THE BLACK PIRATE (UA-Fairbanks, 1926) Directed by Albert S. Parker; story by Elton Thomas (Fairbanks); photographed by Henry Sharp; Starring Douglas Fairbanks, with Billie Dove, Sam de Grasse, Anders Randolf, Donald Crisp, Charlie Stevens. 3 reel condensation.

Released in the same year as "The Sea Beast" (which however was produced in 1925), "The Black Pirate" is somewhat less serious, but equally enjoyable, than its predecessor. After four elaborate but somewhat ponderous "prestige" spectacles from Fairbanks, it marked a welcome return to the livelier style of his earlier films. A schoolboy romp which never manages to take itself very seriously, it still packs in enough action and production values to put most other pirate epics to shame. This version, a three-reel condensation, is of course missing the lovely two-color Technicolor of the original, and the flavorsome titles by which Doug made it plain that the whole thing was quite tongue in cheek, but it does retain all of the duelling and acrobatic action. And what matter if Doug does use a double in the sail acrobatics (probably Richard Falmadge) — he showed us in earlier days that he could do it if he chose; and in the duelling scene he displays a grace that none could duplicate.

"CAPTAIN HAREBLOWER" (Warners, 1928) Directed by I. Freeling; One reel; Technicolor.

I don't think we need apologize too much for straying from 1926 to include this lively and savage cartoon which has a great deal in common with "The Black Pirate" and offers Huga Bunny and Yosemite Sam substituting for Doug and Sam de Grasse.

Intermission

"THE SEA BEAST" (Warners, 1926) Directed by Millard Webb; scenario by Bess Meredith from the book by Herman Melville; photographed by Byron Haskin; 10 reels.

Starring JOHN BARRYMORE with Dolores Costello, George O'Hara, So-Uln, Vadia Urankoff, James C. Barrow.

In 1926, at least one critic enthused that this was "by far the most pretentious of all the Warner Brothers Screen Classics". (Their "Screen Classics" were invariably adaptations of noted books, although some odd Tin Tin or two crept into the series too). Odd how certain words of the English language change in their meaning; in current vernacular, this is far from a pretentious film, as opposed to Huston's "Moby Dick" which was thoroughly pretentious, and a far duller movie than this one.

Apart from the basic idea, little of Melville remains in this first "Moby Dick". There are new characters, new motivations, new action; not even the titles seem to derive from Melville, with the possible exception of a single-frame flash-title (unreadable of course!) which sounds as though it was probably lifted from the book. The overall impression is far more one of Jack London, and while this may be reprehensible in a literary sense, it pays off handsomely in good old showmanship and movie hok. Apart from Warners' decision to turn a "difficult" book into a commercial film, and a Barrymore vehicle, there are obvious signs that, as usual, Barrymore did a little reshaping on his own to fit in his beloved mad scenes. As the aged Ahab of the second half of the film, he has a grand time, literally dragging out his old leg, Hyda makeup and playing it for straight horror at times. But it would be unfair to dismiss his performance as merely one that is great fun to watch. The role gives him wonderful opportunities to both ham — and to underplay with that exquisite sensitivity which he could muster better than any other player. He brings tremendous touching poignancy to the tragic scenes; fire and passion to the love scenes with beautiful Dolores Costello (whom he subsequently married) and tremendous bravura to his mad scenes. Every gesture is just right -- the cry of anger at the seagull that has befouled his hat, the mocking gesture of thanks to God when his old enemy is delivered into his hands, the very real agony in his eyes in the crude "operation" scene, it remains one of his best silent screen performances. It is also quite certainly the best film of director Millard Webb, who was a routine film-maker at best. Certainly far more could have been done, in a directorial sense, with this film; but Barrymore so dominates the film that its other weaknesses are not always apparent. However, despite thoroughly enthusiastic reviews (rather overshadowed by those for "Zen Fury", offered to the critics the same week) criticisms were made of the occasional obviousness of some of the studio gags. Actually, only the house by the sea, with its shimmering backdrop, is genuinely funny — and since this set was only used for a mid scene, with a time that probably looked far more effective and convincing than it
Crédit was also made of the use of miniatures — but actually they are good ones, and used sparingly. No shot involving miniatures is held for more than a few frames of establishing footage, and then there's a cut to close-up or other non-miniature scenes. One critic commented that the scenes of Barrymore having a hot iron applied to his leg, and later burning off a tattoo from his arm were "unnecessarily distasteful and likely to offend women." Barrymore adored such scenes of course, but grim as they are (and it is his acting that makes them so, for there is little physical detail) they are far less distasteful than similar scenes today, where the cameras glow lovingly and at length on all the blood and gore they can find.

