

Lionel Barrymore
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One of cinema's most respected and enduring character actors, Oscar-winner Lionel Barrymore's 45-year film career tallied more than 200 movie credits. Remembered for his annual portrayal of Ebenezer Scrooge in radio dramatizations of "A Christmas Carol" and for his work in the popular *Dr. Kildare* film series, Lionel Barrymore died on November 15th, 1954, hours before a scheduled appearance on *The Hallmark Hall of Fame* radio show.

Born on April 28th, 1878, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Lionel Barrymore was born Lionel Herbert Blythe, the oldest child of acclaimed stage performer Maurice Blythe who had gained fame as Maurice Barrymore, and his actress wife Georgina "Georgie" Drew, the daughter of celebrated actor John Drew. All of that family's third generation of thespians, Lionel, Ethel and John Barrymore allegedly aspired to careers away from the footlights, but were forced into the family vocation. Lionel, like his siblings, was afforded a private education and travel (he and his brother John both studied fine art in Paris), but was thrust onto the stage at an early age.

While his younger brother was endowed with aquiline, leading man looks and Ethel regal height and Patrician features, Lionel's craggy appearance lent him an air of severity and maturity beyond his years. Barrymore's seeming lack of physical attributes proved a boon, along with his willingness to take risks and invest himself wholeheartedly into deep character. During his early years on stage, Barrymore's own father often cast him in roles as his brother's father, though Lionel and John were only separated by four years. While John Barrymore found his niche in Shakespeare, Lionel was acclaimed for his interpretation of more modern works, notably in Broadway productions of "Peter Ibbetson" and "The Copperhead".

Barrymore launched his film career in New York in 1911, translating many of his celebrated stage roles into silent films produced by the American Biograph company. Working with the New York studios allowed Barrymore to work in both live and film productions, and he appeared in better than 85 silent films between his first role in 1911 (*The Miser's Heart*) and the advent of "talkies" in 1929. Contracted to MGM Studios around 1926, Barrymore left the New York stage for good to relocate to Culver City, California. Lionel Barrymore ultimately spent a quarter of a century under contract to MGM, lending his talents to more than 100 feature films, as well as bringing new talent into MGM's stable of film stars. Among his "discoveries" were his lifelong friend and frequent co-star Clark Gable, who he met when he was still a rough-edged ex-oilfield worker. Gable and Barrymore frequently supported each other's performances in films that included *Test Pilots* and *Saratoga*, a film that marked the loss of their friend and co-star Jean Harlow who died during its completion.

Barrymore also brought his errant and flamboyant brother John and later his sister Ethel to MGM for Ethel's "talkie" debut and the family's only joint project, the epic *Rasputin and the Empress*. The siblings occasionally worked together; John and Lionel appeared in such works as *Dinner at Eight*, *Grand Hotel* and *Arsene Lupin* but rarely had scenes together, while Lionel and Ethel's most notable teaming came 20 years after *Rasputin* in the 1953 effort *Main Street to Broadway*. The role proved to be Lionel Barrymore's last on film.

Fellow actors, audiences, and directors best enjoyed Barrymore's diversity, and while his beetle brows, stooped posture (a product of arthritis that afflicted him early in life) and severe features cast him as a curmudgeon or a venerable grandfather, he took his forte into a wide variety of films. Barrymore's performance as a debauched lawyer in *A Free Soul* (1931, with Gable) earned him an Oscar, and provided a contrast to the stern but kind father of Mickey

Rooney's Andy Hardy in *A Family Affair*. It was a considerably different pairing than their co-starring roles in *Captains Courageous*, which featured Spencer Tracy in his first Oscar-winning role. Barrymore bounced from high seas drama to the light *A Yank at Oxford*, an MGM project filmed in England which introduced Americans to Vivien Leigh. His leading ladies included such screen luminaries as Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, and, in 1935's *The Little Colonel* a much younger actress- Shirley Temple.

While Barrymore's forbidding looks lent force to such sinister fare as the Bela Lugosi thriller *Mark of the Vampire* and as the heartless skinflint who drove Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey to attempt suicide in *It's A Wonderful Life*, audiences seemed able to disassociate his nasty turns and embraced him as the all bark and no bite benefactors he often portrayed with top child stars. In films that included *David Copperfield* (with Freddie Bartholomew), *Treasure Island* with young Jackie Cooper, or *On Borrowed Time* with Bobs Watson, Barrymore proved kindly, if not on screen, then with his young costars off camera.

At least some of Lionel Barrymore's most recognized screen traits were not wholly affectations. His weariness and grudging affection for children may have been born of the loss of his own daughters, Mary and Ethel, each of whom died before reaching the age of 3. His frequent portrayals of crippled characters, including the wheelchair bound Dr. Gillespie of the *Dr. Kildare* films and their radio series spinoffs were created to accommodate the actor's own painful bone deterioration from a hip injury and debilitating arthritis. It was only with extreme difficulty that Barrymore was able to complete such late 1940s films as *Key Largo* with Humphrey Bogart and he often opted to work off camera as a narrator (as in *Dragon Seed*, starring Katherine Hepburn) or in radio theater.

Despite a roaring good time in the Roaring Twenties, Barrymore's life and losses left him a sober and venerable member of the Hollywood community. Yet outside it, immersing himself in art as a talented painter and engraver, writing (he authored the novel *Mr. Cantowine* as well as the memoir *We Barrymores* and several of his own early film scripts) and composing music. Twice married, Lionel Barrymore's second wife, actress Irene Fenwick died on Christmas Eve, 1936, the year the actor began his annual tradition of portraying Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol", a tradition carried out most notably with Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater players.

Lionel Barrymore never remarried and after suffering a fatal heart attack on November 15th, 1954 in Van Nuys, California, he was buried beside his wife, Irene Fenwick Barrymore and his brother, John Barrymore, at Hollywood's Calvary Cemetery. At his death, Lionel Barrymore's survivors included his sister Ethel Barrymore, his niece Diana Barrymore, and his nephew, John Drew Barrymore.

Lionel Barrymore is entombed in the Calvary Cemetery in East Los Angeles, California. He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 1724 Vine Street.