Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

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SNEAK PREVIEW TONIGHT! After our regular show, at approx. 9:45, a special showing of a rarely seen feature from the early 30s.

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JOHN BARRYMORE: 1917 and 1937

Two films from near the beginning, and the end, of his career.

"RAFFLES" (Hydean Producing Company, 1917); directed by George Irving, Scenarist by Anthony E. Kelly, based on the stories by E.W. Hornung and the play by Eugene Presbrey. 75 mins.

Starring John Barrymore, with Frank Morgan, Kathryn Adams, Mathilda Brundage, Evelyn Brent, H. Cooper Cliff, Christine Mayo, Dudley S. Hill, Mike Donlin, Frederick Perry.

"Raffles" has been brought to the screen several times, the 1930 version with Ronald Colman perhaps being the best. Next to Colman's film however, this Barrymore version is quite easily the leader of the runners-up, being far superior to the Universal entry with House Peters (an unusually dull version, shown by this society many years ago) and the talkies with Georges Barras and David Niven. Vitagraph also made a short "Raffles" around 1904, with G. M. Anderson somewhere involved, and a little later the amateur cracksman was curiously supplanted Moriarty as the No. 1 menace in some Scandinavian Sherlock Holmes adventures. Most versions of the story have stuck pretty closely to the original story-line, which is a pretty tame one, and so the entertainment stands or falls by the personality of the star involved.

Barrymore of course is perfectly cast as the dashing amateur cracksman, and this is the earliest of his films available outside of Eastman House. That illustrious archive has found two of his films from 1914 or 15. Neither of them are as good as "Raffles" as a movie, and in both Barrymore seems to hover uncertainly between his own style and the broader comedy manner of Fairbanks, who was not then in films but who was a contemporary of Barrymore's on the stage. Even without having seen more of his pre-1920 films, it seems safe to assume that "Raffles" is one of the most enjoyable, and certainly one of those most suited to his talents. In any event, it's good to see such a young, debonair, marvellously handsome Barrymore again. And it's amusing too to note that even then, and in cinematic trifles, he was playing to the hilt and using all the mannerisms that he was later to exploit more fully in running the gamut from Jekyll & Hyde and Beau Brummel to Don Juan. All of his little tricks and delightful gestures are here - the jaunty walk, the whimsical stare with the head cocked at an angle, the hand on the forehead, and those sudden switches from bland complacency to insane rages -- hardly appropriate in "Raffles", but enjoyably present nonetheless. Barrymore is a sheer pleasure to watch and none of the other, more stagey, players have much of a chance, though there's an enforced naturalness to Frank Morgan's performance (which came through too in "Hallelujah I'm a Bum") which reminds us again what a pity it was that the talkies typed him into playing loud buffoons.

Barrymore's breezy playing helps the film from becoming too stagey, since most of the action does take place indoors. But the sets and decor are quite elegant, the pacing fast, and the direction not uncinematic. Some shots take one rather aback with their ingenuity, as for example the intriguing one of Barrymore and a former victim coming face to face from opposite sides of an empty frame. The camerawork is accomplished, and helps to maintain a convincing illusion that it is all taking place in England. A cricket match is particularly convincing, as are most of the other exteriors. At one point, the Players' Club in New York sees service as Raffles' London apartment. Only once
is realism shattered -- when we look from the window of Raffles' London apartment, and find that we're on East 41st Street, with the NY Public Library well in evidence in the background!

We last ran "Raffles" some five or six years ago. Our print then was rather tattered, incomplete, and afflicted with French titles. Tonight's print is in excellent condition, with many scenes missing from the earlier one, and all the original American titles.

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**INTERMISSION**

"BULLDOG DRUMMOND COMES BACK" (Paramount, 1937) Directed by Louis King
Screenplay by Edward T. Lowe, from H. J. McNeile's "The Female of the Species"; art directors, Hans Dooler and Franz Bachelin; musical director, Boris Morros; photographed by William C. Mellor; edited by James Smith; 64 minutes.


It comes as a bit of a shock, after seeing the youthful Barrymore as Raffles, to jump 20 years and find him near the end of his career with the ravages of age -- at colorful living -- showing quite clearly. Yet withal, Barrymore still cuts a distinguished figure when he is on screen, one watches no-one else; and the old sparkle and devilish wit leap out of those tired eyes whenever a good line or an interesting scene come along. It's really more of a shock to realise, not so much that Barrymore was getting old, since that must come to us all, but that he was appearing in this "B" film, without even star billing, only a few years after such great performances in films like "Grand Hotel", "Svengali" and "A Bill of Divorcement". In a boxoffice sense (and in that sense only) it is as though four years from today Elizabeth Taylor and Cary Grant were to turn up in a half-hour "Death Valley Days" TV western. Seldom has any truly great star fallen so spectacularly as did Barrymore. But his financial troubles were well known, and he was making a gallant effort to pay off debts in any way he could. Fortunately this wasn't exactly the end of the trail for him; a comeback of sorts did lie ahead, with good roles in "True Confession", "World Premiere", "The Great Profile" and especially "The Great Man Votes".

