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Silence Amplified: VPAC's Classic American Silent Films Series

Buster Keaton's Masterwork

The General

Richard Kaufman, Conductor

Dennis James, Organist

New West Symphony

Saturday, March 25 at 8:00pm

(Los Angeles, CA) February 16, 2017 - Valley Performing Arts Center will present Buster Keaton's *The General* with a score performed live by the New West Symphony on Saturday, March 25 at 8:00pm. CSUN alum Richard Kaufman returns to VPAC to conduct. The film will feature a score prepared by American musician and historic preservationist, Dennis James.

Regarded among the greatest of all comedies of the silent era, Buster Keaton's *The General* (1927) – his personal favorite of all of his films -- is an action-packed adventure story set against the backdrop of the Civil War about a brave but foolish train engineer, the woman he loves, and his beloved locomotive.

Thor Steingraber, Executive Director of VPAC said, "We are thrilled to continue our silent film series with *The General* and the New West Symphony. Dennis James, organist and score compiler for this event, is a master of recreating silent film scores. His specificity and dedication coupled with Richard Kaufman's inspired conducting, will remind us all why *The General* remains a touchstone of cinematic genius to this day."

The General was in the inaugural list of 25 films selected for preservation in 1989 for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. In 2007, the American Film Institute named *The General* the 18th greatest film of all time and in 1999 said he was the 21st greatest male star of classic American films; the 2012 *Sight and Sound* poll listed as the 34th greatest film ever made; and Roger Ebert placed it in his top 10. Orson Welles is to have said that *The General* is the cinema's highest achievement in comedy and perhaps the greatest film ever made.

In *The New York Times Review of Books*, Jana Prikryl wrote about the genius of Buster Keaton: "Keaton wanted stories of a certain kind of innocence, and aspiration, and even mulish indifference to what might make people laugh (a hilarious film about the Civil War for instance). His humor wasn't a blank face that could be transferred willy-nilly to any kind of satire that might prove timely. This meant temporarily ignoring what the audience expected and having the freedom to keep on inventing."

Although he didn't like to speak about his own work, Keaton once explained his approach to comedy: "What you have to do is create a character, then the character just does his best, and there's your comedy. No begging."

About the Score

Historic preservationist and organist, Dennis James, prepared the score for this screening of *The General*. He explains: "For *The General*, I reconstituted the original compilation scoring instructions supplied with the film. I prepared a highly detailed music cue sheet providing scene-by-scene emotional points and assembled historically appropriate pieces sourced from various scoring. I also looked for opportunities to underscore the identifying themes matched to major characters, settings, and actions."

James continues on the history of complexity of compiling a score: "Compiled scores were a mix of classical works, light orchestral music, popular songs, and show music with film cue attributes. It was an attempt to create a unified musical background for film, with an accompaniment orchestrated for the standard theatre orchestra which offered more continuity than was usually found when a local orchestra attempted to assemble a pastiche of cue suggestions."

About *The General*

The screenplay for *The General* is based on the book, *The Great Locomotive Chase* by Will Pittenger, about a Northern soldier who steals The General, a train, at Big Shanty. In Buster Keaton's film however, the hero is a Southerner, telling the story from a Confederate perspective, which Keaton thought audiences would find more sympathetic.

The General would go on to become one of the most expensive films to be made during the silent era. The iconic train crash scene, in which a train plunges into a river as a burning bridge collapsed, was shot full-scale, in one take. It cost \$42,000 (almost \$2 million dollars today) and is the most expensive single shot in silent film history.

Misunderstood by critics at the time, as the decades has passed it has become widely known as Keaton's best picture and one of the best comedies ever put to film.

In his 1997 review of *The General*, Roger Ebert said, "[In *The General*] Keaton defies logic with one ingenious silent comic sequence after another...He did all of his own stunts, even very dangerous ones, with a calm acrobatic grace. We don't laugh at Keaton, but identify with him."

Ebert continues, "I look at Keaton's works more often than any other silent films. They have such a graceful perfection, such a meshing of story, character and episode, that they unfold like music."

David Robinson, film critic and biographer of both Keaton and Charlie Chaplin wrote that "every shot has the authenticity and the unassumingly correct composition of a Mathew Brady Civil War photograph."

