

Safety Last (1923) & The Navigator (1924) – Two Silent Masterpieces

P Michell, Feb 2016

We begin 2016 with two examples from the Silent Era. They run around an hour and seventy minutes. Interestingly both are made within a year of each other at the peak period of the silent era.

The plot in these films is not complex. We have movable cameras filming outside the studio. Once sound films began films became more studio-bound made due to sound restrictions. Both these films give a good example of how fluid the cinema could be pre-sound. What is on display is how the characters interact with their environment. With Safety Last it is a building, Navigator it's a boat. Particularly in Navigator the female role is at least dominant as the male.

Both Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton were with Charles Chaplin dominant players in silent movies. Had Lloyd not held his films back in the 1950s and 1960s from television he might have gained a whole new audience.

To give an idea of the popularity of Harold Lloyd – the character of 'mild mannered Clarke Kent' of Superman comic was based on his screen persona.

Interestingly neither Keaton nor Lloyd made successful transitions to sound film. Though Keaton did make cameos in certain films – including Wilder's 'Sunset Boulevard' (card game) and of course in Chaplin's 'Limelight' (final scene).

Lloyd was "the third genius," the silent film historian Kevin Brownlow declared in a documentary of the same name. Lloyd's films out-grossed those of Chaplin and Keaton in the '20s, if only because he made many more than Chaplin, and his everyman appealed to a wider audience than Keaton. But he is not a genius in their sense, creating comedy out of inspiration and instinct and an angle on the world.

Source – Roger Ebert

Safety Last (1923) – Harold Lloyd (1893-1971)

Summary:

The Boy promises the Girl (Mildred Davis, Lloyd's real-life wife) that he will go to the city, make good and send for her. He gets a lowly job as a dry goods clerk, but impresses her with such inventive letters that she hurries to the city to join him. The Boy poses as the manager of the store, is exposed and decides to risk everything for a \$1,000 prize offered to anyone who can lure more traffic to the store. His idea: Have his roommate (Bill Strother), a human fly, climb the building. Of course Lloyd has to do this!

More from Roger Ebert here:

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-safety-last-1923>

Trivia:

How did he do it? A website that explains how the famous clock sequence:

<https://silentlocations.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/how-harold-lloyd-filmed-safety-last/>

In 1919 [Harold Lloyd](#) was handed what he thought was a prop bomb, which he lit with his cigarette. It turned out to be real and exploded, blowing off Lloyd's right thumb and index finger, and putting him in the hospital for months. When he recovered, he went back to making movies, wearing a white glove while on screen to hide his damaged right hand. He did his stunts in this film and [Feet First](#) (1930), dangling from ledges, clocks and windows, using only eight fingers.

[Harold Lloyd](#) first tested the safety precautions for the clock stunt by dropping a dummy onto the mattress below. The dummy bounced off and plummeted to the street below.

A stuntman revealed for the first time in the television documentary, [Hollywood](#) (1980), that [Harold Lloyd](#) actually climbed a fake building facade that was constructed over another building's rooftop, positioned so the camera angle could capture the street scene below. The stuntman also revealed that he doubled for Lloyd in the long shots of him climbing the building in the distance. Up until then, even the Time-Life version of [Safety Last!](#) (1923) that was aired on PBS contained an opening title declaring that Harold Lloyd climbed the building himself and without the use of a stuntman or trick photography. The stuntman chose to suppress this information until Lloyd's death, and yet, he did not want to detract from the danger of Lloyd's actual stunt work. Lloyd performed the majority of the stunts himself on the rigged facade over a small platform, which was built near the rooftop's edge and still had to be raised a great height to get the proper street perspective for the camera. The size of the platform did not offer much of a safety net, and had Lloyd fallen, there was the risk he could have tumbled off the platform.

