

HE RESENTS BEING TYPED

Can Basil Rathbone
Escape Playing Villains?

By

Maude Cheatham



Two of his greatest roles. (Left) In "David Copperfield." (Right) In "Romeo and Juliet."



VERY politely but very definitely, Basil Rathbone is refusing to continue being a *Screen Menace*. Already, he has turned down several rôles that meant following this sinister route.

Coming to pictures from an exceptionally brilliant career in the theatre, in such romantic characters as Romeo, Robert Browning, Peter Ibbetson, and other magnetic rôles, his career took an amazing turn. Perhaps the camera over-emphasized his glowing dark eyes and his intensity, for he was immediately cast as Murdstone, the cruel step-father in "David Copperfield." Then, because he is a fine actor, Rathbone imbued the character with bitter realism. This threatened to make movie audiences confuse the player with the rôle, especially as his villainies continued with unsympathetic parts in Greta Garbo's "Anna Karenina," "The Tale of Two Cities," "Captain Blood," and other pictures.

"I had hoped," said Basil, "to escape being typed, which is the bane of every screen player, and I certainly don't want to make my fans hate me. When you undertake to create a characterization you tie it in with a definite mood and your very success may be your undoing."

"Several years ago I came to pictures after appearing as the gay and amorous military attaché in the stage play, 'The Command to Love,' and producers could see me only in bedroom farces and frothy comedies. I was heartbroken, so went back to the theatre, where I created a number of interesting rôles in London and New York. Then, when I return to Hollywood, four years later, behold—I am a menace, a villain!"

"I wouldn't mind occasionally playing a heavy, if this means a character whose wickedness can be justified because he is consistent in following his own line of reasoning. We can all understand Iago's motives in 'Othello,' even though we loathe him, because he appeals to the intelligence. By the way, Iago is the only heavy I ever portrayed on the stage and it became a great experience. Of course, Dickens' characters are caricatures or symbolism. For instance, the French aristocrat I played in 'The Tale of Two Cities' was not an individual, instead, he represented the whole class of people who brought about the revolution: he motivated the whole stirring drama of events, so that raised him above the usual type of villain."

Off the screen, as well as on, Basil Rathbone is an exciting personality. He is very definitely the romantic figure—handsome, tall, lithe, and always he suggests leashed emotions that pique the imagination. We talked, sitting on the shady terrace of his home close to the Hollywood hills, while we watched his five dogs racing over the velvet lawns.

I had caught him between leaps, as it were, for yesterday he had finished the picture, "Private Number," at 20th Century-Fox studio. This morning he had made the final scene in Metro-Goldwyn-

Mayer's "Romeo and Juliet," and tonight he was leaving for location near Yuma, where the Selznick International studio has erected Algerian towns and colorful oases for their new color film, "The Garden of Allah." Tomorrow Basil was to become Count Anteoni, in the terrific drama of this romance in the desert—with the temperature hovering around 120 degrees!

Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, he was taken back to England to be educated. His passionate love for music asserted itself and he spent all his spare time hovering over the piano until his father, a practical London civil engineer, became alarmed lest his son do the unthinkable thing of becoming a professional musician. So the boy was dragged to his uncle's insurance office and told to learn the business.

He stood it as long as he could, then ran away and joined the Benson Players, where he spent five wonderful years becoming steeped in Shakespearean drama. He mastered fifty-four rôles, learned how to wear the picturesque costumes, and how to toss his velvet cloaks at the right angle. He became an expert in the etiquette of that period, the use of the snuff box, how to handle a sword. By the way, Rathbone had no double for his many fencing scenes in "Romeo and Juliet," doing them himself and with utmost skill.

At eighteen he was swept to the French front by the World War. He was wounded several times, decorated twice, and when it was all over he returned to London, and the theatre. It was Constance Collier who gave him his real chance; she chose him to create the title rôle in "Peter Ibbetson" for the London stage production; then he invaded New York and won new honors which carried him to instant fame. Other starring rôles followed in "The Jest," "Death Takes a Holiday," "He Who Gets Slapped."

"I've been in the theatre too long to ever give it up," he said, "but it holds little opportunity at the moment and in the meantime I'm becoming more and more interested in pictures. Now, with dialogue, the whole world of literature is waiting to be filmed. I should love to do 'Cyrano de Bergerac,' and a story of Caesar Borgia; both would be colorful drama."

"Everybody associated with the screen is so terrifically ambitious, and God! how hard they all work. Life in Hollywood is detached from the remainder of the world, with everyone living, thinking, talking pictures. Some may criticise this complete absorption but I consider it a good thing, for no actor who really loves his work can ever get away from it, he is steeped in it."

"In the theatre," Basil continued, "a player must depend upon himself and from the time the curtain goes up he sustains a continuity of emotion that ends only when his final climax is reached and the curtain goes down. This very [Continued on page 60]

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He Resents Being Typed [Continued from page 54]

independence brings him a delicious, almost a delirious sense of elation. Now in a picture," and he threw me a gay smile, "even if you are a star, you are only one of many cogs in the great wheel that is turning out a product. You sustain an emotional mood for only a few minutes at a time and the effect you secure on the screen is never independently your own for it is built up through the aid of mechanics, such as photography, lighting, sound. There is little personal satisfaction for the player because he never sees the finished results of his work and it is a trifle depressing to be—just a cog!"

After a pause, he went on, "I wish I had been born thirty years earlier. The war's disillusionment made people intensely practical and the stage is no longer vitally concerned with ability. Life's tempo is completely changed and it is personality, a salable quality, that the entertainment world demands.

"I once asked Forbes-Robertson if there were as many outstanding figures on the stage now as in the former generation and he replied that there were many more. And because there are so many really fine actors today, one must possess unusual ability and a stirring personality in order to stand out from the surrounding cast of capable players. I never see a motion picture without thinking of this, for even the smallest parts are portrayed with amazing skill."

With the fire of enthusiasm, Basil continued, "If the major studios would each produce one picture a year without regard to its commercial value, only its artistic, it would soon raise the standard to a very high level. It seems such a little tribute to pay this great industry that has brought fame and wealth to its followers; just one picture every twelve months. I'm sure every actor would gladly give his services at a very low

figure for the privilege of creating something that might become a cinema classic and I'm willing to wager that out of the five pictures made, at least two or three would turn into smashing box-office successes. History of both stage and screen shows that the truly worth while productions usually make money. It would be a fine gesture to the screen as *Art*. I'm confident this will eventually be done for, after all, producers are dreamers and full of sentiment. Too, they are always gamblers!"

The Rathbones—Mrs. Rathbone is the brilliant Ouida Bergere—have made over the one-time Jack Dempsey-Estelle Taylor home into a very beautiful place, with spacious gardens and a swimming pool. The gardens are Basil's hobby and he loves to put on old clothes and actually work in them. He excels in many outdoor sports but his favorite is golf. He dislikes going out and so the usual social life of contract and large parties never intrudes on the Rathbone calendar. They prefer riding horseback, or hiking over the hills with their dogs galloping about them.

Basil is still passionately fond of music and has a remarkable collection of phonograph records of the world's famous symphonies and other classics.

He is an idealist, and has a naïve faith in humanity. He worships children and is excited over plans, already in motion, for adopting two babies, a girl and a boy.

As a coming screen triumph, there is a very reliable rumor that when "Julius Caesar" is filmed, Basil will portray Mark Antony.

Tests made with the color camera promise much for him, for they definitely emphasize his good looks and his romantic qualities. So, perhaps Basil Rathbone will finally take his rightful place as an intriguing figure in screen romances.

Talent of the World [Continued from page 31]

Bow from Brooklyn, a Joan Crawford from San Antonio, Texas (via Kansas City), compete on equal terms with the Parisian Chevalier, the Londoner, Ronald Colman, and the Canadians, Norma Shearer, Mary Pickford or the late Marie Dressler.

The camera, once it achieves focus, does not recognize nationality. Three generations of cameras, for instance, proved that Mary Pickford, Marie Dressler and Norma Shearer were the first ladies of the screen. They were American cameras but they honored three Canadians, for the lens of a camera tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, untroubled by boundary lines.

If the stars are elected on the basis of talent, so also are those who direct them and point out the short-cuts to stardom. The directors come from all over the world to Hollywood. Frank Capra is from Palermo, Italy; Lubitsch is from Berlin; Frank Lloyd is from Glasgow, Scotland; Von Sternberg is from Vienna; Frank Borzage hails from Dempsey's town, Salt Lake City; Michael Curtiz is from Budapest; Richard Boleslavsky is from Warsaw, Poland; John Ford, of "Informer" fame, is from Portland, Maine; Mark Sandrich, who directed "Top Hat," is a New Yorker; Mervyn Le Roy is a San Franciscan; Lloyd Bacon is from San Jose, California, and Edmund Goulding is from England. Gregory La Cava is from Towanda, Pennsylvania. Walter Lang is from Memphis, Tenn. Archie Mayo is a New Yorker. J. Walter Ruben is a New Yorker. Norman Taurog is a Chicagoan. King Vidor is from Budapest. Rouben Mamoulian is from Tif-

lis, Caucasus; Clarence Brown from Clinton, Mass.

The cosmopolitan make-up of the directorial staff is a fine influence on pictures, for the directors encourage the artists of their own countries and cities and sections to come to Hollywood. And the directors generally know talent better than the front-office. It was a Swedish director who brought Carbo to Hollywood. It was Director George Cukor who insisted on RKO signing Katharine Hepburn. It was Director Clarence Brown who "made" Clark Gable.

The world indeed is Hollywood's oyster.

It is the Coast's willingness to go far afield in search of talent, and directors and cameramen and writers that has spurred the industry so high, in so short a time. With the finest minds of the world to draw upon, Hollywood has achieved a maturity of intellect that is no less than staggering. It is a long cry from the cowboy thrillers of Bill Hart to such a sensitive document as "These Three"—a far cry from Clara Bow's obvious "It" to the sophistication of a Dietrich—a far cry from Hoot Gibson to the finesse of a Laughton. The movies have grown up because they grafted on to celluloid the background of older countries, borrowing polish here, sophistication there and staining its hands with soil.

The lout has become a gentleman without forgetting his origin.

That the process has been accomplished in good taste, and has been eminently successful was demonstrated to me not long ago on a trip to Havana. Now Havana can be a turbulent community, as menacing and grim as Morro Castle that stands