

“Music, Nostalgia, and *The General*”

Kendra Preston Leonard

[title slide] In 1862, a group of nineteen Union spies led by James Andrews made a daring attempt to steal a Confederate train engine called the “General” from Big Shanty, Georgia, just north of Marietta. Andrews’s goal was to disrupt railroad supply lines between Chattanooga and Atlanta. The General’s engineer and a small corps of Confederate soldiers commandeered another engine, the “Texas,” and sped off in pursuit. After an action-packed event known as the Great Locomotive Chase, the Union soldiers—dubbed “Andrews’ Raiders”—were stopped and the General was returned to the South. Andrews and six of his men were hanged, while the surviving seven Raiders were repatriated to the North, where they received the first Medals of Honor granted. **[slide: Raiders & raiders’ memorial]** One of the Medal of Honor awardees went on to write a book about the event, which Clyde Bruckman, one of Buster Keaton’s writers, and Keaton read early in 1926. They immediately recognized the story’s potential as a film plot. The Great Locomotive Chase became the real-life basis for today’s picture, *The General*, which was made and directed by Keaton and Bruckman in 1926 and released in 1927. While *The General* was neither the first nor the last film to relate this historical event—**[slide: Raiders of 62]** the first appears to have been a 9-minute 1911 movie directed by Sidney Olcott called “Railroad Raiders of ’62” (available on YouTube)—Keaton and Bruckman’s movie was the first full-length feature to do so and the only one in which the events are satirized rather than played straight. Keaton claimed that it was his favorite among all of his movies. In making it, he hoped to fulfill his “ambition to make a really big comedy with a historical atmosphere. [...] While this picture will be designed primarily for laughs, it is my aim to make it historically correct and equally

acceptable in the North and the South. It will not be a burlesque, but a comedy spectacle of certain thrilling episodes in the struggle between the States.”¹ Keaton’s intention was apolitical, stating at the time, “you make villains out of the Northerners, but you cannot make a villain out of the South.” As film critic Jana Prikryl recounts, “Later in life he declared that audiences would never laugh at a Civil War comedy whose villains are Southern: “They lost the war anyhow, so the audience resents it.”² Unlike some of Keaton’s short comedies, the film contains no racist jokes.

[slide: The General] In *The General*, Keaton and Bruckman parody the original source material by telling it from the Confederate point of view and incorporating Keaton’s classic “stone-faced” reactions to every absurd thing that happens to him. Because of prevailing public opinion that the South should be pitied rather than vilified following the Civil War, Keaton decided to cast the Union soldiers as the bad guys and made the Southern engineer—his character—an earnest and scrappy underdog, much like his characters in *The Navigator* (1924) and *Go West* (1925).³ Keaton’s Johnnie Grey is a Southern railroad engineer in charge of the engine called “The General.” **[slide: Johnnie & Annabelle]** Johnnie is courting Annabelle Lee, played by Marion Mack, when the Civil War begins. He doggedly tries to enlist, but is rejected on the grounds—which are never explained to him—that he’s more valuable to the South as an engineer. Annabelle, not knowing of his attempts to enlist, rejects him for his apparent cowardice. But when Union spies hijack the General with Annabelle aboard, Keaton single-handedly pursues them, frees Annabelle, takes back the General, and thwarts a Union attack.

¹ “Details of United Artists’ Productions: *The General*,” *Motion Picture News* (May 29, 1926), 2573.

² Jana Prikryl, “The Genius of Buster,” *The New York Review of Books*, accessed April 26, 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/06/09/genius-buster-keaton/>.

³ Tom Dardis, *The Man Who Wouldn’t Lie Down*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1979), 139.

