

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

### From Richard III to Rex I

*Tower of London* was a 1939 movie starring Basil Rathbone as the future Richard III of England, with Boris Karloff as the fictional executioner Mord. Vincent Price appeared as George, Duke of Clarence, in this quasi-horror historical drama. In 1962 *Tower of London* was remade by Roger Corman, this time starring Vincent Price in the lead role as Richard III. Francis Ford Coppola worked on the movie as dialogue director.



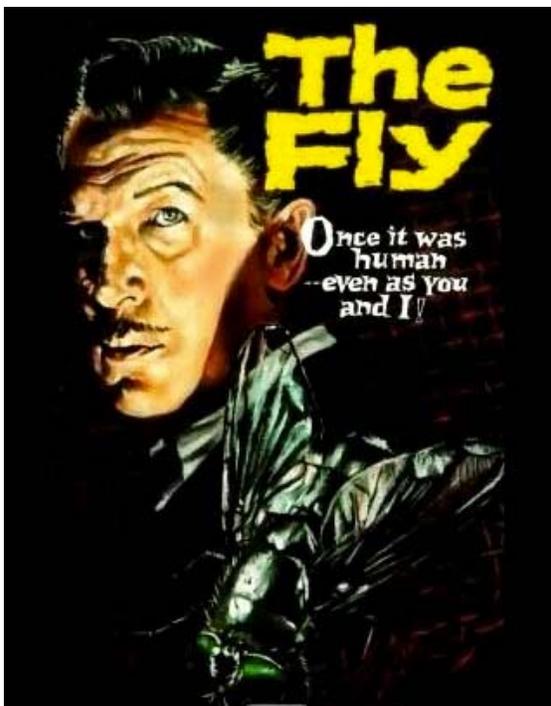
Vincent Price, Jr. (May 27, 1911 – October 25, 1993), the American actor with the perfect voice for horror movies, grew up in Saint Louis,

Missouri, in a well-to-do family whose wealth was made possible years earlier when his grandfather invented "Dr. Price's Baking Powder".

"The Prices loved to travel", wrote the actor's daughter, Victoria Price. "Marguerite and Vincent Sr. had been to Europe, and as their children grew older, whenever they could the couple took shorter trips to interesting cities such as New Orleans ... returning with 'artistic' souvenirs".

From his travels at home and abroad, young Vincent Price acquired a passion for art and, along with an art history major at Yale University, an interest in the theatre. Despite his long career performing in films of the macabre, Price began as a character actor. He gave a memorable performance in the film *Laura* in 1944.

In the 1950s, viewers enjoyed wearing 3-D glasses to watch Price in *House of Wax* and thrilled to *The Fly* (1958) and *Return of the Fly* (1959). Who could forget the part man-part fly, pleading "Help meeeeeeeeeee!" Price starred in *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), as well.



*Vincent Price in The Fly*

Price was also a gourmet cook, authoring several cookbooks and hosting his own cooking show on television. From 1962 to 1971, the "Vincent Price Collection of Fine Art", was offered to the public by Sears-Roebuck. Price selected and commissioned works of art (by Dalí, Chagall and others) for the affordably "Priced" collection.

In 1977, he began playing the role of Oscar Wilde in a well-received one-man stage play. Two years later, he performed on the same stage in Leadville, Colorado, as Wilde himself did ninety-six years before. On that earlier American tour, Wilde performed in New Orleans near Lake Pontchartrain at Spanish Fort. Victoria Price wrote that members of Price's family and friends believed that his role as Oscar Wilde was one of his best acting performances.

On February 4, 2013, the University of Leicester in England confirmed that a skeleton unearthed beneath a city car park, its mitochondrial DNA having been tested, was (beyond a reasonable doubt) that of Richard III himself. The conclusion was also confirmed by dental tests, soil analysis, and physical characteristics of the skeleton. The skeletal remains were, in fact, highly consistent with contemporary accounts of Richard's actual appearance.

In addition to Basil Rathbone and Vincent Price, who each played the King of England who met his death in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth Field, another great actor, Lawrence Barrett, played the role of Richard III back in 1872. That performance, in Shakespeare's play of the same name, took place at the new Varieties Theatre on Canal Street in New Orleans.

Vincent Price, who played Richard III ninety years later, had another connection to Lawrence Barrett. He was Price's wife's grandfather, and it was he who graciously lent his Richard III costume to Lewis J. Salomon that year (1872) for his royal raiment as the very first Rex, King of Carnival.

