



Laughton, Charles (1899-1962)

by Richard C. Bartone

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Charles Laughton was a distinguished Anglo-American stage and screen actor and director, as well as a noted orator and story-teller. He was also a tormented soul who, for much of his life, suffered from self-loathing and internalized homophobia. While his unhappiness may have contributed to his mastery as an actor, it in many ways poisoned his life.

Deeply ashamed of his desires, Laughton died at the age of 62 without having ever publicly discussed or declared his homosexuality--a state of affairs that was pretty much the norm for individuals of his generation. He told his wife, Elsa Lanchester, in 1930, after a year of marriage, and she publicly discussed it for the first time in her 1983 book *Elsa Lanchester, Herself*.

Working in Britain as well as the United States, Laughton appeared in thirty-eight plays, fifty-two films, and gave hundreds of readings in one-man shows. For all his successes, however, he seemed to have most fully defined himself in terms of his failures.

The Night of the Hunter (1955), the only film Laughton directed, failed commercially and perplexed critics. Today it is considered a brilliant work of art, years ahead of its time; but its failure added to Laughton's sense of inadequacy. This sense of inadequacy was further fueled by his spectacular disaster on stage in 1959 in the role of King Lear, the part he had set as his goal since becoming an actor.

Horrified at his homosexuality, Laughton lived with self loathing, torturous shame, and constant fear of public exposure. Accepting and intensifying society's prejudices against homosexuals, Laughton turned against himself.

In *Charles Laughton: A Difficult Actor*, openly gay actor, director, and writer Simon Callow theorizes that Laughton channeled his pain and suffering into his stage and screen characterizations, using his "inner tensions in service of his art."

Born on July 1, 1899 in Yorkshire, England, Laughton was the son of Eliza Conlon and Robert Laughton, who owned the Victoria Inn in Scarborough. Charles attended the Jesuit Stonyhurst College, Lancastershire, where he excelled in mathematics. A brief involvement with theater ignited his passion for acting. He received his "certificate" in 1915, and went into the family business and then into the British Army.

Returning from World War I in 1919, Laughton worked for over five years in a family hotel until finally receiving his father's permission to enroll in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1925. In 1926 he debuted in London's West End in Gogol's *The Government Inspector*.

After scoring a series of successes in London, Laughton appeared on Broadway in 1931 and then made the journey to Hollywood. His first film role was in gay director James Whale's comedy-horror movie, *The Old Dark House* (1932).



Charles Laughton in 1940.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, April 4, 1940.
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By 1936, critics noted that the characters Laughton selected were "downright repellent." Laughton preferred to describe his screen persona as "wicked, blustering, and untidy."

Although journalists did not address Laughton's homosexuality directly, they had no qualms about discussing his corpulence. Laughton responded by boasting that "having poundage has meant a succession of good roles."

Yet the bravado barely hid his hatred of his own body. When Laughton said he would never be a "romantic blade," he added "sadism is more my type"; in the addition, he, perhaps more revealingly than he intended, indicated the consequences of his homosexuality and obesity on his self-image.

Laughton won an Academy Award for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933). In the title role, he created an "impulsive, tender, generous" portrait of a monarch.

But this role was the exception to the lonely, alienated, depraved villains that were more typical of Laughton's choices. He received acclaim for these characters in such plays as *A Man with Red Hair* (1928), *On the Spot* (1930), and *Payment Deferred* (1931), and in such films as *Devil and the Deep* (1932), *Sign of the Cross* (1932), and *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934).

Laughton was a popular star after his Oscar winning performance. His international fame and high critical regard were secured by his intense interpretations of Captain Bligh in *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) and Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939).

Laughton played Quasimodo as the horrific "other," thrown out and tortured by society. On a personal level Laughton heaped additional--even unnecessary--cruelty upon himself, demanding excessive makeup and an unreasonably heavy hump that made movement difficult and exhausting. In his role as Quasimodo he tapped into his guilt and suffering and exposed his inner conflicts in a brilliant interpretation.

Laughton's passionate performances almost certainly were motivated by an attempt to capture the love and admiration of audiences, qualities he believed were impossible for him to attain in his personal life.

To dissipate his loneliness, he sought the companionship of beautiful young men, many of whom began as his masseur or personal assistant. With a few of these men, he developed long and deeply romantic relationships. He was happy and productive when involved in these affairs, but when certain men parted, work was disrupted and loneliness returned.

Many of the actors and actresses with whom Laughton worked knew of his homosexuality, and it was rarely an issue on set or stage. But Laughton felt that his homosexuality rendered him vulnerable to attack by others. In *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), Clark Gable's alleged homophobia and Laughton's apparently detached attitude created so much tension that producer Irving Thalberg had to intervene and restore order.

Although Laughton trembled at a possible public scandal, he always brought lovers on the sets of films to help him relax. Laughton's worst fear materialized while directing Henry Fonda in the play *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* (1954). Fonda, angry at the play's development and execution, lashed out after Laughton made an unprovocative statement and said, "what do you know about men, you fat faggot."

Although Laughton generally played unsympathetic characters, he did so with passion and imagination. His acting was a means of escaping himself and disappearing into another personality. He used those things he despised most in himself to formulate characters so memorable that an audience would love--or at least admire--him for creating them.

In his later years, Laughton appeared less frequently in films, and then most often in smaller roles. Among

his later successes were his memorable characterizations of Sir Wilfred Robarts in *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) and Senator Seabright Cooley in *Advise and Consent* (1962).

In the early 1950s Laughton embarked on reading or story-telling tours, bringing alive the works of writers he loved to audiences in relatively small venues. Laughton valued these "one-man guided tours," as he preferred to call them, believing Americans had a thirst for literature and knowledge.

Of equal importance to Laughton was the context, alone on a bare stage, that allowed closer contact with people. His personal comments and observations, the bridges between stories, intensified the intimacy of his relationship with his audiences. Audiences responded enthusiastically, offering the recognition, love, and companionship he needed.

Some of Laughton's internalized homophobia was also alleviated in 1960, after he and his wife bought a house in Santa Monica next door to writer Christopher Isherwood and artist Don Bachardy. The two couples became close friends, and Isherwood's and Bachardy's gay militancy and pride helped Laughton achieve a degree of acceptance.

Decades after Laughton's death, gay film critics and queer theorists appreciate especially the subtlety and brilliance of a wide range of Laughton's roles, including his work in *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *The Island of Lost Souls* (1933)--which have been characterized as "homo-horror" films--and in *The Sign of the Cross*, where he plays an effeminate Nero.

In Laughton's career one failure was the most physically and psychologically debilitating, and one great success kept him alive. All serious actors, Laughton believed, conquered Shakespeare. But *Macbeth* and *King Lear* could not inhabit the poundage of Laughton's body, and he was unable to speak authoritatively and rhythmically Shakespeare's verse. The failure of his performance as Lear in Stratford in 1959 was crushing.

However, his supreme acting success as a happily married man sustained him. As prominent actors, Laughton and Lanchester were scrutinized by the press, reported on regularly in entertainment and mass market magazines. Although their marriage was far from ideal, it satisfied certain needs of each of them. A measure of Laughton's success in the role of husband for 32 years is that in 1962 the press proclaimed him and Elsa the screen's happiest couple.

Laughton died in Hollywood on December 15, 1962.

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