

THE BLACK PIRATE



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by **Albert Parker** (credited) and **Douglas Fairbanks**.
(uncredited) Produced by **Douglas Fairbanks** Production Design by
Carl Oscar Berg. Screenplay by Jack Cunningham from a story by
Douglas Fairbanks (crediting himself as Elton Thomas)
Cinematography by **Henry Sharp**. Technicolour specialists : **George
Cave and Arthur Ball**. Music by Mortimer Wilson Original Editing by
Costumes by **Michele Clayton** Filming Locations: Production
Company: **The Elton Corporation/ Technicolour Motion Picture
Corperation. A United Artists Film** Released On: **8th March 1926**
Time: **94 minutes (88 minutes in some versions)** Rating: **85%**

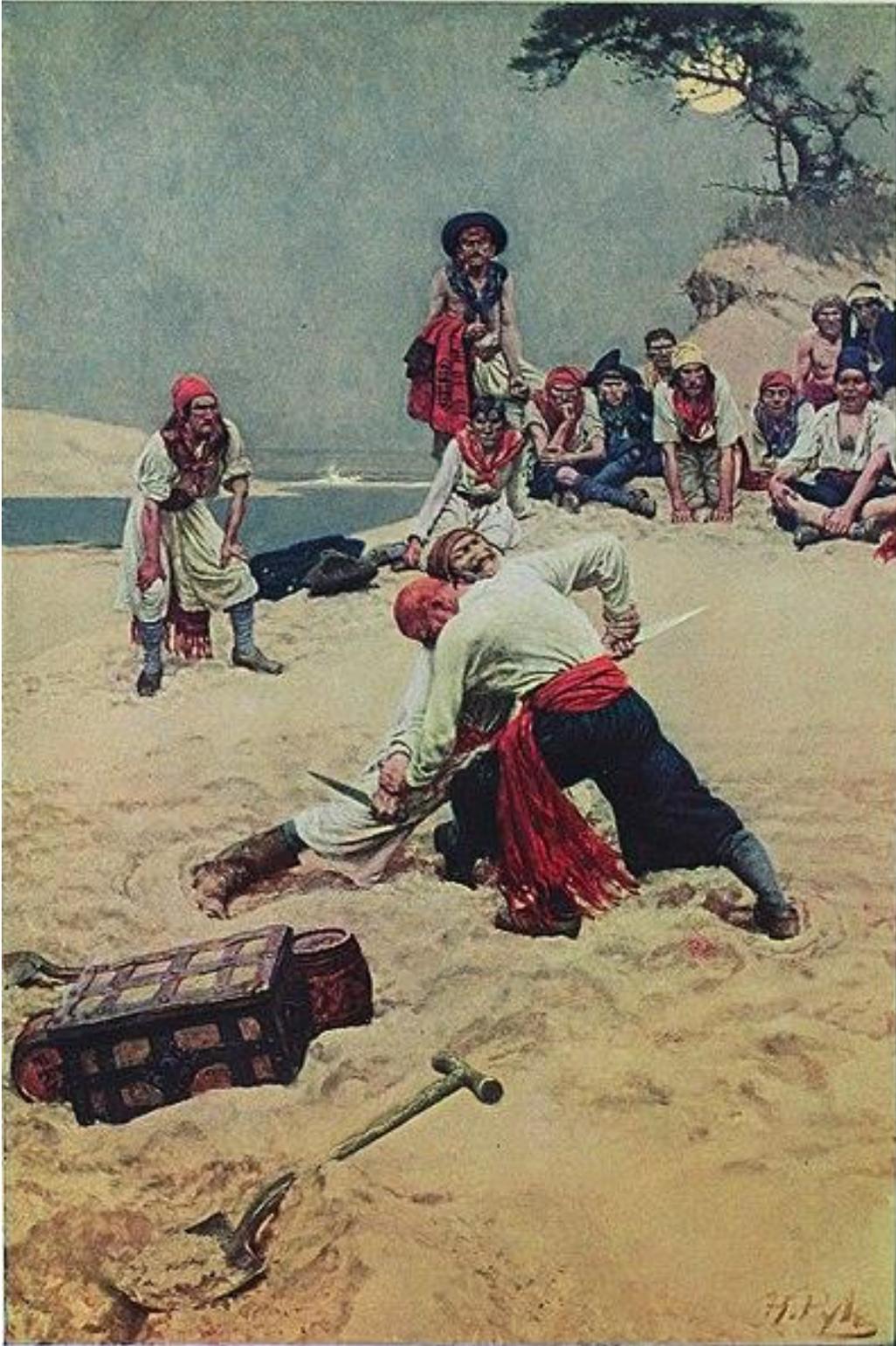
Cast

- **Douglas Fairbanks as The Black Pirate**
- **Billie Dove as Princess Isobel**
- **Donald Crisp as MacTavish**
- **Anders Randolf as the Pirate Captain**
- **Tempe Pigott as the Duenna**
- **Sam De Grasse as the Pirate Chief's Lieutenant**
- **Charles Stevens as the Powder Man**
- **Charles Belcher as the Chief passenger (Nobleman)**
- **Nino Cochise as a pirate**
- **E. J. Ratcliffe as the Governor**
- **Mary Pickford as Princess Isobel (uncredited, last scene)**

