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On Being A Barrymore



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Ethel and Lionel and John. The Barrymores. "We were the Royal Family of Theater," John said. "And I was the clown prince."

Known for his antics, his ribald wisecracks, and his exorbitant drinking, John Barrymore was also celebrated for his charismatic good looks and dramatic skills---especially after he graduated from fluffy light comedy to the

heights of Shakespeare.

All these aspects of his life in "the family business" show up in William Luce's 1996 play, *Barrymore*, which is now being presented in Los Angeles by the Good People Theater Company in association with the Greenway Arts Alliance. When the play was first presented on Broadway in 1997 its star, Christopher Plummer, won a Tony, a Drama Desk, and an Outer Critics Circle award for the role.

This current production stars Gordon Goodman, and I don't think Christopher Plummer could have done it better. Goodman has the looks and the mannerisms that we associate with John Barrymore, having become familiar with them on old late-night movies on TV.

As Janet Miller, founding artistic director of the Good People Theater Company and director

of this, their second production, said in a company press release, “This show is risky. You’ve got to have the right actor---someone who’s Barrymore-handsome and who can believably disappear into the role. The decision was easy. It was either Gordon Goodman, or pick another show.”

Goodman is mesmerizing from the moment he walks onstage, mixes himself a drink, and prepares to run lines from *Richard III*. With him, but backstage and never seen until the curtain call, is his loyal stage manager and prompter, Frank, played by Matt Franta.

It is 1942 and Barrymore, at 60, is trying to reprise the role that made him a star in 1920, when he was 38. “I need to be taken seriously once more,” he says.

He starts with the first line: “Now is the winter of our discontent...” but needs prompting from the first word. And so, to Frank’s growing concern, and to keep from acknowledging that he doesn’t remember the lines, Barrymore prances around the stage, pouring himself another drink, and telling anecdotes about his friends and family.

He imitates his sister Ethel and his brother Lionel flawlessly, as well as his good friend W.C. Fields. About Lionel he says, “He felt bad when he felt better.” And he quotes Ethel as characterizing New York as “Sodom with subways” and Los Angeles as “Gomorrhah with palm trees.”

He talks about Louella Parsons, the Hollywood gossip columnist, saying, “I don’t like Louella and I always will.”

From time to time he breaks into a Shakespearean monologue: *Hamlet*’s “To Be Or Not to Be” speech and his “What a piece of work is a man” speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

He tells of his four wives and his short marriages, and of his second wife, Blanche Oelrichs, who became known as “Michael Strange” and has been the subject of many speculations about her sexuality.

In a burst of braggadocio he trumpets, “My greatest regret is that I can’t sit out in the audience and watch *me* perform.”

But in the end, he finally breaks down. Reciting lines that mirror his emotional conflicts and despair, he confesses that he is “waylaid by regrets.”

“A man isn’t old,” he says, “until regrets take the place of dreams.”

And having acknowledged that his acting career is finished and his life, as he knew it, is over, he doffs his fedora and strolls jauntily off stage.

A month later, he was dead.

Barrymore can be seen Fridays at 8 pm, Saturdays at 2 and 8 pm, and Sundays at 7 through December 1st at the Greenway Court Theater, 544 N. Fairfax (between Melrose and Beverly), Los Angeles. Call 323-655-7679 x100 for tickets.

Photo: Gordon Goodman as John Barrymore

Photo by Kimberly Fox