



## **The Best Arbuckle/Keaton Collection**

**Notes by Jeffery Vance, adapted from the book *Buster Keaton Remembered* by Jeffery Vance and Eleanor Keaton, published by Harry N. Abrams  
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In March 1917, ten days before he was to start rehearsals for the vaudeville review *The Passing Show*, the 21-year-old stage veteran Buster Keaton was walking down Broadway in New York City when he met Lou Anger, an acquaintance from vaudeville, who was with Roscoe Arbuckle, the cinema comedian. Arbuckle invited Keaton to visit the Colony Studio where he was about to begin a series of two-reel comedies for producer Joseph M. Schenck. Keaton gladly accepted the invitation.

Roscoe Arbuckle was known as "Fatty" to the public, so called because of his large size. He too had been a stage performer, but started in motion pictures in 1909 for the Selig Polyscope Company and joined Keystone in 1913 as a Keystone Kop for comedy producer Mack Sennett. He quickly became one of Sennett's most popular stars, often appearing opposite Mabel Normand, and both writing and directing his films. By 1917, Joe Schenck had lured Arbuckle away from Sennett with a contract that gave him a higher salary and his own production company – which Arbuckle named the Comicque (later altered to Comique) Film Corporation – where he had *complete* creative control over the films. By this time, Arbuckle was second only to Charlie Chaplin among film comedians in world popularity.

Keaton visited Arbuckle at the Colony Studio at 318 East 48<sup>th</sup> Street between Second and Third Avenues. In this converted livery stable, Schenck produced the films of dramatic actress Norma Talmadge (Schenck's wife and Keaton's future sister-in-law), Constance Talmadge (Norma's sister, and a fine light comedienne), and Roscoe Arbuckle. Keaton was invited that day to play a scene in a film which became his first, *The Butcher Boy* (1917). In his very first screen appearance, Buster walks into a rural grocery store and immediately improvises with a barrel of brooms (Keaton was an expert at improvising comedy with brooms, as this was a prop frequently used in his family's vaudeville act). He buys a bucket of molasses from Roscoe and becomes completely stuck in the gooey substance. It is a classic comedy sequence, and Keaton would remember it with great affection, later adapting it for his two-reeler *The Haunted House*, restaging it for his television debut in 1949 and performing it on subsequent television appearances.

Arbuckle was impressed with Keaton. His debut performance was flawless and accomplished without a single retake. He was particularly impressed by how well Keaton reacted to being hit with a sack of flour, which literally put his head where his feet had been. Arbuckle saw immediately that Keaton was not only a great comic actor but also a storehouse of vaudeville routines who could do spectacular pratfalls. He invited Buster to join the company at a salary of forty dollars per week. Keaton cancelled his contract with *The Passing Show* at two hundred fifty dollars a week and left the stage to work with Arbuckle. Buster was immediately captivated by the possibilities of motion pictures, particularly the technical aspects; cinema immediately did away with the physical limitations of theater.

For his first screen appearance, Keaton retained the deadpan expression he had developed in vaudeville. It became his trademark, later giving rise to nicknames such as "The Great Stone Face." Amazingly, the porkpie hat he would use for the next fifty years appeared in *The Butcher Boy*. Although Keaton would frequently experiment with both



laughing and crying broadly in the films he made with Arbuckle, he often plays his comedy material in the deadpan manner for which he later became known.

The titles of the comedies in the Arbuckle-Keaton series – *The Butcher Boy*, *Oh Doctor!* (1917), *Coney Island* (1917), *Out West* (1918), *The Bell Boy* (1918), *Back Stage* (1919), *The Garage* (1919) – indicate Arbuckle's working method. Arbuckle chose a particular role or setting, and gags evolved from the premise. The Arbuckle films are pure slapstick, rich in gags that contain as their focal point Arbuckle himself, who had a warm and charming comic personality that captivated audiences. Despite his bulk, he was graceful and performed great comic falls.

