



**SAN FRANCISCO**  
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**A DAY OF SILENTS**  
**FEBRUARY 2, 2025**  
**SFJAZZ CENTER**

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## A DAY OF SILENTS

- 12:00 PM THE NAVIGATOR**  
Music by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra
- 2:00 PM A STORY OF FLOATING WEEDS**  
Music by Guenter Buchwald and Mas Koga
- 4:30 PM CHILDREN OF DIVORCE**  
Music by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra
- 7:00 PM CHICAGO**  
Music by Guenter Buchwald conducting the SF Conservatory of Music with Mas Koga

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## MUSICIANS

### GUENTER BUCHWALD

Conductor, composer, pianist, violinist Guenter Buchwald is a pioneer of the renaissance in silent film music. Known for his virtuoso improvisation he has performed with a repertoire of more than three thousand titles and conducted orchestras worldwide.

### MAS KOGA

New York City-based multi-instrumentalist Mas Koga is a jazz musician whose performances are deeply informed by his multicultural background, having been raised in various cities around the world. Primarily a saxophonist, he also apprenticed under shakuhachi master artist Masayuki Koga and incorporates this traditional end-blown flute, as well as its hybrid sister, the shaku-lute, into his music.

### MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

A chamber ensemble that culls its scores from 1920s-era music libraries, Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra has been accompanying silent films since 1994, recording and touring with their signature vibrant, witty style on more than 144 titles. The orchestra is led by composer and pianist Rodney Sauer and includes Britt Swenson on violin, David Short on cello, Brian Collins on clarinet, and Dawn Kramer on trumpet.

### SF CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC ORCHESTRA

With roots in the Ada Clement Piano School, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music expanded to teach voice, theory, composition, and additional instruments when it officially incorporated in 1923. In the century since, the conservatory has become a vibrant world-class institution providing musicians a place to achieve their best possible selves.





# THE NAVIGATOR

## MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

**DIRECTED BY DONALD CRISP AND BUSTER KEATON, USA, 1924**

**CAST** Buster Keaton, Kathryn McGuire, Frederick Vroom, Clarence Burton, H.N. Clugston, and Noble Johnson

**PRODUCTION** Metro Pictures/Buster Keaton Productions **SOURCE** Museum of Modern Art

**B**y now, the world has come around: the decades and decades of Chaplin domination have finally receded, and we're all newly-born Keatonians. Why exactly this has happened is harder to parse—perhaps Buster Keaton appeals to a savvier, mass-media-educated culture, less naïve than the more guileless early-century global viewership Charles Chaplin enjoyed? If we do indeed dare to hazard an analysis, I'd guess it has a good deal to do with Keaton's signature restraint and heroic modesty, which was always in sharp contrast to Chaplin's pandering and self-aggrandizement. For one thing, Keaton's set-pieces are rarely cute and begging for our approval; they can be, in fact, breathtaking and ambitious beyond the demands of comedy. But Keaton also doesn't date as a personality; he's thoughtful, introverted, and unperturbable in a modern way that certainly suits cinematic close-ups, gazing out, not at us but into the whirlwind of circumstance, while Chaplin can seem to be very much a latent relic of the 19th century, down to his camera-winking as if from the edge of a vaudeville stage. The subject of at least three book-length biography-appreciations in the last two years alone (including a graphic novel), as his cult continues to expand and his films continue to get restored and screened, Keaton has become the silent-era G.O.A.T. for the 21st century, the timeless and heroic mystery man at the center of some of movies' most original acts of daring and grace.

There isn't, we can confidently say, such a thing as a Keaton detractor, or even a Keaton-neutral movie-lover. And so *The Navigator* (1924) is required viewing, being the fifth of his thirteen silent features and made the same year as the supreme meta-movie *Sherlock Jr.* (It was also the year he stopped making two-reelers altogether, focusing on features as both Chaplin and Harold Lloyd had begun to do the year before.) Codirected by Donald Crisp (who had tutored under Griffith and busily spent the silent era directing whenever he wasn't acting), *The Navigator* is a blissful dose of Keatonian intoxicant, with all of the visual precision, effortless rapport, and filmmaking savoir-faire that implies. In a Keaton film, you always have the sense that the camera is in the perfect spot, the action will unfold with diamond-cut rhythm, and the strain of making it all happen, even the impossible things, will not show.

The film began with the ship—a 500-foot cargo liner that Keaton's art director found in San Francisco, waiting to be stripped for scrap metal. (The boat had actually been used by the Army during World War I and had reportedly been once employed to deport exiled Communists to Russia, including Emma Goldman.) Titled, like *The General*, after the vessel's name, not a character, the movie seems to utilize every square inch of the ship for comedic purposes. The setup is tossed at us so briskly it's as if Keaton knew it hardly matters:



it's some wartime or another and there are spies afoot, conspiring to A) send a certain ship, meant for the opposing side, adrift, and B) kidnap its owner, a shipping magnate with a spoiled daughter, Betsy (Kathryn McGuire). It so happens that across the street from her lives wealthy bachelor Rollo Treadway (Keaton), an apparently clueless and hyper-privileged drip who, upon glimpsing a pair of happy newlyweds, decides he'll marry Betsy and go on a honeymoon, that day. She scoffs at him, of course, and so he decides to embark on his own anyway, and thanks to series of absurd mistakes, ends up on the empty boat, along with Betsy, right before it's cut loose.

In the morning, both of the ersatz stowaways, unaware of each other's presence, search what they think is a mysteriously empty and drifting ship, continually missing each other in a sequence brimming with Keaton's visual confidence—we

end up with the two characters scrambling over three decks and six staircases, all in one master shot. Once they find each other, no corner of the setting, or of the premise, goes unexplored, from the rich kids ineptly trying to cook breakfast for themselves, to sinking a lifeboat, to donning a deep-sea diving suit to repair a hull leak (and have a swordfight with a swordfish), to fending off the perhaps-now questionable onslaught of "cannibal" island natives, and so restlessly on. We even get, in the end, aboard a *deus ex machina* submarine, the first-ever rotating-set trick shot later employed in *Royal Wedding* (1951), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Inception* (2010), and, of course, the music video for Lionel Richie's "Dancing on the Ceiling" (1986).

