

the biggest laugh in movie history

by Robert de Roos

THE LONGEST, LOUDEST LAUGH in movie history exploded in theaters all over the world in 1920. That colossal, eruptive, cumulative bellow of laughter closed a two-reel silent comedy called *Hard Luck*, starring that master of slapstick and deadpan pantomime, Buster Keaton. To-



day, 39 years later, people are still laughing.

Recently, I sat with Buster Keaton in the den of his farmhouse in California's San Fernando Valley and watched his famed never-crack-a-smile face break wide open as he relived that historic belly laugh. Here's the scene that provoked it.

The camera found Buster Keaton clad in a long bathing suit, wearing his hat with the crushed-down crown, at the Ritzmore Country Club. He was walking toward the prettiest girl in the world.

"The girl was Virginia Fox, who is now Mrs. Darryl Zanuck," Keaton recalls. "But in the picture, she jilts me for Bull Montana. When I saw her walk away with him, I was really down in the dumps because Bull Montana was, without a doubt, the homeliest man ever to appear before a motion picture camera."

His face an immobile mask of suffering, young Buster turned away from the faithless girl. He looked around at the swarm of beautiful, wealthy bathing beauties surrounding the swimming pool. On screen flashed the subtitle:

"There are other good fish in the sea!"

He began to strut a bit, flexing his muscles and bending to touch his toes. When he was sure he had the attention of every beauty, he swaggered to the diving platform and started to climb. Ten feet, 20, 30, 40 feet. At the highest level, he ventured out onto the diving board. He

did a deep-knee bend. Airily, he waved at the fashionable crowd.

He looked down. Far below was the pool, bordered by a broad brick walk. Beyond, on the lawn, lolled the beautiful girls. Every lustrous eye was upon him. The ladies gasped at his daring. Adjusting his hat, the intrepid lad backed up. Then, with a tremendous run and leap, he arched out in a perfect swan dive.

Immediately, it was apparent that he had leaped too powerfully. He soared clear over the pool and crashed head-first through the brick walk. There was a scream from the crowd. Everyone rushed toward the hole which now gaped in the walk. They peered into the crater, their faces mirroring horror, disbelief and fear. The pit was bottomless; Keaton had plunged completely out of sight. In this moment of wonder and shock, the scene gradually faded away. Then came the title:

"Years later."

The mists cleared and the camera again scanned the country club scene—a scene of desolation and decay. Gone were the fashionably dressed men and women. The pool was cracked and empty. Grass grew between the bricks of the walk. The lawn was brown and dead. Slowly, the camera moved toward the hole which had swallowed Keaton so long ago. Only the blackness of the pit remained. But hark! There was a stirring in the hole and out of the darkness emerged Buster Keaton.

His face, mournful as a basset-

hound's, turned toward the dilapidated diving platform. He gestured toward it and turned to someone behind him. "That's where I came from," he seemed to say. But it was not apparent to whom he was talking. Not apparent, that is, until he clambered out of the crater—followed by his Chinese wife and two Chinese children!

"It was such a ridiculous thing," Keaton grinned, "the audiences just sat and hollered. The more they thought about it, the funnier it got. They laughed so hard that when the next feature came on, they laughed all the way through the credits and halfway through the first reel. It wasn't only in this country—people reacted in the same manner throughout the world.

"You just couldn't time a laugh like that," Keaton continued. "But mind you, I'm not comparing it with a high and dizzy bit, where you're on the edge of a cliff and everyone thinks you're going to fall, or a scare sequence, where you have a ghost or a gorilla sneak up from behind. You've got to discount those because one or two women can set off the whole house with a scream."

This funniest of all gags—the brain storm of E. Francis Cline, an old Keystone comedy director—was extremely dangerous to bring off. A few years ago, when Paramount filmed *The Buster Keaton Story*, the world's champion gag was eliminated. It just seemed too tough and costly to duplicate. 🍌