Influential British film critic and scholar Raymond Durnat wrote, "Perhaps *The General* is the most beautiful [film], with its spare, grey photography, its eye for the racy, lunging lines of the great locomotives, with their prow-like cowcatchers, with its beautifully sustained movement."ⁱ

About Buster Keaton

Buster Keaton is considered one of the greatest comic actors of all time. His influence on physical comedy is rivaled only by Charlie Chaplin. Like many of the great actors of the silent era, Keaton's work was cast into near obscurity for many years. Only toward the end of his life was there a renewed interest in his films. An acrobatically skillful and psychologically insightful actor, Keaton made dozens of short films and fourteen major silent features, attesting to one of the most talented and innovative artists of his time.

Born in 1895 to Joe and Myra Keaton, Joseph Francis Keaton got his name when, at six months, he fell down a flight of stairs. Reaching the bottom unhurt and relatively undisturbed, he was picked up by Harry Houdini who said the kid could really take a "buster," or fall. From then on, his parents and the world knew him as Buster Keaton. By the age of three, Keaton joined the family's vaudeville act, which was renamed The Three Keatons. For years he was knocked over, thrown through windows, dropped down stairs, and essentially

used as a living prop. It was this training in vaudeville that prepared him for the fast-paced slapstick comedy of the silent movies.

When, in 1917, his father's drinking broke up the act, Keaton moved to Hollywood, where a chance meeting brought him contact with another former vaudevillian. Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, one of the most famous of the comic actors of the time, took Keaton on and showed him the ropes of the movie industry. For the rest of his life, Keaton would acknowledge Arbuckle as one of his closest friends and his greatest influence. With his deadpan humor and exceptional acrobatic technique, the lanky Keaton was a perfect partner for Arbuckle's clumsy antics. The audience agreed, and within a few years, Keaton had acquired the notoriety to move out on his own.

The bulk of Keaton's major work was done during the 1920s. Writing, directing, and starring in these films, Keaton created a world unlike the other comic stars of the times. Where Harold Lloyd battled physical adversity trying to make it to the top, and Charlie Chaplin avoided catastrophe through luck and good will, Keaton was an observer, a traveler caught up in his surroundings. He often found himself in the same compromising circumstances as Chaplin and Lloyd (chased by an angry crowd, left behind by a train), but he maintained a sense of even composure throughout. No matter how lost or downtrodden Keaton seemed to be, he was never one to be pitied. The *New York Times* said of him, "In a film world that exaggerated everything, and in which every emotion was dramatized and elaborated, he remained impassive and solemn, his poker-faced inscrutability suppressing all emotion." It was this "stone face," however, that came to represent a sense of optimism and everlasting inquisitiveness.

In films such as *The Navigator* (1924), *The General* (1926), and *The Cameraman* (1928), Keaton portrayed characters whose physical abilities seemed completely contingent on their surroundings. Considered one of the greatest acrobatic actors, Keaton could step on or off a moving train with the smoothness of getting out of bed. Often at odds with the physical world, his ability to naively adapt brought a melancholy sweetness to the films. The subtlety of the work, however, left Keaton behind the more popular Chaplin and Lloyd. By the 1930s, the studio felt it was in their best interest to take control of his films. No longer writing or directing, Keaton continued to work at a grueling pace. Not understanding the complexity of his genius, they wrote for him simple characters that only took advantage of the most basic of his skills. For Keaton, as for many of the silent movie stars, the final straw was the advent of the talkies.

Though he acted in a number of films in the '30s (often alongside Jimmy Durante), Keaton no longer possessed the stoic charm many had grown to love. He worked as an uncredited writer for the Marx Brothers and Red Skelton, eking out a living at a fraction of his former salary. He began drinking and through the '40s did very little work of serious interest. It was not until 1953, and his appearance in Chaplin's *Limelight* that the public revival of Keaton's work began. More than simply a nostalgia for the old days, this new interest encouraged Keaton to revive his career with frequent appearances on television. The sheer ability of his acrobatics astounded audiences who had become used to less sophisticated physical comedy, and by the 1960s, his films were returning to the theaters and he was being hailed as the greatest actor of the silent era.