It might sound like a lot, particularly for a film that's literally one minute short of an hour, but, as always, Keaton, often with little more than a shrug

## "HIS SOLEMN FACE CONCEALS THE WHIRRING GYROSCOPE OF INNER-DIRECTION."

or perhaps the unassuming deftness of a prime athlete, makes it flow like a daydream. (Again, compare the tense pathos and gag setup stress of Chaplin or Lloyd.) That may be the crucial consideration with Keaton: how his visual style—mise-en-scène plus montage, framing plus timing, always striving toward a full-frontal this-really-happened realism—dovetails with his famously reserved performative affect. The two currents rhyme and complement, demanding our attention; you could think of his sensibility as a martial-art-inflected decision to bend like a reed in the wind, forcing us to lean into him. His haunting lighthouse gaze is always searching for the solution to an absurd problem, inviting us into his crises. He is "a geometrician," critic Raymond Durnat wrote in the '60s, long before the Keaton zeitgeist fully took hold. "His solemn face conceals the whirring gyroscope of inner-direction."

*The Navigator* doesn't come with a lot of subtexts, unlike *Sherlock Jr.* Even its gentle class-conscious lampooning of the clueless rich, adjacent to Keaton's first feature *The Saphead* (1920), is neutered soon enough by Rollo's explosive resourcefulness and bravery (when Betsy can't climb up the forty-foot ladder on the ship's side, Rollo just launches from the railing into the sea to help her up). *Sherlock Jr.* did only moderately well at the box office, so perhaps Keaton aimed to keep his next scenario uncluttered with ambiguity. But that doesn't mean the film was a breeze; a forty-sailor crew was hired to run the ship, and the underwater scenes ended up being shot in Lake Tahoe, at outrageous

expense. Crisp, hired to handle the few standard dramatic scenes, became an amateur gagman annoyance, and Keaton literally lied to him about the shoot being complete just to get rid of him.

The film was, in any event, the hit Keaton needed, and it enabled him to push the limits of the system he was in—an independent producer distributed by United Artists (still co-owned by Chaplin)—with *The General* (1926) and *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928). Both of those films were spectacular, fabulously costly, and ultimately unsuccessful, which compelled United Artists to handcuff Keaton's creative profligacy, thereby leading him to sign on with MGM, which he famously wrote in his memoirs was the beginning of the end for his career.

Of course, the coming of sound was a factor, too. Keaton was one of the talkie revolution's most famous casualties. Much was gained, but a good deal was lost. With Keaton's eclipse we saw the last of the crazy eloquence and stoic fluency of the silent era's most sublime incarnation, the odd, decisive sloe-eyed figure who never seemed to grow dated, and who may, for generations hence, represent the entire bygone culture paradigm all by himself.

— MICHAEL ATKINSON





# A STORY OF FLOATING WEEDS

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY GUENTER BUCHWALD AND MAS KOGA

DIRECTED BY YASUJIRO OZU, JAPAN, 1934

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TITLE *Ukigusa monogatari* CAST Takeshi Sakamoto, Choko Iida, Koji Mitsui, Emiko Yagumo, Yoshiko Tsubouchi, and Tomio Aoki PRODUCTION Shochiku SOURCE Janus Films/The Criterion Collection

The films of Yasujiro Ozu are rooted in a particular time and place—his own. But they bring to mind core elements of the human condition. Jealousy and desire, sacrifice, the family bond: elements that persist across cultures and the march of years, through changes in technology and outlook. We connect with his characters because we're human and they are too, and some things are just eternal.

With this in mind, consider *A Story of Floating Weeds*.

It is one of Ozu's last silent films, emblematic enough of his mature style that he would remake it, in 1959, as the sound and color classic, *Floating Weeds*. But while it contains plenty of the timeless wisdom we look for when we rent or stream—or, ideally, buy a ticket to watch—an Ozu movie, one is tempted to say that *A Story of Floating Weeds* speaks more to our own day than any other. Because the hero of this picture, if he can be called that, is part of a brotherhood that includes men like Tony Soprano, Don Draper, and Walter White. The duplicitous icons of our age.

Takeshi Sakamoto plays Kihachi, the middle-aged leader of a traveling acting troupe. They're a band of greedy, venal, unkempt, but largely good-natured actors, providing us with a number of low-comic scenes, including a two-man horse costume and a kid with jock itch. Ozu keeps things

light, at least early on—consider one scene, where a hungry actor steals money from his own son's cat-shaped ceramic bank. The child confronts his father, humiliating him, and takes the money back. This is a disturbing set of events, if you think about it too long. But you will laugh.

Sakamoto was a busy actor in this period. He excelled at playing flustered men, even hapless ones, animated by a fierce and, at times, toxic pride. He brings this core contradiction to Kihachi. The troupe leader moans about aches and pains, but he has no intention of quitting his job. And though the other actors tease him, there is no doubt who's in charge. Kihachi is no matinee idol, but he has magnetism. A local woman wistfully recalls seeing him years ago, to her husband's annoyance. His girlfriend, Otaka, is an actress many years younger than he is. And then there's Otsune ...

The film opens with the troupe's arrival in a small town, where they've been popular for years, and it is Otsune, a local restaurant owner (played by Choko Iida) that Kihachi is most anxious to see. She receives him warmly, as though he's visiting his own home. Otsune's son Shinkichi comes and goes throughout the course of their conversation. Whenever he leaves the room, Kihachi asks after him. Otsune replies that he's well. "He'll be eligible for the draft next year," she adds. "He still thinks his father's dead?" Kihachi inquires. Otsune confirms that he does—is it now time for Kihachi

to admit to the boy that he is not some traveling uncle, but, in fact, his father? Kihachi declines. “He wouldn’t want a dad like me.”

Otsune ought to be bitter. Yet when Kihachi thoughtlessly remarks how hard it must have been to raise Shinkichi alone, she almost chirps her response: “I don’t mind hardship as long as it’s for his sake.” She seems so much older than Kihachi. Her face moves too fast from grin to frown to grin again. We sense she could be devastated at any moment.

