



## BATTERED CHILD

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# Peter Krämer

## BATTERED CHILD

### Buster Keaton's stage performance and vaudeville stardom in the early 1900s

*Using the meanings of Keaton's nickname 'Buster' and long-standing debates about his traumatic childhood as a point of departure, this paper focuses on the comedian's early years as a child star in American vaudeville. Promoted and widely recognized as the main attraction of the family act 'The Three Keatons', Keaton performed a physically extremely challenging routine, centring on mock fights with his father. The analysis of a wide range of reviews and articles in newspapers and the theatrical trade press reveals that the ludicrously exaggerated violence apparently inflicted on the child by his father was central to the audience's enjoyment of the act. Indeed, while elements both in the performance itself (such as the boy's happy smile) and in the publicity surrounding it (such as its emphasis on his extraordinary talent and harmonious family life) allowed spectators to dismiss the stage violence as unreal, they were also encouraged to identify with, and participate vicariously in, the father's convincingly staged, brutal treatment of the child. The enormous success of this stage scenario of the battered child can partly be explained with reference to public debates about corporal punishment and child abuse in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century America.*

It is easy to forget that 'Buster' was not the real name of the comedian universally known as Buster Keaton. The inverted commas around this nickname have long been dropped, the actual Christian names are rarely mentioned and 'Buster' has been accepted as just another name, an evocative and resonant name for sure, but one without any special significance that might require further investigation. However, this name is neither natural nor coincidental; instead it was fabricated and once served a precise professional function. In fact, 'Buster' was born Joseph Frank Keaton on 4 October 1895 in Piqua, Kansas, while his parents, the variety performers Joe and Myra Keaton, toured the rural Midwest with a medicine show. In 1901, when the Keatons managed to establish themselves as a successful act on the major urban vaudeville circuits, the parents featured the boy as the main attraction of their stage routine under the name 'Buster'.<sup>1</sup> This nickname

served as an official label, which was attached to the boy in order to announce his special qualities to prospective employers and audiences in the world of variety entertainment. In other words, the name 'Buster' served as the focus of Keaton's early star image, encapsulating his performance and his personality as a child, much like the vision of his 'stone face' did for the mature Keaton from the 1920s onwards.

A look at the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) reveals some of the meanings of the word 'buster' that employers and audiences would have drawn on in making sense of the label for the boy.<sup>2</sup> Most generally, seen as a derivative of the verb 'to bust', 'buster' associates a violent act, something breaking or abruptly coming to an end. More specifically, in the 1890s, 'buster' was used as a term for a horse-breaker, that is, a man taming wild horses. Together with the other slang meanings of the word given by the *OED* ('a roistering blade, a dashing fellow'), this usage would suggest that a buster is someone who willingly, even eagerly throws himself into violent and dangerous action, probably with an admiring audience in mind. He is without fear of harm to his body and generally skilful enough to avoid it, although occasionally he may be seriously injured. Moreover, according to yet another meaning of the word, this person is promised to be someone 'great', who 'takes one's breath away' and 'provokes excessive admiration and amusement'. 'Buster' is a particularly apt name, then, for a performer who became famous as one of the greatest acrobatic comedians of all time.

Thus, when Keaton's parents advertised their five-year-old son as 'Buster' in 1901, they made a promise to the readers of their advertisements: this boy's performance would be special, and breathtakingly so; the source of this specialness would be the boy's body, more specifically the sharp contrast between its small size and childish vulnerability on the one hand, and the physically demanding and potentially very dangerous action he would be engaged in on the other hand. That the boy's name was indeed understood as a promise for action, which was then fulfilled by his performance, is indicated by one reviewer's remark about 'the efforts of "the Buster"', who carries out his name to the letter' by getting into acrobatic fights with his father on stage.<sup>3</sup>

