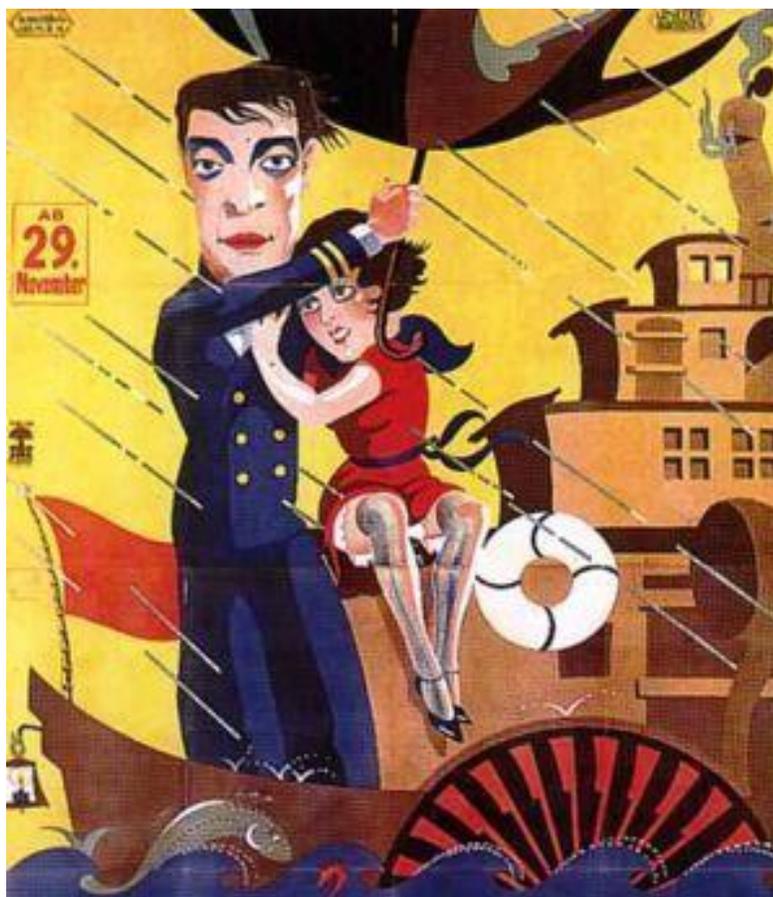


Steamboat Bill Jr.



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Charles Reisner. Produced by Joseph M Schenck. Based on a story by Carl Harbaugh. Cinematography by Dev Jennings and Bert Haines. Cinematic length: 71 minutes. Distributed by United Artists. Cinematic release: May 1928. The DVD release in a triple feature set and documentary devoted to his work. Check for ratings. Rating 80%.

Such usual aspects of a film's creation as music, costumes, editing and screenplay and even the supporting cast have gone uncredited. Much of the screenplay and the direction are attributed to Buster Keaton but are also uncredited.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

Buster Keaton as William Canfield Jr.

Ernest Torrence as William "Steamboat Bill" Canfield Sr.

Marion Byron as Kitty King

Tom McGuire as John James King

Tom Lewis as Tom Carter

James T. Mack as the Minister

Review

Steamboat Bill Jr. is very much Buster Keaton's film, although as both co-director and co-writer he remained uncredited. It greatly resembles his other films from the 1920s when he had artistic control. Fortunately the appointed director Charles Reisner had a flair for comedy, working with Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. Keaton also had a film making team he had worked with before, who are well used here.

The film virtually offers viewing in two ways, the sit back, relax and enjoy the show way or the subject for analysis way. Both have their merits.



The film opens in a small Mississippi River town where John James King (Tom McGuire) the local big man with his name on many buildings there, muscles in on the local river trade from William "Steamboat Bill" Canfield Senior. (Ernest Torrence). King's great and glorious three story paddle wheeler makes a sharp contrast to Bill's smaller one story, tatty steamer. At the same time Bill's son William (Buster Keaton) whom he has not seen since he was a toddler, will be arriving by train to work on the boat. As his earlier note says, he will be recognizable by the white carnation on his lapel. His arrival starts the fun as several men, most of them rather burley and tall like Bill, get off the train wearing white carnations in their lapels and Bill Junior unknowingly drops his, wandering around holding up a blank lapel to puzzled passersby. After disturbing a baby alone in its pram, William tries to calm it with his singing and prancing while playing on his ukulele. The pram and baby are hidden from Bill Senior and his first mate by the corner of the building, but William is not and they watch amazed and dismayed while the shot gives only the viewer full knowledge of what really goes on.