Reviews:

Climb to Remember

[theowinthrop](#) from United States

20 November 2005

It has truly said that while THE FRESHMAN, or SPEEDY, or THE KID BROTHER, are better films, SAFETY LAST is the film that everyone who never saw a Harold Lloyd comedy recalls. That is because in one moment on the screen he engraved himself forever into the minds of movie lovers (something, oddly enough, Chaplin and Keaton never quite did in a single moment of film). Lloyd, of course, became immortal for being the

man suspended from the clock of the building he was climbing in the concluding half hour of this wonderful comedy. There is more to the film than that of course. Harold, here in love with his home town girlfriend Mildred Davis (who was his wife in real life), has sacrificed money to buy her jewelry, and has been sending her letters lying about his business success. He claims he is a bigwig at the department store he is a clerk in. Actually he is constantly in hot water with the pompous floor walker, Mr. Stubbs (Westcott Clarke). After he sends a second gift to Mildred she decides to join him in the city. He manages to pass himself off as the store's general manager (don't ask - you have to see how he does it). But she wants to get married now - he's making enough supposedly for a house. His best friend is a human fly (Bill Strother), so Harold proposes to the actual general manager a publicity stunt wherein a mystery man will climb the department store facade (15 stories). Unfortunately, Police Officer Noah Young has a grudge against Strother, and keeps preventing him from climbing. So Harold has to climb up the side - with Strother promising to take over at the right moment once he shakes off Young.

Although Chaplin and Keaton's physical comedy included dangers to them (Keaton and the water fall in OUR HOSPITALITY, for example), the climb up the store's facade is considered in a class by itself. Certainly it is one of the few comedy stunts that have been taken apart and analyzed over the years (even when we know how it was done, it still impresses us). The stunt got a life of it's own, beyond the famous clock photograph, because the film's theme is the success theme in American business life. Harold wants to make it in business, and he's just a down-trodden clerk. To make it rich, and to get his girl, he has to risk all on a \$1,000.00 gamble. He does in the end, with his "climbing" having been cleverly compared to "climbing" the business ladder or getting ahead in America. When he seems to retreat at one point some of the onlookers shake their heads and point upward. Once he is on his route to success, he can't turn back.

The film is more fun than that particularly good interpretation makes it sound. It deserves a 10 for it's success at remaining a humorous and lasting piece of cinematic comic art, and a fitting monument to that comedy master Harold Lloyd.

The 1920's were halcyon years for cinema comedy...

[Righty-Sock \(robertfrangie@hotmail.com\)](mailto:robertfrangie@hotmail.com) from Mexico

9 August 2005

The 1920's were halcyon years for cinema comedy, and the inspired products of that period are among the silent screen's finest offerings... These films include Harold Lloyd's amusing masterpiece, "Safety Last!;" "The General" and "The Navigator," both starring Buster Keaton; and dozens of short films featuring the mismatched comic duo, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy...

There was certainly no melancholia in the films of Harold Lloyd, who may have lacked the depth of Chaplin and Keaton but who was every bit as funny...

Lloyd was working as an extra on the Universal lot when he met Hal Roach, who

subsequently produced a series of one-reelers starring Lloyd as a character named Lonesome Luke, a frank imitation of Chaplin's Little Tramp...

Later Lloyd was to own character, that of a decent, optimistic, and eager young man who wore horn-rimmed glasses and always emerged triumphant from the incredible scrapes he got into...

From IFC

<http://www.ifc.com/2011/12/shelf-life-harold-lloyd-safety-last>

THE FACTS

Released on April 1, 1923, "Safety Last" was only Lloyd's fourth feature-length film, but he'd already made almost 100 shorts, including a stunning 39 in 1919 alone. At the time of its release, it helped cement Lloyd as a star, and perhaps more significantly, one of the true fixtures of the silent era. A year later, Lloyd would part ways with his longtime collaborator (and "Safety Last" director) Hal Roach, and launched the Harold Lloyd Film Corporation, where he subsequently produced his own films. Meanwhile, the film maintains a 92 percent fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

WHAT STILL WORKS

At 73 minutes, this little tale of an ambitious small town boy trying to make a name (and a fortune) for himself in the big city might seem too slight to leave an impression. But far beyond its iconic clock shot, "Safety Last" is a hugely entertaining, emotionally-involving story, anchored by Lloyd in the lead role. Having worked for more than a decade in silent by the time it was released, Lloyd had refined his too-smart-by-half screen persona to razor sharpness, and here he gets character out of one jam with as much dexterity as he gets him into another: propelled by his fiancée's mistaken impression that he's big and successful, the way he goes from department store clerk to human fly actually seems quite natural, and gives even its short running time epic scope. (Additionally, his physical dexterity on the side of the building, not just climbing but fully taking advantage of the building's vertiginous heights, is a marvel of poetic motion.)