Barrymore's tremendous performance and the well-staged action sequences dominate of course, but the film has much else to offer too. If Dolores Costello has little to do but be serene and lovely, that, after all, is enough in itself. So-O-IN has some interesting scenes, and the scene of Ahab's usual yet tender farewell to the huge Negro who adores him is quite beautifully done.

Warners, and Barrymore, remake the film as a talkie in 1930. It was an interesting film with some improvements on the original — and some weaker aspects too. The special effects were better, and more was seen of an improved whale — although the climactic chase included a lot of footage taken from the earlier film. If Barrymore's makeup was more "normal" and less bizarre, sound allowed him to compensate by roaring out Ahab's lines in grand style. In one great "curtain" line, he teils his first mate — "Get the crew — scour the town — look in all the brothels — we sail on the tide — after Koby Dick!" Dialogue however, didn't serve the heroine so well — Joan Bennett's petulant "Oh, Ahab!" was a poor substitute for a glimpse of Dolores Costello's eyes saying the same thing. And, as was the case in "The Unholy Three", the plot was watered down a bit in its details. In the original, Ahab calmly and deliberately tosses his evil brother overboard to drown. In the remake, Lloyd Hughes was a weaker and less despicable character; in the final set-to, he is broken and he is left a cripple instead. However, "Koby Dick" — whether it be out of Ben Morgan, or Herman Melville's standar or falls by its Ahab. Since Gregory Peck was so monumentally inept in the Huston version, any further discussion of the "best" version is pointless. With Barrymore at the helm, the 1926 version wins hands down.

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Wm. K. Everson

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Coming programs:

Friday next — March 9th — FILM GROUP meets at Adelphi Hall at 7.00 p.m.
Program not yet set.

Huff Society:

March 13th: Abel Gance's J'ACCUSE (1918); Josef von Sternberg's THE SCARLET
EXPRESS (1924) with Marlene Dietrich, John Lodge, Louise Dresser.

March 20th: Henry Hathaway's PET AR IBBETSON (1925) with Gary Cooper, Ann
Harding.

PLEASE NOTE

The print of the 1935 THE GLASS KEY has become temporarily
unavailable, We're not sure yet what we'll be playing with
PETE IBBETSON, but it will probably be either Lubitsch's
DESIGN FOR LIVING, or INNOCENTS IN PARIS ('29) with Maurice
Chevalier. Final choice will be announced on the March 13th
program notes; or you can check with me by dropping me a
postcard (Schwab House, 11 Riverside Drive, NYC 25) around
March 10th.

March 27th: THE ALL-AMERICAN BOYS; Douglas Fairbanks in HIS PICTURE IN THE
PAPERS (1916); JOHNNIE WALKER in SPIRIT OF THE USA (1924);
Wallace Reid in "His Mother's Influence" (1914); Charles Ray
in "In The Tennessee Hills" (Ince, 1915)

Coming: A Charles Ray program, including THE FINCH HITTER and JUST MY LUCK,
one of his few starring sound features, with excerpts from other
silent films ranging from Ince to GARDEN OF GATHER AND VARIETY,
The Lubitsch-Gukor ONE HOUR WITH YOUR ISLAND OF LOST SOULS (Laughton.
Arden, Lugosi); ...TONY OF ANNIE (Mac West); BURN "EM UP BARNES (1921)
with Johnny Hines; And more Manoulians (we're promised four good
early ones).