

Hissed *to the Heights*

—THAT'S RATHBONE

(Villainy has brought him world-wide fame)

By Leonard Soule

DURING the past year or two a powerful new personality has compelled attention from picture audiences the world over. We refer to Basil Rathbone, currently the most hated man on the screen. There is a steel-like, formidable quality about his acting. This consummate screen villain won fame in London and on Broadway in glamorous, romantic rôles. He was, for instance, the poetic *Browning* in the stage production of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, and played *Romeo* opposite Katharine Cornell. He came to Hollywood "to exchange applause for hisses," as he says.

I met him on the set of *Romeo and Juliet*. He plays the fiery *Tybalt*, the deadliest swordsman in fair Verona, who slays *Romeo's* friend, bold *Mercutio* (John Barrymore), whose death *Romeo* later avenges with his piercing steel.

Rathbone has played forty-seven parts in twenty-two plays of Shakespeare. He has played *Romeo* alone over five hundred times. He is passionately interested in the commercial success of M-G-M's elaborate production of the ageless love classic. "Oh, God, how I pray that it's a success. If it isn't, it's goodbye to Shakespeare," he said. He is very enthusiastic about Norma Shearer as *Juliet*. "I haven't seen any of her shots yet, so I don't know what she is like in them, but at the rehearsals of the play I thought her by far the best *Juliet* I'd ever seen. I've never seen anybody so believably young. I don't know Norma's age, but believe me, in the play, she is eighteen years old. She is simple, sincere, earnest, quiet, and yet has a capricious quality, a suppressed emotion, that will make her characterization particularly effective on the screen. She'll be a sensation.

"It is extremely difficult to play *Juliet* with conviction. At the right age one doesn't have the education and experience to speak the exquisite phrases written for this



When better villains are cast they'll call on Basil Rathbone—who came to Hollywood to trade cheers for hisses

part. And when one has grown to an age where one can give full value to Shakespeare's magnificent language one is perpetually busy chasing back over the years searching for the illusion of youth. Miss Shearer lives her part beautifully and is my ideal *Juliet*."

"I suppose you are playing another heavy," I said.

"I'm afraid that's what many people will think. But *Tybalt* really is not a villain. True, he kills *Mercutio*, who defends *Romeo*, and who belongs to a household which is the hereditary enemy of his, but remember, we are in the fourteenth century, and *Tybalt* is a man who lives by his sword. He kills *Mercutio* in defense of the honor and dignity of his family."

THE romantic-looking Rathbone is determined to escape the great menace of the actor—"typing." He said: "I was never typed before I came to Hollywood. I am a character actor, if you please. Imagine saying to a painter, 'Look here, you can paint only cows.' Or saying to a musician, 'You can compose only études.' I am tremendously interested in motion pictures and like to live in Hollywood, but if I have to sacrifice my artistic freedom of portraying characters according to my experience, training and temperament, and be confined only to villainous parts, I'll go back to the theatre."

The hard guys of the screen are notoriously soft-hearted in real life. Rathbone will never cease to hate his screen self in *David Copperfield*. "When I had to beat Freddie Bartholomew," he said, "I wanted to go to the producer and tell him that I couldn't do it, I was through. But there was no other way out, I had to do that beastly thing. When I came home in the evening my wife said, 'You look ill.' I was. I told her I had done the most terrible thing in my life.

"*Murdstone* is supposed to have done me a lot of good. . . ." He smiled painfully, "When *David Copperfield* was released, they treated [Continued on page 74]

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me as if I had just been discovered, as if I hadn't been acting since I was eighteen. They wanted me to play more *Murdstones*. Never in my life will I play another *Murdstone*. He was so cruel, so heartless. A murderer can be very kind to a dog, but *Murdstone* was the sort of man that would beat a dog to death. He did not have a single redeeming feature. Many of Dickens' characters are caricatures, but so exaggerated.

"In *Anna Karenina* I had what many would call a brutal and merciless part as the husband, yet it is a character that is real. No caricature there! My own attitude toward *Karenin* is that he was a man who honored the institution of marriage, and there was no brutality about him. He was an upstanding citizen, married to a very physical wife, whose tragedy was nothing compared to his. He is, indeed, the central character of the story. I should like to play it again."

Rathbone speaks in quick accents, never hesitating for a word, and never saying anything he doesn't mean. He is fully aware of his ability and limitations. His comments upon the rôles he has played have a certain detachment about them even when he speaks with undisguised enthusiasm. An interview with him is a stimulating experience—an education in the art of acting.

In *Anna Karenina*, you will remember, he was Garbo's husband. I was curious to know his impressions of the enigmatic Swede. He paid her high tribute. "Before I played *Karenin* I was puzzled about the technique of film acting, and wasn't satisfied at all with what I had been doing. During the filming of *Anna Karenina* I watched Garbo and learned from her what I think is the secret of good screen acting; play your part with the least possible physical movement, and the greatest possible mental projection.

"It is different on the stage. There your whole body is constantly exposed to the audience, and you must have perfect co-ordination from head to foot. But in pictures, you don't see the feet half the time, and when the character has something important to say, he says it in a close-up. Therefore, physical movement is far more important on the stage than it is in films. In films mental projection means everything. And Garbo has this power of mental projection to a superb degree. I learned from her how little to do in order to get the greatest results. My work improved one hundred per-cent. Now, when I play a part, subconsciously I ask myself: 'What Garbo would do with this? How little she would do physically, and how much she would project mentally?'

"I first met her in 1928. I found her very intelligent and charming. I didn't meet her again until 1935, when we were cast in the same picture. She wasn't the same person, she had changed. You know, I think Garbo suffers a great deal for being typed. Her cameraman thinks so, too. She could play comedy very well. Sad as she is, she has a delicious sense of humor, a lightness of touch, that will make her outstanding in comedy as well. That's my personal impression of her. There is no one I should like so much to play with again." Incidentally, Rathbone is convinced of the absolute genuineness of her craving for solitude and privacy.

