Monday, March 9, 1931.

Bella Vista is an estate, almost fairytale-like in its extravagance, nestled on a mountain in Beverly Hills. In the pre-dawn darkness, the virtual castle, with a tower, pools, and aviary, glistens under a waning moon. The entranceway gate bears a coat of arms, personally designed by Bella Vista's master and revealing his repellant self-image: a serpent wearing a crown. The couple almost as archangels, she’s a tormented leader, a former leading lady and third wife, whom he adores and currently “on the wagon,” more or less. His driver takes him into Hollywood, mornings and nights when, with no liquor to quench thirst, he’s actually placed bars on the windows. Of Dolores’s promiscuity so agonize him that the couple almost as archangels, she’s a tormented leader, a former leading lady and third wife, whom he adores and currently “on the wagon,” more or less. His driver takes him into Hollywood, mornings and nights when, with no liquor to quench thirst, he’s actually placed bars on the windows. The couple almost as archangels, she’s a tormented leader, a former leading lady and third wife, whom he adores and currently “on the wagon,” more or less.

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The company call on March 9 is for 8:30 a.m. The set is the Marionette Tent, on Stage 7 at the original Warner Studio on Sunset Boulevard. On time are Charles Butterworth (as Kartinsky, Tsarakov’s comic hanger-on), E. Percival Wetzel’s puppet troupe, and Barrymore. The star sports a wispy mustache and becomes a legend for his directorial virtuosity and mangling of the English language.

“The next time I send a no good son of a bitch to do something, I go myself!” once ranted Curtiz.

Svensøl wraps on Warners on February 21, 1931. Only 16 days later, The Genius begins shooting.

He Creates the Frankenstein That Destroys Him!

—Warner Bros. publicity

The opening sequence continues shooting the next two days, Curtiz again soaking extras and horses as he returns to the rainy village back lot set on Thursday night, shooting until 11:30. During these days, two players join The Genius, each so anonymous at the time in the eyes of Warner Bros. that the daily shooting reports don’t provide their names—simply listing both as “extras.” One is 13-year-old Frankie Darro, who plays the young Fedor and later stars “extras.” One is 13-year-old Frankie Darro, who plays the young Fedor and later stars in such films as Boys of the Road. He sneaks into the tent, impoverished and barefoot, fascinated to see the puppets dancing. Pursued by his father, Fedor runs, leaps, and bounds wildly, impressively (“like a mountain goat!” marvels Tsarakov) that the puppeteer hides him and kidnaps him—intent on transforming the prodigy into a great dancer.


Frankie told me that, for those leaps, the crew hooked him into a harness with wires, and raised and lowered him on a boom—and he loved that! He was only 13 at the time of The Mad Genius, but knew it was special to be in a film with John Barrymore. By the way, Barrymore signed a beautiful 11 x 14” portrait for Frankie. Although he’d sold much of his memorabilia, Frankie had saved some signed photos—John Barrymore among them. There they were, in a box in his really run-down Hollywood apartment. At one point he told me to take them, but I figured he might sell them, so he surely could have used the money, so I turned them away.

The star sports a wispy mustache and the clubfoot boot Warners has prepared for him. Director Curtiz and set designer Grot splendidly create a forlorn atmosphere as the two carnival puppeteers perform in an empty tent on a rainy night, the music wheezing on a gramophone, the pitiful troupe somewhere in the wilds of Russia.

“Careful!” says Barrymore as he and Butterworth pull the strings of the dancing “female” marionettes. “They are virgins!”

The pre-Code badinage is quickly in evidence. A moment later, Butterworth mentions he took some pills for a malady, but they haven’t helped.

“Perhaps you didn’t put them in the right place,” says Barrymore. “Use your imagination!”

Curtiz, of course, is a notorious taskmaster. The company takes a one-hour lunch at 12:50, then works until 8:10 p.m. The next day, Barrymore and Butterworth work all day, the marionettes on Stage 7, come evening, Curtiz takes five horses and eight extras to the Russian village set on Warners’ First National back lot, under the mountains of Burbank. There the special effects crew whips up a storm, and Curtiz films moody shots of the wagons mournfully riding through the rain—finally calling it quits at 5:30 a.m.

