

Lionel Barrymore

BY BOB KOLOSOSKI

What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer. If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. Merry Christmas. Bah! Humbug!



Lionel Barrymore had been performing on the stage, the silent screen, and in talking motion pictures for a quarter century when he first played the role of Ebenezer Scrooge in a radio version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

It was a role he was born to play. And he would play it almost every year until he died in 1954.

Lionel Barrymore came from a distinguished American theatrical family. His father, Maurice Barrymore was an extremely popular star of the legitimate American theatre. Maurice married Georgiana Drew and they had three children: Lionel, born in 1878; Ethel, born in 1879; and John, born in 1882.

Each Barrymore child pursued acting as a career and each carved out a niche in cinema history. Ethel was aloof and took seriously her title as "the first lady of the American stage." John was a gifted actor

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who let alcohol and lack of internal fortitude destroy his career, and thus his life. Lionel was the reincarnation of the Renaissance man. He was a talented actor, a dedicated artist, and a composer of symphony music, as well as an author and a well-respected motion picture director.

Lionel's desire to achieve high artistic goals was curtailed by his physical frailties and an often hectic movie-making schedule. He wanted to paint and create etchings because the satisfaction he experienced from his art was far greater than the fame he had received as a celebrated Broadway actor. He and his siblings were all Broadway stars at the turn of the century, but in 1906 Lionel and his wife Doris Rankin left New York for Paris where he was determined to study and master the techniques of fine art. He returned to New York in 1909, penniless and resigned to the fact that art, although his passion, was to be his hobby and acting his reluctant profession.

He scored an immediate success in an

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Arthur Conan Doyle play, *Fires of Fate*, but he had to leave the show at the height of its popularity because of an appendicitis operation and grief over the death of his year-old daughter. He was at a low point in his life with his ambition for stage-acting at rock bottom. It took the genius of motion picture director/producer D. W. Griffith to snatch the eldest Barrymore from the clutches of depression and introduce him to an exciting new medium.

Lionel Barrymore felt that motion pictures could be the art form of the twentieth century and he was, in 1912, a true pioneer along with his new comrades and film co-stars Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish. His creative spirit was renewed and he began to write screenplays for Griffith at the Biograph Studios. By 1914 Griffith left Biograph in hopes of producing a film that ran more than the typical two reels and Lionel left a year later to find free-lance work in the motion picture business. He was constantly besieged by theatrical producers to return to the stage, but he was enjoying the pace of movie-making and resisted all tempting offers until 1918 when

he was lured back to Broadway to co-star with his brother John in an adaptation of DeMaurier's *Peter Ibbetson*. Next he agreed to star in *The Copperhead*, a tremendous hit. When Paramount filmed *The Copperhead* in 1920, Barrymore starred in the screen version of his Broadway triumph. The film was a huge success and he was signed to star in *Macbeth* on Broadway.

In 1921 he agreed to star in an adaptation of the French play *The Claw*. His wife Doris Rankin was chosen to play his daughter and the role of the "evil" woman was played by a minor actress named Irene Fenwick. While the play was on tour it became apparent to Doris that Irene was a wicked woman in real life, for Irene was actively trying to steal Lionel away from Doris. Doris left the play—and Lionel—and divorced him in 1922. Lionel and Irene were wed in 1923 in Rome, Italy where he was shooting the film *The Eternal City*.

When that film was completed, the newlywed couple settled in New York where Lionel had many stage offers. In 1924 and 1925 he starred in three flop plays, prompting him to seek employment again in California where his brother John was under

contract to Warner Brothers, making over \$250,000 per year. Lionel decided to free-lance and starred in nine films in quick succession. Louis B. Mayer of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, a shrewd businessman and a bit of a scoundrel, convinced Lionel that if he signed with MGM he would have more time for his paintings. He signed, but what Mayer knew that Bar-



A Free Soul (1931)
Lionel Barrymore and Norma Shearer

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Rasputin and the Empress (1932)
Lionel, Ethel and John Barrymore

PHOTOFEST

Barrymore didn't, was that his new star could be loaned out to other studios and reap a small fortune for his exclusive services. Barrymore didn't have as much time for paintings as Mayer promised, because in his first year at MGM he starred in films with Greta Garbo, John Gilbert, and even Napoleon the Wonder Dog. Gloria Swanson paid MGM more for Lionel's services in her film version of *Rain* than MGM paid Lionel for the entire year.