AS WE spoke of the various rôles he has played, I reminded him of his masterful characterization as *Pontius Pilate* in *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which I thought the finest thing he has done. "Ah, thank you!" he said. "Yes, I think it's the best thing I have done on the screen, and perhaps the best thing I've done in my life. When I returned to Hollywood my manager said, 'Basil, they want you to play *Pontius Pilate* in *The Last Days of Pompeii*. It's a week's work.' I told him I wouldn't even consider a week's work. He wanted me to read the script, as a favor to him. I got the script with the part of *Pontius Pilate* all marked out. As I read it, I had cold shivers running up and down my spine. I called my manager and said, 'Bill, I was wrong. Get that part for me whatever you do.' It was magnificently written, with economy of words—truly a sublime characterization. I played the part, and the director will tell you that everything you saw on the screen was the first take. Not because I was a good boy and learned my lines, or a superlative actor, but because the part was me, and I was the part."

Rathbone looks upon motion pictures from the point of view of the actor in the highest meaning of that word. His opinions on the subject are worth listening to. He said: "The average producer hasn't freed himself yet from the mentality of the small town of twenty-five years ago. He still thinks the public likes a pretty boy hero, a pretty heroine, and a bad man. He is twenty-five years behind the public. He gives the public a heavy, expecting the audience to react to him as such, but they don't. On the contrary they LIKE him. Why? Because usually the hero and heroine have no character, while the heavy is a real human being. And when, as it sometimes happens, he is led to death or prison, they don't hate him. He is a man who has failed, and most people have failed. There is a bond of understanding sympathy.

"We should, if possible, throw out all the 'heroes,' 'heroines,' and 'heavies,' and have nothing but characters. In other words, portray the mental instead of the physical. And all characters should be kaleidoscopic. After all, we are trying to work out the complete reproduction of life on the screen. We have the picture, the sound, color, and, before long, we might have the third dimension. It will be the task of the actor to reproduce with perfection the emotions of the character he is portraying. But as things are now, they buy personalities, and not acting. This business is full of personalities. True, what gets you first is personality, but what lasts is acting. Personalities come and go; good actors remain. Chaplin, for instance, remains because he is not only a great personality, but also a great actor."

TALL, slim, athletic, with a lean, thoughtful face and flashing dark eyes, Rathbone is a decidedly romantic type. I don't know his age, but he doesn't look a day over thirty-five, much younger than I have seen him on the screen. He looks more like his age in *Romeo and Juliet*, a poetic *Don Juan* of medieval Verona. There is an air of merry old England about him—a reckless cavalier in a powdered wig.

He was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, but passed his boyhood in England.

From his Irish mother he has inherited a facile wit and ardent temper. His youthful ambition was to be a writer, but he has been on the stage ever since he left school at eighteen. During the world war he served with the British army in France, and won a military medal. He is a great lover of dogs and stops traffic on Los Feliz Boulevard when he takes his five or six dogs for a walk.

In 1926 he married Ouida Bergere, scenarist. She is American. He is very much in love with his wife. The Rathbones live in an exquisitely furnished English-type house, and are among the leaders of Hollywood's British colony. Although Rathbone was brought up in England, he wasn't happy there. "I felt confined and defeated," he said. "I am a born enthusiast, but I found that enthusiasm, generally speaking, is bad manners in England. I couldn't stand the conventional British chill." He hopes the day will come when all English-speaking peoples would unite, to preserve peace and save civilization. "If England and America would get together they can stop a lot of trouble by saying to any aggressive nation, 'Don't touch us or we'll knock the hell out of you.'"

Such is Rathbone, the screen's formidable new "heavy," whose share of cinematic glory is hisses instead of applause.

Ten Years Ago
in MOTION PICTURE Magazine



Pola Negri

"POLA NEGRI is going to Europe for her annual trip. And they do say that it is definitely all off between Pola and Rudolph Valentino" . . . "Ouida Bergere, the scenario writer, and Basil Rathbone, an English actor, were married recently in New York" . . . "Many mishaps have held up production on *Old Ironsides*" . . . "Harold Lloyd is looking for a new leading lady. Jobyna Ralston, who has been the object of love for Harold in his films during the past two years, is breaking into the serious dramer" . . . "Elinor Glyn is to write a book on IT" . . . "Greta Garbo says that when she reaches the astral heights of a Lillian Gish, 'I will no longer have publicity . . . shake hands with prize-fighters and egg-and-milk men so they have pictures to put in the papers'" . . . "The screen today needs actresses of breeding," says Mr. Lasky. And, he adds, they are the most difficult sort to find." . . . "A preview of the screen version of *Kiki*, given in Hollywood recently, reveals the fact that Norma Talmadge is at last going to give the screen something different in the way of characterization" . . . "Greta Garbo appears to have the making of one of the greatest stars in recent film history" . . .

THEN—In 1910, D. W. Griffith was producing his Biograph pictures in New York. Dorothy Bernard was playing in his company. One day, Dorothy told Griffith that she had just seen a girl, who looked like Billie Burke, then a successful stage star. Griffith told Dorothy to bring the girl in. She did. He signed her up. It was Mae Marsh. Her first Biograph picture was *Man's Genesis*.

NOW—D. W. Griffith, for years a top director, is staging a comeback, one of several. Dorothy Bernard has retired. She is the wife of A. H. Van Buren, a New York stage director. Mae Marsh lives in Flintridge, Calif. In private life, she is Mrs. Louis Lee Arms. She has several grown children. She recently returned to the screen to play in the Fox picture *Over the Hill*.

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