Otsune is a far more sympathetic figure than Kihachi, but it is still his story we focus on. His capacity to grow up. A pattern begins to develop that modern viewers will find familiar: that of the manchild who reframes his own selfish choices as sacrifice. Tony Soprano, we remember, was

a mobster who enjoyed the spoils of his career. But he justified everything from theft to murder by pointing to the lifestyle it afforded his family. (His wife, who complained about his instability and infidelity, was always reminded how much she liked the money.) *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White transformed himself from a milquetoast science teacher into a ruthless cooker of meth, downplaying the thrills that his new life gave him with sober pronouncements about how his family would be comfortable after he was gone. Don Draper, like Kihachi, is no criminal, though both of them are in the business of creating fictions for public consumption. Draper also shares Kihachi’s—at times—painfully transactional approach to emotional relationships. His famous line—“that’s what the money is for”—is delivered in reply to a subordinate in desperate need of personal validation from her boss. Otsune, likewise, longs for more than

## “IT ISN’T GOOD TO BE ALONE ALL THE TIME.”

material support from Kihachi. But he sees himself as doing all he can for her—indeed, the absolute maximum he *should* do.

Kihachi believes he’s doing his loved ones a good turn by protecting their social standing. Telling Otsune that their son “wouldn’t want a dad like him” is his way of saying that acting is a low profession. Which might strike us as pitiable, were it not so convenient. Kihachi’s desire to spare Otsune and Shinkichi his shame also allows him to keep doing what he loves, drinking and sleeping with whomever he likes, in towns and cities far more fun than this one. It’s not just the mother and son who are punished by this dodge. “Don’t think you can just walk out on me,” Otsune warns him during a nasty fight. “My son belongs to a better world than yours,” he replies, as though it isn’t his world too. The truth is, Kihachi loves his job, and he’s not ashamed of being low class. If he were, he wouldn’t bring it up so often. He might even argue that he isn’t low class after all. Or that Shinkichi having a father in his life matters more than what that father does for a living. These are points of principle, and a case can be made for any of them. But making it too well would deny him the freedom he craves.

Like so many of our modern, popular narratives, *A Story of Floating Weeds* keeps us engaged despite a protagonist who’s indefensibly selfish. In this case, I think, the comedy helps. Kihachi is so easy to laugh at that we soften his actions, even when they are monstrous. “It isn’t good to be alone

all the time,” Otsune warns him, as though that had been his problem, rather than hers. The idea that he’ll finally settle down makes her buoyant, and we wish he didn’t have that much power. But since he does, we hope he’ll use it for good.

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I think Ozu fans and silent film fans are the same kind of person. Though Ozu’s most celebrated work comes after he switched to sound in 1936, even those movies emphasize the visual in ways that make him a kindred. What you see in his movies matter far more than what you hear, even though his actors talk a great deal—especially when they’re drunk. Often, their need to talk is more important than what they say. The director’s famed conservatism (he didn’t make a color film until 1958, seven years after Keisuke Kinoshita’s *Carmen Comes Home*) suggests a man who knew that great movies don’t need to meet current technological standards to make an impact. This is, surely, one of the great arguments for watching silent film today—not that we need convincing. Ozu, you suspect, never needed convincing either.

— CHRIS EDWARDS

This essay includes material from the author’s 2009 blog post on the film.







## FOUND IN TRANSLATION

### WHAT THE SUBTITLES LEAVE OUT

by Daisuke Miyao

#### KEIAN TAIHEIKI

A sign on the stage announces *Keian Taiheiki*, or *The Keian Uprising*, as Kihachi appears in the role of a ronin in revolt against the shogunate in the mid-1600s, but any Japanese audience in the 1930s would immediately recognize the setting. The hard-drinking Chuya Marubashi stumbles around outside Edo Castle's stone walls after a long night of revelry as a ruse to measure the depth of the moat for a future assault when he's beset by a barking dog. The scene ends before the arrival of Matsudaira Nobutsuna, a shogunate official who has grown suspicious of the armed, loitering drunkard. In the second act of what survives of this 1870 play, Marubashi reveals the rebel plans to his father-in-law who betrays him, sealing the hero's fate.

#### GOEMON

The 16th century outlaw akin to England's Robin Hood (only fiercer, and real), Goemon

Ishikawa is referenced more than once and his likeness adorns the wall of the acting troupe's dressing room. Some stories claim that in addition to stealing from the rich to give to the poor, Goemon tried and failed to assassinate a feudal lord after which he and his young son were sentenced to die by boiling cauldron, earning him immortality as the namesake goemonburo, a round tub heated by a wood fire. In saving the boy by holding him over his head, Goemon only boosted his folk hero status. He was a frequent character in kabuki theater, most famously the protagonist in *Sanmon Gosan no Kiri (The Golden Gate and the Paulownia Crest)*, first staged in 1778 in its complete iteration as a day-long performance of five acts.

#### BENKEI

Musashibo Benkei, depicted prominently on the dressing room walls in the headwear of the Yamabushi sect of ascetic monks, is central to

the oft-produced *Kanjincho* (1840) and one of kabuki's most beloved characters. Built like a grizzly bear and exceedingly loyal, Benkei was a warrior-monk in the 12th century who grew increasingly mythical down the ages. Benkei supposedly amassed a collection of 999 swords from samurai he'd vanquished but was defeated by the thousandth sword, wielded by Minamoto no Yoshitune, another historical figure turned kabuki favorite to whom Benkei then pledged his everlasting allegiance. Benkei later died, shot full of arrows while protecting his master.

#### KONJIKI YASHA

The cap worn by Shinkichi, Kihachi's son, comes from Koyo Ozaki's *Konjiki Yasha (The Golden Demon)*, which was serialized in a major Japanese newspaper from 1897 to 1902. Considered the author's masterpiece, it tells of the orphaned Kan'ichi Hazama who, after being jilted by the beautiful Miya Shigisawa, becomes a ruthless loan shark. The story's most famous scene depicts Kan'ichi kicking Miya for choosing a wealthy suitor over him. A cautionary tale of the emptiness that comes from valuing possessions over human connections, it has seen several film adaptations, one of which was produced at Ozu's home studio in 1932.

