

The Barrymore family has been acting for centuries. Graham Flashner charts the highs and lows of the glittering

## A family on film

Acting may be a more respected profession than it was 200 years ago, but most parents wouldn't wish it as a career for their children. Unless, of course, the parents are actors themselves. Angelina Jolie, Charlie Sheen, Keifer Sutherland and Kate Hudson are just a few of the many Hollywood offspring of famous actors.

If a case can be made for thespian skill being truly in the blood, one need only look to the legendary Barrymore clan, the closest thing Hollywood has to acting royalty. This family's genealogical tree blends four respected theatrical families – the Drews, Lanes, Costellos and Blyths – and spans six generations over three centuries, dating back to the late 1700s.

And while there are other multi-generational acting families – the Redgraves and Fondas come to mind – none can match the Barrymores for longevity and personal drama.

The Barrymores have been the subject of plays, films and books, and their story plays out like an epic TV mini-series: equal parts triumph and tragedy, brilliant talent matched only by a penchant for self-destructive behaviour.

Along with fame and fortune came tempestuous marriages and raging addictions – which ruined the careers of both John Barrymore and his son John Drew Barrymore, and for a time sidetracked Drew Barrymore, a child star who was in rehab by the age of 12.

### A DYNASTY BEGINS

By the time the three most famous Barrymores – Lionel, Ethel and John – were born in the late 1870s, acting was embedded in their DNA. Their grandparents, Louisa Lane and John Drew; their uncles, John Drew and Sidney Drew; and their parents Georgianna and Maurice had all been stars of various guises from theatre to comedy.

The remarkable saga began in 1850 when Louisa married her third husband, Irish comedian and actor John Drew. In the 1860s, Lane managed the Arch Street Theater in Philadelphia – where the repertory of actors included John Wilkes Booth, whom Lane starred with in *Macbeth* only two years before Booth assassinated President Lincoln.

Louisa and John's daughter Georgianna was a spirited comedic actress in her own right when she fell in love with a handsome, debonair English stage actor (and Cambridge law graduate) named Maurice Barrymore. Born Herbert Blyth, he'd changed his name to spare his family further embarrassment over his chosen profession (Maurice took the name 'Barrymore' from a playbill).

A dynasty was born. Maurice and Georgianna's three children all went on to eclipse their parents and become acclaimed stars of the stage and silver screen.

Ironically, Lionel, Ethel and John were all initially resistant to the family trade. John and Lionel wanted to be artists; Ethel dreamed of being a concert pianist. But genetic predisposition – along with the practical necessities of earning a



The Barrymores in 1932.

Seated, from left to right: Irene Fenwick, Lionel Barrymore, Ethel Barrymore, Dolores Costello holding daughter Dolores Ethel Barrymore, John Barrymore, holding John Barrymore, Jr. Standing, from left to right: Ethel's three children, John, Ethel and Samuel Colt

API IMAGES

living – drew all three inexorably to the bright lights of their forebears.

As Ethel Barrymore said in later life, “We became actors not because we wanted to, but because it was the thing we could do best.” John was fond of attributing his success to ‘luck and heredity,’ but he had a fierce work ethic and a desire to shed comparisons to his colourful father. Given his ancestry and later propensities, it’s safe to say that – like his siblings – John Barrymore was born to be an actor.

Once the three accepted their destiny, there was no stopping them. Ethel, Lionel and John starred in over 300 films and plays between them, and carved out distinctive personas: Ethel, the peerless stage comedienne; Lionel, the versatile character actor; John, the romantic leading man.

Ethel and Lionel became the only brother and sister to ever win Academy Awards for acting, Lionel winning for *A Free Soul* (1931) and Ethel taking home a late-career Oscar for *None But the Lonely Heart* (1944). The three Barrymore siblings appeared in only one film together, *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932).

Though he never won or even received an Academy Award nomination, John Barrymore was the finest and most fascinating actor of the three, renowned for his commanding voice, unmistakable charisma and daring interpretations of Shakespeare. Cultured and urbane, he was a heartthrob who conquered Broadway with unforgettable turns in *Hamlet* and

*Richard III*.

Bored by the repetition of long theatrical runs, he left the stage for good in 1925 and settled in Hollywood, starring in films such as *Grand Hotel* (with Greta Garbo) and *Twentieth Century*. His chiseled good looks led him to be famously dubbed “The Great Profile.”