Carrying out Buster's name to the letter, there on the stage right in front of the audience, turned 'The Three Keatons'—as the family act came to be known—into one of the greatest attractions of American vaudeville and Buster into a child star. This raises problems for commentators in more recent times, sensitized as most of them are to the issue of the abuse and commercial exploitation of children, and to the complicity of those who buy and enjoy the fruits of children's physical labour with those who are in the business of exploiting children. Indeed, the violent nature of Buster's performance as a child has given rise to a debate about Keaton being a victim of child abuse. For example, in 1994, two scholars proposed in *Film Quarterly* that Keaton's films should be seen in the

light of the abuse he suffered as a child (Sanders & Lieberfeld 1994). A group of fans, critics and family members responded with a long letter to the magazine to refute this interpretive approach and the claims about Keaton's life it made (Tobias *et al.* 1995/96). The scholars saw the films both as a reflection of traumatic childhood experiences of physical abuse and as a kind of artistic therapy which allowed Keaton to come to terms with the trauma. The respondents denied that Keaton had been abused as a child and showed that some of the apparently 'symptomatic' features of the films were in fact generic rather than specific to Keaton. They also resented the fact that Keaton's art was being reduced to its alleged psychological causes rather than being appreciated in its own right.

In fact, these issues have been discussed in Keaton criticism and biographical literature for decades. Keaton's first biographer Rudi Blesh based his book (published in 1966 just after Keaton's death) on the premise that a set of fateful childhood experiences—notably an improbable series of dangerous accidents—in combination with Keaton's early stage training and his youthful interest in engineering can explain the ups and downs of his film career and his private life (Blesh 1966). Keaton's childhood taught him about the disastrous interventions of fate and the stoic outlook needed to cope with these interventions. So as an adult he used his performance and engineering skills to stage disasters for the screen, and he faced both these screen disasters and the disastrous developments in his private life with a stonefaced demeanour. Keaton's second biographer Tom Dardis argued in 1979 that Keaton's stoicism had a pathological element, and was in fact the result of the abusive treatment the boy had received from his father both on and off the stage (Dardis 1979). According to Dardis, this resulted in Keaton's tragic inability to take charge of his own life throughout his career and most of his personal relationships, leading to the loss of his independence as a filmmaker and of his creativity in the late 1920s, to divorces and alcoholism. For Dardis, as well as for Keaton's most recent biographer Marion Meade, Keaton's art was effectively destroyed by childhood trauma (Meade 1995). Yet, for psychoanalyst Alice Miller (whose brief essay on Keaton was translated into English in 1990), as for Blesh and the *Film Quarterly* writers, Keaton's creativity was based precisely on the necessity to come to terms with this trauma.

Thus, for 40 years, biographical writers have agreed on the presence and crucial importance of traumatic experiences in Keaton's childhood. They have disagreed on the nature of the trauma (fateful accidents or physical abuse) and the effect it had on Keaton's career (as the very wellspring of his creativity or as the cause of his inability to sustain his work). Despite such disagreements, these writers have found it illuminating to look at Keaton's films through the lens of his childhood. What neither these writers nor other critics have fully acknowledged is that the trauma, whose nature and effect are at the centre of this debate, was in fact carefully staged for an appreciative audience in the early 1900s. Both the violent stage performance and the stories about the many dangerous accidents that

the young child only narrowly escaped were designed by his father, Joe Keaton, for the entertainment of vaudeville audiences.

In this paper, then, rather than engaging in the debate about the nature and long-term consequences of Keaton's childhood experiences, I examine the ways in which the stage scenario of the battered child was presented to vaudeville audiences from 1901 to 1909 (that is, during the time when Keaton was between the ages of 5 and 14),<sup>4</sup> and the immediate and overwhelming impact it made on them. I concentrate on the laughter with which audiences responded to the act, understanding this laughter as a response to the act's denigration of deeply held values (such as the well-being of children). Through laughter audiences became complicit in this denigration, indulging anti-social impulses carefully held in check in everyday life. Yet their laughter also rejected such denigration as improper and unreal, thus reasserting the values being denigrated (Stern 1980).

My main sources are a large number of newspaper and trade paper reviews of the act. Reviewers reported both the audience's reactions to the performance and their own experiences of it. I assume that their statements, their conscious observations as well as the perhaps less conscious revelations made through the language they use, do indeed give us an approximation of the general experience of most members of the audience. This reception study will then be contextualized by an account of some of the historically and socially specific beliefs and values of turn-of-the-century Americans concerning the treatment of children as they have been reconstructed by social and cultural historians.