Warner Bros., believed Marion Marsh would become a major star it. Svensøl and The Mad Genius. (Courtesy of Photofest)
Dancing puppets, a fabricated night storm, and a future Frankenstein Monster talking about with a basso Russian accent and a whip...it's coming together nicely. Yet dominating all, of course, is Barrymore. Come Thursday, March 12, on a wagon set on First National's Stage 8, Barney McGill's camera looks right into those saint/serial killer eyes as Barrymore chillingly delivers a Tsarakov soliloquy, truly propelling The Genius into darkness and tragedy:

Have you ever heard of the Golem, made of mud and given a human soul? Or Frankenstein, the monster created by man? Or the Homunculus, the pale being, the product of science? These are all dreams, brought to life by mortals. I will create a creature...prologues to the greatest, most amazing characterization the stage or screen has ever known!

—Warner Bros. publicity

March 13, 1931—Friday the 13th. The Genius, now set 15 years after its incredible success, has been an actor!

Then there’s Curtiz. Before shooting began, Barrymore was already aware of his director’s notoriety. Curtiz had directed Noah S. Ark (1928), starring Dolores Costello Barrymore—“Jiggie Wink”—herself. Cameraman Hal Mohr had quit the picture because he felt the studio’s plan to film the flood was doomed to kill extras. Legend claims that three drowned, but still very much his own drama persona. A running gag has developed: The script is now complete—As Barrymore goes various wide-eyed ballerinas, such as Olga, played by Mac Madison:

8:30 and all the principals report again to Vitagraph, along with the dozens of dancers and extras. The lights on the cavernous theater set are merciless and, late that afternoon, the heat sets off the sprinkler system—soaking the company. Will this Act of God accident cancel shooting and give everyone Saturday night off? No such luck. Curtiz drags off, rallies his forces, works until 6:55 p.m., gives the company an hour off for dinner, then continues shooting—until 11:40 p.m. The clash is quickly clear: a star practically decaying in his extravagances, and a director sometimes sadistic in his work ethic.

The company wraps up its work on the Vitagraph theater set Monday night, March 16, finishing at 9:20 p.m. Barrymore, for all his loafing of his clubfoot shoe and Curtiz, is giving a solid and colorful performance—related to Svengali perhaps, but still very much his own drama persona. A running gag has developed: The script is now complete—as Barrymore goes various wide-eyed ballerinas, such as Olga, played by Mac Madison.

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Now listen to me. For 15 years I’ve devoted my entire life to you. I’ve poured my soul, my brain into you. I’ve sacrificed everything in the world—everything, do you hear?—for your career. I’ve lied—I’ve cheated—I’ve crushed—I’ve even crushed myself, so that you should appear greater than I. I thought I’d given you strength enough to rise above everything. You haven’t, you’re fallen. You’re not strong, you’re weak. But all of me is in you still, all that strength I poured into that weak soul, so you can’t fail me now. If you fail me now, I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you!

Helping production roll smoothly is a criterion of Barrymore’s crew members who have worked on multiple Barrymores films, including Gordon Hollingshead (assistant director), Herbert “Liny” Pless (property man), “smoke” (a production match expert), John Sullivan (forest engineer), Brian Wallace (makeup artist), John Ellis (portrait photographer), Fred Applegate (script clerk) and Dave Forrest (sound engineer). The buzzwords for The Mad Genius include:

For these men Barrymore, as suggested, stands eternally willing to go to bat. He has known them long enough to trust their judgment and their actions and he shows his favoritism for them in many ways. Important studio officials Barrymore is not above snubbing or openly insulting if a disagreement arises. He enjoys a fight of that kind. But to those who are in no position to answer back he manifests a considerate, a friendly understanding that makes him the most popular star in the business with his particular crew.

Still, there is a very dark side to the shooting of The Genius, and some rather sinister gossip spreads through the First National lot. This is Marian Marsh’s second film with Barrymore and her startling resemblance to Dolores leads many to prattle, as they had during Svengali, that Mad Jack and 17-year-old Marian are lovers. So ripe were the rumors that Gene Fowler felt compelled to destroy them in his 1944 biography Good Night, Sweet Prince. Marian Marsh retorted them too. Still, the rather sordid slander goes on that Barrymore, madly jealous of Dolores, has sexually recruited a dead ringer, under age understudy for his wife in the hothouse climate of Warner Bros. And all the while, star and director clash. The hot-headed Curtiz, who hated even breaking for lunch, surely had no sympathy for a man who wanted to get home to feed worms to his pet vulture. In a sense, the tension is prophetic of Curtiz’s battles with Errol Flynn (a Barrymore crony and idolater) over the course of their eleven films together. Curtiz was provoked by (and sometime sadistically responsive to) Flynn’s “wicked, wicked ways.”

