

# THE BENCHLEY SHORTS

by Robert Luhn

The 49 ten-minute shorts that Robert Benchley wrote and starred in have not been seen for quite some time. But when they appeared in movie theaters throughout the Thirties, audiences came to love his amiably mad meanderings.

Robert Benchley became famous as a writer long before arriving in Hollywood in 1927, publishing humorous articles in *Vanity Fair* and other magazines and eventually compiling 13 volumes of his collected pieces. As a New York theater critic from 1920 until 1940, his opinions often made a difference at the box office. The Benchley profile, once described as being "pearlike," appeared in numerous feature films until his death in 1945. The Benchley progeny have been successful in their own small way; son Nathaniel Benchley is a nationally known author; his son Peter Benchley has since made his own splash with *Jaws*.

Robert Benchley came to film via Broadway, not an uncommon route for a stage actor, but certainly odd for a NYC theater critic. Benchley, along with some of his fellow writers (among them Robert Sherwood, Alexander Woollcott, George S. Kaufman and Dorothy Parker) staged, in 1922, a one-night Broadway show, *No Siree*, for the benefit and amusement of actors they had spent the previous season reviewing. Benchley, who appeared in a few of the skits during the evening, later wandered out on stage to deliver what he called, "a rather dry financial statement." This eight-and-a-half minute "Treasurer's Report" was Benchley's parody of every boring speaker he had the misfortune to hear. The audience loved it. Irving Berlin thought it amusing enough to include in his 1923 *Music Box Revue*. Benchley performed "The Treasurer's Report" seven times a week for nine months on Broadway and for another ten weeks in vaudeville. In 1928 he did it again for the Fox Movietone cameras, slightly restaged, but shot in a manner similar to his original presentation, facing the audience straight on, aided only by charts and a pointer. The film is a landmark in many ways. It was the first all-talking motion picture released; it made Fox a great deal of money, and it brought about a radical change in the direction of Benchley's life—devoting less time to literary pursuits and more to being an entertainer.

Benchley went on to make several more shorts for Fox, including the famous *Sex Life of the Polyp* (1928), a slide show with Benchley discussing the peculiar sexual habits of boy and girl sponges. At the end of the short, Dr. Benchley finds that he is "marvelling at Nature's wonderful accomplishments in the realm of Sex, but rather inclined to complete our experiment with some animal which takes its sex life a little more seriously."

The personal and professional turning point came with a summons from Irving Thalberg at MGM for Benchley to act in features for \$3000 a week. At the height of the Depression, this amount of money could go a long way. Benchley was often in need of funds, being something of a soft touch and occasionally less than prudent. (He once bought a racehorse simply because it had a "certain indefinable quality.") The money was good, the work was easy and in spite of his nagging doubts about the people and the quality of work produced in Hollywood, Benchley went there.

After his feature debut in *Headline*



Basil Wrangell directed *Home Movies* (1940), but Benchley could barely manage to focus them.

and *Social Register* (1934), he appeared in *China Seas* (1935) as the drunken journalist McCaleb. During a storm at sea, a pickled and non-plussed Benchley navigates his way on board as if wildly tilted decks were an everyday experience. Accosted by several waves, he strolls up to the bar, takes his drink and sets it on a grand piano. Everyone else in the bar is hanging onto their stomachs, but Benchley is too demure to let a little thing like a typhoon spoil his night out. He sips his drink and the ship pitches violently to the side, the piano thundering away and nearly crashing into the opposite bulkhead. The ship pitches again in the opposite direction and the piano comes thundering back, only to slide up and stop just in time for the oblivious Benchley to set his drink down again.

This sequence is a masterpiece of comic precision and calmness in the midst of chaos. Benchley wrote the scene, and MGM spent \$10,000 staging it.

By 1935 Benchley had made eight shorts for Universal, RKO and Fox, and that year he was involved in a short that was shaping up as something of a bomb, *How to Train a Dog*. It caught the attention of Jack Chertok, who worked

pretty bad. The shorts department was in poor shape at the time. Harry Rapf, a very successful producer for MGM in those days, also ran the shorts department. They were sort of off his left shoulder. He came from vaudeville, and so we did a lot of vaudeville-type shorts."

