

# The Strange Silence Concerning John Sainpolis

By Steve Frangos

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John Sainpolis is one of the most distinguished Greek American actors of all time. With over 126 films to his credit, Sainpolis, originally a pre-eminent Broadway actor, is in that small group of Greek American performers who successfully made the transition from silent films to 'talkies.'

With a stage, screen and radio career spanning more than 40 years, Sainpolis is an early Greek American actor little known to contemporary Hellenes anywhere. A critically-acclaimed actor during

his lifetime, John Sainpolis' performances can still be seen and evaluated anew in dozens of films readily available on video and DVD's.

Sainpolis' connection to the larger Greek American community is now little understood. We do know that John Belasco, whose long-running "New York City" columns appeared in Athene Magazine spoke well and often of John Sainpolis as a fellow Hellene. Yet Belasco's writings on John Sainpolis always assume that the reader has the same knowledge of this man and his involvement with his fellow Greeks, which we unfortunately do not now share.

Once one begins to read the available reviews on Sainpolis, this general lack of specific details is understandable. John Sainpolis was such a well recognized actor, to the general film audience, that in the 1923 film, "Souls for Sale" he played "John Sainpolis, the actor," in a scene within a film studio's dining hall.

Perhaps part of the historical amnesia concerning John Sainpolis is that, during the course of his long career, this man is credited under a number of different names. Sainpolis' work, both on the stage and in motion pictures, sees him referred to as John M. Sainpolis, Johnny

Sainpolis, John Sainpolis, John Saintpolis, and John M. St. Polis. Even being aware of these various spellings, a list of his movie and stage credits, and quite literally the hundreds of newspaper reviews evaluating nearly each one of his performances, so little is known about Sainpolis' life outside of his film career that saying we only have fragments of information exaggerates their real scope.

We do know that John Sainpolis was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on November 24, 1877. The date and place of this actor

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death are always given as October 8, 1946 in Los Angeles, California.

It must be stressed that Sainpolis was first a stage actor on Broadway. The first stage credit I can locate for this man is January 4, 1909 in the short-lived production of "An International Marriage." In all, I have only managed to locate ten Broadway plays in which Sainpolis appeared between 1909 and 1920. But this can not be an accurate number. We can be sure of Sainpolis' solid stage career by his host of positive reviews and especially the below New York Times, "Who's Who On The Stage," appraisalment on February 8, 1920:

"The goddess of the theater smiles upon some and allots them fat parts in successful productions, thereby bringing their talents sharply to the attention of both managers and public. In the case of others, regardless of their abilities, it assigns them rather relentlessly to failures, and dooms them to season after season without achieving the position and rewards which

IN GLORIOUS BLACK & WHITE



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should be rightfully theirs. All of which is by way of remarking upon the fact that John Sainpolis, as the suavely villainous Dr. Kasimir in 'For the Defense,' is now winning at least a measure of the recognition which should long ago have been his.

"Sainpolis, in the course of some 20 years of stage experience, has given a variety of fine performances in a succession of plays, but only once has he struck an unqualified success. This was David Warfield in 'The Return of Peter Grimm,' in which, for nearly three years, he played the role of the nephew. Since then, haply discouraged by the fate of most of the plays in which he has appeared, he has devoted himself largely to the more lucrative field of pictures.

"He has appeared with Pauline Frederick, Mae Marsh, Will Rodgers and others. Between pictures, or during them, he played opposite Lester Lonergan in that actor's production of 'The Torches' ... Most of his New York roles, if not all, have been at least fringed by the sinister, and in 'For the Defense,' he is an outright villain. But in the more recent centers, he has played everything. His stock experience has been stupendous. It includes almost unbroken 95 weeks at the Castle Square in Boston, giving two performances a day, with rarely a new week without a new play. It includes also several seasons as the director and principal actor in a company in Portland, Oregon; a season in Dayton, and several others.



