

THE 'SHERLOCK JUNIOR' QUESTION

by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill

We have spent at least a year researching the career of Buster Keaton. Working with all the books and articles on his career, we have become acutely aware of a great many discrepancies. The situation isn't helped by the fact that Keaton himself has no sense of historical accuracy. Many of his statements turn out to be muddled - he said, for instance, that he hired Donald Crisp for The Navigator, which was made in 1924, because of his recent success with The Goose Woman. ~~Ignoring the fact that~~ The Goose Woman has nothing in common with The Navigator; it was, in fact, made a year later by Clarence Brown. Crisp hadn't directed anything since 1921 (the AFI Catalogue admits that a 1923 credit is also claimed by James Young.), and Keaton gave his career a much needed boost. Was he perhaps thinking of James Cruze, whose name is similar to Crisp, and who made The Goose Hangs High...? But that doesn't stand up wither, because that film also came out in 1925, and Cruze was Roscoe Arbuckle's director, and Keaton would never have made so basic a mistake.

But mistakes litter his interviews and : we only hope that the errors of name and date do not apply to descriptions of routines and methods. Keaton was no historian - why should he be? ^{yet} - he did have an excellent recall of the way he did things. The mechanics of gags was one of the most important elements in his life.

His historical errors are often minor - one we had to include in the first Keaton programme, because it was an integral part of a filmed interview with Keaton: 'Buster,' he said, referring to how Houdini gave him his name, 'meant a fall - a broncho buster or a fall. It was never used as a name.' What about Buster Brown? *

One question of great historical importance concerns his allegation that Roscoe Arbuckle started Sherlock jr as director and proved so difficult to work with - after all his problems - that he had to get rid of him. Keaton talked to Marion Davies, won her sympathy and she had W.R. Hearst hire Arbuckle for The Red Mill. This solved Keaton's problem; he threw out Arbuckle's footage and directed the rest himself.

There are one or two disturbing thoughts here. Keaton admired Arbuckle unreservedly and called him ^{his closest friend and} the second best comedy director in the business (after Chaplin.) Was his action on Sherlock jr the result of the realisation that he had overtaken Arbuckle artistically, and unwilling

to admit his hero had : feet of clay he blamed . . his troubles in court? Sherlock was in production at the beginning of 1924, sixteen (ch) months after the trials. The idea that Arbuckle was behaving badly in the company of his closest friend and greatest admirer is saddening.

If this was so, the alacrity of the Keaton company in passing him on is understandable.

But there has been another aspect to all this. David Yallop, in his book on Arbuckle, declared that Arbuckle was the director of the whole picture. He pointed out that The Red Mill was not released until 1927 whereas Sherlock came out in 1924. He based his revelation on the evidence of Arbuckle's widow, Doris Deane. She claimed Arbuckle was on the set every day. And she should know - she was in the film. One scene/ shows her hunting for lost money.

So the question has to be asked; why would Keaton write Arbuckle out if, as he so often said, he admired him so much? One can see why Doris Deane would write him in. The Keaton comedies took a long time to make and it might have seemed that Arbuckle had made the whole film after she had hung around the studio for a week or two.

The Red Mill might have been a Marion Davies project long before it went into production - that happened as often then as now.

Or it might have been one of Keaton's errors, and he was thinking of another Hearst film which Arbuckle was considered for. But for Keaton to deny what would have been Arbuckle's greatest achievement is the ultimate cruelty.

For nothing surviving from his career is so brilliant. He was a talented comedy director, but never that talented. The films he made around the same period are less impressive (due to miniscule budgets) than many of his films from the Keystone and Schenck periods. On The Red Mill he ran into such problems that King Vidor had to be brought in to help out.

But he certainly had more to do with Keaton than has been realised. There was in Hollywood in the early twenties a young Frenchman called Robert Florey. He was a film historian before the term had been thought of, and he went round all the studios, sending frequent reports on the industry back to France. He was particularly interested in the comedians - even such forgotten names as Clyde Cook and Bobby Vernon (who was French himself). He was keen on Roscoe Arbuckle, and reported to the French fan magazine Cinemagazine that Arbuckle was directing Renee Adoree in what turned out to be Daydreams.

This film lacks any credit to Arbuckle. It was 'written and directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline' as usual. Of course, the employment of Arbuckle as an actor was forbidden by Will Hays, and so his job at the Keaton studio may have been kept under wraps. We now know that Schenck set up a fund for him, fuelled by sympathisers from the industry. The fact that Keaton gave him work was only natural. What isn't natural is for Keaton to forget to mention that Arbuckle directed it. If he did. He may well have done some scenes in the casual way that was so prevalent then. But he cannot have done all of it - a sizeable chunk of it was shot in the city of San Francisco, and one cannot imagine Arbuckle returning to that city so soon after his ordeal there.

It seems that Arbuckle worked at the Keaton studio for a while, and he certainly started Sherlock Jr as director. Upon that, everyone agrees. But Keaton does not impress us as the sort of person who would claim to have directed something when he hadn't. He was a great director in his own right, even if he never realised it and preferred to bring other directors in to help. He gave Clyde Bruckman directing credit on The General, even though he virtually directed it all himself. And this led to a career for Bruckman as director, which, unhappily, he could not sustain. (Harold Lloyd said he had to take over on Movie Crazy.)

If Arbuckle had produced anything even vaguely similar to Sherlock one might have one's suspicions. Perhaps the occasion at Pordenone will reveal something. But we feel that the world it creates is not Arbuckle's in any way, but unmistakably Keaton's. (Interestingly enough, one of the gag men, Jean Havez, worked for both men.)

So how to resolve the question? Sixty three years later it has proved impossible to find anyone who worked on the film. There are no call sheets or inter office memos which might provide an answer. Nor are there, curiously enough, any production stills showing the film being made which might have included the director.

But we forget our historian-at-large - Robert Florey. He had a report printed in Cinema Magazine, 23 May 1924 p338:

'Roscoe Arbuckle has directed two Al St John comedies while Buster Keaton has been making Sherlock Jr.'

The Al St John comedies were not released until later that year, so the simultaneity is not apparent from filmographies. But one thing is interesting. In both films, Al St John has a co-star - Arbuckle's ^{first} wife, Doris Deane.

* The footnote reads: The comic strip first appeared in the colour section of the N Y Herald on Sunday May 4 1902, whereas Keaton was 'named' in 1896. But it suggests the name was current.

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