This changed with Chertok's move to assistant head of the shorts department. Under his guidance, this department became a studio within a studio, where directors, actors and technicians got a start in the business and learned the trade. It became a testing ground for new techniques (sound and color) and a home to those individuals who functioned better outside of the MGM "system." Like Robert Benchley.

"The problem was, they didn't know what to do with him," said Chertok. "Thalberg brought Benchley out to Hollywood and then let him sit. Word came down that his option wasn't going to be renewed and Bob was worried. We talked, and I asked him if he had thought about making more short subject films. He said he didn't know if he wanted to. And I said, 'Sure you do. You want to make shorts for MGM, and you want to keep on making \$3000 a week, too!'"

the short over and over, trying to figure out why it wasn't working. He took it to theaters, previewed it for audiences, and it continued to flop. Back at the studio, Benchley recorded another voiceover, but the problem persisted.

"I spent a lot of sleepless nights over that one," said Chertok. "But I finally hit on it. The narration was *too* funny. Bob was competing with what he did on the screen. And what he did in front of the camera was very funny. So I went out and got Bob a book on how to train dogs and told him to read it straight. And it worked."

Benchley then recorded yet another voiceover with a few of the distinctive Benchley touches. The film became a hit. MGM was pleased, Chertok soon moved up to head of the short subject department, and the relationship between the two men was sealed, if for no other reason than Chertok let Benchley work without interference. Studio executives were banned from the set, and Benchley stipulated in his contract that no personal publicity would be allowed. The effect on Benchley's film work was salutary. The next short he did for MGM (and the first of the MGM shorts to be released) was



A gripping moment from *A Night at the Movies* (1937)

The idea for *How to Sleep* had originally been suggested by the Simmons mattress company as a means of getting people to think about mattresses. Louis B. Mayer called Chertok to discuss the idea. Chertok admitted he was a bit skeptical at the time.

"I said to Mr. Mayer, 'What are we going to do? A short about people turning over in bed?'"

Mayer persisted and after some discussion they decided that Benchley (not Pete Smith, as some recent historians imply) should write and act in *How to Sleep*. It opens with Benchley sitting behind a desk, confidently pointing a pencil at us. The manner is forthright, the discussion anything but, as Benchley leaps into the fray with a twist: "If you remember, in our last lecture we took up the subject of 'how to keep awake' . . . and on looking about me I notice that many of you did not seem to catch the idea. Today, therefore, we are taking up the subject of 'how to sleep.' And I am hoping for a little better response. Now . . . in order to make the thing clearer to you, I will take up, first, the causes of sleep; second, methods of inducing sleep; third, methods of avoiding sleep; and fourth, how to wake up, which is very important."

The film is vintage Benchley and a blueprint for many of the films he was to make. *How to Sleep* is full of the amiable nonsense and absurdity that characterize his work. Prominent is his very conscious burlesque of the scientific "expert." The Thirties suffered from a deluge of

self-help and pop psychology books. *How to Sleep* deftly put such experts in their place. Benchley the narrator is self-assured, a trifle pompous and a busy-body. At one point his comments are so irksome that Benchley (who also plays the sleeper in the short) snaps, "Oh, shut up and mind your own business!"

Benchley goes on to scientifically analyze sleep. The movie is outfitted with a sleep lab in which subject Benchley is pitted against his insomnia and a large clock hanging above the bed. After much wriggling, tugging and choking, Benchley the narrator concludes, "It will now be understood where the expression 'sleeping like a top' comes from. It makes one wonder what the idea is of getting into bed at all. It would be less exertion to play a good game of handball." The film ends with Benchley at his desk, asleep.

Benchley plays with film conventions in *How to Sleep* and in most of his other films. Unlike most short filmmakers, he was subtle, rarely engaging in slapstick common to movies of the day. Benchley revealed a gracefulness and an ability to look past the camera and to connect with the audience. As a filmmaker, Benchley (who wrote the majority of the shorts) was conscious in a whimsical way that he was making a film.