#### NOZAKI-MURA

*Nozaki-mura*, or *Nozaki Village*, is announced with an onstage banner after the scene in which Otake convinces Otoki she should flirt with Shinkichi. We don't see any of the play performed in the film, but the surviving parts of 1780's *Shinpan Utazaimon*, originally written for puppet theater, tell of Hisamatsu returning home to marry Omitsu, a girl from the country he has known all his life even as his heart belongs to Osome whom he has been secretly seeing in the city. When Osome

shows up as preparations are made for the wedding, Omitsu sees their love and makes the heroic sacrifice of becoming a nun.

#### MOMOTARO

Kihachi's wish to happen upon a lucky peach refers to the Japanese fairy tale that has been around in some form or another since the late 14th century. Momotaro was born to an elderly childless couple who become fertile after eating a peach found floating down a river on laundry day. The boy impresses from an early age when he's able to cut down a tree by himself using only a knife. As an adolescent, he bests a band of marauders from Onigashima (Island of Ogres) with the help of a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant. In the 19th century, Momotaro's origins were modified to make him more suitable as a children's story, which had him miraculously emerge from the found fruit. Three decades before the oblique reference in Ozu's film, Momotaro had been coopted as a national hero in Japan's war against Russia in Manchuria. He remains a ubiquitous cultural touchstone today.

#### DARUMA

In addition to lingering shots of various Shinto altars affixed near the ceilings in homes and businesses, Ozu stops twice to show us a daruma at Otsune's place. These hollow, rotund amulets are modeled on Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism in Japan, and are sold with their eyes unpainted. The daruma's recipient makes a wish, fills in one eye, and when the wish comes true, paints in the other eye. Like the maneki-neko, the beckoning cat figurine serving as Tomibo's coin bank in the film, a daruma is displayed to invite success. At New Year's some Shinto temples host bonfires for burning darumas that have fulfilled their purpose.





# CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA

DIRECTED BY FRANK LLOYD, USA, 1927

CAST Clara Bow, Esther Ralston, Gary Cooper, Einar Hanson, Norman Trevor, and Hedda Hopper

PRODUCTION Famous Players-Lasky Corp. SOURCE Flicker Alley

The ink had barely dried on Owen Johnson's novel *Children of Divorce* when Paramount bought the rights. Its transfer to film was fraught, and the script was tinkered over by no less than five writers. The resulting plot stayed faithful to the novel while transforming it into a quintessential silent screen melodrama. Its love triangle concerns the virtuous and wealthy Jean Waddington (Esther Ralston), her suitor Ted Larrabee (Gary Cooper), and Jean's fortune-hunting friend Kitty Flanders (Clara Bow). Jean loves Ted, but Kitty has her eyes on him as well. Years pass, hearts are broken and mended, and joy is mixed with tragedy. The pointed message that divorce can devastate children well into adulthood is forcefully made.

At the time of *Children of Divorce*, Clara Bow had already been dubbed the 'It' girl and was a primary exemplar of the Jazz Age flapper. She had the clout to influence the casting of the third lead, and she wanted Gary Cooper. He was little known but had met her playing small roles in *It* (1927) and *Wings* (1927), two films in which she had recently starred. Her lobbying had less to do with her belief in his fitness for the part and more to do with their hot romance. This, not surprisingly, displeased Bow's fiancé Victor Fleming.

Production began on November 26, 1926, with locations in Del Monte and Pasadena standing in for the French Riviera. Cooper had done mostly westerns before *Children of Divorce* and wasn't

prepared to play an idle rich man. By all reports his first days on the set were dire. He revealed a shocking ignorance of what was expected of him as a handsome film actor, claiming it was indecent to have a camera peering at him while he made love to a girl he'd just met.

Cooper's inexperience was agonizing to witness, according to Hedda Hopper, who had a supporting role as Kitty's many-times-married neglectful mother. (Hopper was an actress before she became the influential gossip columnist). "The set was my swank Park Avenue apartment," she recalled decades later. "The characters were super-sophisticated Manhattan youths merrily going to hell. The scene was a cocktail party and Gary's job, of all things, was to breeze into the room and make the rounds from one flapper to another, sipping champagne out of their glasses, cadging a nonchalant puff from their cigarettes, and tossing sophisticated wisecracks as he strolled .... He was a New York man about town, the script read, yet only a few months before he'd been riding the range in Montana."

When Cooper failed to adequately complete a stunt with a horse after twenty-three takes, director Frank Lloyd fired him, with Douglas Gilmore stepping in. But Gilmore lasted just one day before Cooper was rehired at Bow's urging. Was Gilmore that bad, or was there some inkling that the awkward, miscast neophyte Cooper had the makings



of a major star? Paramount head of production B.P. Schulberg told Ralston, "I know he can't act now, but I am sure he's got a face—something unusual. He just needs experience. If you'd just work with him, Esther, be nice to him, make a friend of him." Cooper improved with renewed faith in his abilities.

Ralston never forgot the shooting of Bow's death scene, writing in her 1985 autobiography: "I was kneeling beside her bed, prepared to cry buckets of tears in a big close-up. The prop man was dripping drops of glycerine on Clara's face to simulate the 'dew of death.' Clara, as usual, was chewing nosily and energetically on a big wad of chewing gum. When [director Lloyd] called, 'Action, camera,' Clara removed the gum from her mouth, tucked it behind her ear, and promptly ... died! This performance struck me as so funny that I had literally to pinch myself to start the flow of my mourning tears."

Schulberg was displeased with a rough edit of the film. He summoned Josef von Sternberg to have a look, initially engaging the director-screenwriter to rewrite the intertitles. Sternberg had scant directing experience in 1926, yet he felt the film needed a more thorough overhaul. He wrote in his autobiography: "This one was a sad affair, containing mock theatricals ... no skill of mine could restore life to the film by injecting text into the mouths of the players."

Sternberg recommended scenes be reshot and Schulberg agreed, giving him two days to prepare and three days to reshoot. Sets were either brought out of storage and reassembled or new scenes were filmed in a makeshift tent. Heavy rain

interfered as droplets seeped through the canvas and fell onto the scene below. Sternberg powered through the hasty assignment by imitating Lloyd's style while striving to improve the results. The busy stars adjusted their schedules to film at night. "The poor actors that I had mercilessly put through their new paces had to take a prolonged rest cure when I had finished with them," said Sternberg.