## **Buster**

Reviewers of the Keaton act often registered their own overwhelming impression that the boy was subjected to extremely dangerous and actually harmful routines on stage. The harm which was apparently threatened to be inflicted on Buster during the performance ranged from slight injuries to broken bones, maiming and death. 'One would think, to see the way he is thrown about, that it would hurt the youngster', remarked one critic.<sup>5</sup> Another found that 'it is a wonder he has a whole bone left in his body'.<sup>6</sup> It was also noted that '[t]he boy survives some falls that would maim an ordinary person'.<sup>7</sup> The most extreme statements directly evoked the child's death: 'the marvel was how "Buster" ever managed to survive the daily slamming'.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the shocking perception of threats to limb and life was a crucial aspect of the audience's reaction to 'The Three Keatons'.

Reviewers observed a wide range of often contradictory emotional responses to these threats among members of the audience. The most fundamental response was a combination of fear and concern:

Perhaps the rough-handling he [Buster] experienced did him no harm, but the spectators were kept on edge all the time the youngster was on stage ...

[They were] in constant fear that he [Joe Keaton] will break something with the young man.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the very excessiveness of the father's actions against his son defied notions of proper behaviour as well as contradicting everyday expectations, and thus formed the basis for a humorous response. The stage act 'kept the audience alternately shivering and laughing'.<sup>10</sup> Part of the enjoyment of the act derived from the tension between knowing that it was not actually harmful and experiencing it as real violence. This tension could be resolved by laughing. Through their laughter, audiences judged Joe Keaton's attacks on his son as both inappropriate and unreal.

Interestingly, reviewers often singled out people in the audience who were taken in by the stage violence: 'It's a wonder to the uninitiated how the youngster keeps from getting killed.'<sup>11</sup> In particular, '[t]he women and children are apt to think that the rough usage hurts the boy, and it does look that way'.<sup>12</sup> Rather than as an accurate description of those audience segments, I take these comments as an expression of the reviewers' own discomfort, and of their sense of superiority, of belonging to the initiated. Joe Keaton played on the idea of the 'duped' spectator. On one occasion, he rendered the story of having heard a woman 'saying we were the greatest exhibition of brutality she ever saw, and that she would like to complain, etc.'<sup>13</sup> Joe Keaton set this woman up as an ignorant fool who the more experienced vaudeville audiences were meant to laugh at. Fools like this one represented the initial state of shock experienced by audiences of the Keaton act. Since spectators were meant to be able to transcend this shock through understanding and laughter, to be incapable of this transcendence was seen to be laughable in itself.

What kinds of knowledge could audiences use to rationalize the stage violence? Most descriptions of the act's violence were followed by assertions such as this one: 'the boy is a trained acrobat and knows just when and how to take a fall'.<sup>14</sup> Reviewers could draw on the publicity image Joe Keaton had constructed for his son in numerous interviews: Buster, the indestructible child, the born acrobat, the child raised on the stage. Typically, reviewers remarked that although the stage violence 'seems cruel', a closer look immediately revealed that 'the little fellow is really a very clever acrobat and never gets injured'.<sup>15</sup> Audiences were relieved from their concern for the boy by the knowledge that Buster was 'tough as a hickory nut, a born comedian, and agile as a cat', and 'such an expert little gymnast that no matter how his father throws him he lands in a safe position'.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Joe Keaton promoted, and journalists willingly accepted, an image of the Keatons as a happy and harmonious family, the parents taking good care of their famous son and making absolutely sure no harm was being done to him. One reviewer noted that calling the Keatons a 'rough house family' was not meant

to insinuate in the least that what they do on the stage is enacted when they are in their home, for I know that of all the happy families it has been my pleasure to know, Pa and Ma Keaton and their three children are in the first class.<sup>17</sup>

Despite all the apparent violence on stage, Joe Keaton was in fact 'a doting parent'.<sup>18</sup> Such statements often originated in interviews with Joe Keaton. Occasionally, Buster would speak for himself, probably having been coached for the interview by his father. One such interview resulted in an article entitled 'Buster Laughs At His Bumps, Says His Tumbles Never Hurt Him, But He Doesn't Like Haircuts'.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it was reported that Buster had originally been integrated into the act as a toddler precisely because the parents wanted to take care of him even during their performance and, of course, because he liked it on stage.

