

# John Barrymore

Actor (1882–1942)



He is pictured on the U. S. stamp with siblings Lionel and Ethel.

Barrymore was frequently called the greatest actor of his generation. A member of a multi-generation theatrical dynasty, he was the brother of Lionel and Ethel Barrymore, and is the paternal grandfather of Drew Barrymore.

Barrymore was born in Philadelphia but he and his brother Lionel spent much of their youth on their father's farm on Long Island. His academic career was cut short when he was expelled from Georgetown Prep School in 1898 for smoking a cigarette.

He courted showgirl Evelyn Nesbit in 1901 and 1902 and, when Nesbit became pregnant, Barrymore proposed marriage. But STANFORD WHITE intervened and arranged for her to undergo an abortion, disguised as an operation for "appendicitis."

Barrymore specialized in light comedies until a friend, playwright EDWARD SHELDON, convinced him to try serious drama. He created a sensation in John Galsworthy's *Justice* (1916) co-starring Cathleen Nesbitt. He followed this triumph with Broadway successes in *Peter Ibbetson* (1917), a role his father Maurice had wanted to play, Tolstoy's *Redemption* (1918), *The Jest* (1919), co-starring his brother Lionel, and *Richard III* in 1920. Barrymore had his greatest theatrical success with *Hamlet* in 1922, which he then took to London in 1925.

In 1913, Barrymore entered silent films, and when talking pictures arrived, Barrymore's stage-trained voice added a new dimension to his screen work. He was suspended from the Century in 1938 for non-payment of dues, but then was reinstated a year later after he sent a check accompanied by a reportedly witty missive: the check was cashed; the letter, alas, was lost.

Barrymore collapsed while appearing on a radio show in 1942 and died days later. According to Errol Flynn's memoirs, film director Raoul Walsh "borrowed" Barrymore's body after the funeral, and left his corpse propped in a chair for a drunken Flynn to discover when he returned home. Walsh confirms the story in the documentary *The Men Who Made the Movies*. Barrymore was survived by three children from four marriages.