangerous action is the film's comic signature.
- **Location and design:** Shot on location in Oregon with period locomotives and carefully built period detail. The compositions often echo Civil War photography, which gives the comedy a grounded, almost documentary look.
- **Structure and editing:** The plot is a long outward journey followed by a mirror-image return. Gags are planted early and paid off later, and cutting is used mainly to clarify and speed up action.
- **Writing:** The story had several credited collaborators and co-director Clyde Bruckman. Its tight design keeps almost no scenes that are not part of the chase or its setup.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

In Georgia, just before the Civil War, engineer Johnnie Gray loves two things: his locomotive, the General, and Annabelle Lee. When war breaks out, Johnnie tries to enlist, but the recruiting office turns him away because he is more useful as an engineer. Nobody tells him this, and Annabelle, believing he is a coward, rejects him.

A year later, Union raiders sneak into Georgia, steal the General and drive it north, destroying track and telegraph lines behind them. Annabelle, travelling on a train, is accidentally taken with it. Johnnie chases them alone, first on a handcar, then on a borrowed engine, and sees the enemy plan to attack the Confederate army.

Behind Union lines, he learns the raiders' plan and rescues Annabelle, but together they must escape on foot and then on the stolen engine. They race south with the Union army behind them, and Johnnie manages to warn the Confederate forces in time.

At the battle, Johnnie's actions help to destroy a bridge that collapses under a Union train. He is rewarded with a lieutenant's commission, and as he returns a salute, Annabelle kisses him.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **A real event, flipped:** The film draws on the 1862 Andrews Raid, in which Union volunteers stole a Georgia locomotive and were chased by its crew. Keaton reversed the emphasis, making the pursuer, not the raiders, his hero, and the story could then end in a Southern victory.
- **The bridge shot:** The locomotive-falling-from-the-bridge scene used a real engine and a purpose-built bridge near Cottage Grove, Oregon. It was shot as a single big event with several cameras. The wreck was famously expensive and stayed on location for years.

- **Keaton's control:** Keaton worked with co-director Clyde Bruckman and producer Joseph Schenck, and was deeply involved in every aspect. He pushed for period accuracy, studying Civil War photographs to shape the film's look.
- **Stunts without doubles:** Keaton did many of his own stunts, including moving along an operating train. His vaudeville training taught him to fall and land safely, which is why shots so often hold on him in full view.
- **Myth:** The General was a celebrated hit when it came out. **Reality:** Reception was mixed, and the film was costly and did not do well enough to protect Keaton's independence. Its reputation grew much later, and he soon moved to a more restricted deal at MGM.
- **Myth:** The famous train crash was done with miniatures or trick photography. **Reality:** The falling locomotive was real, on a bridge built for the scene. It was filmed in one take with multiple cameras, which is a large part of why the shot still impresses.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

Sherlock Jr. (1924)

Keaton's earlier feature refined the combination of precise stunt work and elaborate mechanical gags that The General then extends over a whole story.



TRADITION

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THIS FILM

The General (1926)



FILM

The Great Locomotive Chase (1956)

Disney's adventure dramatises the same Andrews Raid, played straight, which shows how Keaton had reshaped the true story for comedy.



FILMMAKER

Jackie Chan

His stunt-driven action comedy, with long takes and improvised use of surroundings, is often compared directly with Keaton's approach.



TRADITION

Practical-stunt action cinema

The idea that the audience should see a real, dangerous action in a single clear shot runs from Keaton through later action filmmakers.

Reception and reputation

Critics at the time were divided. Some praised the action and the spectacle, while others found the mix of war and comedy awkward or the pace slow compared to Keaton's earlier films. The film's cost and modest returns left Keaton in a weaker position, and soon after he lost the independence he had enjoyed.

Rediscovered in the 1950s and 1960s as film historians and revival audiences took silent cinema seriously, it is now widely regarded as Keaton's finest feature and one of the greatest comedies ever made. Its depiction of the Confederate side is still sometimes questioned, though it is usually read as an adventure story rather than a political one.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Stone Face image:** Keaton perched on the connecting rod of a moving locomotive, expression unchanged, is one of silent comedy's best-known images. It helped fix his deadpan "Great Stone Face" persona in popular memory.
- **Civil War legend:** The story comes from the 1862 Andrews Raid, a real Civil War train chase. Disney later retold it as *The Great Locomotive Chase* (1956), and the original locomotive, the General, is displayed in a museum in Kennesaw, Georgia.
- **Contested Southern hero:** The film's sympathetic Confederate hero has drawn comment from later viewers. It is often discussed as a product of its era's romanticised view of the South, and that sits uneasily with its otherwise lasting popularity.
- **Live-music revivals:** The film is a staple of silent-cinema festivals and repertory screenings, often shown with live orchestral or piano accompaniment. It is also a common choice for teaching physical comedy and screen staging.

Its lasting influence

It shaped how film action and comedy share a language: the sustained chase, practical stunts shown in full, and gags built from space and machinery. Jackie Chan has often cited Keaton as a model for his own stunt comedy.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Sherlock Jr. (1924)

Keaton's inventive earlier feature, in which a projectionist enters a film. It shows his playfulness with cinema itself, in a shorter and more experimental form.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

The Kid (1921)

Chaplin's way of mixing comedy and sentiment is a useful contrast to Keaton's deadpan, physical precision.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Sunrise (1927)

Another late-silent high point, from the same moment, showing how far the visual art of silent film had developed by 1927.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

Stagecoach (1939)

A journey and chase through open landscape, carried by action and clear geography. It shows how that structure lived on in the Western.

JUMP FORWARD

Singin' in the Rain (1952)

A comic look back at the end of the silent era, with musical stunt work that owes a clear debt to physical comedians like Keaton.

FULL CAST AND CREW



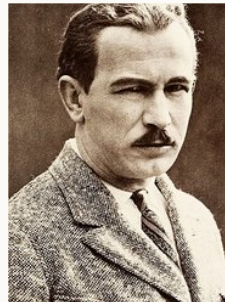
Clyde Bruckman
DIRECTOR



Buster Keaton
DIRECTOR · ACTOR
as Johnnie Gray



Marion Mack
ACTOR
as Annabelle Lee



Glen Cavender
ACTOR
as Captain Anderson



Jim Farley
ACTOR
as General Thatcher



Frederick Vroom
ACTOR
as A Southern General