Spectators did not have to rely exclusively on interview statements to validate the boy's enjoyment of his acrobatic comedy. During the performance itself the most violent routines were followed by a sure sign of Buster's pleasure: 'The kid seems to like it. His smile is happy.'<sup>20</sup> The fact that 'he comes up smiling every time and invites other flings' was seen as a proof that the routine 'does not hurt him a bit'.<sup>21</sup> Few reviewers failed to point out that the kid was having fun. Occasionally, their pronouncements had a defensive tone, as if the audience's enjoyment of the apparent violence inflicted on Buster needed to be justified: 'the boy ... gets as much fun out of it as the audience'.<sup>22</sup> '[H]e enjoys all that happens just as much as you do.'<sup>23</sup> Reviews sometimes noted that the boy's expressions of joy were a mere device serving to reassure the audience: 'Master Keaton has a laugh all his own that he crackles at intervals just to show he's still alive'.<sup>24</sup> Yet, reviewers did not object to being manipulated in this way, because the boy's smile and laughter registered both as spontaneous expressions of a child at play and as clever devices employed by a professional performer.

Sometimes the Keatons changed their strategy and tried to enhance the comic effect of the stage violence by having the child fail to respond to it at all. A solemn expression was just as inappropriate a reaction to violence as a smile, and therefore equally funny: when thrown around by his father, Buster landed 'in all sorts of ridiculous positions, and does it all with a solemnity that is convulsing'.<sup>25</sup> Here, we can see the beginnings of the performance style that would much later become so characteristic for Keaton. However, in these early years the deadpan remained an exception, and it was received with considerable criticism: 'The youngster should be encouraged to smile. As things are his intense gravity is too long maintained.'<sup>26</sup> On the whole, audiences seem to have depended on the reassurance provided by the boy's smile.

In any case, both the smile and the solemn expression were recognized as professional devices. In general, reviewers tended to emphasize the artificial and

artistic nature of everything that was going on during the performance. Although stage routines might draw on natural talents and playful instincts, they were carefully rehearsed and coordinated with respect both to their physical execution and to the emotional states projected by the performers. This applied as much to the boy's smile as to the father's apparent anger. Even reviewers critical of the Keatons' lowbrow comedy acknowledged the artifice involved in staging its violence and did therefore not object to the violence as such. Father and son did not actually beat each other; instead they were just pretending by 'representing themselves as a proud but very abusive father and a solemn child'.<sup>27</sup> This critic also noted that Buster was equipped 'with a suitcase handle between his shoulders so that he can be flung about the deck without tearing his clothes'. Another writer insisted:

It must be remembered that every move made upon the stage ... is timed and arranged for to just as much nicety as prevails in Goldin's illusions. That's a part of the business ... every stroke is prearranged.<sup>28</sup>

So far, I have analysed the types of knowledge audiences could draw upon in order to see through the shocking violence of the Keaton act, to rationalize it and detach themselves from it so that they were able to laugh about it. Audiences were assured of the harmlessness of the stage violence by their familiarity with Buster's publicity image as an indestructible child and highly trained acrobat, by reports of the Keatons' happy family life, by the obvious signs of the child's enjoyment of his routine, and by their general awareness of the artifice of vaudeville performances. However, there also is a darker side to the audience's emotional trajectory from initial shock to its subsequent resolution in laughter.

### **The battered child**

There are many indications that spectators of the Keatons' stage act were complicit with Joe Keaton's violent attacks on his son. This is indicated, first of all, by the reviewers' excessive use of dehumanizing terms for Buster: 'human mop', 'human broom', 'human rubber ball', 'boy made of India rubber', 'boneless India rubber personification', 'human ten pin ball', 'human football', 'human missile'.<sup>29</sup> These epithets emphasized the extraordinary qualities of the boy's body which allowed him to endure and even enjoy the physically demanding stage routines. Yet, they also objectified the child, reducing him to a thing which could be battered and torn and thrown around in every possible fashion. At the same time, these terms acknowledged that this 'thing' remained recognizably human, and underneath the appreciation of physical comedy we can therefore detect the audience's pleasure in vicariously battering a child.