In 1928 Barrymore married Dolores Costello, an up-and-coming actress whose career he’d launched when he made her his leading lady in the Moby Dick-inspired *The Sea Beast* (1926). Dolores did not wander far from the fold in choosing a husband. Her father Maurice Costello was a silent film star once known as the “handsomest man on the screen.”

Barrymore was at the pinnacle of his Hollywood stardom. But beneath the fame and glamour, demons lurked that would derail a brilliant career. His steady decline began in the 1930s when he began drinking heavily, was unable to memorize lines, and was later reduced to playing caricatures of himself in inferior films. His four marriages all ended in divorce. He was only 60 when he died in 1942, broke and ravaged by alcohol.

## THE NEXT GENERATION

Burdened by unrealistic expectations, the next generation of Barrymores was unable to live up to the family’s legacy. John Barrymore and Dolores Costello’s only son, John Drew Barrymore, inherited his father’s matinee-idol looks, his



swagger, and even the distinctive facial gestures that Barrymore pere had made famous.

According to biographer James Kotsilibas-Davis, Dolores – by now divorced from John – tried to discourage her teenage son from entering the business. “I thought I could divert him,” she said. “But I gave up. I guess he was born to act.”

Unfortunately, John Drew never could live up to his father's towering reputation – although he did notable work in movies such as *While The City Sleeps* (1956) and *Never Love A Stranger* (1958), films that allowed him to express his dark energy and anger. In the 1960s and '70s he turned to television, appearing on such staples as *Rawhide*, *Gunsmoke* and *Winchester 73*.

But he was better known for his many off-screen brushes with the law, and like his father, dissipated his talent with drink and drug use. Also like his father, John Drew married and divorced four times.

John Drew's half-sister, Diana Joan Blyth Barrymore – daughter of John Barrymore and his second wife, Michael Strange – gamely tried to carry on the family tradition. Unfortunately, Diana was not blessed with the classic Barrymore beauty and, like John Drew, was overwhelmed by comparisons to her late father. Revealingly, she wrote a best-selling autobiography, *Too Much Too Soon*. Two years later, she was dead at 38, an apparent suicide.

## A NEW BARRYMORE BREAKS THROUGH

John Drew Barrymore had two children with two of his four wives. His son, John Sidney Blyth Barrymore III, born in 1954,

had an undistinguished film career through the 1980s and '90s before abandoning the arts. In 1975, John Drew had a daughter with his fourth wife, aspiring actress Jaid Mako. John left the house before that daughter was born, never to be a part of her life. Her name was Drew Barrymore.

It didn't take long for Drew Barrymore to realise her innate talents. At the precocious age of four, having already appeared in a TV commercial and a TV movie, she announced to her mother that what she wanted to do was ... act.

She was undeterred by her mother's daily rejection and long hours away from home trying to balance her own acting dreams with raising a child. At age seven, Drew became an instant star in Steven Spielberg's *ET The Extra-Terrestrial*. The future seemed limitless, but trouble was brewing in Drew's anything-but-normal childhood.

The self-destructive gene that had plagued many a Barrymore didn't take long to manifest itself. Long before Lindsey Lohan and Britney Spears became the poster children of spoiled Hollywood excess, there was Drew Barrymore. By nine, she had discovered alcohol and marijuana. At 12, she was doing cocaine and partying in clubs. After an attempted suicide at 14, she went in and out of rehab.

Unlike her tormented predecessors, however, this Barrymore had an inner strength and a support system to see her through. The miracle is that she has not only survived but prospered, becoming a romantic comedy star in hits like *The Wedding Singer* and *Ever After*, a mega-star in the *Charlie's Angels* franchise, and a Hollywood player with her own production company, Flower Films.

In her autobiography, *Little Girl Lost* – published when she was 15 – Drew writes that acting enabled her to find the extended family she never had growing up. Today, that “family” includes a network of close friends such as *Charlie's Angels* co-star Cameron Diaz.

While Drew's relationship with her mother remains turbulent – Jaid's apparent jealousy of her daughter's early success has been well-chronicled – she managed to make peace with her father before he died in 2004.

Considering all she's been through, Drew appears to have emerged with a uniquely positive outlook. Speaking about her family to *Vogue* magazine, she said: “Maybe they were crazy, but they were talented and they were interesting and they were passionate about life. I'm proud I come from that circus.” ●