The great thing about the silent era was the way in which filmmakers were forced to communicate so much without the use of a lot of superfluous, expository dialogue, which arguably has made audiences lazier in the sound era. The storytelling itself is a marvel of economy, injecting jokes into the narrative (and a narrative into jokes) without adding unnecessary embellishments or digressions. For example, there's a scene in which Lloyd's character (also named Harold) meets a hometown friend who's become a cop. In a moment of showing off, he tells his friend to play a prank on a police officer, but inadvertently picks the wrong cop, and while the gag is funny enough as a standalone set piece, it actually puts in motion Harold's eventual climbing of the outside of his department store.

Meanwhile, Roach's direction is similarly economical, although there are definitely some really clever, subtle flourishes that augment the humor where they might have played more obviously. For example, right before Harold's friend Limpy is set to start climbing the building, the cop who's after him shows up and starts snooping around. Lloyd races into action and leads the cop to a little shack, where he thinks he'll lock him in, but there's another door the cop exits through easily, and begins following Harold back to the store. While we see the cop behind Harold as he congratulates himself for his ingenuity, he doesn't notice him until he starts noticing a shadow following his in perfect rhythm, and it's a great, understated little revelation that gives the moment more emotional power – if only in terms of hilarity.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

If there's anything at all that could be faulted in "Safety Last", it's that perhaps by today's standards the humor is occasionally a little broad – not quite the stuff of slipping on a banana peel, but just about. (All of which is nothing a film like Jack and Jill would exploit.) Truthfully, I don't find this problematic at all – there's a gag in "An Eastern Westerner" where he literally pulls the rug out from under two of his pursuers, then turns a fire hydrant on full blast into a ballroom, and it floors me. But I think it's rescued not just because of one's penchant for sight gags or simple goofs, but because of the effective creation of character, and especially in "Safety Last", you're pulling for this guy, even if he survives literally by hanging from his fingertips.

THE VERDICT

"Safety Last" is a great film that remains entertaining and involving today, and has aged only because of its technical limitations. Otherwise, it's fun, emotionally affecting, and absorbing in ways that quite frankly most modern movies aren't. New Line's 2005 box set features a wonderful transfer of that film as well as many other Lloyd classics, so make sure you check that out, because if you're looking for someone to call "the artist," you need look no further than him.

The Navigator (1924) – Buster Keaton (1895-1966)

Summary:

Rollo Treadway decides to marry his sweetheart Betsy and sail to Honolulu. When she rejects him he decides to go alone but boards the wrong ship, the "Navigator" owned by Betsy's father. Unaware of this, Betsy boards the ship to look for her father. Spies capture her, before cutting the ship loose. It drifts out to sea with the two socialites each unaware of there being anyone else on board. *Written by Ed Stephan <stephan@cc.wvu.edu>*

General:

In an extraordinary period from 1920 to 1929, Keaton worked without interruption on a series of films that make him, arguably, the greatest actor-director in the history of the movies.

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-films-of-buster-keaton>

The 1960s saw the restoration of most of the Keaton silent films.

The greatest of the silent clowns is [Buster Keaton](#), not only because of what he did, but because of how he did it. Harold Lloyd made us laugh as much, [Charlie Chaplin](#) moved us more deeply, but no one had more courage than Buster. I define courage as Hemingway did: "Grace under pressure." In films that combined comedy with extraordinary physical risks, Buster Keaton played a brave spirit who took the universe on its own terms, and gave no quarter.

Source – Roger Ebert

In the last decade of silent film, Keaton worked as an independent auteur. He usually used the same crew, worked with trusted riggers who understood his thinking, conceived his screenplays mostly by himself. He had backing from the mogul Joe Schenck (they were brothers-in-law, both married to Talmadge girls), but Schenck sometimes missed the point. He was outraged that Buster spent \$25,000 to buy the ship used in "The Navigator," but then, without consulting Keaton, spent \$25,000 to buy the rights to a third-rate Broadway farce that Buster somehow transformed into "Seven Chances."

Source – Roger Ebert

Keaton lived in the San Fernando Valley, raised chickens, and thought his work had been forgotten. Then came a 1962 retrospective at the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris, and a tribute at the 1965 Venice Film Festival. He was relieved to see that his films were not after all lost, but observed, no doubt with a stone face, "The applause is nice, but too late."