Nostalgia plays an important role in the creation and performance of the film and its music. Films using the Civil War as a setting were popular; D. W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* is probably the best known—or most notorious—today. There are at least 130 movies made between 1908 and 1929 that either take place within the action of the war or use the war to create a set of circumstances on which to base a plot.⁴ The Civil War and its consequences remained highly visible in both everyday life and culture well into the 1910s and 20s. **[slide: reunion handshakes]** Some 50,000 veterans—more than 40,000 former Union soldiers and about 9,000 Confederate veterans—met at Gettysburg in 1913 to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, and several books about and set during the war were best-sellers, including Mary Johnston's *The Long Roll* (1911) and James Lane Allen's 1915 *Sword of Youth*. **[slide: blank]**

The issues that we now see as integral to the Civil War, particularly the end of slavery and emancipation of slaves, are rarely touched upon in early movies about the War. Revisionist historians popularized the concept of the War as what Prikryl describes as “a cruel and sordid era dominated by economically rapacious Northern ‘carpetbaggers’ in league with barbaric black freedmen.”⁵ The vast majority of these films, which were made by white filmmakers for white audiences, focus on a set of common narrative tropes: a daring capture or rescue of an important object or piece of information, often related to the war effort; a love story in which a heterosexual couple and/or a family unit is divided by some aspect of the war (women pushing men into service is also a significant theme); and a sympathetic

⁴ Eileen Jones, “The Cinematic Lost Cause | Jacobin,” accessed April 26, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/civil-war-cinema-confederacy-keaton-lost-cause/>.

⁵ Prikryl, “The Genius of Buster.”

view of the Confederate South. While the first two are probably predictable, the attitude these films adopt in regards to the South may be surprising for audiences today. And although a number of silent Civil War movies relied on tragic or dramatic plotlines pitting brother against brother, requiring sacrifices of non-combatants, or valorizing whites becoming vigilantes against Northern oppressors, some of these films, such as *Hands Off!* (1926), **[slide: titles]** *The Old War-Horse* (1926), and *Hay Foot, Straw Foot* (1928) are, like *The General*, comedies.

Keaton was very aware that he was making a fiction film about an event that had occurred within fairly recent cultural memory: only 64 years separate the actual Great Locomotive Chase and *The General*. So in addition to playing on the public's pity for the South, Keaton also wanted to capitalize on their memories of the war and its cultural artifacts. Even so, memories of the Ku Klux Klan marching in support of D. W. Griffith's 1915 racist epic *The Birth of a Nation* were fresh, and Keaton had his film open first in Tokyo to gauge audience reactions before screening it in the United States. Still, Keaton did retain a number of tropes previously established by "Lost Cause" movies, such as beginning the film with the shelling of Fort Sumter, the stoic hero completely engrossed in his mission to help save his town from a Northern attack, and a complete lack of references to slavery. To make his film both "historic" and palatable to audiences across the United States, Keaton relied on these tropes and the power of nostalgia to sell his movie.

There are multiple layers of nostalgia for audiences who experience live accompaniment at a showing of *The General* today: nostalgia created from elements within the film; nostalgia that serves as paratext to the film—things that surround the film, such as music or marketing;

and nostalgia that is added by the music that may have been used at the time of the film's showing as well as that for modern screenings.

Diegetic Visual Nostalgia

The first layer of nostalgia surrounding *The General* is that created by Keaton within the film itself, what I call diegetic visual nostalgia. Keaton wanted this film to have historical verisimilitude: he initially tried to purchase or rent the actual "General" locomotive engine from Chattanooga's Union Station, where it was on display. ([slide: **General today**] Today it can be seen at the Southern Museum in Kennesaw, Georgia.) But officials turned him down when they learned that the film was to be a comedy. Keaton also scouted locations in Tennessee and Georgia, but soon learned that not only had the areas been built up, they had also switched to modern railroad tracks on which Civil War-vintage stock could no longer run. In the Pacific Northwest, though, Keaton found exactly the setting he needed. Cottage Grove, Oregon, was still a mining and timber town in 1926, boasting just a single hotel but lots of wide-open spaces that just so happened to be crisscrossed with narrow gauge train tracks. As the North industrialized, it began to view the more rural South as an Eden unsullied by coal and grit, and Cottage Grove and its environs provided just the right visual of a small Southern agricultural community. Keaton purchased three vintage Civil War train engines, war-used cannon, and a bevy of remodeled freight and passenger cars. The crew built sets right around the tracks, and Keaton hired on townspeople and Oregon National Guardsmen as extras, employing about 1,500 locals over the course of shooting the film.