When talking films were introduced, the studios were eager to invest in the new technology and Lionel found that he was wanted by several studios. MGM loaned him to Warner Brothers for *The Lion and the Mouse* after which he had to return to MGM to reshoot a silent film as a talkie, adding a considerable amount of dialogue. Louis B. Mayer believed that Lionel could be even more valuable to the studio as a director and in 1930 announced that Barrymore would direct the newest version of *Madame X*.

Lionel worked hard to convey the art of dialogue to a cast of movie actors and was rewarded with a critical hit. Mayer was so impressed that he rushed Barrymore into a new film. The studio had spent a considerable sum of money on John Gilbert's first

talking film, but they were forced to shelve it because Gilbert's high-pitched voice ruined the romantic image he had created as a silent star. MGM executives hoped that Lionel could create a miracle and save Gilbert's career. Lionel directed Gilbert in *His Glorious Night* and was crushed when the film was laughed at by audiences.

Barrymore's directorial efforts that followed produced a mixed bag of minor successes and big bombs. He had had enough of directing and asked Mayer to let him return to acting.

He was immediately cast as the criminal lawyer in the 1931 film *A Free Soul*. His performance in that film, and in particular in the final scene, was so sincere that audiences wept. He won an Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance in *A Free Soul* and was now the most popular actor on the MGM lot, prompting Mayer to offer him a generous long-term contract. He was given script approval and a salary of \$3,500 per week.

Producer Irving Thalberg was happy that Lionel Barrymore was an MGM contract player because his sights were set on luring Lionel's siblings over to the studio. Thalberg wanted all three Barrymores in one film, but he had to settle for John and Lionel when Ethel rejected his offers. The brothers were cast in the 1932 film *Arsene Lupin*, giving them a chance to steal scenes from one another. The public flocked to theatres to see the two Barrymores in one film.

The overwhelming success and publicity of the film strengthened Thalberg's con-

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fidence that the Barrymores were a box office bonanza. His next project was a grand undertaking because not only were the two Barrymores in the film, but also Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Wallace Berry and Lewis Stone. The film was *Grand Hotel* and it was the most talked about and seen film of 1932. The film's huge success reinforced Thalberg's desire to sign Ethel Barrymore to a picture deal and have all three siblings in one film.

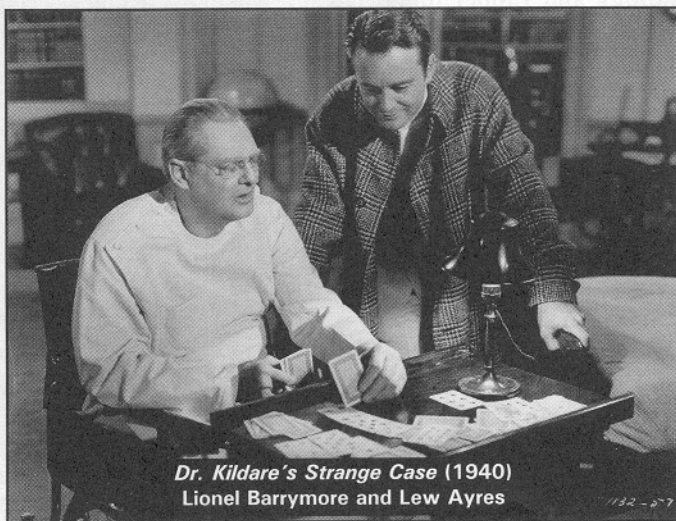
He approached the brothers first with his latest project. It was the story of Rasputin, "the mad monk," with Lionel penciled in to play Rasputin and John to play Prince Paul, a fictional character added to the cast by the screen writers. Thalberg needed someone to play the Empress of Russia. John and Lionel knew their sister had enough regal attitude to be empress of the world. They were sold on the story and convinced Ethel that a family reunion, with pay, was worth her leaving the New York stage for a few weeks. She was in between stage assignments and agreed to the one film.

