

The Black Pirate

By Tracey Goessel

"The Black Pirate" has made its journey into history by way of two mechanisms: it is the first major feature to be filmed in Technicolor, and it contains the most famous stunt of its ever-joyous star/producer, Douglas Fairbanks.

Herbert Thomas Kalmus founded the Technicolor Corporation in 1915. He devised a two color process that did not require special projection equipment. The colors captured were reds and greens, each recorded by a camera that would split the optic beam, permitting separate exposures of each color to register onto separate film strips. In 1922, the company invested in their first full-length demonstration film: "Toll of the Sea." This succeeded, and the two-color process began showing up in short sequences in such major films as "Ben Hur" and "The Merry Widow." Jesse Lasky had given it a full-length try in 1924 with Western "Wanderer of the Wasteland", but it failed. –

Technicolor was stalled. Few producers were willing to take a chance with color. Technicolor needed a major personality with sufficient gravitas and reputation to endorse the process. Enter Douglas Fairbanks: innovative, fearless, and deep pocketed. He had decided to make a pirate picture. And, to his mind, it had to be in color.

Pre-production work began in May 1925. Much of the effort was directed towards Technicolor tests. The challenge was "to take the color out of color." If more attention was paid to the effect than the narrative, it would be no more than an expensive novelty. Fairbanks was "afraid that the public might at first be more intrigued by the colors than by the story itself. So we decided to practice restraint."

They elected to model the film's coloring on that of the old masters – Rembrandt in particular. Either out of aesthetics or necessity (Technicolor could not capture blues or yellows) they elected to use a color palate of greens and browns. Six months of tests were conducted. Dual sets of costumes had to be made, as it was discovered that they photographed



This film's original lobby card depicts several scenes from the film with star Douglas Fairbanks at the forefront. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

differently under artificial lights than outdoors. Even outdoor shooting required supplemental lights. Fairbanks had always been bedeviled by a heavy growth of beard; whenever a five o'clock shadow threatened, his lower face would photograph green. Extra red powder was added to his beard area to neutralize this effect.

This principle did not just apply to Fairbanks. Any item would be dyed or otherwise colored so that it came out the proper color on the two-strip Technicolor film, as opposed to the color that it demonstrated to the naked eye. Their efforts paid off: the film had a muted, lovely palate that did not compete with the story. The occasional flash of bright red (as in a bloody sword in the film's opening sequence) served the narrative function, rather than competed with it.

There exists archival color footage of Mary Pickford wearing leading lady Billie Dove's costume and wig. Pickford replaced Dove in one of the final shots of the film, when the hero kisses the heroine. What was an inside joke to the production company – Doug plants a very enthusiastic kiss on the princess – a rare sight in a Fairbanks film – provides succeeding generations the pleasure of seeing Mary Pickford in color in 1925.

Direction was assigned to Albert Parker. Parker was the definition of a company man – and a staunch

admirer. Actor Donald Crisp claims that there was a dispute over who would do the most famous stunt in the film: the knife-in-the-sail slide, in which our hero travels from the main topsail yardarm to the main yardarm by means of plunging a dagger into the top-sail and slicing his way down. Historian Booton Herndon muddies the waters, quoting Donald Crisp's distinct recollections of working with Chuck Lewis on the stunt, running a wire through a plaster cast on his knife arm and chest, and pulling him down through the canvas with a wire. Child actor Robert Parrish claimed that Fairbanks later showed him the device – a baseball bat in lieu of the knife, operated by a pulley behind the sail. Kevin Brownlow in subsequent years deciphered the mechanism of the stunt: the sail was angled at 45 degrees, with the camera tipped in parallel, to give the illusion that the sail and mast were fully upright. The fabric had been pre-torn and loosely stitched together. A counterweight rose as gravity pulled Fairbanks down, and thus controlled his rate of descent.

It is likely that all accounts are correct. Trial and error was a significant part of designing the stunt, and many mechanisms – plaster, wire, pulleys, baseball bats – were likely tried. Similarly, much as Richard Talmadge would help Fairbanks design stunts in the early 1920's, Chuck Lewis helped Fairbanks now. "We had a place on the lot where we tried out all these things...I did it, Charlie Stevens did it, Doug did it, everybody did it," he stated. Outtake footage shows repeated takes of Fairbanks performing the stunt. And the form sliding down those sails in the final print of the film is also Fairbanks. The cervical kyphosis that causes his neck to jut forward at an anterior angle is distinctly recognizable.

Production was not without risks. Fairbanks separated a rib from his sternum in early October, while lifting Dove. He also experienced an accidental slice to his arm shooting a fight sequence with Randolph, and another gash perilously close to his left eye

while filming with fencing master Fred Cavens (who stood in for his opponents in over-the-shoulder shots.) Outtakes reveal him scowling in annoyance at the first injury (complete with expletive); for the second, however, he had studio guests, and upon the scene being halted, he turned to the visitors and cheerfully exclaimed, "Pirates always were a bloody lot." The public Doug never scowled.

While preproduction lasted six months, filming took only nine weeks, five of which were devoted to exteriors. Fairbanks purchased and had restored an 1877 clipper ship, the *Llewellyn J. Morse*, but it wasn't the only ship in the shoot: a reproduction Spanish galleon was built, as well as a one hundred foot-long galley. Location shooting was twenty-five miles off the coast of Catalina Island.

The film was a tremendous success. "The Black Pirate" enjoyed a tight story that contained every archetype of pirate tales without an overly complex plot. Only seventy-eight intertitles were required to tell the story. But this was part of the film's strength. It was a fable, pure and simple, a Howard Pyle-inspired tale of buried treasure chests and heroes forced to walk the plank. It was, perhaps, Doug's last truly joyous production.

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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