This pleasure can occasionally be glimpsed in the wording of descriptions of the act. One reviewer wrote, for example, that Joe Keaton was 'made up as a grotesque Irishman who takes infinite delight in tossing about his small son'.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, reviewers emphasized that the scenario of the Keaton act was recognizable as a mirror image—albeit a distorted one—of highly familiar domestic situations. To begin with, the very name of the Keaton act and the accompanying publicity made sure that audiences were aware of the fact that Joe and Buster Keaton were indeed father and son, their real life roles merely being exaggerated in their stage performance. The scenario they played out on stage was basically that of a father trying to do his job (of entertaining the audience with a speech or song), and a son, who was explicitly told to stand by quietly, yet instead fooled around and eventually disturbed the father's performance in a violent fashion. The son's action was clearly meant to be perceived as transgressive; the boy 'must behave', as the father repeatedly stated, but the boy did not. Consequently, for disobeying his father and for hurting him in the process, the boy was severely punished.

Reviewers frequently characterized the act and its performers in familial terms. Buster was said, for example, to be 'in enough mischief for two families of Keatons'.<sup>31</sup> He was 'at the obstreperous age, and the reproofs his father is required constantly to administer are a fund of humor'.<sup>32</sup> Joe Keaton was merely carrying out his task as a father, 'sorrowfully reprimanding his son for his pranks'.<sup>33</sup> Occasionally, the stage behaviour of the Keatons was compared directly to the everyday experiences of their audiences:

Few boys are handled as Pa handles Buster, and no boy ever seemed to enjoy a general trouncing as Buster gets his.<sup>34</sup>

[Buster] stands more hard knocks from a kissing pater in the course of the afternoon than most hopefuls of the masculine gender get in a whole school vacation.<sup>35</sup>

The spectators were expected to recognize themselves in the general situation of a conflict between father and son:

Buster is full of sarcastic sayings and the way he 'joshes' Keaton would make people feel like spanking him if his remarks were not so funny.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Joe Keaton's violent treatment of his son was carefully motivated, both in terms of a basic narrative sequence of events (prohibition, transgression, punishment), and with reference to a situation familiar from everyday life. This invited spectators to identify with the violence that was portrayed and to participate vicariously in the father's 'infinite delight'.

Joe's actions would sometimes appear as rational attempts by a father to teach his son a lesson, before or after which he affirmed his affection with a kiss. At

other times, however, the stage father appeared to be 'irate', his violence not being in any way measured but apparently aiming at permanent damage to his son's body: 'His father did his best to put the boy on the hospital list.'<sup>37</sup> Thus, the stage act evoked both the rational administration of corporal punishment and the uncontrolled excesses of child abuse.

Of course, this was all perceived in the spirit of comedy and acknowledged as professional acrobatics. In fact, the audience's acceptance of, and complicity with, the violence depended precisely on its comic exaggerations and surprise reversals (the father's tenderness being followed by an attack, the attack by the son's smile). Assured of the make-believe nature of stage events, spectators could safely engage in the scenario of familial violence portrayed on stage. Through laughter the audience negated both the father's transgressive behaviour and their own transgressive complicity with it, thus reasserting the values of harmonious family life, of non-violent parenting, of a generally tender and caring attitude towards children which had been temporarily denied by the initial transgression.

### **Child abuse**

What made this particular form of comedy possible, and why was it such a big success? It is difficult to imagine a similar performance taking place, let alone being popular, in more recent decades. The values, whose temporary denigration this comedy relied on, have become too deeply ingrained to be challenged playfully in a physically explicit fashion. Beating a child has become too transgressive an act to be enjoyed, even if it is only vicariously. Physically executed in front of an audience, it would be merely offensive, an attack on values which are beyond questioning.

