Reeling

By
Barry Kornhauser

Reeling was first presented by The Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis for the 2005-2006 season.

The license issued in connection with PYA perusal scripts is a limited license, and is issued for the sole purpose of reviewing the script for a potential future performance. All other rights regarding perusal scripts are expressly reserved by Plays for Young Audiences, including, but not limited to, the rights to distribute, perform, copy or alter scripts. This limited license does not convey any performance rights of any kind with this material. By accepting any perusal script(s), Licensee agrees to and is bound by these terms.
In *Reeling*, the clown character will be referred to in captions as “Our Hero” or the “Little Fellow,” and also, now and again in stage directions, as “Buster” to distinguish him from Keaton.

We should stay rooted in the Keaton iconography. Nothing in our play happens that isn’t based upon or directly pulled from cinematic oeuvre. Such sources will be noted for the purposes of ready reference.

The only exception to the iconography rooting rule is the use of Ancient Egypt as the setting for the movie within the play. Keaton did take us to Rome in *THE THREE AGES*, and that is close. We were looking for something offering colorful and exotic costuming, and the epics of the silent film era drew us to this locale.

Similarly, the play is to be filled with period instrumental music and sound effects, anything but silent when it comes to underscoring and Foley work. But whereas the soundscape should be far richer than is even specified in the text that follows, there are no spoken words at all. Dialogue and narration should be conveyed through silent movie titles and subtitles. Keaton often utilized word play in his captions, filling them with “pun, punch, and jibe.” We might replicate their quaint, simplistic style. It should also be kept in mind that Keaton’s silent films were the talk of the industry because of the small number of subtitles they needed to explain their action.

What follows is a manuscript of a would-be clown show. It is really little more than a haphazard assortment of ideas. With a bit of luck (and the hand of Fate), a company can use some to build a “contraption” worthy of the Keaton tradition, while throwing others away no less offhandedly than Buster would an empty banana peel.
SCENE 1

Music plays. Lights up on the exceedingly humble bedroom of Our Hero who is sleeping in a nightshirt, feet on his pillow. A rooster crows and he does a graceful somersault out of bed, yawns broadly, and raises the shade of the room’s only window, revealing a bright bucolic country sunrise. A “ding” sounds signaling the appearance of a title (projected in the CTC production on the set’s proscenium arch). The sound puzzles the Little Fellow. He looks to the Foley Guy stationed stage right who points to the subtitle. Our Hero reads it to himself along with the audience.

TITLE: The beginning of a Big Day for the Little Fellow.

That reminds him! He nods a quick thank you to the Foley Guy and, briefly taking in the scenic panorama through the window, tries to calm himself by breathing deeply of its fresh morning air. He then nonchalantly lifts the window off the wall. It is only a painting (not unlike that of the painted image of the sea framed by the porthole in THE LOVE NEST).

He flips the painting over, and on the reverse side is a photo of his Beloved (just as there is on the back of the shaving mirror in THE SCARECROW), holding a sunflower. Buster clasps the picture to his chest, kisses it, and, with a sigh, hangs it back on the wall so that is now shows in place of the morning vista.

Time to get ready. He gingerly slips out of his nightshirt, revealing himself partially dressed beneath in archetypal Keaton fashion – tie and collar, vest, slapshoes, not yet his porkpie hat. Noticing that his Beloved’s image is staring at him, he becomes a bit embarrassed, turns away, and quickly rolls up his nightshirt. He then takes the one chair in his room, hoists it onto the wall, and pulls open its seat, which serves as a dresser drawer for his sleeping apparel. That taken care of, Our Hero begins his morning toilet.

Clearly preoccupied, even slightly apprehensive about what lies ahead this day, he begins quite distractedly to shake tooth powder on his toothbrush. Furtively glancing at his Beloved’s photo, the powder keeps coming, covering his brush and a good bit of the floor beneath it. Once he finally begins brushing, he notices that those slapshoes he’s wearing are in need of a shine – having just been quite well powdered. Without a second thought, he dips his toothbrush in dark shoe polish, and raising one foot at a time onto the sink, gives each a quick stroke. Satisfied, he returns absently to his tooth brushing.

That done, he puts the toothbrush away, and looking once again at his Beloved, puts on his suit jacket – backwards. Fixing that, he fishes nervously in his pockets for a gift-wrapped ring box, but is unable to find it. Then he remembers that he had put it away for safekeeping. Tugging on a string, a small toy train rolls out of a tunnel on the wall and comes to a stop over the Little Fellow’s mirror and sink. He takes his chair dresser down from the wall, and stands on the chair to reach into a freight car for the ring box. Relieved to have located it, he offers it to the image of his Beloved, practicing his proposal of marriage. But he quickly reconsiders his tactic, and
drops on one knee, offering the ring again with different words of woo. Also displeased with this attempt, he shakes his head, rises, switches to the other knee, and mouths and gestures a different proposal before shaking his head yet again. He makes a few more such attempts, alternating his kneeling leg each time, only to rise and find that he has covered his knees with the tooth powder coating the floor. Undaunted, he reaches for his toothbrush, dips it back in the shoe polish, and paints each white knee to match his dark pants.