Keaton [slide: **Keaton on set**] recreated Marietta in Oregon. Seeking to make a film "so accurate it hurts," Keaton used engravings in the source book and Civil War photographs by

Alexander Gardner, Mathew Brady, and other Civil War photographers as his visual guides.⁶

[slides: 4 photos] The sheer amount of photographs taken during the Civil War is astonishing: for the first time, camp sites, resting troops or those in preparation for battle, and the aftermath of battles could be documented in a stable and lasting visual medium.⁷ In addition to its role in accurately showing the horrors of war, photography provided detailed historical records that could be used for various, often-unforeseen future purposes. Using period pictures, Keaton had modifications made to the railway stock and passenger cars, created nineteenth-century building facades, and had costumes made when he could not secure actual Civil War-era materials. He grew out his own hair to a length popular among Confederate soldiers, made his own hats, and ensured that co-star Marion Mack was dressed and groomed as Southern women of her station appeared in photographs.

Keaton also set up his shots to mimic the still images taken by Gardner and his teams of war photographers. Shooting during the summer and while the sun was high, Keaton positioned actors in front of machinery and at angles to buildings and other figures similar to those seen in Civil War images of soldiers manning cannon or posing in front of tents. While it's impossible to know exactly why photographs of the Civil War Keaton saw, it's clear that he made use of common poses and situations. Keaton's scene in which Union soldiers sit around a table discussing plans neatly mirrors an image of soldiers seated around a rustic

⁶ The initial observation of the similarity between Keaton's imagery and Brady's is credited to Orson Welles (<http://hamptonroads.com/blog/776868/2017/02/keaton%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cgeneral%E2%80%9D-2017-derails-picture-quality>); Lon Davis, "Saluting *The General*," <http://www.silentsaregolden.com/articles/SalutingtheGeneral.html>, 2009. Later, Keaton would claim that *The General* was more authentic than *Gone With the Wind*, saying "Well, they went to a novel for their story. We went to history." Steve Bailey, "*The General*," <http://www.angelfire.com/indie/busterkeaton/BKGeneral.html>.

⁷ As the Metropolitan Museum of Art notes, photography was still created through the wet collodion process, which was a delicate and time-consuming task not suited for battle or action shots. Department of Photographs. "Photography and the Civil War, 1861–65." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phcw/hd_phcw.htm (October 2004).

table a Yorktown, PA, in 1862; this is a frequently seen pose. The camera angles Keaton uses in his scenes trying to fire a cannon are similar to pictures taken of men on cannon platforms during the war, preparing charges. And the film's most famous—and expensive—shot **[slide: Firefly & Bull Run]** may have been inspired by the many images of steam trains and engineers on high trestles over rivers and gorges, such as one of the train engine “Firefly” taken during the war on a trestle of the Orange and Alexandra Railroad or a train wreck at Bull Run.⁸

[slide: blank] These visual references to the photography of the Civil War function to both reiterate Keaton's desire for the film's historicity and provide audiences with a familiar style of imagery inextricably linked with the War. But the film's painstaking attention to visual detail never crosses the line into hagiography of either the North or the South. Although the soldiers shown in the film wear correct uniforms, Keaton points out the impracticable and awkward nature of some of their features, such as when he struggles with his sword. Annabel may be a paragon of Southern womanhood, but she too receives a satirical treatment that keeps her off any pedestals. She is shown to be naïve when she has to feed the engine's fire, and she's less-than-elegant when she's unexpectedly drenched by the water tower. These humanizing elements of “normal folks” during the war prevent the film from ever becoming maudlin. Reviewers noted that Keaton had “gone to considerable expense and trouble in making the picture,” writing, “there is an authentic character about it which shows that it wasn't thought out over night.” *The General*, predicted the reviewer, “should be a riot south of Washington.”⁹

⁸ http://www.civil-war.net/cw_images/files/industry.htm. Train image 111-B-185. National Archives Identifier: 524604.