When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Keaton family act highlighted the father's violence against his son, the situation was less clear-cut. The success of their stage act relied heavily on a widespread concern for the violent treatment of children, and on the fact that the values at stake in this form of treatment were still contentious. Ethical and emotional standards prohibiting violence against children were a relatively recent and localized phenomenon and hence could be explored and negotiated through comedy. The success of the Keaton act derived precisely from the way it mobilized and resolved many of the emotional and social tensions surrounding the issue of child beating.

Social and cultural historians have shown that, beginning in the 1830s, middle-class writers used the new medium of a burgeoning literature of family advice and popular fiction to launch a campaign against the feeling of anger and all its expressions, especially the beating of wives and children.<sup>38</sup> The control of angry feelings was a cornerstone of a new conception of the family as a safe retreat from the turmoil of a rapidly changing urban industrial world. In contrast to the

public sphere of work and commerce with its aggressive competition and anonymity, relations within the family were to be characterized by mutual understanding, love and trust. In this context, the traditional view of children as innately depraved and redeemable only through the violent breaking of their will, gave way to the sentimental image of the child as a vulnerable and infinitely malleable innocent. Parents were supposed to build up the child's character gradually through appeals to conscience and reason, through encouragement, persuasion and good examples. Physical punishment had to be used only as a last resort, and it would have to be administered calmly and rationally, parents carefully explaining the reasons for this punishment and the lesson it was supposed to teach, while also emphasizing the pain this very act of punishment and the child's initial transgression had caused them. In general, the authority of parents was to derive from their emotional bond with their children, not from their superior physical strength. By accepting and internalizing this authority, children would effectively control themselves, being punished for any wrong-doing by self-generated feelings of guilt rather than by their parents' infliction of physical pain. In practice, this educational ideal encountered many problems. Within the middle-class family, the high standard of emotional self-control expected of parents in their interaction with children (and each other) could not always be upheld. In this context, popular entertainment—ranging from contact sports to vaudeville comedy—served as an important outlet for the harmless release of familial anger. The Keaton act, in particular, allowed adults the vicarious enjoyment of the otherwise strictly prohibited violent expression of parental anger.

However, the stage routine also addressed issues of a more public nature. The middle class had an ambiguous attitude towards corporal punishment outside its own homes.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century campaigns against the violent treatment of prisoners, sailors and school children attempted to transfer the moral and emotional standards of the middle-class home to the public sphere. Furthermore, there was great concern in the late nineteenth century about the allegedly widespread violent abuse by immigrant men of their wives and children. At the same time, the difficulty of maintaining public order, perceived to be threatened precisely by immigrant violence, was cited by school superintendents and legislators to justify, among other things, the beating of unruly school children and the public whipping of wife-beaters. Thus, corporal punishment had considerable middle-class support when directed at the lower orders.

The family life of immigrants was closely scrutinized and turned into a public issue.<sup>40</sup> After the foundation of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1874, similar societies rapidly spread across the country so that by the early 1900s several hundred organizations were reported to be working in this area. They were almost exclusively concerned with immigrants, their agents investigating the life of tens of thousands of families. After an initial

period in which the activities and publicity of child protection societies focused on cases of extreme physical abuse of children, on the punishment of violent fathers and the removal of victims from abusive families, their agenda was broadened to include a wide range of issues such as child neglect, child labour, juvenile delinquency, mothers' pensions, illegitimacy, alcoholism and poverty. By the early 1900s child abuse in itself was no longer a widely debated issue. Instead of exposing in gruesome details the brutality of parents and the injuries of children, child protection societies reported that they had considerably reduced the most violent forms of abuse and were now dealing with general family welfare.

Thus, when, from 1901 onwards, Joe and Buster Keaton, dressed up as Irishmen, put their particular version of family violence before the public, they encountered audiences that must have grown very familiar in previous years with accounts of immigrant fathers' abuse of their children. Yet, audiences had also been assured that this real life cruelty to children had been brought under control, which allowed them to perceive the Keaton act as a harmless form of comic entertainment rather than being horrified and offended by its off-stage implications. The audiences attending the high end vaudeville theatres (the so-called 'big time'), in which the Keatons mostly appeared, were comprised of both the middle class and an upwardly mobile, largely immigrant working class.<sup>41</sup> While middle-class audiences could vicariously enjoy the otherwise forbidden pleasures of parental anger and then laugh off their imaginary transgression, the laughter of upwardly mobile working-class and immigrant audiences expressed their distance from practices that the lower orders were associated with, and thus their own aspirations to middle-class status. In this way, the disreputable violence of the Keaton stage act very successfully appealed to the respectable audiences of vaudeville.