It is widely believed that the first full-length feature film in colour was made in the 1930s. Even Errol Flynn erroneously believed that his *Adventures of Robin Hood*, made in 1938, was the first colour film. Others give that claim to *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1936) and *Becky Sharp* (1935). The reality was that this technological first was an obscure film *The Gulf Between*. Apparently a mediocre film in other aspects, it was released in September 1917. The only known surviving copy was destroyed in a fire in 1961, only a few stills remain.

Europeans developed a different form of colour film even earlier than this. As early as the Edwardian era coloured shorts appeared in France, but the colourisation process consisted of factory women hand painting every single frame with extreme care. Even so, the results could look like crude matches and doing this work sent some women blind. There was also the expense and time the process took. Humanity or economics? Whichever reason was the main one, hand done colourisation soon faded out of existence. Even in the 1920s technicolour filming remained a time devouring, expensive effort as processors needed to film in two joined strips with different colours and then match them. This meant that very few technicolour films were released between 1917 and 1936, when one strip colour filming became standard. Even as late as the last years of the 1950s the majority of the world's feature films were in black and white.

The Black Pirate was therefore not the first Hollywood feature film to be in colour, but it was an outstanding example in those pioneering days. By the time it went into DVD the film's colour only sometimes retained its vividness: much has apparently vintaged into almost sepia, giving it a storybook feel, which is fortuitous as it has a storybook plot. Following the same broad pattern, it was not the first swashbuckler. Even so, its producer/writer/star/assistant director, Douglas Fairbanks did initiate the genre from novels into full-length films a few years before *The Black Pirate* was released - and released to popular acclaim, in March 1926.



Pirates fighting to be captain. Howard Pyle [Wikipedia](#)



Attack on a Galleon. Howard Pyle. Wikipedia

Inspired by Howard Pyle's vivid paintings of pirates, he tried for and got that same ambience, which considering how colourful, vivid and dramatic Pyle's paintings were, was an easy achievement. They sometimes look like cinematic stills and contain their own narratives. The Howard Pyle painting reproduced here with the caption 'Pirates Fighting to be Captain' is so similar in its idea, colouring, setting and roles to the scene where the Black Pirate makes himself captain that it must have inspired Fairbanks.

Fairbanks' narrative goes at a fast pace. The silent screen era dialogue cards tell us that the pirates have captured a ship and are plundering it before they will blow it up. The surviving crew and passengers are all bound together at the main mast and will be blown up with the ship. We are shown that these pirates are not the glossy adventurers of children's books, but are dirty, ragged and obviously deserving of the epithet that they accept here, 'sea wolves.' They are shown looting the dead, even picking rings off the fingers of corpses. They gleefully blow up the ship and with it the prisoners. The only two survivors, Fairbanks and his badly injured screen father, who is dying, make it to a deserted tropical island. While burying his father there Fairbanks swears to avenge him. He soon gets his chance as the pirate captain and some of his crew have arrived to bury the treasure, just as the captain and his lieutenant are about to shoot the burial party in the back because "dead men tell no tales" Fairbanks exuberantly appears, challenging the Captain to a duel so as to become the new leader. He of course wins, but he knows he has to do more to get the admiration and submission of those watching and also the rest of the crew. To do that he swears that he will capture a nearby treasure ship single handed, then he rapidly does this.

The capture of this treasure ship involves what must be the most famous stunt work in cinematic history and one frequently imitated. To board the treasure ship Fairbanks strings a line to the top of the main mast and then from there descends by placing himself dead centre in each of the three sails. Knife in hand he uses it and his body weight to slice down each sail, landing on the deck to cause mayhem and capture the ship. The stunt is breathtaking, but not as dangerous

as it looks. The sails were already sliced with soft fabric in the middle so the cutting would be easy and a thin metal harness (invisible on screen) attached to the topmast, held the stuntman in.

With the capture of this ship the clichés roll on. Of course the passengers include a beautiful, unmarried, hapless young noblewoman (Princess Isobel) and her protective older duenna. Of course the pirates are lustful, but do not ravish her. Of course their leader becomes her protector and falls in love with her at first sight and of course some pirates intrigue against their new captain, who turns out to be a secret aristocrat, so he can marry the nobly born maiden on a few days acquaintance.