⁹ Laurence Reid, “The General,” *Motion Picture News*, 35, no. 8 (February 25, 1927), 681.

Paratextual Nostalgia

The paratext is the material that surrounds a work and contributes to the broader understanding of it. For *The General*, the paratext includes things like period marketing, reviews, and commentary, as well as its reception over time up to the present. The paratext in this case also includes the music used at screenings of the film in 1927 and the music now attached to the film through various DVD releases, which I'll get to shortly.

American advertising for *The General* at its 1927 release consisted primarily of lobby cards and magazine advertisements. Many of the lobby cards feature caricatures of Keaton done in an Art Deco style, his long face overwhelming the rest of his body. One oft-used caricature includes a stogie burning away between Keaton's closed lips. **[slide: cigar lobby card]**

Many of the images show Keaton in the grey uniform of the Confederacy with an emphasis on his grey cap, although a few **[slide: hat lobby card]** show him in a large Stetson. Most lobby cards include a drawing of the train itself somewhere in the background, although one **[slide: cannonball]** inexplicable design has Keaton seated on a flying cannonball. Several designs include colorized stills from the film, usually pictures of Keaton and Mack together, but some showing Keaton sticking his head into the mouth of a cannon or sitting on the side rail of the engine. Magazine ads **[slide: ad]** use the same images as lobby cards, but also incorporate studio-written slogans promoting the film as providing "trainloads of laughter" and "private laughs, corporal laughs, and major laughs."

This paratext emphasized Keaton's role as the primary character; the different versions showing him in uniforms or partial uniforms of both the North and the South

communicated the fact that the film was a costume drama. The relatively few inclusions of Mack in the marketing material suggest that the romance element of the movie was not particularly important other than as a framing device. The cartoonish way in which the train itself is rendered—usually much smaller and in less detail than cartoons of Keaton himself—indicates that while Keaton may have been interested in filming a historic event, studio producers felt the need to tell potential audiences that the movie was a comedy involving a steam engine and all of the prospective shenanigans and stunts that trains made possible.

More recent marketing and packaging material has both emphasized **[slide: cover with flag]** and de-emphasized **[slide: cover without flag]** the film's setting in the Confederate South. Other nostalgic elements include borders that mimic those found in silent film intertitles and hand-tinted or sepia coloring. These paratextual visuals seek to locate the action of the film in time and identify the film's status as a "historical" work; those emphasizing the imagery of the Confederacy present a rather problematic approach in that the make connections with symbols of the Confederacy carry with them meanings today that they would not have communicated in 1927. This paratext appears to have been added to the film either because of ignorance about how audiences and buyers would interpret the flag's presence or because the marketer hoped to promote the film as a pro-Confederacy work.

Music and Nostalgia

Keaton—unlike Charlie Chaplin, who often composed his own music to accompany his movies—didn't particularly care what music was used to accompany his pictures. And so while a cue sheet compiled by James C. Bradford was made available for *The General*, other

arrangements, made by cinema musicians for use in their own theaters, were common. These include the James Luke and Donald Hunsberger score for full orchestra, held by the Eastman House Museum, and other versions for smaller ensembles.

[slide: cue sheet] The cue sheet for *The General* was published in 1927 as part of M. J. Mintz's Thematic Music Cue Sheet series and is comprised of forty individual cues. Bradford used pre-existing music for the cues, relying on the familiarity of many to communicate the film's action and attitude. The movie opens with "Dixie Queen" to suggest the setting, and when Keaton's "two loves"—his train and Annabelle—are referenced in an intertitle, Bradford recommended "I've Been Working on the Railroad" as the accompaniment, indicating that Keaton would more easily give up Annabelle than his engine. A number of cues are to be played "burlesque," such as the "Light Cavalry" Overture and "My Own United States;" for the first, Bradford even recommends playing the "Light Cavalry" Overture on the harmonium, giving it a comedic effect. The cue sheet uses several similar military-themed marches, gallops, and other generic pieces. Bradford also gives directions for frequent sound effects "ad lib," particularly for cannonball scenes, crashes, the storm, and Johnnie's many instances of chopping wood. The film's biggest crash is marked only "catch crash of bridge collapsing," which indicates that Bradford expected an experienced accompanist to be capable of creating a spectacular sound to accompany the scene.