Rasputin and the Empress was not well-received by the critics but was saved from box office doom by a curious ticket-buying public. Ethel hurried back to Broadway leaving John and Lionel to bask in the California sun. John was using film acting to pay his considerable bills while he concentrated on drinking as his main ambition. Lionel continued to be an asset to MGM with a hec-

tic pace. He appeared in eight films in 1933 including *Dinner at Eight*. He was in demand by the other studios and, of course, by the public.

In 1934 he entered a new medium that would make him one of the most beloved actors in history. The Columbia Broadcasting System asked Lionel Barrymore to portray Ebenezer Scrooge in a lavish one-hour adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. His performance on Christmas Day, 1934 was a study in perfection resulting in his rendition of Scrooge becoming an American Christmas tradition. From 1934 to 1953 he would recreate the character of Scrooge on radio almost every Christmas season. He was absent from the part in 1936 because of the death of his wife Irene, and again in 1938 when he was battling pneumonia.

In 1942 he starred in his own radio series *The Mayor of the Town*, ably supported by Agnes Moorehead. When that series ended in 1948, MGM saw an opportunity to continue its *Dr. Kildare* film series on radio. Lew Ayres was signed to reprise his role of Dr. Kildare and Barrymore continued his role of Dr. Gillespie as he had in fourteen films. Lionel loved radio work



Dr. Kildare's Strange Case (1940)
Lionel Barrymore and Lew Ayres

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It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

Frank Hagney, Lionel Barrymore, Bobbie Anderson, Samuel S. Hinds

PHOTOFEST

because he earned a tidy sum over and above his MGM studio salary.

Lionel's salary, incidentally, from movies or radio was spent as fast as he earned it. When his wife Irene was alive he never denied her any extravagance she desired and her chronic ill health required expensive medical treatment.

He maintained a frantic work schedule. In 1935 and 1936 he appeared in thirteen films including *David Copperfield*, *The Little Colonel*, *Ah, Wilderness*, and *Camille*.

While filming *Camille* Lionel broke his hip after a bad fall sent his heavy drawing table on top of him. It took several weeks for him to recover at home, allowing him to be with his wife as her health deteriorated. When she died on Christmas Day, 1936 he almost succumbed to a nervous breakdown. But strong support from family and friends pulled him through a most difficult time.

He returned to work in 1937 reporting to director Victor Fleming for the Spencer Tracy film *Captains Courageous*. Lionel's part as the strong captain of a fishing boat bolstered his will to continue living and working. Also in the cast were Freddie Bartholomew and a young Mickey Rooney.

In Barrymore's next film he was reunited

with Mickey Rooney who was cast as Andy Hardy opposite Lionel in the role of Andy's father, Judge Hardy. The movie, *A Family Affair* was the first in the most successful movie series. Barrymore did not repeat the role in subsequent Hardy Family films.

Lionel Barrymore was filming *Saratoga* with Jean Harlow

when he tripped on a sound cable and broke his hip once again. He spent months hospitalized, forcing the studio to replace Lionel with Reginald Owen in the MGM version of *A Christmas Carol*, losing the opportunity to place his famous Scrooge characterization on film.

He was still on crutches when he starred in Frank Capra's *You Can't Take It with You*. The resourceful Capra had a broken leg written into the script for Barrymore's character, Grandpa Vanderhof.

For *Young Dr. Kildare* (1938) Lionel was cast as Dr. Gillespie, the crusty old head of surgery. By this time Barrymore needed a wheelchair constantly, so Gillespie was to be a cancer victim who needed a wheelchair. The part of Gillespie became his best remembered movie character and virtually monopolized his career until 1946. He was so identified as the saintly Dr. Gillespie that when Frank Capra cast him as Mr. Potter, the evil banker in *It's a Wonderful Life*, audiences had a difficult time accepting him as a miserly villain.