As with the clichés, so with the implausibilities and impossibilities. Whatever her motives, Fairbanks real wife, Mary Pickford, replaces Billie Dove in the last scene where the Black Pirate accepts the embraces of Princess Isobel. Gunpowder was an expensive and crucial item, so why would rapacious, wealth obsessed pirates who have cannons on their ship blow it up? Especially to sink a valuable ship which has many other valuable items in it? Why not ransom the prisoners and the ship, instead of destroying these sources of wealth? When Fairbanks appears on the island, nobody recognizes him as being one of the people they had blown up. How did Fairbanks, swimming to the island, make it carrying his half-dead father, ahead of men in a rowboat, especially as he arrived with time had time to bury him? When an assassin makes it to the ship, he leaves his little boat adrift, even though he is clearly an impossible swim away from his own vessel. As he dies this does not matter.

Cliches impossibilities, and implausibilities also do not matter. Fairbanks zestful energy, the fast pacing, high production values and lively score make *The Black Pirate* work, sucking us into its adventure.



Billie Dove as the princess Isobel with her Duenna (Tempe Piggott Albert Parker, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)



Fighting the disillusioned crew. Courtesy above and still below www.silentfilmstillarchive.com



DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS
in
'THE BLACK PIRATE'

Story by
Ellon Thomas

Directed by
Albert Parker

Adapted by
Jack Cunningham

Photographed by
Henry Sharp

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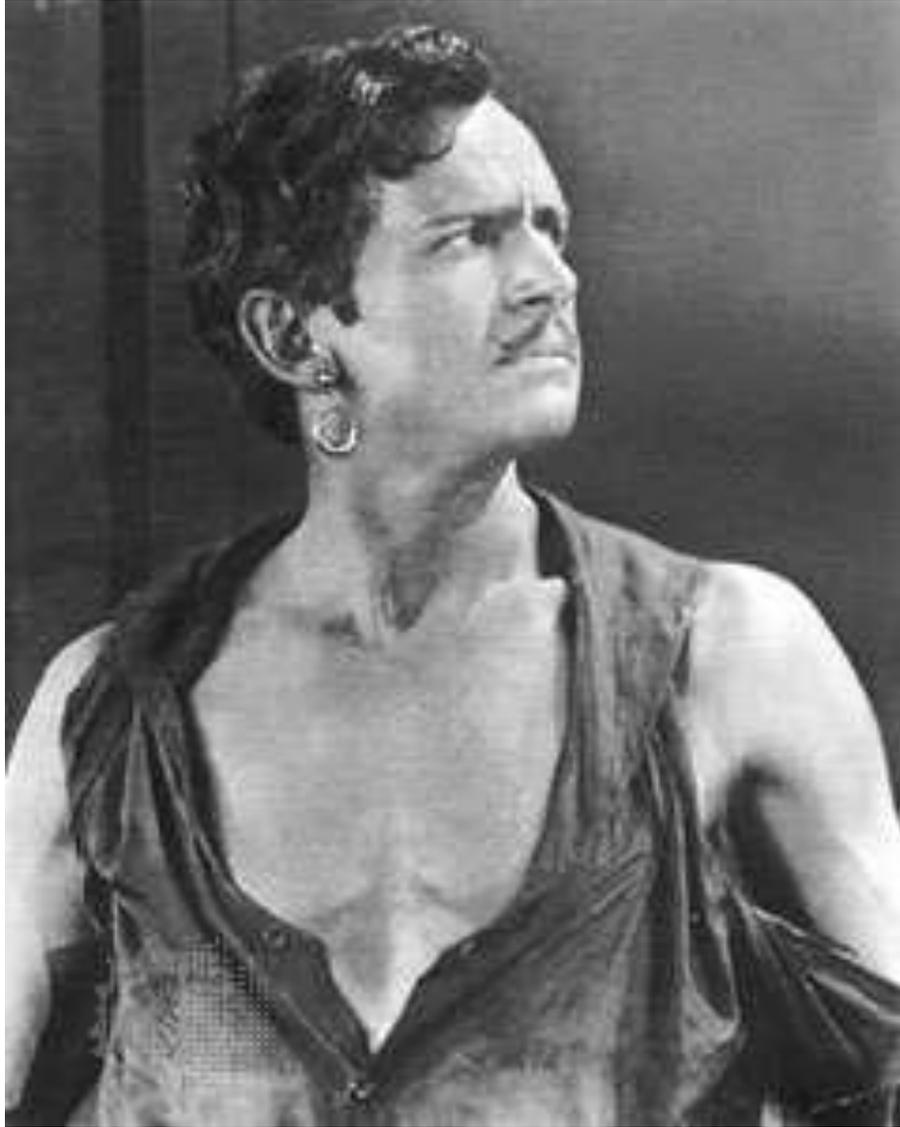
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