JOHN BARRYMORE

"SVENGALI" 
"THE GREAT MAN VOTES"

In our last Barrymore program a year or two ago, we devoted a great deal of space to discussing Barrymore's performances through the years, and to considering the superiority of his performances - and his style of performance from other actors - to that of the so-called "Method" and Actor's School players. There is no need to repeat the discussion here; indeed it would be far too depressing. In any event, in the face of such recent affronts as Rod Steiger in "Al Capone", the genius of Barrymore - and the pleasure of watching an ACTOR at work - speak for themselves. Our two films today represent two extremes from the thirties -- one, from 1931, when Barrymore was still at a relative peak, the other, from 1939 the last landmark of a decline before it became absolute. Perhaps, in terms of chronological accuracy, we should show the films in the order in which they were made; but it seems kinder to Barrymore, and more stimulating generally, to reverse the order - and this is how we shall show them.

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"The Great Man Votes" was one of the most successful sleepers of its year, 1939. Sleepers are sometimes solely the creation of the critics, who, unused to seeing "B" pictures, rhapsodise when they accidentally happen to see a good one. In this fashion, the very routine "The Narrow Margin" was boosted to an undeserved success a few years back. But once in a while the critics do strike it lucky -- they rightly and deservedly applauded "Cat People", "The Window" (if such an elaborate little picture can really be termed a "B") -- and they were similarly impressed by "The Great Man Votes".

One of Garson Kanin's earlier films, it's a charming, whimsical and often quite biting political satire, actually resembling the films of Preston Sturges far more than the later work of Kanin. In terms of production value, the very most is extracted from a limited budget - something probably more to the credit of Cliff Reid than Kanin. (Reid, an interesting and little known film-maker, produced a number of darned good films at Rko, and was also associated with John Ford on a number of ventures - ranging from "The Informer" to "They Were Expendable").

But for all the film's neat writing and direction, it is the Barrymore performance that makes it live. Barrymore - not even given star billing, incidentally - was quite obviously at the beginning of the end here. One can see that he is reading most of his lines from boards, and occasionally erratic editing and non-matching scenes suggests that much of his performance had to be pieced together on a splicer. But even a Barrymore on the decline is still more than a match for any other actor in Hollywood: most of his role calls for flamboyant theatrics a la "20th Century", and he launches into his tirades with magnificent gusto. But in the scenes of tenderness and pathos, and in the climactic speech, that love of his profession makes itself manifest - it's a tired and ageing Barrymore reciting the lines, a Barrymore
in whom the spark has begun to die, but still a Barrymore too devoted to the theatre to give anything but his best -- even though that best might be of a lesser standard than in previous years. This knowledge perhaps gives an added, moving poignancy to his performance -- a poignancy denied to some of the more letter-perfect performances of happier times. "The Great Man Votes" in any event, represents Barrymore's last important screen acting. Thereafter, forced to lampoon himself in insulting roles -- roles that he accepted only in order to earn money to pay off debts -- the descending spiral of Barrymore's career flattened out into an inglorious fadeout with a cheap Kay Kyser musical.

* Intermission *

"SVENGALI" (Warner Brothers-First National, 1931) Directed by Archie Mayo; from the novel by George du Maurier; screenplay by J. Grubb Alexander; settings by Anton Grot; camera: Barney McGill; special effects by Fred Jackman; edited by William Holmes; 8 reels.

Starring JOHN BARRYMORE with Marion Marsh, Luis Alberni, Lumsden Hare, Bramwell Fletcher, Donald Crisp, Paul Porcasi, Carmel Myers.