But "Bulldog Drummond Comes Back" is sad only when viewed in the light of Barrymore's immense talents and prior achievements; taken on its own, it is tremendous fun, and Barrymore makes the utmost of a role that seems to have been literally tailored for him. The first of Paramount's "B" Drummond films had appeared earlier in the year, with Ray Milland as Drummond, and Sir Guy Standing as Neilsen. When Standing died suddenly, Barrymore took over as Neilsen - with a quite different, more colorful, and decidedly larger than life approach. His Neilsen got out into the field and did things, and like his Sherlock Holmes of 1920, operated with the aid of a number of bizarre and quite outlandish disguises. Authentic Scotland Yarders must have shuddered at this mania who sought anonymity in disguises that could only draw attention (not to mention revulsion!), but Barrymore obviously was having the time of his life, and the picture benefited immeasurably thereby.

By 1937, the "series" detective films had become rather standardised. Apart from the occasional "Thin Man" special, the "B"s were monopolising the mystery field. Perry Mason came along occasionally, but the emphasis was on action rather than detection. The Charlie Chans were growing commonplace and repetitious, and were losing their thunder to the Mr. Moto films, some of the most ambitious "B" thrillers ever made, with production values that put many of today's "specials" to shame. Paramount's Drummond films were less ambitious
by far. They were cheap, and it showed. The back projection was obvious, the special effects cheap. Almost all of the exteriors were done at night, so that standing sets could be utilised with a minimum of extra work to simulate British backgrounds. The humour was often weak, and the often very strong and colorful stories were not exploited to their full potential. But — they moved — and in their unsuitably and overdramatic melodrama, they recaptured much of the zestful spirit of the old silent serials. "Bulldog Drummond Comes Back" is replete with sundry death-traps, time bombs, a gas chamber, a Limehouse dive, secret codes, a trapdoor into the Thames and other such devices. Not only is it written fast, but it is cut fast — and it’s interesting to note that the editor is James Smith, D.W. Griffith’s cutter for years.

All of the Paramount Drummonds had this pacing and zest, and even the weaker ones — like "Bulldog Drummond’s Secret Police" — at least had good climaxes to make up for slow beginnings. And they all had marvellous villains in the grand old all-out tradition — Porter Hall, George Zucco, Leo G. Carroll, and here, J. Carrol Naish. Drummond, having just escaped yet another of Naish’s death traps, greets the fiend with a polite "You’re full of surprises tonight doctor", to which Naish, smiling, his eyes glistening through a pair of enormous glasses, replies "Yes — and the night is still young".

John Howard makes an adequate Drummond, with a reasonable British accent apparently copied from Ray Milland. But of course he can’t hold a candle to Ronald Colman, who made the best Drummond adventure of them all (in 1929, for Sam Goldwyn), or even to John Lodge, who made the best Drummond per se, and whose "Bulldog Drummond at Bay" was an excellent little film that we’d give a lot to see again. But it’s Barrymore’s Neilson that gives the film that little extra lift. Sadly, the writers failed to exploit him as well in the two subsequent Drummonds, "Bulldog Drummond’s Revenge" and "Bulldog Drummond’s Peril". His scenes were so brief and badly written in the latter that he treated them with the contempt they deserved, playing the role with bombast and without charm or thought, and giving perhaps his only really bad performance. In the next film, H.B. Warner took over and curiously patterned his performance on this irredeemable one of Barrymore’s, overplaying in a manner strange indeed for Warner. But he soon saw the error of his ways, and for the rest of the series settled down to a more dignified Neilson, much as Sir Guy Standing had interpreted the role.

I am quite sure that no other film society will ever play "Bulldog Drummond Comes Back", and that if this society was a member of the Federation of Film Societies, it would be promptly drummed out of the organisation for so doing. It certainly isn’t an important film, but it’s an immensely enjoyable one, the best perhaps of its own particular series, and in its own way instructive as a lesson in slick "B" production, and as an example of the later, colorful, but too often ignored work of John Barrymore.

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Next Tuesday — February 5th — Program One in our three-part British series of Comedy and Cavalcanti films —

"BULLDOG JACK" (1935) with Jack and Claude Hulbert, Ralph Richardson, Fay Wray
"WENT THE DAY WELL?" (1942) with Leslie Banks, Elizabeth Allen

Extra show in March (to be confirmed again in March bulletin)
Tuesday March 5th — "HONEY" (1930), dir. by Weasley Ruggles, with Nancy Carroll
"NOW & FOREVER" (1934), dir. Hathaway, with Lombard, Gary Cooper, Shirley Temple

A REMINDER: W.C. Fields’ marvellous "The Man on the Flying Trapeze" opens at the New Yorker today, along with "Hanky Business" with the Marx Brothers and Thelma Todd.