In 1966, after finishing work on Richard Lester's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Buster Keaton died at the age of sixty-nine. His career spanned six decades and touched the lives of millions of people. He had worked with everyone from Marlene Dietrich to Samuel Beckett, Cecil B. DeMille to Tony Randall, and had maintained a seemingly selfless composure throughout. For many, this deadpan style was a poignant reminder of the fragility of life in the age of complex and overwhelming machines. Today, more than thirty years after his death, Buster Keaton's films seem as funny, touching, and relevant as ever.

About Richard Kaufman, Conductor

Richard Kaufman has devoted much of his musical life to conducting and supervising music for film and television productions, as well as performing film and classical music in concert halls and on recordings. The 2015-16 concert season marks Kaufman's 25th season as Principal Pops Conductor of Pacific Symphony. He also holds the permanent title of Pops Conductor Laureate with the Dallas Symphony, and is in his tenth

season with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert series, "CSO at the Movies." This past May, Kaufman made his conducting debut with the Boston Pops, stepping in on short notice for John Williams.

Kaufman regularly appears as a guest conductor with symphony orchestras throughout both the United States and around the world including Cleveland, Atlanta, St. Louis, London, Calgary, Edmonton, Liverpool, the RTE Concert Orchestra in Dublin, Rotterdam, and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. In addition to conducting "traditional" concert presentations, Kaufman often leads performances of complete film scores in concert, synchronizing the music to the actual film as it is shown on the screen above the orchestra. These legendary film titles include *Singin' in the Rain*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Psycho*, *Casablanca*, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Home Alone*, *On the Waterfront*, and *Star Trek*. He has also conducted numerous silent films in concert. Kaufman has conducted for performers including John Denver, Andy Williams, Mary Martin, Nanette Fabray, Sir James Galway, Diana Krall, Chris Botti, The Pointer Sisters, The Beach Boys, Peter Paul and Mary, Robert Goulet, David Copperfield, The Righteous Brothers, and Art Garfunkel.

Kaufman received the 1993 GRAMMY Award in the category of Best Pop Instrumental Performance. In addition to his two recordings with the London Symphony Orchestra, he has recorded CDs with the Nuremberg Symphony, the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, and the Brandenburg Philharmonic in Berlin.

In 2012, Kaufman received the "Distinguished Alumni Award" from California State University, Northridge (CSUN). While a student at CSUN, he composed the University's Alma Mater and Fight Song, and was the keynote speaker for the CSUN Honors Convocation Ceremony. He has appeared as a guest speaker at various universities including USC, Georgia and the California State Universities at Northridge and Fullerton. He is a member of the Music Advisory Board of the Young Musicians Foundation.

Born in Los Angeles, Kaufman began violin studies at age 7, played in the Peter Meremblum California Junior Symphony, and was a member of the Young Musicians Foundation Debut Orchestra. He attended the Berkshire Music Festival at Tanglewood in the fellowship program, and earned a B.A. in Music from California State University, Northridge. Kaufman lives in Southern California with his wife, Gayle, a former dancer in film, television, and on Broadway. His daughter, Whitney is a graduate (with honors) from Chapman University in Orange, Calif., and for 2 ½ years was a member of the cast of the National Tour of *Mamma Mia*.

About New West Symphony

Founded in 1995, the New West Symphony is a professional orchestra that draws its players from the rich talent pool of professional Los Angeles-area musicians. Led by music director Marcelo Lehninger, the Symphony is the resident company of the Oxnard Performing Arts Center, the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, and Barnum Hall in Santa Monica. It presents six Masterpiece Series concerts annually, performing major works from the symphonic repertoire with internationally-acclaimed artists as guest soloists. The Symphony also provides quality outreach and educational opportunities for the communities it serves through its annual Symphonic Adventures concert programs for youth, its traveling Music Van, and its partnership with New West Symphony Harmony Project of Ventura County, a year-round music and leadership program for underserved students.

Calendar Listing for *The General*

Venue: Valley Performing Arts Center
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330

Date: Saturday, March 25 at 8:00pm

Tickets: Starting at \$28

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Photos:

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