

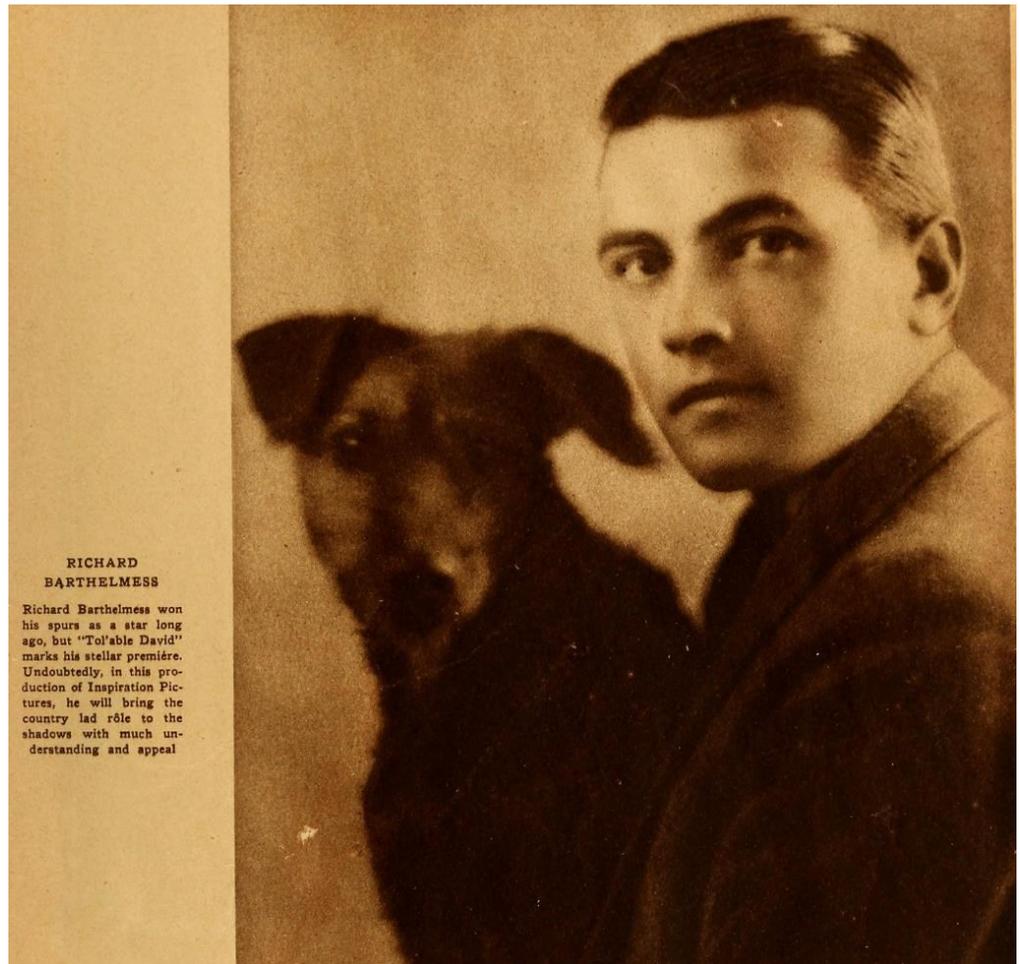
Tol'able David

By Fritzi Kramer

Movies have always found success in going back to the “good old days” and silent era films were not immune to nostalgia. A passion project of leading man Richard Barthelmess and director Henry King, “Tol’able David” is a celebration of rural American culture; Americana has never been more lovingly celebrated or adeptly filmed. The film was praised by critics and moviegoers alike upon its initial release; it was an instant classic that arrived in theaters at just the right time. The First World War had been over for only a few years and audiences welcomed a chance to slip away into a simpler time and place.

