
LINDA C. EHRLICH

BUSTER KEATON TAKES A WALK

(In the Fundación Federico García Lorca in Madrid, there are copies of the poet's short play *El Paseo de Buster Keaton*, copied over neatly by hand, with ink splotches here and there. Two different versions, each one missing the first page.)¹

I arrived in Granada in the pouring rain. A torrential rain sliding along the tile streets. I thought of the "poet of a million tears" buried somewhere here in a Granada covered with rain. I came in search of Lorca's Buster Keaton.

All I knew from those few pages was that Lorca's Keaton loves objects more than people (he kills his four children right off the bat, believing they will grow again like flowers). Ah, his poor children! But they were not as charming as his one-dimensional bicycle "soaked in innocence," or as alluring as the crocodile shoes of the large North American woman (for surely she must be large).

I knew that Lorca's Keaton is transparent, like a child, and cruel like a child, with a face that rests between sleep and waking like a blank page, an onion with a straw hat. Lorca's Keaton raises one leg like a flamingo, and then the other, like an ostrich. Then, he balances in the air.

From a small, tranquil room in La Huerta de San Vicente, Lorca's poems reached out to the surrounding garden where ripe apricots fall, and then up to the caves of the gypsies in their crystal catacombs. Sacromonte, white-washed cave houses pressed one next to the other. A place of lost lovers and songs hidden under the low limestone ceilings. And then on to the towers of the Alhambra guarding a medieval dream.

Lorca's Keaton doesn't answer the foolish questions of the American woman with her celluloid eyes. Instead, he dreams of becoming a swan, but can't because he would have no place to put his hat. He shares the stage with an owl and a young woman with the head of a nightingale who faints upon hearing his name.

A balcony overlooking orange trees, soft flowers of the South. There Lorca wrote words of a dark love that claws at your heart. Lorca's piano sits in a corner of the drawing room, covered with a rainbow brocade. It's silent now too. But I heard it playing with notes of clear water as the moon wept triangular tears.

Lorca's life itself is a silent film; no recordings of his voice remain. And yet, in those seven minutes of amateur film of his troupe *La Barraca* touring provincial towns, the trace is still strong. The actors unload parts of the wooden stage from their truck and line them up against the church—a pile local boys can't resist climbing. Women dressed from head to toe in black sit for hours watching the show that is preparation for the show.

And yet that film is also silent—just a home movie. Lorca steps out on stage to announce the next play, a bit shyly, but obviously thrilled at the chance to address such a large, enthusiastic crowd.

Lorca. A lover of the sea but not a sailor. A lover of the dance, but not a dancer. Keaton, the man of silence, was forced to speak, and Lorca, a fountain of poetic eloquence, was forced into silence.

Because the poet was shot by the Fascists and buried in an unmarked grave, all of Spain has become his graveyard. Long after the name of the man who shot him is forgotten.

Some writers die young of despair and are wrapped in a light golden shadow, but Lorca's face is forever the color of the green leaves of the lemon tree. His eyes are the yearning of the almond tree. His hands are bleached white by the bright Andalusian sun. He is forever a branch in flower, forever the blood stain on the unmarked ground.

Lorca's Keaton rushes into the horizon on a bicycle as light as wings. Defying death, gambling with each stunt. In *Sherlock Jr.*,

Keaton falls asleep, and in his dreams he leaves the boredom of he projectionist's booth to enter into the glamour of the story on screen. One world splices smoothly into another, and another, but all in silence, in inspired linked movements through many spaces where a bored projectionist is ever the hero.

As silent as the tomb but always stirring up the energy around him, Keaton enters into motion reluctantly, like a ragamuffin doll without bones. Written on his face are a thousand faces. Buster Keaton's face is a clear spot in the turning world. Delicate as a cat's eyelid. And as precise. Like Bancusi's *Sleeping Head*, Buster Keaton's face in sleep absorbs all the light. It looks vaguely familiar and yet we cannot quite recall its name.

Two men completely present, two men completely hidden.

Keaton always played the outsider—the one too slight to be selected as a soldier, the dandy who didn't know how to survive at sea. Lorca aligned himself with people who had become outsiders in their own land. But Keaton adored machines—their clean lines, their intricate workings—while Lorca fell into a hypersensitive panic during his short stay in NYC where the machine age had gobbled up those who could tell us the difference between “a hot cup of tea and a cold cup of tea.” Lorca's gaze falls on every object and ignites it. Keaton's sets each one in motion.

A painting in La Huerta de San Vicente shows how the poet might have been—older, more tired, with a sadness after the years of Resistance and the years of forced silence. In the end Keaton's face sagged as well, his spirit sagged, but the limber man he carried within himself was ready to reappear with the right combination of wheels and falling objects.

Lorca—son of a wealthy family who wanted to be a travelling performer.
Keaton—son of travelling performers who became too wealthy too fast.

In Keaton's world, horses are transformed in the wink of an eye into Southern ladies. Surrealist poet of the cinema, like the Spanish poet who turned snails into great navigators.

Then Lorca's poems take flight beyond Granada, drawing down strange creatures from under the earth and from a voyage to the moon.

Lorca's Keaton passed me on the rainswept streets of Granada,
far from the tourist crowds.

¹ This short play was published in the journal *gallo* (no. 2, 1928), around the time the art of the silent film was dying.