Arbuckle and Keaton had an instant rapport both on- and off-screen; they shared a generous nature, a love of practical jokes, and a devotion to their work. Keaton first played second-string roles, along with Al St. John (an original member of the Keystone Kops and Arbuckle's nephew). St. John frequently suffered injuries while performing pratfalls in films, probably another motivating factor in Arbuckle's decision to hire Keaton. Buster soon graduated to the role of Arbuckle's comedy partner, both in front of and behind the camera. They became the original fat and thin comedy team in films. Keaton began to be Arbuckle's co-director and contributed many of the gags, along with gagmen Herbert Warren, Jean Havez, and Clyde Bruckman. Arbuckle became Keaton's mentor, and Keaton learned from Arbuckle the technical side of filmmaking, everything from setting up shots to operating the camera to editing film.

According to Keaton, he and Arbuckle had only one friendly disagreement in all their years of friendship. Arbuckle maintained that the average mentality of film audiences was twelve years old. Keaton disagreed. He believed that anyone making motion pictures who subscribed to the notion that audiences had a twelve-year-old mind would not be in the motion picture business very long.

Arbuckle's Comique company soon moved from the Colony Studio to the Biograph Studio at 796 East 176 Street in the Bronx and in October 1917 moved to California. They rented space at the Horkheimer Brothers Balboa Amusement Producing Company on Sixth and Alameda Street in Long Beach and later used the Henry Lehrman Studio in Culver City.

Keaton had made twelve two-reel comedies with Arbuckle when The First World War broke out. He was drafted and sent overseas in the army for nearly eight months where he spent much time entertaining troops. Upon his return to California, Keaton eagerly returned to work with Arbuckle and the Comique company; the "Princess Rajah" drag act in *Back Stage* – with Buster adorned in a skirt assembled from mess-kit utensils and a brassiere made from Army dog tags was adapted from one of his Army show routines. The last Arbuckle-Keaton collaboration, *The Garage*, Keaton believed to be the best of the series. Indeed, it is filled with Buster's gags and looks forward to Keaton's *The Scarecrow* (1920) and *The Blacksmith* (1922).

Joseph Schenck sold Arbuckle's contract to Paramount Pictures where Arbuckle was to make feature-length comedies under an arrangement that guaranteed him three million dollars over a three-year period. Schenck gave Keaton a contract to make his own two-reel comedies; he took over the Comique studio and most of its personnel. This marked the beginning of Keaton's great career and the beginning of the end of Arbuckle's.



Arbuckle's first features were not a great success. His salary was a significant amount of his films' budgets, so the studio attempted to recoup its investment by using him in otherwise inexpensive remakes of old Paramount properties that were inappropriate vehicles for Arbuckle. Paramount also had Arbuckle going back and forth between sets, making two films at a time. However, what really ended Arbuckle's film career was the aftermath of a bootleg liquor party in Arbuckle's hotel suite at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco over Labor Day weekend in September 1921. When a bit player named Virginia Rappe became ill and died four days later, Arbuckle was accused of brutally raping her and was tried three times for manslaughter. He was eventually exonerated with an unprecedented apology from the jury. However, by that time, it was too late for Arbuckle. Public opinion had turned against him, his contract with Paramount was canceled, and for many years he was banned from appearing on the screen by the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (later renamed the Motion Picture Association of America). Arbuckle was devastated, his great career destroyed. Eventually, he worked as a director under his father's name, William Goodrich, and in the early 1930s he starred in three two-reel Vitaphone comedy shorts for Warner Bros. before his premature death in 1933.

Buster Keaton, of course, went on to make such classic feature-length comedies as *Our Hospitality* (1923), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), *The Navigator* (1924), *The General* (1926) and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928). Buster never forgot Arbuckle. Buster kept a smiling portrait of his best friend and mentor on the wall of his den at his Woodland Hills home until his death in 1966.

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