Somewhat miraculously, *Children of Divorce* wrapped on time on January 15, 1927. Neither Sternberg nor his cinematographer James Wong Howe received credit. But Schulberg faced an unusual dilemma in a film with two leading actresses. Ralston was being groomed for stardom, while *Children of Divorce* was a vehicle for the already very popular Bow. According to Ralston, Schulberg flipped a coin into the corner of his office to decide. He then picked it up and declared, "Well, well, I see it will be Clara Bow and Esther Ralston in *Children of Divorce*, supported by Gary Cooper!"

With various off-camera crises plaguing *Children of Divorce*, a failed product might be expected, but Schulberg's attentiveness paid off. The completed film, if not a masterpiece, has much to appreciate. The production values are excellent, with sets and lighting often evocative of German Expressionism. Editor E. Lloyd Sheldon keeps its seventy minutes well-paced, while Lloyd (or Sternberg?) enlivens it with a deft mix of close-ups, two-shots, and tracking shots that exemplify the best of late silent-era filmmaking.

**"CLARA REMOVED THE GUM FROM HER MOUTH, TUCKED IT BEHIND HER EAR, AND PROMPTLY ... DIED!"**

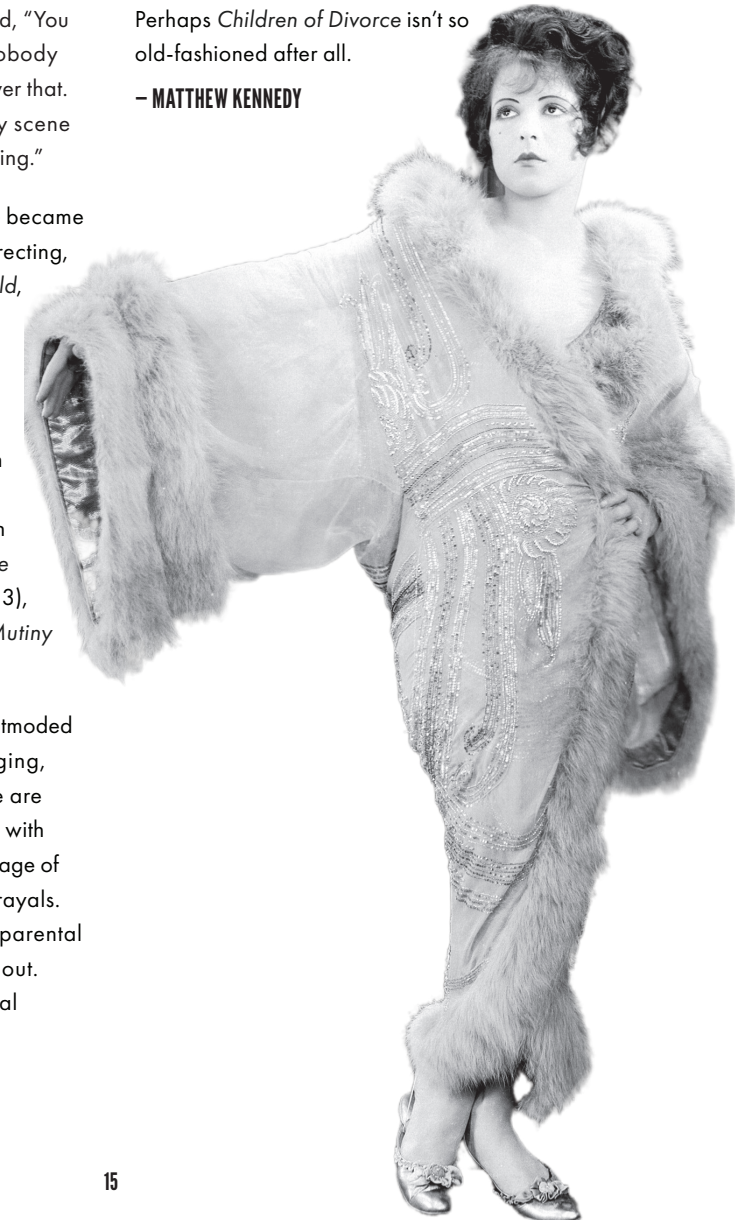
Cooper overcame his insecurities and turned in a credible performance, as did the beautiful Ralston. Bow faced the greatest acting challenge, as her effervescent screen presence was at odds with a morally repulsive character. Cooper, whose romance with Bow flickered and died soon after the film's completion, had nothing but praise for her performance. After completing *Children of Divorce*, his final film with her, Cooper said, "You couldn't steal scenes from Clara Bow. Nobody could. She doesn't 'mug' the camera. Never that. She just naturally walks away with every scene she's in. She's marvelous. She has everything."

Released on April 2, *Children of Divorce* became a solid box-office hit. For his phantom directing, Sternberg was rewarded with *Underworld*, a 1927 gangster drama that began his remarkable tenure at Paramount. A successful director by any measure up until this point, Lloyd had directed Norma Talmadge four times and founded his own production company where he made the massive 1924 hit *The Sea Hawk*. He won the Best Director Academy Award for *The Divine Lady* (1929) and *Cavalcade* (1933), but had his most enduring success with *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935).

*Children of Divorce* displays its share of outmoded acting styles, with plenty of hand-wringing, furrowed brows, and bulging eyes. There are multiple scenes of departure and reunion, with trembling emotions brought on by the passage of time, desires unmet, and devastating betrayals. But the corrosive effects of divorce and parental neglect remain in primary focus throughout. *Children of Divorce* contains the essential

ingredients common to so many of the dramas of marital catastrophe to come. The themes readily carry forward into weepies of the subsequent decades, all the way through to modern takes on the consequences of divorce like *Boyhood* (2014), *Carol* (2015), *Marriage Story* (2019), *The Lost Daughter* (2021), *American Fiction* (2023), and *The Holdovers* (2023), among so many more. Perhaps *Children of Divorce* isn't so old-fashioned after all.

— MATTHEW KENNEDY



# American Venus: Esther Ralston

by Lea Stans

Today, “American Venus” is connected with Louise Brooks, a supporting player in the 1926 comedy of the same name. But in its day the term was associated with the film’s top-billed star: Esther Ralston. A graceful, sunny blonde equally at home in romantic dramas or flapper flicks, Ralston was a major name in the 1920s and, at the top of her game, was commanding up to \$8,000 a week.