Hostility keeps rising. Barrymore and Curtiz both bristle. During the three weeks of shooting to date, Barrymore has had only one day off. The story goes that Barrymore and a lady friend passed a dance marathon about this time, and the lady expressed sympathy for the dancers on their feet for those many hours.

“Ah,” said Barrymore. “I see you’ve never worked for Michael Curtiz.”

The director, anxious to wash his hands of Barrymore and the whole damned movie, makes a decision. He decides not to film the big ballet showcase, “The Spirit of the Factory,” despite the weeks of rehearsal devoted to it by Adolph Bolm. And he vows to slip into high gear and wrap up The Mad Genius as quickly as possible, no matter how late the hours…and no matter how his star curses and rants.

Climaxing Triumph Of His Stage and Screen Career!
—Warner Bros. publicity

Monday, March 30. The theater set on Stage 2, Vitagraph Studios. Michael Curtiz is hell-bent on finishing The Genius as soon as humanly (or irumably) possible.

The climax he’s so shoot is as gothic a finale as any melodrama of Hollywood’s Golden Age. As a lavish, rather sinister ballet performs in a theater before a grotesque centerpiece of a giant Idol head with illuminated eyes—a morbid masterpiece created by Anton Grot—Tsarakov discovers that Serge has overdosed, gone rabidly mad, and—amok back-stage—has decided to destroy the giant head with an axe.

“Look at it!” rants Alberni to Barrymore. “It’s cardboard! It is made of plaster! It is cardboard! It is wood! It is cardboard!”

Death Scene-in-Excelsis! Barrymore’s bloody puppet head and the dance between the glowing eyes of the Idol. In The Mad Genius. (Courtesy of Photofest)

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“The ballet company and The Idol behold Barrymore as the dead Tsarakov. (Courtesy of Photofest)
Barrymore’s hypnotic powers are interesting until getting a look at Miss Marsh under an unbecoming wig. After which a lot of people will figure it’s a waste of expert concentration…. Watts signed off, praising “the mad melodramatics of the leading actor, who is, after all, the greatest of the Barrymores.”

Mordaunt Hall of The New York Times also praised the star’s “startling acting” and Michael Curtiz’s “gifted and imaginative direction,” but noted that Barrymore’s “mas- terful conception of Tsarstov so outshines the efforts of the other players,” especially targeting Marian Marsh—“she is out of her element…particularly when she is called upon to appear in scenes with Mr. Barrymore. The contrast of the amateur and the artist is most pronounced.” Another New York critic put it more curtly: “Marian Marsh…plays the feminine lead. I wish she hadn’t.”

When Marian Marsh died in 2006, after exhuming and looking at his father’s corpse, 1980

May 1, 1931: Stengel opened on Broadway. As Warners hoped, it was a triumph for Barrymore (“…surpasses anything he has done for the screen,” wrote The New York Times’ Mordaunt Hall). Yet despite Barrymore’s powerhouse portrait, a star campaign for Marian Marsh,光洁 Flair, racy content (including a brief from-the-derriere nude shot of Marian Marsh, gothic flavor, racy content (including Mordaunt Hall). Yet despite Barrymore’s power…As Warners hoped, it was a triumph for Barrymore’s greatest screen performance: Svengali—Warner Bros. publicity

Mr. Barrymore, having had his fun with peglegs, hypnotic eyes, grotesque skulls and all the other impediments of pervasive physical fortune, offers us the drama of the clutest of his new films…. called, with considerable accuracy, The Mad Genius…. certainly it is a real Barrymore show, which, naturally, is more concerned with providing a field day for an actor than in exploring the potentialities of drama. Thanks to the star, however, it is a grand show…. As a clown, it is pretty trashy stuff…. About it, however, there clings an inescapable air of perverse fascination, macabre melodrama, sadistic excitement and, above all, the field day of the picturesque actor who must strut and fret all over the screen before he can be really happy. In addition, the film is handsomely and lavishly staged. The result is, I think, good, if quite decadent entertainment…

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Still, it would be unfair to blame Marsh, or even Barrymore’s Alaskan totem pole, for the failure of The Mad Genius. Possibly the dark, perverse mockery in Barrymore’s persona and acting was both the film’s blessing and curse. On Thursday, November 19, 1931—a week and two days after Lionel Bar- rymore won the Best Actor Academy Award® for MGM’s A Free Soul—The Mad Genius had its Hollywood premiere at Warner Bros.’ Western Theatre; the next day, Frankenstein opened in several key cities. The world fell into a strange love affair with Colin Clive’s blathersopher and, especially, Boris Karloff’s Monster, and as Frankenstein became a sen- sation, The Mad Genius crashed and burned. Worldwide rental: $480,000 (compared with Frankenstein’s $1,400,000). Loss: $241,000.

