

Document Citation

Title	Lightnin'
Author(s)	Lait.
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1925 Jul 22
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Lightnin', Ford, John, 1925

LIGHTNIN'

William Fox presentation from the stage play by Winchell Smith and Frank Bacon; scenario by Frances Marion, directed by John Ford, released by a John Golden unit; seen at Strand.

Lightnin' Bill Jones.....Jay Hunt
Millie.....Madge Bellamy
John Marvin.....Wallace MacDonald
Judge Townsend.....J. Farrell MacDonald
Margaret Davis.....Ethel Clayton
Raymond Thomas.....Richard Travers
Sheriff.....James Marcus
Zeb.....Otis Harlan
Oscar.....Peter Mazulis
Mother.....Edythe Chapman
Hammond.....Brandon Hurst

Next to the greatest stage success of all times, "Lightnin'", is a good but not great film.

The story does not dovetail on the screen as it did on the stage. Much of the classic comedy which fitted so snugly in the spoken drama appears dragged in, though it isn't, for the screen version closely follows the original script. But Frances Marion's scenario is amateurishly unskillful, despite her long experience and repute as the ranking movie adapter.

Jay Hunt, sloshing about in the ill-fitting shoes of the late Frank Bacon, muffs the spirit of the immortal role. He looks so much like Bacon that he would seem to be that revered artist, himself—until he begins to act, when the resemblance dims away. Lightnin' Bill was one of the funniest characters ever created in light comedy, and Hunt is one of the unfunniest screen actors who ever put on a makeup. He lacks as thoroughly the penchant for pathos, that getting a tear with a smile which Lightnin' had—and not alone Bacon produced it, several who followed him attained the effect. It is in the character, not alone in the play. Hunt is not the character.

The producing and direction, however, cover a multitude of his sins. Seldom has a film conductor revealed a better touch for combined humor and drama than John Ford here develops. And when the shortcomings of the principal player and the disjointed continuity are not deadly, the action is sweet and amusing, as well as effectively touching at times.

The cast is a distinguished one, and the list is imposing. Otis Harlan, who plays the part of Lightnin's bozo pal, is a delight; had he been cast for the lead it would have been a far finer film, even though he does not look like Frank Bacon. Madge Bellamy is a confection as the daughter, and Edythe Chapman plays her mother down to the ground.

But the performing palm goes to Ethel Clayton as the divorce-seeking hooperess. Handling the vamp very much as Jane Ocker did in the New York run of the play, when she gave an account of herself that will not be soon forgotten, Miss Clayton translates all that Miss Ocker gave through the interpretative limitations of the celluloid. The scenario has fumbled her part, but it would take more than a scrap of paper to befumble Miss Clayton.

Richard Travers, also a star in his day, in a small bit stands forth with unction and distinction; Travers is still a good bet for a producer as judged by his work and appearance here.

To those who have not seen the stage edition of "Lightnin'" (if there be any) flaws and shortcomings of the screen conception may not be so conspicuous. But one who saw the great comedy cannot refrain from deploring the opportunities lost, for here was a native comedy destined to pass into folk-lore, screened without the spark and the flare which made it great.

Though many of Lightnin's famous fibs are in the titles, yet his whimsical personality as the most notorious and most harmless liar in Nevada does not gleam forth here. Lightnin's was not the creation of either Winchell Smith or Bacon—he is the beloved Tennessee's Pardner of Bret Harte, and he should breathe the soul of the sympathetic, Peterpanlike Bill of Harte, not the stilted stock-company character-man of Frances Marion as crippled up by Jay Hunt.

Commercially, "Lightnin'" may turn out a good investment. Its title should be a gold-mine of box office appeal, and the film will not displease, though it may disappoint many who remember the reactions of the play.

The love interest, which might have been amplified for the screen, is not warmed up, the undercurrent of melodrama is not inflated, leaving the feature dependant upon its comedy to give it backbone. That element cannot be lost in any version of "Lightnin'", but stacked against many funny pictures that come and go, "Lightnin'" will not rate as a high-power laughing effusion.

It will get by, and no more.

Loit.