Source – Roger Ebert

Trivia:

[Donald Crisp](#) was hired to direct the more dramatic scenes in the movie, but soon became interested only in working on the comedy scenes with Buster. Keaton was unhappy with Crisp's work, feeling the scenes were overacted, and re-shot many of the dramatic scenes after Crisp left the production.

An elaborate scene was cut from the underwater sequence because audiences didn't respond to it. Buster attached a starfish to his chest and proceeded to direct fish traffic, made up of several hundred rubber fish built by the prop department. Keaton loved the scene and regretted having to cut it, but did use it in the 'Coming Attractions' trailer.

The ship in the movie was actually the USAT Buford, named after prominent Union Civil War cavalry officer and hero of Gettysburg Gen. John T. Buford. The ship had begun life as the S.S. Mississippi for the Atlantic Transport Line in 1890. It was later purchased and renamed by the US government in 1898 and became an army troop transport in the Spanish American War and in WW I. Its most notorious incarnation was as the "Soviet Ark" (or "Red Ark") when the ship was used to deport 249 political radicals and other "undesirable" aliens, among them the fiery anarchists [Emma Goldman](#) and Alexander Berkman, to the Russian SFSR in December, 1919, during the Palmer Raids of the first "Red Scare" period in the US.

The underwater scenes of [Buster Keaton](#) trying to repair the ship in full diving gear were originally intended to be filmed in the local municipal swimming pool. However, the pool was not deep enough, so higher retaining walls were built around the edges, to hold more water. Unfortunately, the weight of the additional water broke the bottom of the pool, and Keaton had to pay for the repair. The production was moved to Lake Tahoe, where the water was very clear, but so cold that Keaton could only stay under for ten minutes at a time. The camera crew was sent down in a watertight box, with ice packed around the camera to keep the lens from fogging over.

Links

Senses of Cinema. Good summary of Keaton's work.
<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/keaton/>

Dedicated site:
<http://www.busterkeaton.com>

Machine Age Comedy
<http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/book-reviews/machine-age-comedy-by-michael-north/>

Reviews:

Ship-shape comedy, on a grand scale and flawlessly executed

Author: [imogensara_smith](#) from New York City

15 August 2006

Fred Gabourie (affectionately known as "Gabe") was Buster Keaton's hard-working art director, responsible for sets, props and special effects—quite a job when working for a boss so devoted to scale and authenticity. Gabe's first assignment was a 1922 short comedy called *The Boat*, and he had endless difficulties with the little craft of the title. According to biographer Rudi Blesh, he vowed to supply his boss with a *real* boat someday. Two years later, Gabe chanced to discover the S.S. *Buford*, an ocean liner on her way to the scrap-heap. He alerted Keaton, who jumped at the chance to rent the ship. Then he and his creative team sat down to build a story around their new prop.

What they came up with was beautifully simple: a rich young man and the girl he wants to marry are stranded on an ocean liner, which is adrift on the open ocean without power or crew. That's it. They have to learn how to survive—neither has ever made a cup of coffee before—and then cope with damage to the ship and an attack by cannibal islanders. It is, unfortunately, necessary to set up a reason for this situation, and the solution (an anarchist plot combined with a mix-up on the docks) is implausible and marred by hammy acting by the plotters—which Buster blamed on his co-director Donald Crisp, whom he'd hired for his dramatic skills. (To his dismay, Crisp wanted to meddle with the comedy, and Keaton regretted hiring him.) The scenes introducing Buster's character, Rollo Treadway, are charming. Rollo is sedated by his wealth, docile and helpless. To get to the house across the street, where his girl (Kathryn McGuire) lives, he climbs into his chauffeured car and the vehicle makes a U-turn. After the girl has rejected his proposal, he tells his chauffeur that a long walk will do him good, then toddles back across the street.

Once the liner (renamed the S.S. *Navigator* for the film) is adrift in the Pacific, boy and girl both think they are alone on the ship. The scene in which they suspect each other's presence and race around the decks, always just missing each other, is a marvel of choreography, timing, and spatial sophistication. The ship itself is the film's third major character. (Cast and crew lived happily aboard the *Buford* during filming.) The long white corridors and the maze of decks and stairs resemble an M.C. Escher drawing, and the boilers, funnels, and other nautical machinery provide both a handsome backdrop and raw material for Keaton's favorite kind of mechanical humor.