To say that this "Svengali" is by far the best screen adaptation of DuMaurier's "Trilby" is perhaps, of itself, small tribute. The earlier Maurice Tourneur version was a strange disappointment; the last (British) version with Hildegarde Knaff a ponderous bore. However, it certainly is the best -- and the most faithful to the original as well, particularly insofar as the ending is concerned. And it could hardly have been made at a more propitious time. Barrymore, with his wonderful voice, was one of the most successful of the silent stars who had made the transference to sound -- and was at just the right age to be a perfect Svengali. Too, the film was made at a time when German and Gothic influence was particularly strong in Hollywood. The horror cycle was well under way, and such films as "Dracula" and "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (which preceded, and followed "Svengali", respectively) drew heavily on the pictorial style of the German silents. At another time, and with another star, "Svengali" might have been less macabre -- but Barrymore's own love of the bizarre ensured that the moments of terror and horror were played -- beautifully -- for all they were worth. "Svengali" is a magnificent pictorial treat - full of long travel shots, a marvellous trick pull-back from a window and across the roofs of Paris, and some of the finest sets ever created by Warner's talented Anton Grot. Some of his sets are on the screen for but a few seconds -- but what opulent, and atmospheric sets they are!

Barrymore himself is obviously having the time of his life - it's a great bravura performance, with the same combination of malicious wit, charm and unadulterated evil that he gave to his Mr. Hyde eleven years earlier. But, again, he is too much of a respecter of the theatre to treat lightly the scenes that require serious acting; how effortlessly, with a shrug and a few words, he can make us pity a man that seconds before we had been despising! Nobody else has a ghost of a chance - least of all Marion Marsh, rather too perfectly type-cast as Trilby, though Luis Alberni - a faithful friend here, as in "The Great Man Votes", has some moments, and Carmel Myers has a chance to virtually repeat her role from an earlier Barrymore, "Beau Brummel".

Today "Svengali" is such a completely cinematic piece of work -- especially in contrast to most of the stage-bound talkies of 1931 that it is difficult to realise why it was so poorly reviewed at the time. Evidently it must have been a huge popular success however -- certainly enough of a success to warrant a careful rehash the following year in "The Mad Genius" (a very inferior picture by the way, despite another great Barrymore performance, and a finely bizarre climax).
Archie Mayo, who directed "Svengali", is a most curiously inconsistent director. Some of his early silents, like "Christine of the Big Top", are incredibly bad, giving no indication of the talent that was there, somewhere. His talkies ranged between the pretentions of "The Petrified Forest" and the conventions of "The Great American Broadcast". He made one of the worst adventure epics of all time - "The Adventures of Marco Polo" - and one of the best of the early gangster films, "Doorway to Hell". His last filmic venture was a cheap quickie for Allied Artists last year, "The Beast of Budapest". "Svengali" quite certainly represents one of Mayo's best pictures, even though it is impossible to decide whether some of the best touches (the neat little scene with the milestone; the wickedly suggestive fadeout as Svengali is listing Trilby's past amours) should be attributed to him or the scriptwriter.

To date, "Svengali" has not appeared on television here in the East. When it does, one can expect a very thorough hatchet job from a censorship standpoint, as most of the sexual implications are too open to get past even the reception-desks of Madison Avenue, let alone the policy-making inner sanctums! Our print, happily, is quite flawless and complete.

** Program Notes & Enquiries: 
William K. Everson, Hotel Bradford, 210 W. 70th Street, New York City 23, NY
Committee:
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Forthcoming programs:

Tuesday next, June 23:

COMEDY SHOW: Laurel & Hardy in DO DETECTIVES THINK?; Charlie Chase in LIMOUSINE LOVE and A TREAT FOR THE BOYS; Charlie Murray in THE LIFE OF REILLY; Gaylord Lloyd in TROLLEY TROUBLES; Harold Lloyd in FROM HAND TO MOUTH; CAPTAIN KIDD'S KITTENS; etc.

Following Tuesday, June 30th:

"THE DROP KICK" (dir: Millard Webb, 1927) with Richard Barthelmess, Dorothy Revier, Hedda Hopper
"CONCEIT" (Selznick, 1921) with William B. Davidson, Hedda Hopper, Maurice Costello, Louis Wolheim.