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# "MYSTERIOUS MR. WONG"

# Sainpolis: Film Star Never Got his Due



"They Shall Have Music (1939)," "Abe Lincoln in Illinois (1940)," and Cecil B. DeMille's, "Reap the Wild Wind (1942)." Sainpolis' last film was "Assignment in Brittany (1943)."

Sainpolis was a working actor. No role seems to have been too insignificant for him. Aside from starring roles, he also performed in a number of movie serials. He was Caleb Delthem in "The Shadow Strikes (1937)," Carl Roemer, the poison gas inventor, in "Mr. Wong, Detective (1938)," with Boris Karloff in the title role, and in any number of the following Mr. Wong mysteries.

Sainpolis also played in a series of cowboy "oaters" as the less than distinguished B-cowboy movies were then called. Surprisingly, quite a number of these cowboy films are now much sought after cult classics such as "The Mysterious Rider (1938)," "Phantom Ranger (1938)," or "Zane Grey's Knights of the Range (1940)." In addition, Sainpolis can also be seen in quite a number of Hopalong Cassidy films such as "Three On the

ISE (from top left): This video box "Coquette" shows John Sainpolis, r man with white hair to the right. d the father in this 1929 'talkie,' Mary Pickford; Sainpolis was in sev- along Cassidy" films; Lon Chaney

"Still earlier in his stage career he played three seasons with Walker Whiteside in Shakespeare - all of which probably explains why his occasional New York appearances have invariably revealed a finished

whom Sainpolis worked in several films with Karloff in "The Mummy." Sainpolis played characters in several "Mr. ms.



and through performance."

With this kind of artistic pedigree, exactly who did Sainpolis appear with in his film career? A short list would have to include Lon Chaney Sr., Rudolph Valentino, Mary Pickford, Boris Karloff, Charlie Chaplin, Marion Davies, Loretta Young, Joel McCrea and Zasu Pitts. As the above New York Times theater critic noted, John Sainpolis' stage roles spanned the full gamut of characterizations. With equal ease, Sainpolis, in his film career, portrayed the leading man as well as governors, bankers, the occasional sheriff, the professor, count, doctor, loving father figure, foreign agent, inventor, colonel, judge, defense attorney, ambassador and even the arch-villain.

If all this praise is true, which movies and roles did John Sainpolis appear in over the years? As far as I can determine, his screen debut was in 1914 as President Alvarez in "The Soldiers of Fortune." While initially moving back and forth across the country between Broadway and Hollywood, Sainpolis had made at least 21 films by 1919.

Over time, he was praised for his early film work in "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921)" and "Phantom of the Opera (1925)." All published sources agree that it was Sainpolis' 1929 performance in "Coquette," where he appeared as Mary Pickford's father, with which he made the critically noted successful transition to "taking pictures."

Later roles for which Sainpolis received special notice include

Trail (1936)," "Rustler's Valley (1937)," and others.

Videos and DVD's of films John Sainpolis performed in are readily available. Aside from classics such as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," "Phantom of the Opera," "Coquette" or "Reap the Wild Wind," Sainpolis also appeared notably in a number of Lon Chaney Sr. silent films classics such as "Shadows (1922)" and "The Unknown (1927)" which have been recently re-released on restored digital versions.

A word of advice on searching for John Sainpolis films: Be sure to use the "John St. Polis" spelling. This was the mistaken way his name was spelled in the film version of "Coquette," and for some reason it stuck - most of the time.

An actor who may never have received the roles his talent deserved, Sainpolis always sought work. I wish I knew more about him. Along with Lou Tellegen, Jack Pierce, George Regas, Pedro Regas, Belle K. Maniates, Spyros Skouras, Elia Kazan and others, he made up the Greek American community of the Golden Age of Hollywood. Knowing more about this individual is not simply a matter of the Greek American historical record, but also critically necessary as an example and guide for all those Greek Americans now setting their sights on a career on stage and screen.

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