Pocketing both his toothbrush and the ring box, he takes one last look in the mirror only to notice that something is amiss. His porkpie hat is missing. He lifts his bed – of the Murphy variety - up to the wall, where it transforms into a door. There, hanging by a mousetrap where a hook might be, is his hat. He takes it off, puts it on, and takes one last look at his Beloved’s photo. Steeling himself for the big moment, he then cocks the hat ever so slightly, and exits through the bed/door.

**SCENE 2**

A quaint country setting in which a pretty young woman (who we recognized as Beloved from the photo) is hanging laundry on a line that already has a few period women’s undergarments on it. She stops to move an obtrusive rake leaning on the line, resting it head down at the side of a bench, and then continues her business. Sunflowers grow nearby, and a white picket fence provides an upstage border to her yard. Looking to make certain no one is coming, she reaches into her laundry basket and produces a movie magazine of the silent film era she has secreted there. The Foley Guy provides a ding, and a title appears. She looks up and reads it to herself.

**TITLE:** His Beloved…with *stars* in her eyes.

She then gives a brief silent giggle and nod to the Foley Guy and holds the magazine up in front of her so that the face of the starlet on its cover becomes her face for a brief moment. Sitting down on the bench, Beloved begins perusing the magazine, and in short order begins to imitate the dramatic – or more accurately, melodramatic – poses of the actresses pictured in its pages. Grabbing a long coat from the laundry basket and draping her arm in one of its sleeves, she enacts an entire love story, from the first wooing to its tragic conclusion - playing both woman and her lover, and perhaps even the rival villain. Lost in her dreams, Beloved does not notice the Little Fellow’s arrival behind the fence. He peers at her with some concern, his head draped over one foundation undergarment hanging on the line, until he notices, with embarrassment, where he is standing. Hastily dislodging himself, he enters through the gate, only to step on the rake head, sending its handle smack into his face. Lost in her dreams, Beloved still hasn’t noticed her suitor, and just as he reaches her, she dramatically flings her arms open – one final pose - knocking him onto his backside in that Keaton trademark legs-extended fall.

Apologetically helping Buster up, he in turn sits her back down on the bench. He begins to drop on a knee, but remembering the complications from his rehearsal, stops himself and instead just
reaches into a pocket. He pulls out and offers her...his toothbrush! Realizing his mistake, he pockets that and fishes again for the box. Our Hero then proceeds to ineptly propose marriage to his Beloved, in a deviation on the gag used in THE SAPHEAD. He produces the small box, and unwraps it. It contains a smaller box that contains an even smaller box that contains another smaller box, etc. At several moments in this unwrapping ritual Our Hero believes that he has reached the ring only to find another container within the one he opens. Ultimately, he does make his way down to the actual ring box, only to find it...empty. In our case this might be the “slow-think” moment when he realizes that he put the ring in his pocket for safekeeping. He offers it to his Beloved. She struggles with the decision, but finally, sadly, turns him down.

He tries, *mildly*, to protest. She continues.

*OPTIONAL TITLE (after “ding”): “Even if you were to offer me the moon, I promised myself I would first try to become a star. ...A star on the silver screen.*

She shyly hands him her magazine before continuing so he might peruse it and understand her urge, briefly clutches his hands, and then exits with her basket – and the magazine. Not knowing what else to do, the Little Fellow puts the ring back in his pocket. He then assumes a look of steeled determination, crosses back through the gate, and walks to its end in the direction of his Beloved’s exit. He indicates that he will not give up, turns opposite to exit, and heads off unknowingly catching the last fence post in a belt loop. As Our Hero departs, he unwittingly begins to drag the fence along. Finally noticing that the thing seems to be pursuing him, he breaks into a nervous run, taking the whole fence off with him.

**SCENE 3**

A noisy street in a landscape suggesting a somewhat squalid metropolis of the period - a far cry from the small town imagery of picket fences and bucolic country sunrises. A tenement building with two doors and many windows, some boarded up, marks the upstage wall.

**TITLE:** Still determined to SWEEP his girl off her feet, Our Hero lands a job in the big city.

Our Hero enters the scene, a street-sweeper as in DAYDREAMS, pushing a wheeled cart that holds a rubbish can, broom, shovel, and traffic cone. Now in the white suit and helmet of his profession, his porkpie hat hangs on a hook on the cart. He looks for some rubbish to clean up, but there is none – at least not until the Foley Operator tosses some onto the stage. Buster places his traffic cone down near the mess, and begins to sweep until he notices a dying sunflower within the trash. That, of course, reminds him of Beloved. He reaches into his pocket, and takes out a letter. He tries to read it, but its print is too small. No matter how far he holds it from his eyes, it’s no good. Perhaps he hands it to an audience member to get some distance, but still no go. Finally, there is a “ding” and the words of the letter appear as a title from which he can at last read it.
TITLE (in letter form): “Exciting news. I have been asked to join a motion-picture company. I believe I may end up carrying the whole production! - Your Beloved”

Buster pulls out the engagement ring, sighs, puts it back in his pocket, and crumples the letter, which he then drops forlornly onto the street. After a moment, realizing that he has littered, he grabs his broom and shovel and sweeps up the letter along with a pile of dirt, dropping all into his can. Ready to move on, Buster then tosses in his shovel, and we see something he does not. The force of the shovel has broken the bottom out of the can, (creating a “hole” and) unloading its contents with a puff of dust. A laugh sequence based on that in DAYDREAMS follows with the little guy moving off with the can, unknowingly leaving the rubbish behind as he does so. When he finally looks back over the distance he swept and discovers the new heap, he drops his broom, stares at the new pile with his hands on his hips…and then decides to investigate. First he tilts the wheeled can, so that he and the audience see the hole where its bottom should be. Then, to lift his dropped broom from the ground, he does the deft broom kick-up seen both in Arbuckle/Keaton’s THE BUTCHER BOY and THE BELL BOY. Crossing to the pile, he notices the crumpled letter, smooths the missive out, and folds it back into his pocket.

