

Sherlock Junior (U) US 1924 ✓

16 December 2019

DIRECTOR: **Buster Keaton**. LEADING PLAYERS: **Buster Keaton** (Sherlock Jr., projectionist), **Kathryn McGuire** (the girl), **Joe Keaton** (the girl's father), **Erwin Connelly** (the hired man, the butler), **Ward Crane** (The Local Sheik, the villain). SCRIPT: **Jean C. Havez, Joseph A. Mitchell, Clyde Bruckman**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Byron Houck** and **Elgin Lessley**. EDITING: **Roy B. Yokelson** and **Buster Keaton**. Running time: 45 minutes

Safety Last (U) US 1923 ✓

DIRECTOR: **Fred Newmeyer, Sam Taylor**. LEADING PLAYERS: **Harold Lloyd** (Harold, the boy), **Mildred Davis** (Mildred, the girl), **Bill Strother** (Bill, the pal), **Noah Young** (the Law), **Westcott Clarke** (the floorwalker). SCRIPT: **Hal Roach, Sam Taylor, Tim Whelan**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Walter Lundin**. EDITING: **Thomas J. Crizer**. Running time: 70 minutes

“First there was Mack Sennett, where slapstick was king. To hell with a script, let's just sit around the set and see what gags we can think up. Then there was Chaplin, who gravitated from these working methods to putting in backstory, sentiment, social realism, etc. Then there was everybody else.” The above may be a rather glib summary of silent film comedy, but there is a lot of truth in it. Tonight, we present a pair of films from artists who would be the first to acknowledge their debt to Chaplin and Sennett. Moreover, that during the 1920s they elevated screen comedy to unprecedented levels of fecundity and polish would be equally hard to deny.

As medium length features, *Sherlock Jr.* and *Safety Last* offer pretty unbeatable examples of Keaton and Lloyd's particular talents and are generally recognised (and recognisable) as classics of the genre. In *Sherlock Jr.* Keaton plays a mild-mannered projectionist (Keaton's characters are always mild-mannered; it accords well with his blank expression) who dreams of being a private detective and winning his love. A rival steals her father's pocket watch to pay for a gift, and frames Buster with the pawn ticket, giving ideal cause for the latter to exercise his somewhat scant gifts in the field of detection! Happily, the girl is a much better detective.

This brief synopsis affords us two glimpses of Keaton's comic idiom. First, his character is an innocent klutz, who succeeds in spite of himself. He is, initially, without guile, but he learns fast. This process of learning, often through use of objects and décor, is the source of most of the gags. He is courageous, but not always victorious, were it not for the unforeseen chance, for example an inanimate object become animate, or the intervention of an unwitting bystander. Second,

the heroine is a modern girl and perfectly capable of looking after herself, thank you. This is quite different from Chaplin, who triumphs thanks to his ingenuity and manipulation. The girl is a Victorian ingénue who stands (or sits) waiting to be rescued, one hand raised to her brow (with or without handkerchief).

Sherlock Jr. has found itself into the history books largely by virtue of its self-conscious manipulation of the medium itself for gag value. In a celebrated sequence, Buster dreams himself into the scenes of films projected from his booth, thus influencing the action, a concept Woody Allen would later work into an entire feature, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1984).

Safety Last, in turn, is perhaps unfairly known for one gag (and still), that in which the hapless hero dangles from the hands of a clock face which threatens to detach itself from the tall building to which it is fixed. ‘Unfairly’ because it is far from being Lloyd's funniest film and has led to the misapprehension that he was simply some sort of glorified stuntman (actually the shot is a trick of perspective, though his daredevilry is something he has in common with Keaton). Harold Lloyd's persona was far more resourceful and go-getting than Keaton's, a frat boy determined to make good, as befitted the jazz age. His source of comic misunderstanding is the *quid pro quo*, leading to chase sequences of impeccably timed poetry in motion. The refinement in tonight's film is that the chase takes place up the façade of a department store: prepare to have your heart in your mouth!

David Clare