"Steamboat Bill" Canfield Senior wanted and therefore expected a younger version of himself, that is somebody nearing seven feet, burley in build, no nonsense, adept at working boats and loving that way of life. He gets the exact opposite. Junior is a small college kid, replete with European moustache and beret, ukulele, and the knitted patterned vests beloved by college kids. He appears as ineptitude incarnate while his father is an extreme control freak trying to make Junior into what he expects. It makes for many comic situations. Enjoy.



The Bills Junior and Senior

Now for the analysis. Keaton was one of the few silent screen directors who knew how to use the medium. Most silent films are not enjoyable now. The title cards often tell us what we know or expect and they hold the screen for too long so that someone with an average reading speed loses attention. Too many actors and actresses are not really in role and overact to make points: batting eyelashes repeatedly so signify being in love or villains scowling like angry wolves to show their evil intentions. Too many silent films seem to be made by people from stage

melodramas or vaudeville, where loud voices and overdone body language were needed to convey meaning throughout the theatre. A stage manager once asked a theatregoer if the lead was a good actor and was told that he certainly was as he could not only be heard in the back rows, but even on the other side of the street. This lack of loudness was sometimes replaced by loud music, but some performers tried even more overacting to compensate. Directors would often veer between scenes that were so slow they were almost tableaux, then use fast filmed drama. Their havoc looks maniac. Close ups to catch human expression were also slow and obviously didactic. Apart from the exciting developments in soviet Russian silent films in the 1920s, few directors had Keaton's abilities in the silent era.

Keaton and Reisner use around three hundred words for his captions and they are all necessary and do not hold the screen for long. Only three verbal jokes appear amongst these, they conveys jokes visually and without the melodramatics, over use of close ups and tableau style so common at the time. Keaton shows rather than tells and avoids doing what is even worse and so common in silent films, the virtual spoon feeding of the audience. When Junior unknowingly drops the carnation we see this in a quick, moderate long shot. Lesser directors would have made the point with a lingering close up of the carnation either on the lapel or on the ground. Although that scene becomes important in terms of the chaos that follows, Keaton films it the way it would happen in reality, quickly and barely noticed by the viewer amidst the fast paced mayhem. When Junior races around showing the blank lapel the joke gets repeats, but not too many times and the fast paced editing makes it all one joke. Other gags are also filmed this way.

In narrative development Keaton and Reisner made several wise decisions. They begin the film with long shots showing the river, the town and the riverboats, establishing an attractive setting that has a great sense of place. Many such shots are used and very few close-ups are. This means that the characters and their problems and conflicts do not overwhelm the setting and the story. The gale in the film's last section also reinforces this, all the characters are just people in an unpredictable environment. Making films where the characters or the family are the centre of the universe is a way to create an essentially neurotic worldview on film and extracting comedy from such methods can at best be difficult. For this reason the filmmakers were also wise to change Junior's ineptitude and Senior's bullying into reverse patterns just as these characteristics were on the verge of becoming predictable and vexing to an audience.



Junior wakes up in a hurricane

After saying that the film has faltering moments in the gale scenes. Wisely few people are shown and some scenes are funny - as when Junior wakes up in what was a hospital ward to find the walls blown away and he looks like he thinks he is hallucinating. His battle with the wind and a gate are also effective, but what can be funny about seeing somebody's home blown apart? This cannot be funny in itself and becomes disturbing if we have seen similar wartime or disaster scenes where a home wall has been removed and we see that the privacy of the inhabitants has been violated. Another big mistake both in terms of humanity and film making was the collapse of the heavy house wall onto a motionless Buster Keaton. He survives because he stands where the small attic window lands and it frames him with inches to spare on every side. When he did this stunt on one occasion half the film crew walked off the set, not wanting to be involved in the danger. Apparently we are meant to laugh with relief, but both the danger and the effect feels too real, and breaks into the sense of comedy.

Perhaps audiences and critics at the time also felt this way for *Steamboat Bill Jr.* got mixed reviews and was a commercial failure. The financial failing has several

causes. The expensive set and its demolition with hired, expensive wind machines pushed the budget up beyond \$300,000. In 1920s dollars that was a massive amount. Two things happened in 1927 that also had an effect. The first was the arrival of the talkies, which made Keaton's comedies suddenly passé. Even more importantly was his climax using a gale on the Mississippi. Exactly a year before this film's release in May 1928 forty eight American states had been hit by the worst floods known and they were particularly bad on the Mississippi. Over six hundred thousand people were left homeless. The death toll was never clearly established but was at least well over a thousand. – and Keaton makes a comedy about a similar disaster just after the event?

The film's aftermath led to his break with producer Joseph M Schenck and United Artists and his move to MGM. In only one 1929 film made with them did he gain the same level of artistic control that he had in the rest of the 1920s. A genius with visuals, the early sound era, with its need for static players so microphones could pick up dialogue went against his talents.

Today *Steamboat Bill Jr.* is considered an American classic.



Buster Keaton 1895-1966