Here is the place to incorporate the “broom-through-the-hole-in-the-floor” business that harkens back to the 3 Keaton’s vaudeville act and is also revisited, perhaps as a tribute, in the PLAYHOUSE. Holding the broom head up as if to rest on it while contemplating his next move, its handle drops through a small hole, sending Buster plummeting to the ground. He may battle that hole for a bit before realizing that it is in the lid of a manhole. He looks both ways, and certain that the coast is clear, he lifts that cover up a bit, and drops the sunflower down the hole. The Foley Guy provides a sound effect capturing its cacophonous fall – its long cacophonous fall. Just when the Little Fellow thinks it has reached bottom, Foley Guy adds a little more. This goes on a bit until Our Hero gives a stern look to the carried-away sound man, who – caught in the act – sheepishly stops shaking his bucket filled with nuts and bolts, etc. Our Hero then sweeps some more rubbish inside the open manhole as though he was sweeping it under a rug. Pleased to have gotten away with this, he removes the manhole cover altogether, rolls his cart over the opening, places the traffic cone nearby, and gets rid of the remainder of the rubbish by shoveling them into his bottomless can right down into the open manhole. He inadvertently drops his shovel in right behind, all to the Foley Guy’s accompanying sound-effects. And then, purposely, the traffic cone.

Just as Buster finishes this, the Big Man (- a Joe Roberts* type -) enters the scene on a tear, rolled newspaper under his arm. He stops, waiting for his title, and when it doesn’t materialize, he angrily snaps his fingers. There is a “ding” and then the appearance of

TITLE: The Big Man who has everything. Except time to waste.

Satisfied, he steps forward just as Our Hero, as in the Arbuckle/Keaton HAYSEED, raises his broom to put away on his cart, inadvertently – and unknowingly - clocking the Big Man, and

* Keaton’s favorite antagonist, a physically gigantic guy!
knocking him to the ground. The Big Man’s top hat flies off, as well. Helping him to his feet, Buster bends down for his hat. Before handing it over, he stops to brush off the Big Man’s jacket, accidentally tearing the sleeve off at the shoulder. Furious, the Big Man quickly retaliates with a smack. The Little Fellow does the trademark Keaton fall on his backside, feet flying out in front of him. Getting up, the Little Fellow responds with another classic Keaton move. He swings the broom, spins twice on one toe, and, missing his target altogether, lands back on the ground. Our Hero gets up again, and stands face-to-stomach with the Big Man. The Big Man removes the Little Fellow’s helmet, and bops him on the head with his rolled newspaper. Our Hero responds accordingly; still holding the Big Man’s top hat in one hand, he takes the newspaper in the other, and jumps up to swat the Big Man on the head in turn. So begins another vaudeville homage – a head hitting “anvil chorus” duel to music.

Realizing, that he is being bested, Buster chooses once again to run. The Big Man chases him in circles around the cart, both donning the other’s hat. Of course, the top hat falls over the face of the Little Fellow and the street sweeper’s helmet barely sits on the Big Man’s head. After a revolution or two, they realize that they have the wrong hats, and without stopping the chase, make a polite exchange. Then, tossing his helmet in ahead of him, Our Hero dives through a first floor window of the tenement to escape. As the Big Man leans into the window to find his nemesis, the Little Fellow returns via a nearby door, minus his helmet, and kicks the Big Man into the window. He then stands in front of that window, facing the audience, wiping his brow and catching his breath. Suddenly, there is a tug from behind, and his street sweeper suit is pulled right off of him and into the window. Now in his first scene garb, minus the suit jacket, he runs for another door, out of which the Big Man appears.

Not knowing where else to go, Buster retreats into the rubbish can. The Big Man lifts it up and attempts to dump our hero, only to find he’s not in it! The Little Fellow is, of course, down the manhole (or so we think). After the Big Man notices that the can has no bottom, he moves the cart away from the open manhole, and returns to look inside the hole in the street for his foe. As he does so, Buster begins to quietly lift himself out of the can as in the Arbuckle/Keaton CONEY ISLAND, hoisting one leg at a time and gently grabbing the toe of each slapshoe to help finish the extraction. The Big Man looks up, and noticing this, rushes for the can. Our Hero “sits” back in to it. The Big Man moves the can across the stage, dumping the Little Fellow, who dives into the open manhole. But the Big Man grabs his legs, and struggles to pull Buster out, until he tumbles in headfirst after him instead. Just as the Big Man falls in, Our Hero appears out of the can (which happens to have been placed by the Big Man over another trapdoor in the stage floor). He’s wearing his porkpie hat and has the traffic cone in his hand, which he uses as a telescope to scout the area. The Big Man rises part way out of the manhole. Spotting him, the Little Fellow, still holding onto the cone, grabs his porkpie hat from its hook, dons it, and does what he does best – runs! – while still inside the can. Taking the cart with him, he scuttles off-stage. The Big Man attempts to pursue him, but his girth causes him to be stuck in the hole, a fact lost to our vanished protagonist. The scene ends with the trapped man waving his arms angrily and shouting silently in frustration.