## Conclusion

The above analysis of the Keaton stage act does not answer the questions of whether Buster was abused as a child or whether his childhood experiences had a lasting influence on his later work and life, and it is not meant to do so. Instead it suggests that Keaton scholarship has a lot to gain from a reversal of its usual perspective, in which the comedian's early years are only of relevance in so far as they shed light on his later development, and Keaton's performance and personality are discussed in terms of unchanging essences (most notably through the patently false assertion that already as a child he stopped smiling). The close examination of the surprisingly rich array of extant primary sources relating to Keaton's work in variety theatre shows him to be a highly successful and astonishingly accomplished comic performer long before he ever made movies. It also reveals the sophisticated and complex fashion in which his variety performance was staged and publicized (mainly by Joe Keaton), and received (by reviewers and audiences), resonating strongly with important

social and cultural issues in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America. This line of inquiry can be pursued further, with reference, for example, to the popularity of the figure of the 'bad boy' in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America (cf. Krämer 1998).

Paying attention to Keaton's early performance in its own right does not preclude Keaton scholars from investigating continuities between his early and later work. Such investigations may well confirm the importance of the Keaton family act of the early 1900s as a formative influence on his later development, not so much because of its connection with presumed childhood trauma but because it provided Keaton with a model for his film work in the 1910s and 1920s, which continued to foreground physical comedy and conflicts between fathers and sons, and also integrated professional with familial relationships (most notably in the figure of Joseph M. Schenck who was both Keaton's producer and his brother-in-law). As important as such continuities are, though, Keaton scholars need to place more emphasis on processes of historical change, and to make better use of trade papers, newspapers, fan magazines, press books, contracts, memos, letters, scripts and other primary print sources documenting the production, presentation and reception of Keaton's performance as well as its changing professional, institutional, economic and cultural contexts.<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

- 1 For biographical details on Keaton's early years, the most thorough and reliable source is Meade (1995). In addition I have traced the breakthrough of the Keaton act in vaudeville and the development of their routine as well as its impact on audiences by going through the *New York Dramatic Mirror* (NYDM), a leading theatrical trade paper, from 1900 to 1901, and by examining hundreds of press clippings in the Myra Keaton Scrapbook (MKS) at the American Film Institute, Los Angeles, and in the Locke Collection Envelope no. 887A (LCE), Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
- 2 Since the *OED* refers to both British and American sources, I assume that in general the meanings it outlines apply in both countries.
- 3 Unidentified press clipping from the early 1900s in the personal collection of film historian and filmmaker Kevin Brownlow. For a detailed description of the act, based on Myra Keaton's recollections, see Blesh (1966, pp. 30–32).
- 4 The year 1909 was a turning point in the development of the Keaton act, because on 4 October that year Buster officially turned 16 (his father had changed his birth date by two years in response to legal action against the family by the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the so-called Gerry Society). From then on, Buster was widely perceived