Once they meet, the two socialites attempt to cook breakfast in the ship's galley kitchen, using massive pots and utensils. Watch for Buster's priceless reaction on tasting the coffee made by the girl with three unground beans and seawater. Kathryn McGuire (who also appeared in Keaton's previous film, *Sherlock, Jr.*) is more comedy partner than love interest, and she makes an excellent foil, with her endearing gawkiness, straight-faced style, and willingness to be the butt of a joke. The clueless seafarers don sailor suits, but they have many difficulties finding a secure place to sleep on the eerie vessel. Finally despairing of rest, they decide to play cards; in a tight close-up of his hands, Buster

shuffles a wet deck of cards that turn to mush in his nimble, oblivious fingers. This small moment is a gem of pure physical comedy.

No sooner have our heroes gotten everything ship-shape—filling the kitchen with patented Keaton contraptions to grind coffee, open cans and boil eggs—than the ship runs aground, and Buster has to put on a diving suit to mend the damage. The underwater sequence was a nightmare to film. Rejecting studio tanks because he wanted to use a full-size mock-up of the ship's propeller, Keaton wound up filming at the bottom of Lake Tahoe, where the glass-clear water was so cold that he and the cameramen could only stay down for short periods of time. None of the difficulties are visible in the zany, slow-motion gags of his sequence, as Buster uses a lobster to clip wires, grabs a swordfish to fence with another swordfish, washes and dries his hands underwater. Buster's subtly expressive acting while encumbered in the huge diving suit is a marvel. The grand finale of the film is an invasion of the boat by cannibal hordes; in all the swirl of crowds, the highlight is Buster's encounter with a tiny toy cannon that chases him around the deck.

Compared to Keaton's other masterpieces, *The Navigator* is richer in gags and weaker in drama. If it has a flaw, it's that it lacks the warm heart found in *The General* or *Our Hospitality*, the sweet and soulful quality that marks Buster at his very best. But I wouldn't argue with the audience member I overheard coming out of a recent screening of *The Navigator*, who said, "That's as close to perfect as anything needs to be."

Keaton Scores Another Big One With This Work.

[Edward Goldenberg](#) from United States

9 November 2014

*** **This review may contain spoilers** ***

The Navigator tells the story of two reach people who inadvertently find themselves stranded together on a luxury liner with nobody else on board.

I first saw *The Navigator* many years ago when I rented it from a local public library, and considering how much I like Buster Keaton, I decided to give the movie a watching. And once again, Buster Keaton proves to us that he was a master of cinema with this piece of work. *The Navigator* is a hilarious film, like *The General* and *Seven Chances*, there are laughs to behold. In my opinion, what makes this movie different from the two other Keaton films that I just mentioned, is the fact that this movie seems to put less focus on the drama and more focus on the laughs. However, there is still some drama in this movie, as near the end, there is a scene where Keaton is underwater in a diver's suit, and his oxygen tubes get cut, and his reaction speaks for himself, that probably the most tense scene in the movie. Otherwise, there are a significant number of laughs in this film, which is definitely something that Keaton did right. In fact, I don't think that Keaton could do any wrong (as far as his silent pictures went).

While there are many hysterical scenes to be found in *The Navigator*, I'll name my favorite. There is a hysterical part where Keaton and Kathryn McGuire are getting ready to go to bed, and while Keaton gets to be right away, McGuire finds in her cabin a picture

of a rather scary looking man (who actually, is the movie's co-director, Donald Crisp). She eventually tries to get rid of the picture, and it ends up getting caught on a hook outside the porthole of Keaton's cabin, which ends up scaring Keaton out of his wits. There is also a hilarious scene following Keaton's near death undersea experience, where these cannibals believe that he is some undersea demon, and they run away from him in fright. There are also a lot of more hysterical gags and scenes, but I might give away the whole movie if I tell you, so if you want to see what they are, you'll just have to watch the movie for yourself to see what they are.

All in all, *The Navigator* is definitely another must see for all Buster Keaton fans, and for fan of comedy in general. Grab some popcorn, grab a seat, and join Buster Keaton on a sailing trip that you will never forget. When you watch this film, you had better be prepared for laughs, as Keaton has brought along plenty of them, and when they do appear, they are usually big laughs. On another side note, there is a scene where Keaton and McGuire get scared by a gramophone that mysteriously turned on by itself (although we do actually see how it happens). In short, if you love Keaton, then this is definitely a movie that you will enjoy. Excellent work Mr. Keaton!