During the scene change, there is a “ding” and

TITLE: Little Fellow in a hurry…going nowhere fast!
SCENE 4

Now, out of the can, but still carrying the traffic cone, Buster runs into a room, slamming the door behind him. He appears to be in a parlor of sorts. (Again, perhaps some element of its décor could lead the audience to think it is another chamber of his own dwelling glimpsed in Scene 1.) He sits on the sofa exhausted, and while surveying his surroundings, notices a newspaper next to him. He puts down the cone, picks up the paper and begins to read. As in THE HIGH SIGN, he keeps opening the newspaper, it getting larger and larger with each unfolding. Before too long, it is much bigger than he is and quiet unwieldy! Utterly overwhelmed, he falls to the floor with it, and attempts to squash it down to its original size by pouncing on it with his body. Soon, hearing something, he crumples the paper and stashes it under a sofa cushion. Just then, several workingmen enter and begin removing the room’s furniture piece by piece. Lastly, after handing Buster a vase of flowers that had been sitting on a table, they even take the sofa from underneath Our Hero. He is dumped onto the floor holding the vase in one hand and his cone in the other, and the sofa is dragged away right over him. The vase is taken out of his hand, but one flower has dropped out of it, unnoticed. Buster picks it up, tries to offer it to the men, but they are already busy with their next task. There is nothing left for him to do but tuck the neglected flower into his lapel. It should seem to the audience as if the Little Fellow’s furniture and belongings are being repossessed, and he evicted. But as in THE PLAYHOUSE, after everything else has been removed, the very walls are hauled away, revealing that they are merely scenic flats (their backs marked with “Property of Veronal, Stage Left”, etc.) and that we have not been in an actual home at all.

SCENE 5

Right before Our Hero’s eyes, the whole space continues transforming into a complete silent movie era film studio. The two workers are joined by others who help complete the transformation. One even hands Buster a rope that dangles from a grid way out of our sight lines high above the stage. Clearly, he has been mistaken for another crew member. Not having a clue what to do with it, he fastens the rope to a convenient lighting platform stage left. Upstage, beneath a large sign reading “Veronal Film Company,” stands a wall vaguely designed after that in the Arbuckle/Keaton BACK STAGE.* The wall has four doors in a row. A small star sits over the first of these doors, marking it as the “star dressing room.” Center on the wall is a punch clock and cards, a sign reading “PUNCH THE CLOCK.” There is one other doorway, on the stage left wall, perhaps marked “Studio Exit.” The following completes our stage: On the floor down right sits a typical director’s chair, although its back cheats upstage so that the audience cannot see what is printed on the canvas there. Opposite is a large wind machine, its cord unplugged. A pot of clearly marked “Splicing Glue” sits on a table with some reels, empty and full, a hand-cranked splicing machine, and some unbound script pages. There are also several ropes dangling from the heights out of sight – some attached to different backdrops that,
for now, are hidden in the air, and all tied-off at a pinrail on the floor stage left close to the wind machine. A canvas bag marked “snow” hangs on it. Up right there is also a light board with big old dimmer switches, too, and above that a large metal water cistern with a spigot. Part of the floor up center should be built as a turntable like the one in Arbuckle/Keaton’s THE GARAGE, with a big lever nearby at its control mechanism. Finally, there is a hand-cranked camera of the period standing on its tripod. The camera should have a small “vent” or opening of some sort at its top.

During the scene change, a few set pieces are rolled on and off across the stage by the crew. These are a section of solid wooden fencing seven or eight feet tall with a solid wooden gate (that can be latched closed), reminiscent of the set piece in STEAMBOAT BILL JR. (- ours is on casters, although it can also be locked into place), a wooden ladder, and finally a hinged flat with an old movie poster to one side, a variation of the show bill in BACK STAGE. Ours says:

Don’t MISS
Gertrude McCUTIE
Famous star WILL
play
The Little LaUNDRESS
Previews TODAY
Premieres NEXT
week!!!
Tickets at the DOOR.

* Oldham wrote that Keaton’s “best talents flare when the landscape becomes his playground.” Although theaters served as that landscape in several of his films [BACKSTAGE, THE PLAYHOUSE], and although in his dreams Buster enters into a motion picture in SHERLOCK JR., the movie studio per se remained an “undiscovered country” in Keaton’s movies. Whereas we can consult some of his “maps” – Keaton film images used in other contexts – we will be entering this terra nova at own risk, and will have to sometimes find our own way as Keaton and team did in the process of making each of his films. In other words, this landscape is an invitation to play. In this scene Our Hero will make discoveries about the studio topography, typically at his own expense, as each piece of “machinery” he encounters will initially throw him for a loop, sometimes quite literally. Later, particularly in Scene 7, he will demonstrate all that he has learned as he put this same paraphernalia to good service. “Veronal Film Company” is the name Keaton gave to the fictional movie studio in SHERLOCK JR., so using it here is a gag for the Keaton aficionados. His gag, incidentally, was that “Veronal” was the name of a popular sleeping medication of the day.

(The capitalization shown above is only for the purposes of these pages, not intended for use on the actual billboard.)

The Little Fellow begins tentatively exploring this “landscape.” When a final departing crew member eyes him a bit suspiciously, he leans against the upstage wall feigning nonchalance, his arm extended over his head, his hand clutching a cord on a pulley. He inadvertently pulls the cord, dropping to the floor, and having moved the little dressing star attached from its place over the door. He quickly corrects the error as the crew member leaves shaking his head. The studio empty of personnel, the Little Fellow plays a bit more with the pulley, enjoying the back and forth of the star. The pinrail then catches his eye. He crosses to it, and tugs on a rope he saw a worker tie off. A backdrop lowers with some trompe-l’œil seascape. As he admires it, another crew member returns with that flower vase, now emptied of flowers. With neither man noticing the other, the worker empties the vase’s water by tossing it away – right onto Buster. The
worker exits as Our Hero, a bit taken aback with the “realism” of the seascape, quickly flies it out. He then tugs at another rope that lowers another painted backdrop – a scene of Ancient Egypt, which includes a large doorway. It is decorated with the painted head of a pharaoh above, his long thin beard running down the center where two doors meet. Buster decides to examine it more closely and so cautiously touches it. Soon satisfied that it is indeed just paint on canvas as he suspected, he takes his hand away. But in doing so, he accidentally tears off a strip of the muslin that was the beard. Failing to reattach it, he quickly stashes it by the wind machine as he flies the drop out to cover his crime. He then pulls one final rope. A sandbag drops on his head provoking another classic backside-fall. (In STEAMBOAT BILL JR. Keaton’s foot gets tangled in a rope. Releasing his foot, a sandbag beans him on the head with the backside-fall reaction.)

While the Little Fellow lies on the floor momentarily stunned, a crew member crosses carrying a featureless stunt dummy - one quite coincidentally dressed very much like Buster himself. Looking in the direction of our fallen hero and the offending sandbag, the crew member gives a silent gasp, presumably out of concern for the injured party. But when he rushes over to where Our Hero lies, he drops the dummy, and gently lifts and inspects the sandbag. Finding it undamaged, he gently carries it off much relieved.

Recovering, the Little Fellow notices the seemingly unconscious figure by his side. He taps it, lightly kicks it, takes its pulse, and then holds his hat to his heart. But then, Our Hero slowly turns his gaze to the pinrail, then the grid above, and then back to the dummy. He puts two and two together, realizing that he to blame for the fellow’s demise! He must hide the corpse. Struggling to lift it, he scrambles about when another crew member enters carrying a bucket that says “BUCKET”. Buster adopts a pose of nonchalance, arm in arm, with the dummy, perhaps waving his victim’s limp hand at the intruder. The man shrugs his shoulders and begins to exit. The Little Fellow resumes his task, but the crew member turns back with a question. Our Hero returns to his casual pose, only now the dummy is upside down. The crew member thinks better of asking, and exits. Buster tosses the dummy upstage into one of the more central dressing rooms.

Breathing easier, the camera finally catches his eye. He is much intrigued and crosses to it. Moving it about on his tripod, he breaks into a brief dance of sorts with the camera, almost poetic in its beauty, before stopping to inspect the machine more closely. He turns its crank, then opens a latch and the camera door flies open spilling film, lots of film. Our Hero tries to contain it but instead gets tangled in the coils. Unable to keep the door shut, he at last reaches into the pot marked “Splicing Glue” and first with its brush, and then more vigorously with one hand slops some of its content on the camera. He closes the door with the other hand, and to his great relief it stays shut.

Exhausted, he rests his hands on the splicing table. Of course, a script page sitting there gets stuck to his hand still messy with glue. What follows is a staple of slapstick comedy, a lazzi sequence about coming unglued from some substance. Ours can be partly built from the sticky-money sequence of THE HAUNTED HOUSE, partly from the molasses business in THE BUTCHER BOY, and perhaps concludes with the flypaper bit from SHERLOCK JR. The script page can go from one hand to the other to Our Hero’s mouth to his foot to his hat and back onto his hand until the bit ends with the Little Fellow noticing an entering crew member. He drops to
the floor, extends his arm, the script page still stuck to his hand. The worker, head buried in his clipboard, unknowingly steps on the page, sticking it to his shoe and off the Little Fellow’s hand. Much relieved, Buster moves on to another self-inflicted dilemma, as the worker crosses to the dimmer board.

Coming upon the punch clock, the Little Fellow cautiously inserts a time card, just as the worker tests a dimmer by pulling a large switch. Consequently, there is a lighting effect that results – or so seems to Buster – from his action, with accompanying sound provided by the Foley Guy. He tries another time card, again coincidental to the testing of a dimmer, creating a new lighting effect. With this Keatonesque confusion of causality, Buster begins to enjoy the results of his actions, and continues with more vigor ultimately performing a little “symphony of light” scored with accompanying sound and music. It reaches a crescendo, when stuffing all the remaining cards, they jam, and the lights go crazy, the crew member simultaneously having increased the pace of his switching. Finally, the Little Fellow reads the sign and literally “punches” the clock just as the worker lowers the master. The stage goes black! In the darkness, briefly, there are the sounds of confusion, and when the lights restore, we find the worker with his hand on the switch, having thusly reversed the blackout, and Our Hero cowering in his arms. The worker drops him, marks a check on his clipboard, and moves off in a huff. Regaining his composure, Buster rises and leans his arm against the dimmer switch in a posture of insouciance. As in THE NAVIGATOR, this, of course, causes it to slide down, bringing about a second blackout.