- to be a young man rather than a child, and the family act lost much of its special appeal (Krämer 1997, pp. 135–136).
- 5 Review of performance at the Salem Mechanic Hall dated 23 February 1904, MKS, p. 64 (most sheets in the scrapbook are paginated); cf. review in Hartford, Connecticut, paper, dated 27 February 1905, MKS, p. 85: ‘How he escapes being hurt is a mystery.’
  - 6 Unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 124; cf. unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 150: ‘[Buster] comes up smiling when you expect to see him a limp and broken boned kid.’
  - 7 Unidentified clipping on unpaginated sheets in MKS.
  - 8 *New York Morning Telegraph*, 17 October 1909, unpaginated clipping, LCE, p. 16; cf. unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 142: ‘[Buster] performs stunts that would kill an ordinary child.’
  - 9 Unidentified clippings, c.1904, MKS, p. 38, and c.1907, MKS, p. 147.
  - 10 Review in Worcester, Massachusetts, paper, 5 April 1909, MKS, p. 152.
  - 11 Unidentified clipping, c.1906, MKS, p. 62.
  - 12 Unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 141.
  - 13 Ad for the Keatons in *NYDM*, 14 January 1905, p. 19.
  - 14 Unidentified clipping, c.1905, MKS, p. 87.
  - 15 Unidentified clipping, c.1909, p. 129.
  - 16 Unidentified clipping, c.1908, MKS, p. 125; *NYDM*, 22 October 1904, unpaginated clipping, MKS, p. 50.
  - 17 Unidentified clipping, c.1908, MKS, p. 132.
  - 18 Unidentified clipping, c.1905, MKS, p. 75; cf. *NYDM*, 21 March 1908 and 4 January 1908, and *Pittsburgh Sun*, 25 September 1907, unpaginated clippings, LCE, p. 15 (the sheets in the envelope are numbered).
  - 19 Unidentified clipping, c.1905, MKS, p. 109.
  - 20 Unidentified clipping, c.1903, MKS, p. 26.
  - 21 Unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 141. There are dozens of similar statements on the preceding and subsequent pages of the MKS.
  - 22 *Daily Dispatch*, 12 January 1909, unpaginated clipping on unpaginated sheets in MKS.
  - 23 Unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 125.
  - 24 Unidentified clipping, c.1905, MKS, p. 145.
  - 25 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 January 1905, unpaginated clipping, MKS, p. 60; cf. unidentified clipping, c.1903, MKS, p. 35: ‘He is a sober, serious child, wonderfully bright and never happier than when he is “on”.’
  - 26 Unidentified clipping from New York paper, c.1906, MKS, p. 24; cf. unidentified clipping on unpaginated sheets in MKS, c.1909: ‘He should make an effort to put more enthusiasm into his work and not play so placidly.’
  - 27 *Variety*, 9 January 1907, p. 3. Quoted in Dardis (1979, p. 12).
  - 28 Unidentified clipping, c.1903, MKS, p. 41.
  - 29 See numerous unidentified clippings, MKS, pp. 24, 25, 60, 85, 136, 143, 145; also the quotation from the *Brooklyn Citizen* used in an ad in *NYDM*, 21 January 1905, p. 19.

- 30 Unidentified clipping, MKS, p. 155.
- 31 *New York Morning Telegraph*, 24 January 1909, unpaginated clipping, LCE, p. 16; cf. unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 131: 'Buster is a mischievous son of Sire and Matron Keaton.'
- 32 Unidentified clipping dated 5 September 1909, LCE, p. 16.
- 33 Unidentified clipping, c.1909, MKS, p. 129.
- 34 Unidentified clipping, c.1908, MKS, p. 131; cf. the following ad from 1905: 'Maybe you think you were handled roughly when you were a kid. Watch the way they handle Buster!' (quoted in Slide 1981, p. 82).
- 35 Unidentified clipping, c.1908, MKS, p. 131.
- 36 Unidentified clipping, c.1901, MKS, p. 36.
- 37 Unidentified clippings, MKS, pp. 138, 144, 155.
- 38 This paragraph is based on Stearns and Stearns (1986, pp. 36–57), Taylor (1987) and Brodhead (1988).
- 39 In addition to the texts listed in the previous footnote, this paragraph is based on Raichle (1974), Hiner (1979), Pleck (1987, chaps 4–6) and Gordon (1989, chap. 2).
- 40 For this paragraph, see in particular Hiner (1979), Pleck (1987, chap. 4) and Gordon (1989, chaps 2–3).
- 41 The classic account of the mixed composition of the vaudeville audience and the meanings of vaudeville entertainment for this audience is McLean (1965). More recent studies include Kibler (1999) and Butsch (2000, chap. 8).
- 42 I have attempted to show how this may be done with respect to Keaton's stage and film work in the 1910s and early 1920s in Krämer (1995, 1997).

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