STONEFACE (THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF BUSTER KEATON)

BY VANESSA CLAIRE STEWART

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BUSTER KEATON	French Stewart
YOUNG BUSTER	
	Oonal Thoms-Cappello
ROSCOE "FATTY" ARBUCKLE	Scott Leggett
MAE SCRIVEN	Erin Parks
NATALIE TALMADGE	Tegan Ashton Cohan
ELEANOR NORRIS/NORMA TALMADG	E Rena Strober
JOSEPH SCHNECK	Jake Broder
EDWARD SEDGWICK/GEORGE JESSEL .	Conor Duffy
LOUIS B. MAYER	Pat Towne
CHARLIE CHAPLIN	Guy Picot

STONEFACE (THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF BUSTER KEATON) was subsequently produced at the Pasadena Playhouse (Sheldon Epps, Producing Artistic Director), Pasadena, California, in 2014 with the following creative and cast changes: the sound design was by Cricket S. Myers, and the role of Mae Scriven was played by Daisy Eagan.

CHARACTERS

BUSTER KEATON: Former movie star, an alcoholic past his prime, 50s YOUNG KEATON: Younger version of Buster, spry and proud, 20s ROSCOE "FATTY" ARBUCKLE: Silent comedy genius, Buster's sad confidant, 20s-40s JOSEPH SCHENCK: Wealthy film producer, weary from anxiety, 40s NATALIE TALMADGE: Buster's first wife, glamorous, but insecure, 20s NORMA TALMADGE: Natalie's older, more famous, beautiful sister, 20s MAE SCRIVEN: Buster's overly talkative nurse/second wife, 30s LOUIS B MAYER: The famously blustery MGM film executive, 50s EDWARD SEDGEWICK: An insecure, inexperienced film director, 30s ROBERTO: Mexican actor on a low-budget film, 40s JORGE: Mexican director on a low-budget film, 40s GEORGE JESSEL: An old-school, washed-up vaudeville comic, 50s STARLET: A very young Marliyn Monroe pre-fame, 20s CHARLIE CHAPLIN: The legendary star of silent film, 50s PRODUCER: A bedraggled producer of low-budget movies, 50s ROOMMATE: A very bad actor in Jail Bait, 40s OPERATOR: Old-timey phone operator from the 1940s, 20s NURSE: Very competent and helpful, 20s PRODUCTION ASSISTANT: Just doing his job, 20s ELEANOR KEATON: Keaton's 3rd wife, confident and fun, 30s KITTY: British makeup artist, 30s JAMES KEATON: Buster's son, played by Young Keaton, 20s

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ACT ONE

Scene 1

A set resembling a 1920s movie bare soundstage—including ladders, dressing rooms, and catwalks. A screen temporarily hangs in the middle of the stage.

A silent movie pianist enters, and sits at his piano. They begin the score that will play throughout...

Once the music begins, a projection lights up the screen, replicating silent movie title cards.

Projection:

INTRODUCING ROSCOE "FATTY" ARBUCKLE, FAMOUS ACTOR, BUSTER KEATON'S MENTOR AND DEAR FRIEND.

Roscoe enters playfully from offstage. He sees the screen, which is now projecting an image of a Stage Door. He teases the audience for a second before entering the screen—transitioning seamlessly from live action to a film image of Roscoe. The filmed Roscoe does a dance, then enters the Stage Door on the screen. Some "photographers" are there to get a quick shot of him, but he is gone.

FLASH FLASH FLASH.

Another projection reads:

INTRODUCING JOSEPH SCHENCK, BUSTER'S PRODUCER, AND HIS FAMOUS MOVIE STAR WIFE, NORMA TALMADGE.

Schenck and Norma enter, arm in arm and impeccably dressed: Norma with a fur and Schenck in a tailored suit. They pose, as if on the red carpet—Norma blowing kisses at her fans. The bulbs flash again:

FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

They, too, disappear into the screen and into the Stage Door as:

Another title card lights up the screen:

NORMA'S YOUNGER SISTER AND HOLLY-WOOD'S MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELORETTE, NATALIE TALMADGE!!

Natalie emerges from offstage, bedecked in jewels and smoking a cigarette dangling from a long stick. She blows out a puff of smoke as photographers capture the moment...

FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

Natalie disappears into the screen, becoming the film version of herself, and enters the Stage Door.

Projection:

[producing entity here] PRESENTS STONEFACE

Young Keaton comes out of the screen ala The Playhouse and enters the onstage dressing room, careful not to face the audience.

