FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Biography

Douglas Fairbanks
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Douglas Fairbanks, Charles Chaplin, and Mary Pickford were among Hollywood's first superstars. Not only were they the first to actually build and live in the Hollywood Hills, but they also constructed a major industry with the sheer force of pantomime.

Of the three, however, Fairbanks is the least understood and appreciated. As an actor, and later a director and producer who preferred spectacle and action, his films may, ironically, feel the most dated. But, as Vance writes in the prologue to this serious biography, "A close examination of Fairbanks's oeuvre amply demonstrates that he was the dominant creative force in the production of superlative films and a gifted comic actor who made the transition from satirist to swashbuckler."

Fairbanks made his professional stage debut in 1900. He was seventeen, and enthusiasm was no match for his inexperience. As a Duluth newspaper reported: "Mr. Warde's supporting company was bad, but worst of all was Douglas Fairbank…" Four years later, married and with a young son, a cameraman stopped the family in Central Park and invited the Broadway actor to do a spontaneous screen test. Fairbanks happily jumped over a park bench. A few weeks later, Harry E. Aitken, the producer of the soon to be released blockbuster *The Birth of a Nation*, saw the test and offered to hire Fairbanks for $2,000 a week.

Arriving at 4500 Sunset Boulevard in 1915, Fairbanks signed a contract that stipulated that all his films were to be personally supervised by director D.W. Griffith. Griffith was far from pleased with the acrobatic actor. "He's got a head like a cantaloupe and can't act." Fairbanks himself remembered that "D.W. didn't like my athletic tendencies. Or my spontaneous habit of jumping a fence or scaling a church at unexpected moments which were

not in the script." Fairbanks' first film, *The Lamb*, however, was a complete success.

Three more years of hits, and Fairbanks looked like he was on top of his game. Privately, life was tumultuous: he'd fallen in love with "America's Sweetheart," Mary Pickford. Divorce followed quickly, and it was while the pair was on route to a European honeymoon that Pickford read the story that would give her new husband both a vehicle and a purpose for the rest of his career. The story was called "The Curse of Capistrano," and it became *The Mark of Zorro. Zorro* was followed by *The Three Musketeers*, and then *Douglas Fairbanks in Robin Hood*. But *The Thief of Baghdad* is generally recognized as his greatest artistic triumph.

Besides his creative direction, Fairbanks, with Chaplin, Griffin, and Pickford, founded the film production and distribution studio, United Artists. He was also a founder and first president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and encouraged the study and preservation of film. *Douglas Fairbanks* is without doubt a serious biography of one of the pioneers of cinema, but it's also the history of an industry that, even then crossed the frontiers of states and continents like no other art form to unite people through pageant, drama, and humor. This biography boasts extensive notes, a bibliography and filmography, and a list of Fairbanks' Broadway appearances. Almost all of the magnificent photographs are from the collections of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

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