The film is based on a short story of the same name by Joseph Hergesheimer and its protagonist is David Kinemon, a teenager who is trying his best to reach for adulthood. Barthelmess sensitively conveys David’s innocence, his innate goodness and his longing to be something more than just “tol’able.” The baby of the family, David dreams of becoming a mailman like his older brother but his ambitions are met with indulgent smiles from his friends and family. In his spare time, he awkwardly romances Esther Hatburn (Gladys Hulette), a neighborhood girl who is experiencing similar growing pains. A former child actress and veteran performer, Hulette is equal to Barthelmess in acting skill and the ability to project the kind of wholesome innocence that the plot requires. The pair flirt and fight and break up and make up but it’s easy to see that they care deeply for one another. All that changes, though, when Esther’s extended family moves in.

Ernest Torrence plays Luke Hatburn, a violent and terrifying criminal. He moves into the neighborhood with his father and brother and then begins to destroy the Kinemon family just because he can. He paralyzes David’s brother and the tragedy drives David’s father to have a fatal heart attack. Esther is terrorized



RICHARD
BARTHELMESS
Richard Barthelmess won his spurs as a star long ago, but “Tol’able David” marks his stellar premiere. Undoubtedly, in this production of Inspiration Pictures, he will bring the country lad rôle to the shadows with much understanding and appeal

A portrait of Richard Barthelmess from the September 1921 issue of Motion Picture World touts his upcoming role in “Tol’able David.” Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

by the Hatburns and her failure to stop their violence turns David against her briefly, though the pair make up once he takes time to process his grief. David inherits his brother’s postal service job but Luke steals a sack of government mail, takes it to his house and refuses to return it. Mail is a lifeline for a rural area and the mailman has an almost sacred obligation to deliver it; the film has established this from the beginning. David cannot allow the mail sack to remain in Luke’s hands. There must be a showdown.

The climactic fight between Richard Barthelmess and Ernest Torrence is the set piece of the picture. The two men could not have been better cast. Barthelmess was twenty-six but easily looked a decade younger thanks to his boyish features and acting skill. Torrence towered over him physically and was a powerful and intense performer who specialized in playing brutes of every variety imaginable, likable to terrifying. Needless to say, Luke is one of the more frightening parts of Torrence’s career.

Henry King allows the scene to simmer, slowly but

steadily cranking up the tension. The suspense is helped along by the careful character building Barthelmess has been performing throughout the film. David is a nice kid and he has the best of intentions but he is not out to be a hero. He's an average teenage boy and no one would blame him for running away but he just can't abandon the mail. His sense of duty, his overarching desire to take on adult responsibilities, his very personality will not allow him to flee. He's terrified, he wants to escape more than anything but not without the mail. Luke attacks and David defends himself in a blind panic. This isn't a graceful fight, full of leaps and flips and stylized choreography; the blows are clumsily thrown but they hurt. The scene boils down to two men struggling and they know that only one of them can survive. There is a pistol on the floor and both Luke and David make a grab for it.

Esther, meanwhile, has run for help. She lives far from town and knows that there is no possibility of rescuers reaching David in time but she still tries. Once she arrives, she collapses and tells everyone that David has been murdered. How could he possibly survive a fight against Luke? Then the film cuts to the cabin door. It begins to swing open. Who will be on the other side? The film teases the suspense a bit until the door opens completely and David stumbles out with the sack of government mail in his hand. Like his biblical namesake, he has beaten his giant.

"Tol'able David" is praised for its successful celebration of rural American culture and American youth. It accomplishes this thanks to skillful performances from its leading performers and sensitive direction

from Henry King. While the fight scene is spectacular, it would have had no emotional resonance if the audience had not been shown David's personality and daily life. The film was shot on location in Blue Grass, Virginia with some residents playing extras for added local color. King allowed his camera to linger on the fields and streams, to show the sheep and cows in their pastures, to capture David and Esther playing mumble-peg and to take in the townsfolk enjoying their gossip. The audience feels the trauma of David's tragedies and his lost innocence because King allows them to fall in love with the idyllic setting and the youthful naiveté. Luke's violation of this peaceful world comes as a shocking intrusion, as it should. All of this serves to create an immersive world, an idealized rural American childhood that was becoming increasingly rare by 1921 but proved to be ideal entertainment for the time. The picturesque world is threatened by the brutish Luke and his family but good really does conquer evil. "Tol'able David" succeeds because the screenplay shows genuine affection for its setting and because both the performers and the artists behind the camera had the skill and artistic vision to translate it into film.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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