When the lights turn on, Buster is found holding the worker in his arms. The irritated man attempts to extricate himself, but the Little Fellow has become entangled in the man’s suspenders. A lazzo ensues based loosely on the changing room sequence from THE CAMERAMAN and the much earlier Arbuckle/Keaton CONEY ISLAND. When Our Hero finally does find his way out of the suspenders, at some physical distance from the man still wearing them, he lets go, and the elastic snaps at the worker sending him sprawling to the floor. Handing the man his clipboard, Buster also offers to help him up, but the worker refuses and scurries off to his next check.

He puts two fingers in his mouth, and mimes a whistle, sounded by the Foley Guy. The fence unit is wheeled back on stage by unseen crew members (standing on its upstage side as they roll it on). The worker also steps upstage of the fence as Our Hero, curious, crosses down to it for closer inspection. Of course, the worker swings the gate wide-open - right smack into the Little Fellow, flattening him into the fence. Oblivious to what has happened, the worker closes the gate - revealing a woozy Buster to the audience – makes another checkmark, and sends the fence back offstage. He then crosses to the lever controlling the turntable. Still a bit unsteady, Our Hero decides to confront the worker, but no sooner does he take a step in his direction than the man pulls the lever which starts the turntable spinning – first one way, then the other. Our Hero is whirled in circles as the worker makes a final check on the clipboard, turns off the turntable, and exits totally unaware of Our Hero’s predicament.

Dizzy, Buster grabs a cord for balance and follows it, wobbling, to its source - a wind machine. Recovering and now interested in this new machine, he plugs it on and is immediately battling the strong current of air it generates, unable to get close enough to shut it off. The hurricane sequence in STEAMBOAT BILL JR. offers some great wind-blown lazzis that can be readily
modified to suit this indoor landscape. The strip of muslin beard he earlier tore off the Egyptian backdrop blows over his face before dropping around his neck, choking him. In desperation, he grabs his traffic cone to try to fend off the breeze, but is finally blown into the chair. As he sits, the plug of the cord he still holds reaches its full extension and is disconnected, stopping the wind at last. Loose script pages that have been blowing about furiously now float down, and Buster calmly catches a few in his seat.

SCENE 6

The two original crew members usher a small group of people into the room. This group is the core team of moviemakers for a particular project at Veronal. The entourage should include three Actors; men of varying types, a female Costumer pushing a rack loaded with clothing and make-up (- specifically powder and puffs to apply it); and a couple of Grips, one with, not a clipboard, but a clapboard. The group strikes a “Hollywood” pose and gestures upward. There is a “ding” and the following title.

TITLE: The Cast and Crew of “The Queen of the Nile...”

A final character enters, the leading lady, a Diva who refuses to admit she is no longer exactly an ingénue. She pushes all of the others out of her way and, at another “ding,” strikes an even more self-important pose.

TITLE: …and its star barge in to meet their director.

They all simultaneously spot the Little Fellow, still sitting in the chair. Script pages rest in Buster’s hand, and in the other is the traffic cone, held unconsciously as one might a megaphone. The strip of muslin that was the Pharaoh’s beard remains draped scarf-like around his neck. The male actors converge on him excitedly. He flinches, perhaps dropping the script pages, as they eagerly greet him. The Diva approaches slowly, seductively, pushing the others way by sheer force of her presence. She extends her hand to Our Hero. Not knowing what to do with it, he breathes onto her fingers and uses the pieces of muslin to polish her nails. She pushes him away, playfully, but the force knocks him back into his seat. All resume their adulation.

Our Hero is a bit confused by the continued fawning. Then he notices his “megaphone,” “scarf,” and other accouterments. He turns the chair and sees printed on its back the word “DIRECTOR.” He is about to protest when a final member of the party enters. It is his Beloved, loaded down with everyone else’s luggage and supplies. She does not see Buster right away as she is rather occupied struggling with all she carries. He pulls her letter out of his pocket and quickly reviews it.

OPTIONAL TITLE (in letter form used earlier): “…I believe I may end up carrying the whole production!”
Just then, their eyes meet. She drops her load, both a bit embarrassed for him to discover that she is a lowly production assistant, but also mightily impressed at how Buster has indeed “cleaned up” in the big city so quickly. He impulsively runs to her rescue, but the others stop him, that being beneath his station. They snap their fingers at the poor girl who begins retrieving her heavy load. She looks adoringly at Buster and gives him a reassuring nod, eager to see him in action. Now the Little Fellow stops his denials and quickly assumes the role of Director – as best as he can figure out what that means. He silently barks through the megaphone, ordering the others to assist his Beloved. He then tries to suavely sit down in his director’s chair. It collapses under him, and he becomes engaged in a little collapsing/setting-up/collapsing lazzi as with the deck chair in THE NAVIGATOR. The others watch with an expression of disbelief. Finally, he simply chooses to stand with as much nonchalance as he can muster, as Beloved gives him an adoring look. The Grips pass him the camera. He coolly taps the crank to give it a quick spin. The spinning crank hits him, sending him sprawling off stage (perhaps into the lap of an audience member). As he gets up, one of the Grips signals “Five Minutes” and all begin to hustle, getting ready for the first shoot of the first morning.

