

The Sex Life of the Polyp

By Steve Massa

Essayist, theatre critic, and Algonquin Round Table regular Robert Benchley made his first movie appearance in 1928. Although his focus was on writing, Benchley had been performing mock lectures in the character of a bumbling speaker since his days in college. The routine was known as “The Treasurer’s Report,” and he first officially performed it in 1922 for the Algonquin’s amateur production “No Siree!” It was a highlight of the show and afterwards Irving Berlin and producer Sam Harris persuaded him to do it in the 1923 edition of their annual Broadway show “The Music Box Revue.” Making a huge hit there, Benchley was in demand and after 273 performances in the revue he went on a ten week vaudeville tour with the piece. When sound hit the motion picture industry he was tapped to put it on film.

This was not Benchley’s first brush with the movies. In 1926 he had gone to Hollywood to work on the titles of the Raymond Griffith feature comedy “You’d Be Surprised.” He stayed on to contribute “additional material” for early talkie scripts and was approached by Thomas Chalmers of the Fox Pictures Corporation to put “The Treasurer’s Report” on film. Made in early 1928 in Astoria, Long Island, it was extremely successful, so much so that Benchley did a sequel almost immediately.

“The Sex Life of the Polyp” was released in July of 1928, and while similar in presentation to the earlier short, in “Polyp” Benchley gives his talk to a ladies group and uses slides to help illustrate his points. The simplicity of his presentation was perfect for the limitations of early sound technology, and as with many of Benchley’s future shorts the original idea came from his essays. The source material here borrows from the pieces “The Social Life of the Newt,” “Do Insects Think?” and “Polyp with a Past.” After the popular success of these first two entries, he quickly made four more shorts for Fox. From there he took a bit of a break from appearing onscreen and concentrated on dialogue writing.

In 1933 he started turning up in character bits in features, but his acting career kicked into high gear after he made the short “How to sleep” (1935) for MGM. It was a huge hit that won the Academy Award for best live-action short subject. MGM then set him up with his own

regular series of “How To...” comedies, where he took his everyman hero, Joe Doakes, through the pitfalls and minefields of everyday life. Classics of the series include

“How to be a Detective” (1936), “The Romance of Digestion” (1937), and “A Night at the Movies” (1937). The one-reel length was ideal for Benchley’s droll observations, and many of the shorts were directed by Roy Rowland who later went on to helm the cult classic “The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T” (1953).

In the early 1940s Benchley would take his series to Paramount and then briefly return to MGM. By then he had become an extremely popular movie commodity appearing in character roles in big features like “Foreign Correspondent” (1940), “The Major and the Minor,” “I Married a Witch” (both 1942), and “Week-End at the Waldorf” (1945). Sadly as his film career accelerated so did his drinking, and his writing, which had always been of the utmost importance to him, dwindled to nothing. More and more in demand, Benchley died in Hollywood of a cerebral hemorrhage on November 21, 1945.

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

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Robert Benchley in a photo promoting his appearance at New York’s Selwyn Theatre in 1928, the same year of the series “Polyp” was released. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection