

Wild and Woolly

By Steve Massa

Remembered today as the cinema's original swashbuckler for sword-crossed epics such as "The Three Musketeers" ('21), and "The Black Pirate" ('26), Douglas Fairbanks is also noted as a founder of United Artists, and husband of Mary Pickford, with whom he reigned as the King and Queen of Hollywood in the 1920s. What's generally forgotten about Fairbanks is that he first became a film star as a comedian.

He was born Douglas Ulman in 1883. His father, Charles H. Ulman, was a prominent New York lawyer who met Doug's mother when he helped her settle the estate of her recently deceased first husband John Fairbanks, and obtain a divorce after a terrible second marriage. Unfortunately the elder Ulman deserted the family five years later, so Mrs. Ulman went back to the name Fairbanks, giving it to Douglas and his older brother Robert. In love with the theatre, Douglas got himself kicked out of school so that he could go on the stage. He began his career in 1899 at the age of sixteen by joining a Shakespearian touring company, and made his Broadway debut only a year later. Doug spent the next fourteen years becoming one of the theatre's best light leading men. One of his stage successes, 1913's "The New Henrietta," was made into the film "The Saphead" ('20) with Buster Keaton playing Doug's original role.

Fairbanks, naturally athletic and rambunctious, was always in motion due to a restless streak and was looking for new worlds to conquer. In 1915 the movies beckoned. The Triangle Film Corporation was bringing well-known stage stars to Hollywood – names like Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, DeWolfe Hopper, Billie Burke, Weber and Fields, Raymond Hitchcock, and Douglas Fairbanks. When Doug arrived in California his larger-than-life personality took everyone aback (particularly D.W. Griffith), but he soon found that he was able to express himself physically on film in ways that he never could on the stage, and was an immediate hit with audiences. In 1917 he set up his own production company with distribution through Paramount Pictures, and alternated smart, satirical comedies with light-hearted action vehicles.

"Wild and Woolly" was written and directed by the team of John Emerson and Anita Loos. Doug had worked with them at Triangle and took them with him when he set up his own company. Anita Loos was an ex-child actress who was enamored of films and put together a story which she sent to the Biograph Company. It was bought and made by D.W. Griffith as "The New York Hat" ('12), and she continued submitting stories until Griffith hired her full time in 1914. Broadway actor John Emerson had worked for the Shuberts and Charles Frohman and had been hired by Triangle to act in and direct dramas. The pair first collaborated with Fairbanks on "His Picture in the Papers" ('16), and its breezy and satiric tone was perfect

for his tongue-in-cheek personality. They also did "Down to Earth," "Reaching for the Moon," and "In Again – Out Again" (all '17) with Doug before moving on to write for Constance Talmadge.

Loos later wrote her famous novel "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," and in the 1930s she and Emerson wrote MGM films such as "The Girl from Missouri" ('34) and "San Francisco" ('36).

Seeking greater control, Fairbanks co-founded United Artists in 1919 with Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and D.W. Griffith to produce and distribute their films. Having flirted with swashbuckling in comedies like "A Modern Musketeer" ('18), Doug took the plunge to serious sword-play in 1920 with "The Mark of Zorro." Its huge success convinced him to continue, and light-hearted action adventure films like "Robin Hood" ('22) and "The Thief of Bagdad" ('24) followed.

After "The Gaucho" ('28) talking films were on the horizon and Fairbanks made his last silent swashbuckler "The Iron Mask" ('29), which today seems like an elegant elegy for his career. Sound film affected Doug very much as it did Buster Keaton – they seemed boxed in, unable to give the incredible physical performances that were the whole point of their silent films. Suddenly the quicksilver musketeer seemed middle-aged and listless. He continued making films for a while but eventually grew disinterested, and after divorcing Mary Pickford spent much of his time abroad. His rousing adventures ended quietly at age fifty-six in 1939.

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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