Young Keaton examines a mirror, then trips over a large box of hats. The hats spill out, and Young Keaton gets an idea...

Young Keaton tries each hat on in the mirror, trying out the persona of each. Fancy man for the top hat. Frenchman for the beret...etc.

Projection:

AND THE HERO OF OUR FEATURE...

Finally, Buster discovers his famous porkpie hat!

Projection:

HOLLYWOOD'S MOST REVERED PHYSICAL COMEDIAN—

Young Keaton tries it on in the mirror. Looks at every angle. He's happy, in his deadpan expression.

Projection:

PRESENTING BUSTER KEATON!

Young Keaton turns to finally face his audience. The flashes begin again—too many to count—blinding Young Keaton.

FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

Projection: (Spinning images of newspaper articles heralding his success.)

LIFE MAGAZINE PROCLAIMS BUSTER KEATON 1924 PERFORMER OF THE YEAR!!

1925. *THE NEW YORKER* NAMES CHAPLIN AND KEATON BEST STARS OF THE SILENT FILM ERA.

1926. *LOS ANGELES TIMES* PROCLAIMS BUSTER KEATON A PHYSICAL COMEDY GENIUS!

Young Keaton has to cover his eyes. It's too much. The flashes slowly begin to slow down...

FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

Young Keaton peeks at the photographers through his fingers...

Projection: (The years flash by along with the spinning head-lines.)

1927. *CINEMA NEWS* PROCLAIMS BUSTER KEATON'S LATEST WORK A DISASTER!! 1929. *VARIETY*: TALKIES ARE ALL THE RAGE IN HOLLYWOOD!

FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

Young Keaton takes down his hands. Are the photographers going away? He isn't sure what to think.

Projection:

1932. LOS ANGELES TIMES: WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR BELOVED BUSTER?

FLASH.

FLASH...

One more FLASH breaks the solid darkness. Just long enough to see the disappointed expression on Young Keaton's face.

The music suddenly stops.

The stage is pitch black for a few seconds. Just long enough to be uncomfortable. The large screen is now gone, revealing a sterile hospital.

Scene 2

Sudden lights up on Buster. He is fifteen years older now, confused and standing in a straight jacket under a buzzing florescent light, but still in his porkpie hat—the only recognizable sign that this is still the same man.

Behind Buster is a hospital bed. After too much silence, a nurse, Mae, enters. She's in her twenties, but with a hard face that makes her seem much older.

Projection:

1933. AFTER ENDLESS DRINKING BINGES, MGM FIGUREHEAD LOUIS B. MAYER SENT A DOWN-AND-OUT BUSTER TO ARROWHEAD SPRINGS DRY-OUT CLINIC.

MAE. Oh good. You're up. Do you need help going to the bath-room? No? I'll wipe you.

Buster, very confused, tries to wriggle out of his straightjacket.

Don't do that, honey. You're in no condition. Let's get you in bed.

Mae exits the room. Finally. Buster stands up and limps over to the mirror, taking a long look at himself. Disgusting.

Reentering, Mae sits a confused Buster back on the bed.

(As she takes his hat off his head.) Did I tell you when I went to school, I took a class in "modern marriage"? Aren't you so glad I did? I know exactly what to do with you, my little man!

Buster doesn't respond. He just stares blankly at her. She nudges him a little.

Scoot over. I'm gonna scratch your back. (As she scratches his back.) You poor thing. When they first brought you in here, I saw all your scars. I said to myself, "Mae! This man's had a rough life." I looked up all the records for this new anonymous patient. See-they didn't want to use your real name in case it got out who was in here. "John Doe," I said. I talk to myself a lot. Gets lonely tending to a bunch of drunks when really what you want to do is be an actress. Isn't that funny? I'm just like you! "Let's see." It said in your files you've broken almost every bone in your body!!! Even all your toes and fingers and even your neck! "Holy Hell," I said! Was that from Seven Chances when you were running away from all those brides and then you went down that mountain with all those boulders?! I thought, "How did you do that?!" at the same time wishing I was one of those people chasing you! And also I couldn't figure out how you were still even walking around especially with your drinking being what it was. So then I said to myself, "I'm gonna take care of that man." And then I recognized you. Isn't that funny? I didn't even know who you were when I said that to myself! "I'm gonna take care of that man!" Ha, ha. "I'm gonna take care of that Buster Keaton!" Ha, ha. Yeah. Your face is a little rounder than it used to be. Probably puffy from whiskey. I like it though. Did you know that people that drink too much whiskey can get to a point where they start to hallucinate. I've seen it happen. Don't worry though. I'm not a hallucination. I'm REAL! Aren't you happy about that? I'm really here!

Mae looks at him expectantly. He's still deadpan.

How'd you learn to do that? Keep your face so still in all those movies? Buster?

She puts her face closer to his, trying to affect his expression: If I didn't know any better, judging from that silly expression, I'd think you didn't even recognize me! Silly!

Still deadpan. She laughs.

You're so funny. I like men that make me laugh. I used to have a boyfriend that would tell me all these jokes, but he lived in this terrible apartment on Franklin. It had all these awful rotten wooden floors with holes that rats used to crawl through. I said to myself, "Mae this is no place for a lady! And you're a lady!" You know what's funny? I used to drive by that big Italian villa of yours wondering what it must be like to live in a thing like that. How much square footage would you say our house has?

Buster starts to struggle in the straightjacket again.

Now stop that. You're just going to get aggravated! There's no use in—

In a flash, Buster has removed his straightjacket, and it drops to the floor.

Now WAIT A MINUTE! How did you—

Puzzled, Mae just looks at him. Then after a moment, she decides it's a joke and bursts into laughter. Buster puts his hand on her mouth before she can launch into another monologue.

BUSTER. Forgive me madam, but I have no idea who you are.

She removes his hand, revealing a wedding ring.

MAE. I'm your wife. I'm real.

He absorbs the information...

You were blacked out for a long time, darling. But you have to at least remember our wedding night!

Buster is clearly confused. Behind Mae, he sees:

Projection: Roscoe is watching the whole thing from a screen. He gestures that Mae is "crazy," then beckons Buster to join him...

Lights change:

Projection:

1917. HOLLYWOOD. IMPRESSED AFTER SEEING A YOUNG KEATON ON THE VAUDEVILLE STAGE, FATTY ARBUCKLE DECIDES TO GIVE BUSTER HIS FIRST BREAK IN THE MOVIES.

Lights change and the piano player starts in just as Roscoe's image leaves the screen and appears live on stage.

Projection:

COMIQUE FILM CORPORATION PRESENTS GOOD NIGHT NURSE STARRING FATTY ARBUCKLE AND BUSTER KEATON.

Finally, Buster leaves Mae and the hospital room, entering a hallway where he encounters Roscoe, dressed as a female nurse.

Roscoe acts demure, and both stop—noticing each other.

Roscoe winks at Buster. Buster flirts back.

Both pretend to be shy. Roscoe picks at his teeth, and touches a door frame. So does Buster.

Roscoe walks away, beckoning Buster to follow...

Buster does, trying to be demure himself...

Buster falls through the door and back into the room where Mae is. Mae hits his head with a breakaway vase, yet he manages to escape back into the hallway where Roscoe is batting his eyelashes...

Buster beckons for Roscoe to come closer.

Buster playfully taps Roscoe's back. Roscoe reciprocates. Buster does it again, harder. This time, Roscoe hauls off and punches him in the face, sending Buster crashing to the floor. Roscoe then picks him up and throws him back into the door where Mae awaits.

Lights change. Music stops.

It's 1933 again, and a broken Buster stands before Mae in the hospital:

BUSTER. Forgive me Mrs. Keaton, but I'm going to have to release myself from the drunk tank.

Buster starts to go, but Mae stops him.

MAE. You can't go. I haven't discharged you yet.

BUSTER. Please let go of me.

MAE. I said "I'm your wife"!

BUSTER. I see. Mix up at Central Casting?

MAE. You said "Till death"!

BUSTER. Clearly I'm well on my way.

MAE. Before God!

BUSTER. Even He knows not to trust a blacked-out drunk. Who invited Him anyway? I'm sorry.

MAE. Buster, please.

Buster sits her down gently.

BUSTER. Mae, is it? You don't even know my real name.

MAE. What is it?

BUSTER. I'm Joe.

MAE. Joe? Joe and Mae. I can get used to that.

BUSTER. Don't. It was truly nice to have met you.

He starts to leave, but she blocks him.

MAE. If you leave me, I'm taking everything you have!

BUSTER. Sorry—but the first Mrs. Keaton beat you to it, my dear. *Mae finally lets go.*

That's better.

Mae starts to cry.

MAE. But I love you.

