



BY THE WAY

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American Superstars Play Plum

Eddie Grabham recalls the stars of P. G. Wodehouse's first play, which was performed off-Broadway in 1911. Based on his own novel, Plum dramatised A Gentleman of Leisure in collaboration with John Stapleton, and it opened its 76-performance run at New York's Playhouse on 24 August. The play was given a new title, A Thief for a Night, for Chicago when it was performed at McVicker's Theatre from 30 March 1913. The stars in these two productions were light comedians who were both to become heroes of the silver screen.

Douglas Fairbanks (1883–1939)

Douglas Fairbanks was born Douglas Ulman in Denver, Colorado, on 23 May 1883, and is said to have been so stage-struck that he learned whole Shakespearean plays by heart. Following his education at Harvard, Fairbanks opted for a career on the stage. He made his Broadway debut in *Her Lord and Master* (1902), and it was not long before he was playing juveniles. He became a star with *All for a Girl* in 1908 and toured in *A Gentleman from Mississippi* before starring in *A Gentleman of Leisure* in 1911 as Robert Edgar Willoughby Pitt.

It was about this time that film producers sought leading Broadway actors in order to raise the status of the 'movies', and Douglas Fairbanks, already noted for his famous grin, was a natural. The legendary D. W. Griffith directed his first film, *The Lamb*, which was based on Fairbanks's Broadway play *The New Henrietta* and, following a smart New York première in 1915, it proved to be a big success. It later proved to be an equally successful vehicle for Buster Keaton under the title *The Saphead*. His exuberance and athleticism onscreen found him expanding his style beyond comedy. He took control of his own films when he set up the Douglas Fairbanks Pictures Corporation in 1917, though he only directed one (*Arizona* in 1918), regarded by some as his worst film.



However, Fairbanks continued to be successful as a producer as well as star of his own films and gained even more control when he joined director D. W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Charles Chaplin in forming United Artists in order to both produce and distribute their own films. Despite some claims that the 'lunatics had taken over the asylum', the company was a huge success and became a major Hollywood company. He married Mary Pickford, Hollywood's sweetheart, and the couple became Hollywood 'royalty', holding court at their famous home, Pickfair. His famous swashbuckling screen persona was developed during the 1920s in a series of hugely successful adventure films (including *The Mark of Zorro* in 1920 and *The Three Musketeers* in 1921), culminating in his most successful films, *Robin Hood* in 1922 and *The Thief Of Bagdad* in 1924. Although he gradually lost some of his extravagant athleticism, he maintained his place at the top of the Hollywood tree with *The Black Pirate* (1926) and *The Gaucho* (1927).

By now the ‘movies’ had become the ‘talkies’, though Fairbanks bucked the trend by having a hit with his silent film *The Iron Mask* in 1929. It was, however, the end of an era, and his next film was his first talkie, *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which he starred with Mary Pickford. It was not a success, and the movies had more or less passed Fairbanks by. Alexander Korda brought him to England to make *The Private Life of Don Juan* in 1934, but it failed at the box office. Fairbanks and Pickford divorced in 1935 and, though he planned to produce a film starring his son, Douglas Fairbanks Junior, he never made another film. He died of a sudden heart attack in his sleep in the early hours of 12 December 1939.

John Barrymore (1882–1942)

Maurice Blythe, the son of Anglo-Indian civil servants, took to the stage and adopted the name Barrymore, possibly after Michael Barrymore, who had been the first manager of the Coburg Theatre when it opened in 1818; it is now known as The Old Vic. As Maurice Barrymore, he went to America, where he met and married Georgina Drew, who was descended from John Drew, described by theatre historian James Kotsilibas as ‘a beloved delineator of Irish and Shakespearean characters’ during the early years of the 19th century. According to Kotsilibas, the Drews were descended from strolling players during Shakespeare’s time.



It is therefore perhaps not too surprising that all three of Maurice and Georgina’s children – Lionel, Ethel, and John – should become Broadway stars during the early years of the 20th century. John, the

youngest, was born in 1882 and made his stage debut in Chicago in 1903. He soon became recognised as a fine light comedian following his successes in J. M. Barrie’s *Pantaloons* (1905) and W. S. Gilbert’s *The Fortune Hunter* (1909). By the time he returned to Chicago to star in *A Thief for a Night* in 1913, his stage skills and fine profile had made him a matinee idol.

John Barrymore developed into a very fine serious actor, taking Broadway by storm in 1922 when he played *Hamlet* for a record run of 101 performances. He repeated this success in London with Constance Collier as Gertrude and Fay Compton as Ophelia. It has been suggested that he never reached such heights again and that this was due in part to the onset of his alcoholism.

He made his first film in 1913 (*An American Citizen*) and, from 1914, made a series of comedies for Famous Players–Lasky, some of which were based on his stage successes. In 1922 he came to England and starred as *Sherlock Holmes* with Roland Young as Dr Watson. He cut a dash in 1926 when he starred in *Don Juan*, the first feature film with added sound (no dialogue, just music and sound effects). Unlike many film stars, he easily adapted to the talkies and made his best film, *Twentieth Century*, in 1934. It is regarded as the first in a series of ‘screwball comedies’ in which the leading men were led a merry dance by wilful women. In this case the woman was played brilliantly by Carole Lombard.

Before that, Barrymore played his more usual role as the great lover opposite Greta Garbo in the film version of *Grand Hotel* (1932). In that year he also played Katharine Hepburn’s father in *A Bill of Divorcement*, another film version of a stage play. He then joined his brother Lionel and sister Ethel in *Rasputin and the Empress*, and Lionel again in *Dinner at Eight* (1933), another film adaptation, which proved to be a great success. Although he continued to make films, none quite reached the brilliance of *Twentieth Century*. After a 14-year break, Barrymore returned to the stage in 1939 when he toured with *My Dear Children*. However, by this time he had become ‘weary and seemed aged, and his health was not good’, according to the *New York Times* obituary. He died in Hollywood on 29 May 1942.