The Grips exit while the Costumer hands each of the Actors his or her wardrobe – the exotic garb of a character from antiquity – for the men, in turn, the attire of a Roman General, an Egyptian Pharaoh, and a Eunuch/Slave. Each then grabs a piece or two of luggage from Beloved, spinning her one way and then the other; and each approaches the first upstage door, the one with the star. They argue over who belongs in the star dressing room. As they do so, the Diva, having been issued her Cleopatra garb, pushes past them all, slamming the door behind her. The first male Actor complains to his director. Our Hero has a solution, a bit from BACKSTAGE. He pulls the pulley cord and moves the star over the next dressing room door. This satisfies the first male Actor who haughtily enters, and Buster crosses to speak with Beloved. However, before he can reach her, the second male Actor registers his displeasure. The Little Fellow quickly moves the star over door number 3, and the Actor contentedly enters that dressing room. Even before the third male Actor can fully register his complaint, Buster swings the star over the final dressing room door, satisfying the last of the company.

No sooner has this last Actor closed the door behind him than Buster, again eyeing his Beloved, removes the flower from his lapel, waters it at the large cistern’s spigot, and then shyly approaches his sweetheart who has been left holding several bags. He offers her the flower. Accepting it, she drops the bags, which, of course, land on Buster’s toes. He hops about a bit, but assures her that all is fine as she offers comfort. Another moment of shyness between them and The Little Fellow gestures for her to wait a moment. She coyly turns away. He does also, fishing for the engagement ring. But he has forgotten what pocket he has it in. He might perhaps find the toothbrush instead. While he searches, the Diva sticks her head out of her dressing room and beckons impatiently for the girl. Nudged by the Costumer who has been busy organizing, Beloved picks up the remaining bags and having failed to get Buster’s attention, hastens reluctantly to the dressing room. Just as the door closes behind her, Our Hero finds the ring, and turns to present it to her. But there is no one there. Another Keatonesque double take. He then resignedly returns the ring and toothbrush to a pocket.

At that moment, the Grips return. One lowers the backdrop depicting the Ancient Egyptian panorama as the other, carrying the clapboard, mouths the word “Places!”
The costumed Actors all enter from their dressing rooms simultaneously, the Diva followed by Buster’s Beloved. In single-file they pass by the Costumer who gently dabs their faces with powder. Intrigued, Our Hero falls in line close behind the last Actor, a male. When it’s his turn to be dabbed, he bends to tie a sandal, and Buster gets a huge puff of powder right smack in the kisser. He staggers away as the last Actor is properly dabbed and moves into his place among the others.

The grips lift the camera off the tripod and hand it to their director who, reeling under its weight, somehow turns it upside down. Its legs flail open, and as the Little Fellow twists and turns, the two Grips find themselves ducking and dodging those now horizontally extended twirling legs, as do entering crew members, two carrying wooden waves that they will slide back and forth at the feet of the Actors to indicate the Nile, another perhaps with a hand-operated smoke machine. While the three swinging legs miss all of them, one does clock the Diva before Our Hero finally manages to plant those legs on the ground. But now he can’t figure out what has happened to the camera itself. Still upside down, it is resting below the apex of the tripod. The incredulous Grips help right the camera, and Buster is ready to film.

One of the grips silently shouts “Action!” All take their places as the other Grip sharply claps the clapboard. The Foley Guy provides the very loud accompanying clapping sound, one so loud it startles the Little Fellow who may leap into the arms of one of the Grips in a fashion not unlike that of Keaton upon discovering the crab on his restaurant plate in one of the “modern age” moments of THE THREE AGES. The other Grip mouths a “Cut!” Both check to see if Our Hero – and the camera – are all right. Struck with an idea, Buster indicates that they should resume. The first Grip shouts another silent “Action!,” but as the other claps the clapboard, the Little Fellow sticks the powder puff between the hinged sections, thereby muffling all sound. The Grip is not pleased. After another silent “Cut,” he removes the powder puff, returns it to the Little Fellow, and is about to try again, when Buster signals him to wait. He then rips the powder puff in two, stuffing each half in an ear. Once more a silent “Action!” and a loud clap - but one Our Hero doesn’t hear, as he makes clear with a knowing look.

The Action begins, the Actors hamming it up (- the Diva perhaps going through motions that Beloved will soon replicate; see Page 20), the Crew busy at their tasks. But what immediately ensues is derived from the family photo scene in MY WIFE’S RELATIONS. As the Little Fellow starts cranking the camera, the tripod begins slowly, slowly dropping. The Actors and Crew go through their motions while also dropping to keep within the camera’s lens. This continues until all are flat on the floor. Only then does the Little Fellow realize something is wrong, and at that moment there is the sound-effect of a factory whistle and the Caterer arrives rolling a lunch wagon. With the usual “ding,” he silently shouts:

**TITLE: “Break!”**

Everyone converges on the lunch wagon, except Buster whose ears are still stuffed. The Caterer tries again. Another “ding.”