## A Vaudeville Childhood

Born Esther Louise Worth in 1902 in Bar Harbor, Maine, Ralston was in show business by the time she could crawl. Her father Harry was a fitness instructor who gave demonstrations of strength by holding baby Esther and her brothers in a sheet suspended by a rubber mouthpiece. The popularity of this amusing feat led Harry to create a family vaudeville act. After hearing one too many puns about “how much is Harry Worth,” he decided to adopt a more dignified surname and, as the “Ralstons,” they toured every U.S. venue that would have them: vaudeville theaters, schools, carnivals, even insane asylums.

## On Her Way at Last

Like many traveling performers looking for new opportunities, the Ralstons arrived in Hollywood in 1917, where they worked as extras at Universal. In her 1985 autobiography *Someday We’ll Laugh*, Ralston recalled her mesmerized young self watching Tod Browning directing a Priscilla Dean feature. Hoping for a startled reaction from Dean in a key shot, Browning discreetly asked the young Esther if she would scream when he touched her arm. The camera started cranking, and accordingly: “I let out a shriek that must have been heard for two blocks.” Ralston claimed this led to a bit part

in Browning’s next picture. “I was on my way at last—you might even say I screamed my way into the movies!”

## Hollywood Darling

Ralston’s first significant film role as Mary Jane Wilks in William Desmond Taylor’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1920) was followed by appearances in crime dramas and Lois Weber features. She was a regular in westerns opposite stars like Hoot Gibson and Tom Mix, learning horseback riding on the fly, and her willingness to do her own stunts sometimes came with a price. During an Art Acord film, much of her hair was singed off when a scene atop a burning oil well went awry. Her career got a major boost when she was cast as Mrs. Darling in Herbert Brenon’s 1924 hit *Peter Pan*. The role resulted in a long-term contract with Paramount and her reliability on set earned her the affectionate nickname, “One Take Ralston.”

## Becoming Venus

“Miss Ralston is my idea of the way a movie actress should be and look,” wrote Ethel Sands for *Picture-Play* magazine in 1925, “witty and intelligent, without any affectations, and smart and chic without being artificial.” With her graceful beauty, Ralston proved ideal for wholesome leads but she could also add a touch of spice to flapper characters. She acted in comedies opposite stars like Richard Dix and Ford Sterling and was Edward Everett Horton’s love interest in James Cruze’s lavishly-staged *Beggar on Horseback* (1925). When Florenz Ziegfeld announced the upcoming “bathing beauty” picture, *The American Venus*, Ralston was surprised to be handpicked for the lead. While it was an admittedly lightweight

film, *Photoplay* declared that Ralston made it watchable: “[She is] so good-looking and full of pep that the romance of the story romps along at a very gratifying rate.”

## A Personal Favorite

Her fame as America’s Venus led to more prestigious pictures, including Frank Lloyd’s *Children of Divorce* with Clara Bow and Gary Cooper. Ralston later cited James Cruze’s *Old Ironsides* made in 1926 as a personal favorite. Based on the true story of the battleship U.S.S. *Constitution*, the film was shot off Catalina Island on refitted—and rickety—vintage ships. Ralston was the lone woman among the cast and found the production a real adventure. An attempt to film night scenes of a pirate attack was interrupted by a storm, and the cast’s ramshackle ship nearly sank before the Coast Guard came to the rescue. The dangers paid off, however, and the film opened to rave reviews, with *Moving Picture World* singling out its naval battles as “staggering in their magnitude and impressiveness ... [they] mark a new record of screen achievement.

## A Lost Masterwork

Much of Ralston’s silent work has vanished, one of the greatest losses being Josef von Sternberg’s *The Case of Lena Smith* (1929), which survives only as a four-minute fragment. Sternberg had Ralston in mind when he crafted the grim story of a peasant girl who has an illegitimate child with a cadet officer, and the now twenty-seven-year-old proved she could handle tragedy with depth and sincerity, including a shocking prison scene that calls for Lena to be brutally whipped by the prison matron. Despite *Lena Smith*’s critical praise, the new craze for talkies overshadowed the film and Ralston’s bright star began to dim.



## A Long Final Act

Despite her extensive stage experience, Paramount refused to bump up Ralston’s contract price and she turned to freelancing in the early 1930s, acting in a couple British dramas opposite Conrad Veidt and Basil Rathbone. When she got seventh billing for Universal’s *San Francisco Docks* (1940), she retired from films at age thirty-eight. After her three marriages ended in divorce, Ralston found work in a department store to support herself and her three children. She never fully gave up the acting bug and regularly took roles in radio, television, and theater. To the end of her life, she expressed fondness for her memories of Hollywood, frequently watching classic films on cable to revisit “people I know.”





# CHICAGO

## MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY THE SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC ORCHESTRA WITH MAS KOGA CONDUCTED BY GUENTER BUCHWALD

**DIRECTED BY FRANK URSON, USA, 1927**

**CAST** Phyllis Haver, Victor Varconi, Robert Edeson, Warner Richmond, May Robson, Julia Faye, Virginia Bradford, and Eugene Pallette **PRODUCTION** De Mille Pictures Corp. **SOURCE** Flicker Alley

Nothing guarantees immortality for a murderer quite like getting away with it, as Lizzie Borden could have told you. And so could Beulah Annan, the woman who, in 1924, shot a lover foolish enough to announce he was leaving her. Despite, or perhaps because of sensational press coverage nationwide, Beulah walked out of a courtroom thirteen months later as a free woman. The story so captured her city and era that a play, a Broadway musical, and two movie versions bear only the name of Beulah's hometown as their title: *Chicago*.

Maurine Dallas Watkins, who covered both Beulah and a similar murderess for the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote the original 1926 play that held the seeds of all the versions to follow. Watkins, however, gave her anti-heroine a catchier name, Roxie Hart, and it stuck. In fact, there's a William Wellman-directed version from 1942 called *Roxie Hart*, with Ginger Rogers in the title role, and Ginger isn't bad, though it's an awfully vanilla Roxie. (Heck, she's not even a killer.)

By 1975 *Chicago* was exhumed as a Broadway production with music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, and book by Ebb and Bob Fosse, a musical that was revived to great acclaim in 1996. It's a pity that for the 2002 Oscar-winning film, director Rob Marshall slowed down the numbers

that needed to sizzle and cranked up the ones that needed some quiet. No matter—the 1996 revival is *still* on Broadway, after twenty-eight years.

All this is to say: If it's a movie version you want, in my opinion, your best bet by far is the 1927 silent *Chicago*. You'll see how delightful this little cyanide pellet of a story has always been.

This version unspools the simple tale of a simple woman with two simple needs: fortune and fame, in that order. Roxie Hart (Phyllis Haver) is married to Amos (Victor Varconi). Amos works at a news-and-candy stand. Amos is poor, honest, hardworking, and loves his wee girly with all his handsome, sappy heart. Roxie, naturally, is sick to death of him and has been carrying on with Casley (Eugene Pallette), who provides her with the niceties Amos can't afford.

In this silent movie Pallette is, of course, robbed of his famous voice, which sounded like a bullfrog trying to climb out of a tuba. But Pallette is young(ish), virile, much lighter of frame than in *My Man Godfrey* nine years later and, more to the point, his character Casley has money. Money that Casley has been spending on Roxie, and money that he has decided, it transpires, to spend on something else. What that something else might be, we are destined never to know, for when



Casley arrives at a tryst and rudely announces he's giving Roxie the air, she airs him in return—with a couple of bullet holes.

Amos, once over the shock of discovering Roxie isn't the true-blue sweetie he thought, attempts to take the rap for her, but he is foiled by a wily, ambitious assistant district attorney (Warner Richmond). Roxie lands in jail, where she encounters the Matron (May Robson) plus an assortment of other murderers, including Two-Gun Rosie (Viola Louie), the tragic Teresa (who isn't billed), and "The Real Lady," later called Velma Kelly in the musicals. The Real Lady is played by a skinny, menacing, and altogether fabulous Julia Faye; she was based on another true-crime character (Belva Gartner) and Faye bears a spooky resemblance

to Bebe Neuwirth, who played Velma in the 1996 Broadway revival of *Chicago*.

The rest of the film is taken up with watching Roxie scheme and feud from jail cell to courtroom, while Amos slides further into chump-dom as he attempts to rob William Flynn (Robert Edeson), the jailhouse lawyer who's promised to get Roxie an acquittal. The idea is to pay the crooked shyster with his own money, and it's a pretty good scheme—for someone capable of doing it competently, which, needless to say, Amos is not.

Perhaps you've noticed that so far there has been no discussion of the director. Therein lies a tale. The name on the credits is Frank Urson, but an essay included as part of the Flicker Alley DVD liner

## FRIZZY-HAIRED, SULKY-SEXY PHYLLIS HAVER...

notes shows that even at the time of the movie's release, producer Cecil B. DeMille was widely believed to have done most of the directing. Written by fastidious DeMille scholar Robert Birchard, the essay cannot definitively say who was at the helm for most of the shoot. It points out that DeMille took over direction after seven days of photography; then, in the next sentence, asserts: "Urson seems to have directed much of the film." However! There's more! In his biography of DeMille, *Empire of Dreams*, Scott Eyman says the producer wound up "stepping in and directing a fair amount of the picture himself."

All clear then? No? Then it's best to look at *Chicago* itself, which is studded with moments that fairly screech DeMille, such as the opium-den splendor of lawyer Flynn's lair. Who knew jailhouse work could exist alongside a highly developed taste for chinoiserie, down to an elegant marble inkwell where you can stash your cash? There's also the major role played by Roxie's garters, which have little tinkling bells attached to them—very much a DeMille-ish detail. And a catfight between Roxie and The Real Lady is shot in a lip-licking style any viewer of DeMille's epics will recognize.

Frizzy-haired, sulky-sexy Phyllis Haver was one of Mack Sennett's original Bathing Beauties at age sixteen, earning a salary of \$12 a week before eventually landing a role opposite Buster Keaton in his 1923 short *The Balloonatic*. Shortly after that, Haver moved on to DeMille's production company and performances in *What Price Glory?* (1926), *The Way of All Flesh* (1927—now lost, alas), and this picture, her biggest and best role.

"I wasn't much of an actress," she told Sennett in his memoirs, but Sennett begged to differ, and so will anyone who watches *Chicago*. Haver's Roxie is a study in comic venality, rejecting any flashes of remorse in the time it takes to powder her nose—in the mirror just shattered by a bullet she fired at her lover.

Roxie makes little pouty-faces at Amos and deploys baby-talk, helpfully spelled out in the intertitles. Judging by this movie, Booth Tarkington's 1916 novel *Seventeen*, as well as Boop-A-Doop singer Helen Kane and others, there was an epidemic of female baby-talk in the early 20th century, and it threatened the sanity of many who had to listen to it. Haver plays Roxie like a child in other ways, whether she's chewing energetically while Amos embraces her or giving him a kittenish look of apology when he accuses her of cheating.

Even the intertitles, not always a boon to a good silent movie, are funny—my favorite being May Robson's matron rebuking her charges with, "This is a decent jail, you can't act the way you do at home!" Despite some last-act concessions to conventional morality, *Chicago* is a rambunctiously cynical film. That's surely the reason why, almost a century later, you still can't keep Roxie down.

— FARRAN SMITH NEHME

Adapted from the author's essay originally published in 2016 on Self-Styled Siren.



# MODERN TIMES :: MODERN PROBLEMS

BY FRITZI KRAMER

## NEW FAMILY VALUES

The silent era was a time of the New Woman, suffragettes, flappers, and vampires. Alice Guy-Blaché envisions a world of sexually aggressive ladies-about-town openly harassing timid house-husbands in the satirical comedy *The Consequences of Feminism* (1906), but movies also tackled the new family values in a more serious manner.

In *Miss Lulu Bett* (1921), Lois Wilson portrays a double whammy of Victorian social holdovers: she is both a spinster and a poor relation. She jumps at an old-school solution: marry the first man to come along. When he confesses that he might have another wife somewhere, she must leave him and is worse off than before until she embraces modernity, gets a job, tells off her horrible family, and sets out in pursuit of life, liberty, and Milton Sills.

