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# John Barrymore Attempts a Comeback

By **Steven Leigh Morris** Thursday, Nov 14 2013

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Actor [John Barrymore](#), star of theater and screen for a quarter of a century until his death in 1942, was thrown out of prep school after having been seen entering a brothel. This detail isn't in [William Luce's](#) 1996 two-person show based on the actor's reminiscences, *Barrymore*, though the play does have the title character mention a scene in which young John fetched his own father home from a brothel.

*Barrymore* is being staged by [Good People Theater Company](#) at Greenway Arts Alliance. [Janet Miller](#) directs this genial curiosity of a performance with craft and wit.

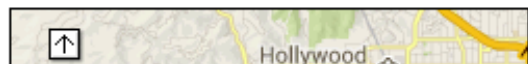
Whether the younger Barrymore was dismissed from his prep school for rescuing his dad or for engaging a prostitute's services goes unanswered in Luce's play. Yet this ambiguity is fitting for the depiction of a man suffering from memory loss. (By 1942, Barrymore may well have been in the throes of the then-unnamed and little-understood Alzheimer's disease. He died from the complications of liver and heart ailments.)



PHOTO BY KIMBERLY FOX

Gordon Goodman as Barrymore

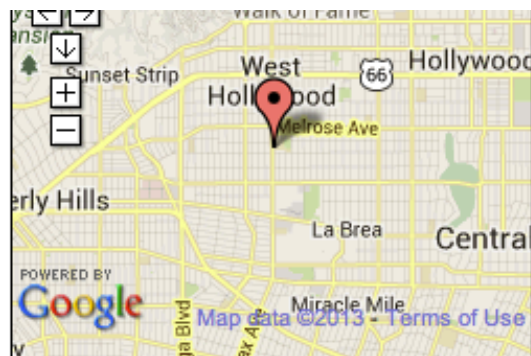
### Location Info



[Christopher Plummer](#) played the title role in the play on Broadway 16 years ago (as well as here at the [Ahmanson](#) and in a 2011 film adaptation). And though [Gordon Goodman](#) lacks Plummer's gravitas, he nonetheless offers a command and commanding performance that's impish and tragic. He tosses off the play's many ribald jokes and one-liners with aplomb, and has a winking, wry rapport with the audience, between recitations from *Richard III* — which sometimes morphs into *Hamlet*.

Drifting from one play to another doesn't bother Barrymore as much as it does the prompter, Frank ([Matt Franta](#)), whom Barrymore has hired to guide him through this production of *Richard III*, his last hurrah. Frank remains an offstage voice, guiding and goading with growing impatience, accusing the fallen star of being lazy and irreverent of the text that he's aiming to perform.





## Greenway Court Theater

544 N. Fairfax Ave.  
Los Angeles, CA 90036

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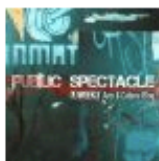


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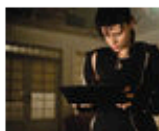
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Frank is a young man and a self-described homosexual — such an admission is a mark of his bravery in the play's 1942 setting, juxtaposed against Barrymore's cowardice. Between bouts of annoyance, Frank reminds Barrymore that as Richard and as Hamlet he was once not "good" but "great."

With these words, Goodman's posture straightens. For a fleeting moment, dignity and pride return in flickers to the actor who has hitherto been dosing himself with shots of bourbon, and who can't remember entire sections of the play that once thrust him to stardom and now has driven him to his knees:

"Line, line LINE!"

"Don't tell me! ... Tell me!"

**Scott Walewski's** set design let us know directly that this is one of "those plays" — about the theater. The stage floor is a, well, a stage floor. There's a prop bin containing swords and sheaths, and a costume rack — both situated on the stage floor. Center stage is the throne of Richard III, a role Barrymore is rehearsing to play a mere one month before his death. There isn't any biographical support for this encore performance. It is Luce's conceit that resides somewhere between a convenience and a contrivance.

The heart of the matter is an actor, born into America's "royal family" of actors, the black sheep of his own family (which included brother

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Lionel and sister Ethel), the one who "sold out" the family's legacy of theater in order to get rich in Hollywood. He squandered those riches on four impetuous marriages and the cost of four divorces and alcohol; now, in the midst of such profound memory loss that for years he's been unable to perform a movie role without cue cards, he's aching and straining to find the significance of his life. He is also unable to concentrate, except on his own personal recollections, which punctuate his attempted rehearsal.

Poignantly, he recites his father's self-written epitaph:

"He walked beneath the stars; and slept beneath the sun. He lived a life of going-to-do; and died with nothing done."

Staging the play in 1997 on Broadway made it an homage to the ephemeral life of the theater. But in 1997 New York, audiences understood what that meant.

In 2013 Los Angeles — where putting on any play at all is an act of defiance against the broader culture of indifference to the theater — the performance takes on added significance. Barrymore's loss of memory becomes an allegory for our entertainment culture's larger amnesia.

Here Barrymore name-drops the likes of [W.C. Fields](#) and playwright [Ned Sheldon](#) to a crowd in which at least half of its university students have no idea even who [Arthur Miller](#) was. This renders the play both a curio and a weirdly ironic sliver of performance art.

It's a fusty, dusty tribute to a man and to an art form that once trafficked in fame, and now have been largely relegated to anecdotes of antiquated glories. There's something harrowingly moving about that.

**BARRYMORE** | By William Luce | Presented by Good People Theater Company in association with Greenway Arts Alliance, 544 N. Fairfax Ave., Fairfax District | Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; through Dec. 1 | (323) 655-7679 | [greenwayarts.org](http://greenwayarts.org)