Incidentally, Edward G. Robinson, who’d lost The Genius to Barrymore, had received First Star Final as a consolation prize—and that film became Warner Bros.’ top hit of 1931. Meanwhile, John Barrymore had left Warners, where his last two films had lost the studio nearly a half-million dollars, and signed a contract with MGM.

As for the prime movers of The Mad Genius… Warners soon dumped Marian Marsh. After coping for a time on Poverty Row, she enjoyed something of a comeback at Columbia in the Bob Hope-Laurel and Hardy vehicle The Big Train and Peter Lorne’s in Crime and Punishment, both in 1935. Still, her career never fully took off, and she soon retired from the screen. She died in 2006; among her relics of Hollywood history…

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Adolph Bolm, whose work found only a few fleeting moments in The Mad Genius, presented the complete ballet at the Hol- lywood Bowl in August 1932. Bolm died in 1951.

Michael Curtiz received five Academy Award® nominations, winning, as noted, for Casablanca (1943) and carrying himself a place in Hollywood history as Warner Bros.’ top- dog director. He died in 1962. The sadistic leg- ends abound.

As for John Barry- more…he enjoyed tri- umphs at MGM in Grand Hotel, Rasputin and the Empress, and Dancer at Eight, at RKO in A Bill of Divorcement, and at Columbia in Ten Cents a Dance. Then came the end. The self-destructive pet devil dominated, cacaked, and roared, and the end mercifully came May 29, 1942.

And finally, as for Barrymore’s despised chateau shoe… it made a comeback, of sorts, in Warners’ Green Grow (1937)—worn by Sir Cedric Hardwicke.
“Out of the way!” shouted a very drunk John II. It had always been a Barrymore custom to give a red apple on an opening night performance. This was so, after all, as John III noted, “an opening,” and John II had brought apples, which he now handed to the gravediggers. Then he personally grabbed the coffin, placed his feet against the wall of the tomb and yanked. The coffin surrendered. The gang hefted it onto a hand truck and wheeled it out to a waiting brown Ford van. “The body fluids were leaking out all the way,” wrote John III. John II and his mourners made a beeline to Odd Fellows Cemetery, locale of the closest crematory, and selected a book-shaped urn. Before the immolation, John II decided he wanted to take a look at the corpse of whom he had so little memory. The Most hellish cemetery I’ve ever seen, overgrown, unkempt... the fear is that homeless people have broken into the tombs and live there,” John Barrymore’s son manically dug his father’s grave himself, at his own insistence and by hand. The cremated remains remain sealed the casket to the marble slab and the gravediggers couldn’t budge it.

“If John III hadn’t seen the cadaver, Bruce Pedy had, and John III remembered Pedy’s nightmarish description: Apparently all the bouncing around we had subjected it to had left the cadaver’s jaw apart from what was left of the head. They were convinced it was John Barrymore by the hooked nose, pale and crying. Although John III hadn’t seen the cadaver, Bruce Pedy had, and John III remembered Pedy’s nightmarish description:

“Alas Poor Yorick,” reads the inscription on John Barrymore’s small marker. Fans unlikely to gain admittance to pay tribute. It seemed that even in so horrific a state, John Barrymore was still the Great Profile. It had always been a Barrymore custom to give a red apple on an opening night performance. This was so, after all, as John III noted, “an opening,” and John II had brought apples, which he now handed to the gravediggers. Then he personally grabbed the coffin, placed his feet against the wall of the tomb and yanked. The coffin surrendered. The gang hefted it onto a hand truck and wheeled it out to a waiting brown Ford van. “The body fluids were leaking out all the way,” wrote John III. John II and his mourners made a beeline to Odd Fellows Cemetery, locale of the closest crematory, and selected a book-shaped urn. Before the immolation, John II decided he wanted to take a look at the corpse of whom he had so little memory. The Most hellish cemetery I’ve ever seen, overgrown, unkempt... the fear is that homeless people have broken into the tombs and live there,” John Barrymore’s son manically dug his father’s grave himself, at his own insistence and by hand. The cremated remains remain sealed the casket to the marble slab and the gravediggers couldn’t budge it. 