The cue sheet is full of works that recall the Civil War and are designed to generate feelings of nostalgia. Bradford incorporated variations on "Dixie;" selections from the nineteenth-century works "An American Battle Scene" by Theodore Moses Tobani, which was an 1898 musical portrait of the battle at Antietam and dedicated to the Union Army; and "Memories

of the War” by L. P. Laurendeau. He included excerpts from songs by Stephen Foster, whose music was closely connected with the South; “1863” by Calvin; and “Maryland, My Maryland.” “The Parlor is a Pleasant Place,” suggested for the scene in which Johnnie courts Annabelle at her house, reminds audiences of a time and place of different customs and behaviors, and “Old Folks at Home” hints at the pitiable South. The action is bookended with “Alabama Bound.” [slide: recording]

“Dixie,” [slide: Dixie] of course, was created for blackface minstrelsy in the 1850s. I don’t want to rehash the history of the song here, but it is important to understand what it represented to people in the 1920s who might have heard it in conjunction with *The General*, as their reaction was likely to be quite different from what many of us think today when we hear the song. “Dixie” itself began as satire, making fun of a former slave who longs to return to the plantation, and both Northern and Southern soldiers and performers claimed the right to use it, usually with different lyrics, during the War. It became the *de facto* anthem of the Confederacy and remained closely associated with the “Old South.” Eubie Blake and Noble Sissie used the song in their 1921 musical *Shuffle Along*, and it appears to have been regarded as an uncomplicated signifier of the South in general during the 20s and 30s. In 1934, *The Etude* dismissed all connections between the song and white nationalism. Clearly this changed between that time and today, in part because of white Southerners’ revival of the song as a symbol of opposition to the Civil Rights Movement.

Today, the performance of “Dixie” in any situation is extremely complex, involving issues of race and class. And so while it has become a traditional exercise in nostalgia for both the time periods of the film’s action and its cinematic release to use “Dixie” in accompanying

The General, each modern use must be carefully read to determine intent and meaning: whether its inclusion is meant to represent contemporary accompanying practices; if it is representing the Confederacy, and how; or whether it appears as part of a valorization attempt on the part of a performer to present the film as political rhetoric for the Confederacy.

Likewise, it is crucial to consider the historical context of the cue sheet's inclusion of music by Stephen Foster, which often included racist language despite Foster's anti-slavery views. At the time *The General* was made, Foster's music was performed by black and white singers alike; Paul Robeson often performed Foster's songs in recital in the mid-1920s. For *The General*, Foster's music seems to be used to construct a soundscape of a genteel Southern society from which, perhaps, the characters come. Bradford's choice of "Old Folks at Home" accompanies a scene in which the Confederate Army organizes to retrieve the engine while Johnnie triumphs over obstacles in the chase. The song can be heard as sympathetic within the framework of the contemporary attitude regarding the South as downtrodden and pathetic. Nonetheless, in a modern performance, the casual racism of many of Foster's songs—including "Old Folks"—means that, especially in combination with the cue sheet's use of "Dixie," the musical suggestions could be understood as anti-abolition and pro-Confederacy.

The potential for alternate readings of *The General* based on today's considerations of the pre-War and Civil War South is perhaps one reason that performers today sometimes seek other music for scoring it, including composing or improvising new music that carries with it no connotations of the politics of the War. At the same time, many performers who wish to

recreate the experience of seeing and hearing the film in the cinema in 1927 employ “Dixie,” “Old Folks at Home,” and other songs that would be difficult to defend without offering the audience knowledge of how the South and such songs were received in the 1920s.