Barrymore was loaned to David O. Selznik in 1947 to play the part of a stubborn cattle baron in the over-produced western *Duel in the Sun*. He was required to ride a horse but the mere act of mount-

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ing the steed aggravated his hips. He would stay in the saddle for hours to avoid mounting the horse more than once a day. One scene called for Lionel's character to be dragged by his horse. He insisted on doing the scene himself—without a stunt double—and after it was completed he wound up in bed for a week.

MGM stopped the Kildare series in 1946 and didn't have much for Lionel to do in 1948. He appeared in only one film, the Warner production of *Key Largo*. It would prove to be his last great film. He would appear in only seven movies over the last five years of his life. His health was weakening each year and he was almost always in pain. However, he loved to work and approached each new project with enthusiasm. His last film was *Main Street to*

Broadway in which he played himself. His sister Ethel was also in the film and they had a delightful time working together again.

On April 12, 1954 he celebrated his seventy-sixth birthday working at home on one of his etchings. All that year he had worked on a radio series called *The Hallmark Hall of Fame*. After the November 11 broadcast he went directly home because he felt weaker than usual. Four days later he lapsed into a coma and died November 15, 1954.

Lionel Barrymore was mourned by his colleagues and millions of fans. ■

Tune in TWTD December 22 to hear Lionel Barrymore as Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol and January 19 to hear him as Dr. Gillespie on The Story of Dr. Kildare and as The Mayor of the Town.

Barrymore's Scrooge

Lionel Barrymore's 18 radio appearances as Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

- [1] DECEMBER 25, 1934— *Christmas Party*, CBS, sponsored by Nash-Lafayette automobiles.
 - [2] DECEMBER 25, 1935— Special presentation on CBS, sponsored by Campbell Soup.
 - [3] DECEMBER 25, 1937— *Hollywood Hotel*, Campbell Soup, CBS.
 - [4] DECEMBER 24, 1939— *Campbell Playhouse*, CBS.
 - [5] DECEMBER 20, 1940— *Campbell Playhouse*, CBS.
 - [6] DECEMBER 24, 1941— *The Rudy Vallee Show*, sponsored by Sealtest, NBC.
 - [7] DECEMBER 24, 1942— *The Rudy Vallee Show*, Sealtest, NBC.
 - [8] DECEMBER 22, 1943— *Mayor of the Town*, Barrymore's own radio series, sponsored by Lever Brothers on CBS.
 - [9] DECEMBER 23, 1944— *Mayor of the Town*, CBS, sponsored by Noxema.
 - [10] DECEMBER 22, 1945— *Mayor of the Town*, Noxema, CBS.
 - [11] DECEMBER 21, 1946— *Mayor of the Town*, Noxema, CBS.
 - [12] DECEMBER 24, 1947— *Mayor of the Town*, Noxema, CBS.
 - [13] DECEMBER 25, 1948— *Christmas Festival*, Wrigley's Gum, CBS.
 - [14] DECEMBER 25, 1949— Special presentation for the first time on the Mutual Broadcasting System, sponsored by Capehart TV dealers.
 - [15] DECEMBER 24, 1950— Special presentation on Mutual, sponsored by various advertisers. Andrew McCann Plumbing and Heating was the Chicago sponsor on WGN.
 - [16] DECEMBER 23, 1951— A syndicated presentation, with A. O. Smith Water Heater Dealers sponsoring in Chicago on WGN.
 - [17] DECEMBER 21, 1952— *Hallmark Playhouse*, a program he is now hosting on CBS.
 - [18] DECEMBER 20, 1953— *Hallmark Playhouse*, CBS. Barrymore's final performance as Ebenezer Scrooge.
- DECEMBER 15, 1954— A recording of the 1953 broadcast of "A Christmas Carol" was presented in tribute to Lionel Barrymore who died a month before his scheduled performance on the Hallmark Playhouse on CBS.

—Todd Nebel, *Nostalgia Digest*, Dec. 1990