Silent films about divorce sometimes treat reconciliation as the ultimate desirable outcome. Louis Feuillade's *Custody of the Child* (1909) opens with a father winning guardianship of his son but after the little boy runs back to his mother, the family reunites. *Are Parents People?* (1925) follows a similar chain of events with a teenage Betty Bronson horrified by her parents' childish divorce antics, but they come together when the stropky teen goes missing.

A romantic reunion wasn't always the Hollywood ending, however. In *Dancing Mothers* (1926), Alice Joyce cannot take the ongoing selfishness

and manipulation of her husband and teenage daughter, Clara Bow. After time away, she returns to find that neither have changed. "You've given me my freedom. My duty now is to myself." No amount of *Parent Trap* escapades can bring her back. *Children of Divorce* (1927) sees a far darker vision for broken marriages, with death in the cards.

## FAME AND MISFORTUNE

Movies captured the turn of the 20th century with actualities and street scenes that featured bystanders staring into the camera and thus becoming part of the story. Charlie Chaplin introduces his Tramp in *The Kid Auto Races at Venice Beach* (1914) by aggressively trying to hijack—and make himself the star of—an actuality film being shot by an increasingly infuriated camera crew. An obsession with stardom backfires in *A Kiss from Mary Pickford* (1927), when the star's lipstick stain makes Igor Ilyinsky the object of fixation, forcing him and his girlfriend to fight off his fans as they invade his flat until he publicly scrubs off the kiss.

In the new media saturated world, celebrity, or at least infamy, was easier to achieve than ever. Phyllis Haver's Roxie Hart fills Eugene Palette full of lead then basks in full-page newspaper coverage of her crime and its sensational trial in 1927's sassy movie version of *Chicago*. A tabloid-glamorized murderess is made sympathetic in director Dorothy Davenport's tragedy *The Red Kimona* (1925), with Priscilla Bonner treated as a novelty by the smart set before being discarded for the news cycle's next darling.



*Unseen Forces* (1920) portrays a genuine clairvoyant who becomes a New York celebrity, her fame leading to an attempted debunking, which culminates in her summoning the dead child of her chief accuser. Celebrity quackery is a theme in the lost 1919 film *The Miracle Man*, in which a gang of crooks that includes Lon Chaney presumes that a faith healer is crooked, too, and hopes to use his celebrity for profit—but the tables turn when he proves to have real powers. The 1927 Mexican film *Iron Fist* offers a more pessimistic portrayal of celebrity do-gooders and features a charismatic antidrug crusader who happens to be the secret leader of a narcotics syndicate.

## THE SPEED OF LIFE

Flying machines of all kinds, from real airships to space vehicles, always filled the cinematic skies but heavier-than-air flight is science fiction in the earliest movies. In 1903, fantasy becomes reality, courtesy of the Wright Brothers, and the movies quickly follow them up, up, and away. Barney Oldfield's automobile vies with a train to save Mabel Normand in *Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life* (1913), but Normand had already taken the rescuing into her own hands in *A Dash Through the Clouds* (1912) with aerial pioneer Phil Parmelee,

accompanying the pilot for a series of flights and buzzing the villains into submission.

Even with the newfangled competition, trains share in this rage for action and speed in the silent era. There are epic crashes, such as an entire full-size passenger train derailing into a river and sinking in *The Juggernaut* (1915). Anthony Asquith modernizes rail travel in *Underground* (1928) with a bold, unchained camera, rapid editing, and a dose of violent sexual jealousy. In *The Arizona Express* (1924) villains pursue the heroine alternately by train, horse, and automobile, complete with crashes and cliffhangers.

Automobiles predated the movies by only a few years and they roar energetically across the silent screen. Cross-country comedies like *Rubber Tires* (1927) and *California Straight Ahead* (1925) showcase the era's new velocity, with road trips a chance for humor and romance, no conductor or porter needed. Racing pictures like *The Lucky Devil* (1925) and *Fast and Furious* (1927) deliver laughs and thrills, while the changes wrought by the shift from horse to car are mused over between contests in *The First Auto* (1927).

## Program Book Contributors

Former editor of the magazine of Film Arts Foundation, **SHARI KIZIRIAN** edits SFSFF's program books and slide shows.

**MICHAEL ATKINSON** writes about film for *The Village Voice*. His books include *Exile Cinema: Filmmakers at Work Beyond Hollywood* and the BFI monograph on *Blue Velvet*.

**CHRIS EDWARDS**, a science-fiction writer based in Toronto, ran the blog, *Silent Volume*, for eight years. He has also been a contributing writer for the Toronto Silent Film Festival.

**MATTHEW KENNEDY**, host and curator for the Mechanics Institute's CinemaLit Film Series, has authored several books on film, including *On Elizabeth Taylor: An Opinionated Guide*.

**FRITZI KRAMER** is the founder of *Movies Silently* online and has contributed essays to the National Film Registry, *Keaton Chronicle*, and Smithsonian websites.

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**DAISUKE MIYAO** is currently completing a new book on Yasujiro Ozu.

**FARRAN SMITH NEHME**'s writing has been published by *Sight and Sound*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the Criterion Collection, and her Substack, *Self-Styled Siren*.

**LEA STANS** writes the *Silent-ology* blog and has contributed to *Comique: The Classic Comedy Magazine*, as well as to the book, *Chase! A Tribute to the Keystone Cops*.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And thanks to all members at the Basic level

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**SPECIAL THANKS** Robert Azevedo, Robin McRoskey Azevedo, Robert Bambej, Brittney Beck, Brian Belovarac, Anika Brenner, Serge Bromberg, Maria Chiba, Brian Collette, Ryan Delgado, Louise Francis Forde, Pam Garcia, Blanca Garay, Beth Hanna, C. Husk, Dave Kehr, Teddy Kuhn, James Layton, Saskia Lee, Silas Lesnick, Noel Loder, Alma Macbride, Bill Martinez, Mike Mashon, Jeff Masino, Peter Moore, Sarah Moore, Egan O'Rourke, Joseph Shepherd, Abbey Springer, Nate Sutton, Katie Trainor, Mitch Vaughn

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