Today, if you watch *The General* at home on DVD or Blu-Ray, **[slide: score options]** you can select from one of six scores included on recent commercial releases. Each of these modern accompaniments (by Carl Davis; Robert Israel (two scores: one for piano and strings and one for full orchestra); Lee Erwin; Joe Hisaishi; and the Mont Alto Moving Picture Orchestra, led by Rodney Sauer) seeks to replicate one of the many manners in which the film might have been accompanied in the cinema at the time of its release. Davis’s accompaniment is scored for full orchestra, while Hisaishi’s uses a smaller ensemble. Lee Erwin’s score is played on the Mighty Wurlitzer, the “king of cinema organs.” Mont Alto recreates a typical small theater orchestra of piano, violin, cello, clarinet, trumpet, and percussion. Screenings with live musicians **[slide: score options 2]** can rent a newly created score by Timothy Brock for accompaniment, or hire an improvising accompanist like Ben Model of MOMA and the Library of Congress to perform.

These newer accompaniments for *The General* vary in their approaches to scoring the film. Composer and performer Mark Orton has gone so far to recreate a historic Civil War sound as to find, restore, and use portable, folding reed organs **[slide: field organ]** known as field organs as part of his orchestration, which also includes popular nineteenth-century instruments like the zither and its cousin the marxophone **[slide: marxophone]**, autoharp, and harmonicas of various sizes and ranges. Although modern audiences may not be able to name these instruments, they may well associate the instruments’ sounds with music of

another era and/or the South.¹⁰ Carl Davis's score uses a full, modern orchestra, and is primarily composed of pre-existing nineteenth-century orchestral works for the concert hall, but retains traditional performance practices such as including period tunes; he gives the film's genre as parody a nod by also incorporating minor-key version of "Dixie." Joe Hisaishi's score, on the other hand, incorporates music and musical effects in the style of classic Warner Brothers cartoons and—for reasons I cannot explain—a variety of themes from Stravinsky, particularly the "Rite of Spring." I do not know whether this is intended to make connections between war and personal sacrifice, or to signify brutality, or if it has some other function altogether; or has no function at all. Hisaishi scholar Alexandra Roedder tells me that the composer frequently incorporates music he likes into his scores without intending any "metameaning."¹¹

Robert Israel's score is likely similar to what audiences would have heard at large motion picture palaces in 1927. Composed for a medium-sized orchestra with piano, Israel's score establishes several generic themes at the beginning of the film, including a love theme, a theme for the Union villains, bugle calls, and music for hurrying and chasing. Israel frequently incorporates "Dixie," **[slide: references]** and "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" as major themes. He also quotes "Maryland, My Maryland," and "I'm On My Way," which was known in the 1920s as a "Negro spiritual" and was used by George Gershwin in his opera "Porgy and Bess" in 1935.¹² The score includes references to "I've Been Working on the Railroad," "Rock-a-bye Baby," "Turkey in the Straw," and "The Teddy Bears' Picnic," along with a parody of "Hail Britannia," and a satirical "Yankee Doodle," to create

¹⁰ Jared Rasic, "General Excitement," *The Source Weekly - Bend*, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.bendsource.com/bend/general-excitement/Content?oid=2746964>.

¹¹ Alexandra Roedder, online conversation with author, April 28, 2017.

¹² Newman Ivey White, *American Negro Folk-Songs* (Harvard University Press, 1928), 118.

specific musical atmospheres and to comment on or mirror the action. Israel mimics Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* to signify some frantic physical movements and quotes Rossini's overture to *Semiramide* as part of the battle sequence at the end of the movie. Although the Dukas work wouldn't take on its iconic association with Mickey Mouse until 1940, it was often included in collections of pre-existing music for film accompaniment for suspense or "creepy" situations; Rossini was also a popular choice for exciting music for races, battles, and other high-movement scenes. Here's an excerpt from Israel's score from the beginning of the engine chase. **[slide: Israel clip]**

For smaller picture houses, a small ensemble may have supplied all of the accompaniment. **[slide: Israel chamber clip]** ...or it could have been accompanied by an organ: **[slide: Erwin clip]**...or piano, such as William Perry's improvised piano score: **[slide: Perry clip]**

Erwin's and Israel's scores obviously make use of pre-existing pieces. One group that seeks to eliminate the metamusical meanings older pieces can carry is Chicago's Quasar Wut-wut. Quasar Wut-wut scored *The General* in 2014 and departs entirely from the previous approaches. **[slide: Quasar clip]**

There are numerous other soundtracks for the film, including mash-ups of James Bond themes and other pieces written for other films; numerous piano or organ-only accompaniments; and several for small ensembles, such as an earlier Israel score and the score by the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra, which I'd hoped to have in time to show today, but didn't.