**TITLE: “BREAK!”**
No response. This time the Caterer means business. He crosses to Our Hero, and as the “ding” sounds yet again, points to the subtitle:

\[ \text{TITLE (in very large print):} \quad \text{“BREAK!”} \]

That does the job. The Little Fellow removes the powder puff stuffing and sees the Caterer gesture to the overrun lunch wagon. Buster raises the camera only to have it collapse again. He considers raising it again for a moment, but then gingerly drags it out of harm’s way, as far downstage center as possible. He then approaches the wagon, reaching it just as the vultures disperse offstage. Only Beloved has remained, standing by the costume rack, studying a script that was left behind. All that’s left for the Little Fellow is a single banana. He takes it downstage next to the camera. Buster raises the camera only to have it collapse again. He considers raising it again for a moment, but then gingerly drags it out of harm’s way, as far downstage center as possible. He then approaches the wagon, reaching it just as the vultures disperse offstage. Only Beloved has remained, standing by the costume rack, studying a script that was left behind. All that’s left for the Little Fellow is a single banana. He takes it downstage next to the camera. There he sits by himself and begins to peel it acquiescently as the Caterer rolls off with the wagon. To Our Hero’s surprise, the banana peel is empty! He turns it upside down and shakes it to be certain, but then notices his Beloved lingering in front of the costume rack, now holding a spare Cleopatra costume in front of her. Safe in the assumption that no one is around to notice, she crosses in front of the Egyptian drop, and begins to go through the motions of playing the part of the Queen of the Nile. Buster tosses the peel a bit upstage, quietly leaps off the stage, and begins surreptitiously filming her. Her blocking must be carefully staged so that the actions later played on film help tell the story to come, and allowing for Buster’s on-film connection in Scene 8. It might look something like this: \textit{At its start, she is looking wistfully away. Then she turns and smiles blissfully. After a beat, she bashfully averts her gaze downward and a look of surprise comes over her face. She then looks up} only to notice that the returning Diva has spotted her. The Actress laughs mockingly, and starts to approach her. \textit{Mortified, Beloved shakes her head, points at the Leading Lady, and runs off.}

Buster stops filming, and goes to rescue his Beloved, but he slips on the discarded banana peel and while falling rips the back of the Diva’s dress exposing her period underwear and knocking off her very fancy Egyptian headgear. As she covers her bottom, he retrieves her hat and offers it to her, but he neglects to let go when she grabs hold, and it rips in half. She takes both halves and angrily tosses them to the ground. Just then two crew members who have carried in a small flat, let it go to retrieve the hat, and the flat topples onto the Diva very much as the flat lands on the leading lady of ‘Faust” in Keaton’s \textit{THE HAUNTED HOUSE}. But here the piece is much smaller, and the Actress’ head goes right through its muslin. When she turns full front, we discover her face perhaps sticking out above the neck of the Sphinx or Jackal-Headed god or some such similar statuary. The others laugh. As she crosses to the studio exit door, she bellows in furious indignation, a lengthy, lengthy stream of fast and furious words. When she is done, the others all look at each other, having no idea what she said. A “ding” sounds, followed by a title as short as her harangue was long:

\[ \text{TITLE: “I quit!”} \]

The others all acknowledge this with nods and smiles, perhaps a calmly mouthed “Oh” as she huffs off, still wearing the scenery. \textit{(An Optional Moment: The two Grips aren’t too upset by this. One turns to the other and, with a “ding”, speaks.)}
OPTIONAL TITLE: “Wasn’t right for the part anyway, ‘though she’d never admit it.”

The other Grip concurs, with another “ding”:

OPTIONAL TITLE: “Nope. There goes The Queen of…Denial!” [The Nile]

Then, as the realization hits, the Actors grow aghast; their simple silent “Ohs” of acknowledgement becoming silent “OHHHS!” of horror. How will the show go on?! But Buster has a brilliant idea. He plucks the dressing room star off its line, grabs his Beloved from the wings, and holds it over her head. She balks, but the others concur, and the Costumer hands her that duplicate of the Cleopatra garb worn by the exited Diva. Giving Our Hero a peck on the cheek, she runs into the dressing room to change, followed by the Costumer. The others converge to discuss the situation, as Buster dreamily makes his way back to the camera. He again slips on the banana peel, and the star flies into the air. It is caught by a passing Grip and carried offstage. When he does arrive at the machine, Our Hero takes out the engagement ring, and sighs hopefully. Just then, with accompanying sound-effect, the Grip who has not yet handled the clapboard gives it a try (- just practicing in the hope of a promotion). Startled by the loud clap, the Little Fellow drops the ring into the camera’s top “vent.” He looks at the Grip who sheepishly crosses away.

Buster begins a desperate hunt for the ring. He shakes the camera and we hear the metallic rattling of the ring somewhere in its works. The other Grip returns just as Our Hero removes a spool canister of film from the camera, finding it in the way of his search. The Grip, concerned that the film might get exposed, grabs it from Buster and quickly and safely bags it in a sack marked “FILM TO BE DEVELOPED.” He exits, and as he does so we hear that metallic rattle in his sack. But not Buster; he is too busy continuing his frantic search through the camera works. And as he buries his head back in the camera, the real director storms into the studio. It is, of course, the Big Man who tangled with our street-sweeper hero in Scene 3, finally free from that manhole. He looks much the worse for wear; a dirt ring even circumnavigates his middle.