

THE FOUR FEATHERS

USA

1929

80 minutes

Directors Lothar Mendes, Merian C Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack
Writer Howard Estrabrook
Producer David O Selznick
Novel A E W Mason

CAST:

Richard Arlen	<i>Harry Faversham</i>	Philippe De Lacy	<i>Harry aged 10</i>
Fay Wray	<i>Ethne Eustace</i>	Noble Johnson	<i>Ahmed</i>
Clive Brook	<i>Lieutenant Durrance</i>	Harold Hightower	<i>Ali</i>
William Powell	<i>Captain Trench</i>	Zack Williams	<i>Idris</i>
George Fawcett	<i>Colonel Faversham</i>	E J Ratcliffe	<i>Colonel Eustace</i>
Theodore Von Eltz	<i>Lieutenant Castleton</i>	Augustin Symons	<i>Colonel Sutch</i>
Noah Beery	<i>Slave Trader</i>		

I am pleased that when selecting films for this season, our Committee managed to continue its laudable policy of including a film from before the 1930. In the past we have shown silent films (invariably with live piano accompaniment), tonight we have a very early talkie which has rarely been screened. Indeed this film does not appear in one or two of the movie listing books, which proliferate annually.

The public screening of a film over seventy years old is a very rare occurrence nowadays, with the National Film Theatre being one of the very few large venues which still regularly undertakes this. It could of course be argued that as the NFT is regarded as the archive centre for film in this country, that it has an obligation to show its stock of film including the "oldies".

As Chairman of the Club, I am delighted that we are able to screen such rare films. In my opinion it is one of the main reasons why WNCC has always been different from many other clubs, especially those who shy away from screening anything other than films from the last 5 years.

When discussing with distributors the question of hiring films from before the 1930, Andrew Youdell at the British Film Institute commented:

"We have just lost the rights to ten of these which were not worth renewing because of a complete lack of interest within the film society movement in showing anything except the most recent or most obvious. Happily, I perceive that Woking has a good track record of doing something different!"

In researching tonight's film, it became clear that the production history was not well recorded, although it is a historically interesting film. Part of it is silent and other sections have a soundtrack, so close was its production to the advent of the "talkie". In addition it is also one of the first films in which a zoom lense was employed. There is apparently no credit as to the person responsible for the photography, the number of scriptwriters is unclear, and even the directors details are disputed.

This is the first adaptation of the novel by A E W Mason following the advent of the "talkie", and whilst considerably less well known than subsequent versions (especially the 1939 film by Alexandra Korda), it had the distinction of being partly filmed in Africa. This must have been quite an adventure in the 1920's for the cast and crew, and resulted in images of African wildlife, which must have been a new experience for most members of the audience.

SYNOPSIS OF CAREERS OF MAIN CAST MEMBERS AND THE PRODUCER

Richard Arlen (born 1 September 1899 as Cornelius Richard Van Mattimore, died 1976). A star of Hollywood films of the 1920's, he continued in lead and supporting roles well into the late 1960's. After careers as a sportswriter, swimming coach and a pilot with the Royal Canadian Flying Corps, he made his film debut in 1920, and was initially billed as Van Mattimore.

Clive Brook (1887 – 1974) was born in London. The son of an Opera singer, he was educated at Dulwich College. After working as a writer and violinist, he served with distinction in the First World War. At the end of the Great War, he became an actor working on stage, but principally in British Cinema. This was rather unusual at that time since the moving picture was viewed as “second class” acting when compared with the “legitimate” theatre.

From 1926 he worked generally for Paramount in America. He stayed until 1935 when he returned to Britain, to work in movies but primarily to be a stage actor, thus reversing his earlier position.

William Powell (born 29 July 1892 and died 1984). Having dropped out of University to pursue his love of drama, he appeared on Broadway from 1912. His screen career began a decade later, when he appeared as a support to John Barrymore in Sherlock Holmes. He became known as a smooth villain of the silents, but managed with the transition to sound to change his image with a string of light mysteries.

He gained an Oscar nomination for The Thin Man in 1934. The casting of himself and Myrna Loy as Nick and Nora Charles proved a boost to both their careers, and they co-starred in several sequels and other films.

Other landmark films in his career were the title roles in The Great Ziegfeld, My Man Godfrey and Life With Father. He was nominated for Academy Awards for the later two.

His career ended on a high, with his final two roles appearing in How to Marry a Millionaire (1953) and Mister Roberts (1955), playing the role of Doc.

Fay Wray (1907 -) has an indelible place in cinema history. The image of herself in King Kong as the near naked woman in the paw of the beast is as stirring now as it was almost 70 years ago. Accordingly her appearance tonight in a film also with an African storyline is very apt considering her most famous film.

She was a favourite actress of Schoedsack, who also directed her in King Kong.

David Oliver Selznick (born 10 May 1902 and died in 1965). The Selznick family was heavily involved with the developing movie industry – his father, Lewis J Selznick, was something of a film magnate and his brother, Myron, was also a producer and subsequently a powerful talent agent.

David began by assisting his father in film promotion, production and distribution. In 1923 after his father went bankrupt, David made two short exploitation documentaries – one about boxing and the other showed Rudolph Valentino judging a beauty contest in Madison Square Garden. However he soon lost his profits in property ventures and set out for Hollywood.

There his father's former partner, Louis B Mayer, reluctantly signed him, as an assistant story editor. He subsequently became an associate producer of MGM's B pictures. A couple of year's later he married Mayer's daughter, Irene.

Unsatisfied with his progress at MGM, he moved to Paramount in 1927 as associate director. He then joined RKO in 1931 and returned two years later to MGM as Vice President and producer.

In 1936 after producing a string of highly successful films, he founded his own company, Selznick International. It was three years later that he produced one of the most profitable films of all time – Gone With The Wind. It was a film on which he employed 3 main directors and 15 screenwriters, yet it appears that he still wrote much of the final script and directed some scenes himself.

The subsequent year, 1940, he brought Alfred Hitchcock from England. Hitchcock directed Rebecca, and remained in America for the rest of his career.

Whilst Selznick failed to produce such large hits again, he continued to produce until A Farewell to Arms, the last film he produced was released in 1957.

IAIN McGLASHAN (CHAIRMAN)