

From 1937–38...



David Niven snapped this photo of Flynn and an ardent admirer aboard *Sirocco* in 1938. Honeys always found their way on board anytime Errol could shake himself free of Lili. (Photo Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

With the script written, thoughts about casting begin while *The Adventures of Robin Hood* is on location at Chico fighting the rains and the flu. As of October 1937, the thinking is that freelancer Fredric March would portray the unscrupulous Robert Lansford. March is a J.L. favorite and hot off the successful screwball *Nothing Sacred* with comedy queen Carole Lombard. The original plan has March leading a Warner Bros. cast that includes Miriam Hopkins as Jean Christy, Pat O'Brien as Patterson Buckley, and Joan Blondell as Lorri Dillingwell. But timing goes haywire and Fredric March, off shooting *The Buccaneer* for Paramount, is unavailable, which throws a monkey wrench in the works and sets off a scramble to find funny people to populate the funny script. Lombard had been on the Warner lot during

the *Robin Hood* production cycle making a screwball called *Fools for Scandal*, and there was talk of putting her on contract, but *Fools* will bomb upon release and nothing comes of a Lombard-Warner Bros. pact.

Put-upon swashbuckler Errol Flynn has been crying to get out of the tights and down off the horse, and the project he pitches to Warner and Wallis is *Cyrano de Bergerac*. J.L. thinks to himself: *Only Flynn would have the balls to go after a part with comedy and gut-wrenching tragedy and tender romance. The only parts of it that Flynn could possibly handle are the costumes and the swordplay.* J.L. knows that *Cyrano* calls for more of an actor than Errol Flynn dreams of being.

The truth is that Flynn doesn't particularly like himself. He will say at the end of his life, "I have been tired of this face for a long time."¹ But it's not the face he dislikes. Oh, no. The face works. He will own all his pictures in 16mm and watch them endlessly and marvel at the face. Happy, sad, brave, sorry, boyish, impudent, lustful, but mostly brave, the face scores every time. But the soul—the soul is ugly, Flynn suspects, and the soul suits *Cyrano's* deformity. What Flynn fails to understand

is that *Cyrano's* face is ugly but his soul is divine—that's the point of the Rostand work. Flynn sees only the opportunity to put a rubber nose on the face and become something grotesque.

Warner and Wallis know better than that, so they will put Flynn in a comedy, and, of course, Livvie has to go where Flynn goes to assure box office. Livvie is a case unto herself. Far from the "always a lady" image that evolves in the 1970s and beyond, a few years into the picture business, de Havilland has picked up a rough side in her long days and weeks on soundstages. She has evolved into something of a minor-league Lombard, she the dean of the epithet, a trait that helps her fit in with the male-dominated production crews. Lombard knows that if you want the guys to

make you look good—light you right and make you up right and shoot you right—you have to get in good with them. Perhaps this is Livvie’s intention as well. Says Hollywood historian John McElwee of the Warner Bros. bloopers of the ‘30s and ‘40s: “One clip finds Olivia blowing a line with Paul Henreid as they’re shooting *Devotion*. ‘Son-of-a-bitch!’ she exclaims, giving each syllable the benefit of her precise, measured delivery. She really stole my heart with that one.”²

Errol’s friend Steve Hayes would be a guest at the Flynn home. “I was looking at pictures from *Robin Hood*,” Hayes remembers, “and I was saying, ‘Oh my God, de Havilland! What a pure creature!’ and Flynn laughed and said, ‘Have you ever met her?’ I said no. He said, ‘You will; I’ll introduce you to her... But beware; it’s like talking to a sailor. She can really give it to you.’” Hayes, a Hollywood bit player and writer, says of the ribald Livvie: “I was always stunned because she and her sister, Joan Fontaine—

both of them seemed so refined but they had as bad a mouth as Ava Gardner. I was on a movie over at Fox and she was in the commissary in costume for *My Cousin Rachel*. I overheard her, ‘That so-and-so.’ I thought, ‘Boy, Errol was right!’”³

But Hollywood will do that. It’s a town populated by ambitious businessmen, by course tradesmen on the soundstages, and by a galaxy of stars—many, if not most, coming from rough backgrounds, and all expert at *not* being or sometimes even knowing themselves, including Olivia, who will say later, “...it is very hard for me to tell who I am, because I really don’t know.”⁴

So, here are all these people, good looking or they wouldn’t be on the screen, adept at putting on facades, and turned loose in the area running from Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades to the west to Glendale and Pasadena to the east, and that exotic area becomes an island controlled by the studios who control the stars. The studios also con-

At least the extras are having fun. Olivia de Havilland sits at left, with Patric Knowles next to her. A standing Rosalind Russell gazes at Errol Flynn. All four stars are coming off illness, and de Havilland is throwing tantrums. But the Flynn-de Havilland scenes have some sizzle.



M'Lord?" She uses that moment to try to seduce him away. After the audience has spent an hour watching Flynn as Essex romancing the Universal Horror Queen, the sight of 22-year-old Lady Penelope of the low-cut gown is one for sore eyes, and yet even after 70 years, the silent treatment she has endured shows onscreen. She is detached as Penelope; she hits her marks by looking right at them. She recites her lines like a pro, but reveals nothing about her character. Lady Penelope has been weakly drawn, and Livvie is at a loss to color in the details and bring her to life. What's missing is a sympathetic director to show her the way.

In one of the picture's foreshadowing moments, Penelope warns Essex: "Oh, Robert, be careful! You anger her too much!" She tells Essex that if they were lovers, she would never curse him as the queen does. He laughs the Flynn laugh, cuffs her chin, and says, "But if we were lovers, you might. So thank your lucky stars we're not." Errol must sell the fact that he loves the queen and has no interest in the ravishing creature before him, and manages to pull this off. Penelope makes Essex promise that he'll be careful, and she steals a kiss from him. And that is that for Flynn and de Havilland onscreen in *The Lady and the Knight*.

In the day and a half it takes to shoot this scene, Errol doesn't toe the party line and give Livvie the silent treatment, but neither does he shower her with sympathy or offer a shoulder to cry on—as much as she is struggling in her attempts to better her career, he's struggling too and merely attempting to *survive*. For Flynn it is an ongoing nightmare working with Davis and Curtiz. He is forced to leave Olivia to her fate

and worry about himself as the ordeal of *The Lady and the Knight* goes on.

Flynn's next sequence might as well take place on the rack, because it's torture: Essex returns to London from his defeat in Ireland bringing his army to storm the palace and seize power. Neither he nor Elizabeth knows that his defeat had been caused by a conspiracy among the Queen's ministers to intercept the letters of the lovers. Essex muscled his way into the throne room and confronts the queen. This

The beleaguered stars sometimes hit a nice rhythm together, but more often struggle to get through the densely packed dialogue.