BUSTER. You don't. Trust me. That kind of thing only exists in movies.

Scene 3

Lights change. The piano music starts in.

Projection:

HOLLYWOOD, 1921.

Lights up on Young Keaton and Natalie. They stand there awkwardly, not saying anything. Young Keaton is too shy to speak.

Projection:

PRODUCER JOE SCHENCK HAS DECIDED OUR HERO NEEDS TO CAST HIS LEADING LADY.

Schenck is behind Young Keaton, manipulating him... Schenck mouths:

Projection:

"It's time to settle down, buddy! Your fans want you to be a family man. Plus, Natalie ain't bad to look at."

Projection:

NATALIE'S SISTER NORMA THINKS IT'S A PERFECT MATCH!!

Norma appears behind Natalie. Norma mouths:

Projection:

"You'll never amount to anything unless you marry well and start a family!"

Norma and Schenck push them together as they clumsily make their way closer to each other...

Young Keaton and Natalie awkwardly kiss.

The piano player plays the "Wedding March."

Upon hearing the the "Wedding March," Young Keaton gets spooked, and runs off "set," pursued by Natalie, then Schenck, then Norma.

(For this scene, reference The Navigator ship chase scene.)

They all wind up offstage until Young Keaton enters through one door. Natalie enters through another just as Young Keaton exits and Schenck climbs up a soundstage ladder, looking for him.

Young Keaton enters again to the dressing room area, puts on a lady costume disguise, and watches as all three of them chaotically run around him in confusion. Young Keaton points to a closet, which Schenck opens, and a bucket falls onto his head.

Young Keaton shrugs as Natalie and Norma try every door, until finally a suspicious Schenck lifts Young Keaton's wig, revealing the prank. All three are in on it now, and overpower Young Keaton until he's on the ground with Natalie sitting on top of him.

Finally, Young Keaton produces a ring—and Natalie proudly puts it on her finger.

Lights change. Music stops.

Scene 4

Projection:

HOLLYWOOD, 1933. BUSTER CONFRONTS HIS OLD BOSS AT MGM: LOUIS B. MAYER.

A drunk Buster stumbles into the office of Louis B. Mayer, an imposing man.

BUSTER. YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE!

MAYER. Hello, Buster.

BUSTER. I want out, asshole.

MAYER. I told them to keep you until you were off the bottle. How'd you manage—?

BUSTER. I should never have trusted Schenck. I was never meant to work on contract.

MAYER. Everyone's a contract player now, Keaton.

BUSTER. Not me. People love what I do. Let me do what I do.

MAYER. Our stars have to be reined in to maintain our bottom line. You're no different than anyone else.

BUSTER. I beg to differ, sir.

MAYER. Beg away. You're getting nowhere.

BUSTER. I'm not working like this. I have to have some kind of control over my pictures.

MAYER. That's it?

BUSTER. It'll be worth it. I'll make you a profit.

MAYER. What do you know about business Keaton? Your latest "magnum opus" was the most expensive piece of shit I've ever seen. One million dollars for what? Some picture about the Civil War that wasn't even funny?

BUSTER. It wasn't supposed to be, *asshole*.

MAYER. First, I ask that you stop calling me that. Second, funny is what you do. When I invested in you, I was buying your audience for MGM, and your audience wants funny. So third, *asshole*, I spent a great deal of money saving your life and reputation. And you're going to tell me what to do? Try again, and I'll boot you out of here so fast there won't be a person in this town that will dare speak your name. So tell me now why you're here. What is it you have to say?

BUSTER. Mr. Mayer. I just want to do my work my way.

MAYER. Do it your way and you're going to wind up a drunk, broken has-been like Fatty Arbuckle.

BUSTER. You studio people warp my character.

MAYER. Everyone thought I was crazy for letting you come back to MGM. Don't waste my investment.

BUSTER. Your investment was Buster Keaton. My brand of comedy. Not scripts and papers and some business-type telling me about polls and schedules.

MAYER. Listen to me because this is the last of it. You are NOT to do the writing anymore. You are NOT to direct, and at MGM our stars do NOT do their own stunts.

BUSTER. Let me pitch my latest idea—

MAYER. Don't tell me what your next movie is! Don't TELL ME how you—an ACTOR—are going to GUARANTEE ME A HIT AT THE BOX OFFICE! DON'T TELL ME HOW TO DO MY FUCK-ING JOB! I'LL tell YOU!

Buster retreats, defeated. Mayer softens.