But despite what we think of today as the film's comedic brilliance, *The General* lost money at the picture house. Perhaps audiences weren't ready for films in which technology played a starring role. Perhaps some of the accompaniments didn't go over so well, or convey Keaton's sense of satire. Perhaps the film was shown at the wrong projection speed. Perhaps it was too humane, lacking pies to the face and kicks to the rear. Perhaps it was really a thriller with funny parts, rather than a comedy with suspenseful parts. Reviews of the film were mixed. Audiences found the train chases to be monotonous; reviewers decried the focus on the trains rather than on the romance or plotting of the soldiers. While *Photoplay's* reviewer found the spoof of the Civil War to be "most uncivilly" handled, they admitted that that Annabelle's character was "a gorgeous laugh at all the helpless ladies of historic fiction."¹³ And it was the "historic" part—rather than the comedy—that did get praise. Laurence Reid, writing for *Motion Picture News* emphasized the film's "real-life story," but subtitled his review "It Could be Funnier."¹⁴ *The Film Daily* lamented that "the laughs are slow and scattered [...] Buster fails to bring them home to this one."¹⁵ *The Educational Screen* magazine called *The General* "wholesome" and "enjoyable, but hardly up to [Keaton's] best,"¹⁶ and *Motion Picture Magazine* deemed the comedy "mild."¹⁷

Part of this can be attributed to Keaton's desire to make the film more serious than normal slapstick. **[slide: Bryher]** Indeed, a February 1928 article in *Close Up* called "Defence [sic] of Hollywood," Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman) wrote of the film's realism and what she felt was its decidedly anti-comedic message:

¹³ "The Shadow Stage: A Review of New Pictures," *Photoplay* (March 1927), 52.

¹⁴ Reid, "The General."

¹⁵ "The General," *The Film Daily* (February 20, 1927), 10.

¹⁶ "Film Estimates," *The Educational Screen*, 134.

¹⁷ *Motion Picture Magazine* 11, no. 11 (May 1927), 60.

No war film ever made has shown so perfectly the absurdity and yet the truth of war as the battle scene at the finish of that film. When people shoot and wave flags and men rush into uniform they are preparing themselves for a conflict that reduced to its logical conclusions is as aimless and as foolish as the men that dropped at their guns like ninepins, one after the other. [...] There was truth too in the scenes of the pursuit, the tossing of wood over instead of into, the carrier. And the scenes in the forest where they stumble over creepers and into a bear were only a physical representation of the mental happenings of most heroics; brave, uncomfortable, necessary perhaps, but always a little ridiculous.¹⁸

Today, the film is recognized both as what film critic Gary Giddins calls “a peephole into history and by any definition an uncannily beautiful film,” and as a masterpiece of comedic timing, stunts, and action.¹⁹ Roger Ebert hailed *The General* as “an epic of silent comedy” with “ingenious” stunts and gags.²⁰ The train chases and clever fixes Keaton comes up with to battle his adversaries and their attempts to sabotage his pursuit presage more recent chase films and scenes, and the film’s comedic and suspenseful treatment of these is appealing to audiences whose tastes range from slapstick to more cerebral humor. And of course, a great score makes it even better. I hope you’ll enjoy all *The General* has to offer. **[slide: contact info]**

¹⁸ “Defence [sic] of Hollywood, *Close Up* 2, no. 2 (February 1928), 46.

¹⁹ Gary Giddins and Matthew Dessen, “Buster Keaton’s *The General*,” *Slate*, November 18, 2008, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/dvdxtras/2008/11/buster_keatons_the_general.html.

²⁰ Roger Ebert, “*The General* Movie Review & Film Summary (1927),” accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-general-1927>.