I have sometimes had the feeling that I was working on this book in secret, the private hobby of a decade’s worth of summers. But I’ll chalk that delusion up to the solitude of writing. I won’t say that it took a village exactly, but it did take something like a campus or two.

The book has its genesis in 2006, in the chance confluence between my purchase of a DVD box set of Buster Keaton’s Columbia shorts and Charles Wolfe’s invitation to contribute an essay on Keaton to a special issue of New Review of Film and Television Studies (vol. 5, no. 3). I don’t think he knows it, but it was Chuck who set me on the path that has eventually led here. Along the way, I have been supported by my colleagues and supervisors at the University of Toronto (where this project was started) and Columbia University (where it ended). I am particularly grateful to Elspeth Brown, Charlie Keil, and Janet Paterson at Toronto, and Nico Baumbach, Carol Becker, Jane Gaines, James Schamus, and Jana Wright at Columbia. Nic Sammond has been a patient auditor of my unformed ideas and gets his own sentence. Thanks, too, to Mark Lynn Anderson, Paul Babiak, Richard W. Bann, Hilde D’haeyere, Kathy Fuller-Seeley, Eric Hoyt, Steven Jacobs, Frank Kelleter, Richard Koszarski, Judith Yaross Lee, Jeff Menne, Ross Melnick, Tom Paulus, Joanna Rapf, and Yair Solan for helping me improve and develop my arguments.

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My research and writing were happily delayed in 2012 by the birth of Samantha and Sullivan. That this occurred two months after my relocation to New York created a special kind of chaos out of which I now find myself, four years later, with a rather splendid family. My partner, Inie Park, gave up several years of weekends to let me hole up in my office while a real-life slapstick onslaught was happening just outside the office door. The twins gave me an invaluable education in humor, even though they’d choose *Dinosaur Train* over Laurel and Hardy every time. If there is something humming in the background of the following pages, it is my attempt to see my childhood self in you, kids,
and to find my present self in my parents, Marilyn and Peter King, to whom this book is lovingly dedicated. The reasons will crop up occasionally in what follows.

* 

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**NOTE ON DATES**

In what follows I cite the month and year of release of all short subjects, but only the years for features. In instances when an exact release date is impossible to ascertain—as, for instance, for many early Vitaphone shorts—I give a best guess as to the rough time frame when the film was first placed in distribution.