I would very much like to get back to the business of being a fan of your work. Help me remember that man, Buster.

BUSTER. I'd like to.

A light fades in on Young Keaton in the corner. He's in a bathroom in the Italian villa, shaving with a straight razor.

MAYER. ... Why don't you pour yourself a scotch?

Buster looks at him in disbelief, then helps himself to a decanter on Mayer's desk.

Young Keaton goes for a flask. Young and old Keaton match sips as Young Keaton's scene brightens and Mayer's office fades.

Natalie enters behind Young Keaton, happily getting ready for a party.

NATALIE. Finish up, darling! Everyone will be here in half an hour! I'll need you to match your tie to this dress if you can. I'm thinking I might wear the patent leather heels. You know, the ones from New York? I'd love if you could take a look at them before you go down and attend to the valet. Also—that painting by the fireplace needs to be reset as well as the one by the breakfast nook. If you can handle that in the next ten minutes, I'll check in with the caterer and the nanny.

YOUNG KEATON. If I could make multiples of myself for you Natalie, I would.

NATALIE. It's not all that much, really.

Young Keaton's mind is somewhere else. He holds the razor parallel to the side of his face, thinking...

Did I tell you I invited Charlie?

YOUNG KEATON. What?

NATALIE. Chaplin. What are you doing?

YOUNG KEATON. I have it. I-

NATALIE. Oh not now.

YOUNG KEATON. If I somehow fashion a camera shutter. Several of them, thin as this blade. Cover the lens with all but one. Rewind the film. Shoot again with the next shutter up and so forth.

He's so excited he can't contain himself. He kisses Natalie.

(Kiss.) And again.

(Kiss.) And again... You'll have your multiples Natalie.

Young Keaton twirls Natalie around and dips her toward the mirror, which Buster sees from the other side. He reaches toward the memory, which seems frozen in time. Young Keaton notices.

Remember that night? I was beloved. We were alive. She was beautiful.

Young Keaton spins her out.

We all get one moment before we die to declare as "THE time of our life." Mine was 1921. Nobody could outmatch my timing. My technical genius. My physical comedy. Try.

Young Keaton begins a dance that Buster has a hard time keeping up with.

The Playhouse music starts in and Young Keaton's dream is realized right before him as multiple filmed Young Keatons dance in unison on the stage in various projections. Buster, who has sadly watched the whole thing, finally joins them a virtual dance-off—challenging his younger self. Old Buster becomes exhausted from the vigorous dancing and Young Keaton stares at his older self, embarrassed.

And there was 1923 when we filmed Sherlock Jr.

With the excitement, the flashes return...and Schenck enters the room.

FLASH FLASH FLASH.

I haven't told anyone yet, but I have an idea for a new kind of film. This will be my own story, my own continuity. I'm going to direct it, cut it, and title it. It's called: *The General*. And it will be my best film to date!

BUSTER. (*To Young Keaton.*) It's going to be a flop! You're going to be a laughing stock! Why didn't you just become an engineer like you wanted when you were a kid?

Young Keaton stops—doesn't even see his future self. A crew busily gathers as he takes command of the soundstage. Buster helplessly watches from the side.

YOUNG KEATON. (*To Schenck.*) Joe—I'm going to need a train. **SCHENCK.** A whole train?

YOUNG KEATON. Yes. Yes! It'll be the climax of the picture. One take. We'll dynamite an old bridge right before the train gets to it and the engine will just fall into the ravine in what your audiences will deem the most amazing movie stunt of all time! Can you imagine the sales Joe? People will be clamoring to see this thing!

SCHENCK. And you need a whole train.

YOUNG KEATON. Yes. By next week.

Young Keaton hops onto the film crane in delight. It raises as he imagines the scene.

SCHENCK. Do you have any idea what that is going to cost me? The ensemble builds the train with parts scattered about the soundstage as he describes it.

YOUNG KEATON. Action! The camera rises to reveal a picturesque scene in Georgia or Virginia or somewhere. Reveal: Me. Johnnie Gray. Confederate. I will single-handedly pursue the stolen train into enemy lines. Track shots follow the train as I jump from car to car. My leading lady at the helm. I'm a true American hero!

SCHENCK. Hmmm.

BUSTER. Oh, no.

YOUNG KEATON. It's time my projects had some weight to them don't you think? I will of course deliver the gags everyone expects. Here's one: We'll start with a tight shot on me. I'll sit on the crank that connects the two front wheels as the train gets

The play doesn't end here...

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