*How to Sleep*, an instant success with audiences, was one of the highest grossing shorts of all time, and the Academy Award it won made MGM realize they had something valuable. The demand for Benchley shorts increased. There were a

number of "How to" films, with Benchley explaining the intricacies of voting, figuring one's income tax and raising a baby. As time wore on, Benchley moved away from the role of lecturer to that of a more conventional screen character. John O'Hara said that Benchley had "practically invented situation comedy," and some of the films, such as *The Day of Rest* (1939) or *A Night at the Movies* (1937) support this premise. Benchley usually played an harassed and bumbling father who could never make things work, be they magic tricks or shoelaces. Some of the shorts were based on the stories and articles he had published, and they translated to the screen relatively well. Others faltered from repetition or flimsy premises. The best were distillations of his humor, proof that brevity is indeed the soul of comedy.

Robert Benchley left MGM in 1940 and went to Paramount for several years, but the films he produced there were not superior and the atmosphere was not congenial. He returned to MGM in 1943 and hit his old stride with the classic *No News is Good News*. It is probably Benchley's most assured and witty film and returns him once more to the familiar lecture format. But the intervening years had a devastating effect and the opening shot revealed Benchley had been very busy since *How to Sleep*. In the short, the desk groans under a heap of impedimenta: books, charts, chess sets, maps and other unknown objects. Benchley takes it all in stride and starts off by

answering questions submitted by the audience. From here, things get more bizarre as Benchley tries to relate elephants, inflation and Rhodesian trade routes, while dealing with a puckish movie camera that has a mind of its own. Even his faithful charts desert him, and Benchley is left apologizing for running out of time. Even *this* is interrupted by a tassel from a chart above that falls into his face.

*No News is Good News* was one of the last Benchley shorts. In some ways it is a culmination of his work in the medium. All of the elements that characterize his film work are here, brought together in a wonderfully controlled burst of nonsense. The short is aptly subtitled, "A Robert Benchley Miniature." This is in essence what Benchley produced. This short, and the others before it, are like miniatures—compact, concise and thematic. Benchley dips in and out of reality all the while, getting lost in his own outlandish logic, backing up and then getting lost again. The comedy is finely tuned—the word play, the props, the minimalist gestures of quiet desperation as he tries and fails to avoid the unavoidable.

For someone who was known to dash off a script in one afternoon or improvise a film on the set (as he did in the 1936 *How to Be a Detective*), Benchley is remarkably consistent. The shorts are still funny and fresh, alive with Benchley's warmth and gentle absurdity. The highest tribute paid to Benchley is by Jack Chertok: "I wish I could say I invented

Robert Benchley . . . but I can't. I never interfered with him. The reason he was so successful was because he was so great. I didn't do anything. I would discuss the ideas with him and he would write the script and I would say, 'Fine, go do it.' He had all the control. I didn't handle him at all. I just told the directors to set up the camera and 'capture him.' What can you tell a genius?"

When the life of Benchley is discussed, his articles and humorous essays are considered to be his greatest accomplishment. But the short films he made are among the best ever filmed. James Thurber noted that Benchley "led one of the most crowded private lives of our century" and that, as well as his disinclination toward Hollywood and its products, led Benchley to give his own films sporadic attention. Yet with all the distractions of a busy social life, feature film work and literary pursuits, he made classic short films.

Unfortunately, these shorts are practically unknown to audiences today. Theaters rarely run short subjects with their features. Jack Chertok adds, "The powers that be at MGM couldn't be bothered with distributing the shorts. And the distributors thought his humor was outdated, since Bob appealed to the intellectual—of which there are few these days."

Whatever the arguments, the fact remains that the films of Robert Benchley are forgotten—but for how long? MGM in recent years has shown a keen interest in its archives, resulting in the compilation film *That's Entertainment* (1974) and its sequel, which featured Benchley's piano-as-highball-coaster scene from *China Seas*. The major film studios, along with some panicky major television networks, have now moved into the cable/VTR market. The need for more and more material for the small screen may mean that such archives may become less dusty. Jack Gordon, who currently heads the MGM cable operations has indicated that this rediscovery has already begun. The studio is planning to repackage the classic MGM shorts for cable and home video—including those by Robert Benchley. "After all," said Gordon, "Benchley's *How to Figure Income Tax* is just as pertinent—and confusing—as it was 50 years ago." —Robert Luhn