Early film had a natural affinity for comedy. Both the medium itself and the environment from which it developed were congenial to comedic presentation. American popular entertainment in the nineteenth century had featured both vaudeville and burlesque entertainments, which featured comics prominently. Burlesque, which means comedy featuring wildly exaggerated and sometimes vulgar elements, can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greeks. In America, burlesque came to be associated with “girlie” shows featuring either strippers, or (for more class) posed art tableaus involving some suggestion of nudity, or suggestive shadow plays. These acts would be overseen by a host who would carry on naughty patter between the acts. This patter eventually evolved into what we know today as “stand-up comedy.” Vaudeville programs were marketed generally as suitable for mixed male and female audiences, but the comedy was often very broad and physical, with drunk acts and “slapstick,” in which the a dominant character would knock his partner around almost mercilessly. Another form of popular entertainment with comedic elements was the minstrel show, in which white singers and comedians would perform in “blackface,” amusing white audiences with racial satire. These crude blackface satires became the basis for many of the demeaning stereotypes (big-toothed grins, popping eyes, obsession with watermelon) that American whites associated with African-Americans during the first half of the twentieth century.

Many of the crude and sometimes racist elements of these traditional live comedy genres found their way directly into the movies. The early Keystone Kops one-reelers, directed by Mack Sennett, were slapstick in the extreme: pratfalls and wild chases with very little plot. The first true “talking picture,” The Jazz Singer, featured Al Jolson, the most popular singer and performer of his era, singing in “blackface.”

The most sophisticated silent screen comedians, by far, were Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Both Chaplin and Keaton saw comedy as a natural and humane extension of real character, and thus their comedic work rarely seems dated or embarrassing today. Both Chaplin and Keaton were masters of pantomime, each developing a distinctive visual language that evoked both humor and sympathy. Their pantomime, while occasionally employing traditional American humor associated with burlesque and vaudeville, hearkened back to the European traditions of commedia dell’arte. Commedia dell’arte is a more stylized form of comedy featuring certain kinds of stock clown types, the two most common being the White Clown and Auguste Clown. The White Clown wears heavy makeup, a pointed cap, a frilly, tight-fitting costume often featuring puffy buttons on the front. The White Clown satirizes pretension by having his mock dignity overthrown. The Auguste Clown is his opposite and sometimes his antagonist. He’s often shabbily dressed, has a big red nose implying drunkeness, and drives the White Clown crazy with his laziness and feigned ignorance. The audience enjoys seeing the White Clown humiliated, but feels some sympathy for the downtrodden Auguste. Probably the most famous clown in American circus history, Emmit Kelley, was pure Auguste type, shuffling around a circus ring as a drunken hobo janitor, futilely trying to sweep up the spotlight.

Chaplin’s Little Tramp combines, in his pantomimes, elements of both the White and the Auguste clowns. He’s down at the heels and shabby like the Auguste, but he strives
for a certain degree of dignity and acceptance like the White. Also, like the White Clown, his facial makeup is very prominently obvious.

Buster Keaton also combined both elements of the standard commedia dell’arte clown, but with more of a tendency toward the Auguste style. Keaton had literally grown up performing in a vaudeville act with his family. While his father would attempt some trite performance of a speech or a poem, the young Buster would wander onto the stage and begin to distract the audience, gradually driving his father to swat him or throw him from the stage. The boy Keaton always took the “punishment” stoically, which added to the audience’s amusement toward what today would seem a tasteless and abusive act. Once Keaton became a film actor, he made his “straight-faced” acceptance of comedic reverses his stock in trade, keeping silent film audiences convulsed with laughter while never cracking a smile himself for an entire movie. His also put his vaudeville experience of surviving his father’s staged abuses to good use as well. Keaton rarely used doubles, and personally performed numerous elaborate and dangerous stunts—all with that same straight face.

Keaton’s \textit{The General}

Buster Keaton’s 1926 film \textit{The General} has been loved by audiences and lauded by critics since its first release. Although it features many of Keaton’s typical stunts and pratfalls, it is also an historically informed film based on a real incident of the Civil War. In its action sequences, Keaton anticipated the ironic conjunction of comedy and deadly violence employed in such popular modern films of Quentin Tarantino, such as \textit{Pulp Fiction}, \textit{Kill Bill}, and, more recently, \textit{The Hateful Eight}.

Though \textit{The General} tells its story from the Southern side of the conflict, Keaton’s film, unlike Griffith’s \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, takes no polemical stand concerning the relative virtues of the two sides. The Union soldiers in the film are the antagonists to Keaton’s Confederate train engineer \textbf{Johnny Gray}, but they are not demonized in any way. There is also none of the embarrassing racism of Griffith’s film. In fact, \textit{The General} is considered by critics to be one of the most historically accurate, in terms of setting and costuming, of any film ever made about the Civil War.

The plot is very simple. Johnny Gray, engineer of The General, a Georgia railroad engine, attempts to enlist in the Confederate army at the start of the Civil War. He is refused enlistment because the authorities think he can make a better contribution as a railroad engineer. His fiancee, \textbf{Annabelle Lee}, and her family misunderstand his lack of enlistment, and he loses her favor as a result. A year later, his train, the General, is stolen by Union spies with the goal of using it to destroy tracks and bridges to disrupt the supply lines for the Confederate defense of Georgia. (This is the actual historical incident on which the film is based.) Johnny must do anything possible to save his train and his fiancee who, by melodramatic chance, has been kidnapped during the theft.

Keaton used trains extensively for stunts in his short films, so he had plenty of experience with them; thus, the stunts involved in the train chase sequence take on an almost epic quality. Note that Keaton never used stunt doubles, relying instead on the acrobatic skill he developed during his vaudeville days. He is working on a real moving train, and there are no special effects. Plus, the obstacles and challenges he faces are accurate depictions of
actions that could really take place in a desperate train chase, so what he pulls off with his physical comedic genius is integral to the plot, not just arbitrary pratfalls for cheap laughs.

While the film was in pre-production phase, Keaton went to Chatanooga, TN, where the real General was then housed, and asked to use the original engine in the film. When local civic and veterans groups learned that the film would be a comedy, they generated so many complaints that Keaton was denied use of the real General. The locals should not have worried. Keaton’s film has plenty of comedic episodes, but the overall tone of the movie is respectful toward his subject matter. Keaton and his female co-star, Marion Mack, are the only truly comedic characters in the film. Everyone, including Johnny and Annabelle, comes across as a sincere participant in the conflict, whether Confederate or Union. Keaton’s classic stone-faced character adds some implicit dignity to the story as well.

Keaton ended up filming in Oregon, using logging trains on parallel tracks for the action sequences—one train for the action, one for the camera. The climactic battle scene, with a train plunging into a river, was the most expensive single scene ever filmed for a silent movie: hundreds of extras in full costume and a real train crashing off of a real bridge. (The wreck of the train remained in the river as minor tourist attraction until World War II, when it was dredged up and scrapped.)

The clarity of the digital transfer and the excellent soundtrack of the version we are seeing allows us to re-create in class something of the original experience of seeing a silent film in a 1920s theater with orchestral accompaniment.