Rex was organized that year by local businessmen in large part to put on a grand spectacle in honor of the Grand Duke Alexis' visit to New Orleans. The Varieties Theatre was also the location of the ball of the Mistick Krewe of Comus, and that evening, the Grand Duke Alexis attended it, as well. The Varieties was earlier located on Gravier, between Baronne and Carondelet streets, but (after a couple of fires) the Variété Association built the new theatre on Canal Street next door to Christ Church Cathedral. The theatre, famous for its magnificent staircase and costing \$320,000 at the time, was located where the façade of the old Kress Building can still be seen today and occupying part of the Ritz Carlton (previously the Maison Blanche Department Store).

Lawrence Barrett was associated in the management of the Varieties Theatre in New Orleans, playing numerous leading roles, and for the first time acting as Richelieu, Hamlet and Shylock. In 1871-1872, he managed the new Varieties Theatre on Canal Street when the historic Mardi Gras wardrobe loan was made, and later that year (December 1872), he played Cassius to Edwin Booth's Brutus in New York. Cassius was his signature role. But let's go back to his beginnings.



*Actress Edith Barrett with husband, actor Vincent Price*

Lawrence Barrett (April 4, 1838 – March 20, 1891), nee Lawrence Patrick Brannigan, was born in Paterson, New Jersey, to Irish-born parents. The self-educated son of a poor tailor, he studied the theatre in depth and brought life and vibrancy to his many roles. His first stage appearance was in Detroit as Murad in *The French Spy* in 1853. In 1856 he made his way to New York City with a role in *The Hunchback*. He was hired in 1857 by Mr. Burton, and acted under his management for nearly two years, supporting Edwin Booth, Charlotte Cushman and other prominent actors. Charlotte Cushman had made her stage debut in New Orleans as Lady Macbeth.

At the beginning of the civil war in 1861, Lawrence Barrett accepted a captaincy in the Union Army and served the 28th Massachusetts infantry with distinction. He later acted in Philadelphia, Washington, D. C., and at the Winter Garden in New York, where he was engaged by Edwin Booth to play Othello to Booth's Iago.



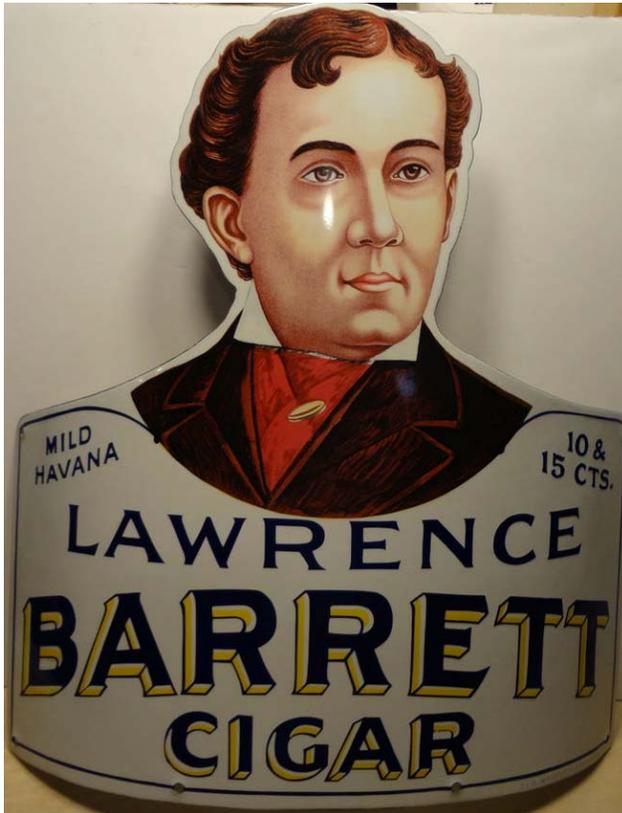
*Lawrence Barrett, celebrated American stage actor*

Otis Skinner once described Lawrence Barrett: "His features, were attractive; a good nose, wide mobile mouth, deep-set and burning eyes, and a broad and thoughtful forehead. It might have been the head of a monk."

Prior to his management of the new Varieties Theatre in New Orleans, he performed at Maguire's Opera House in San Francisco and managed (with John McCullough) the California theatre from 1867 to 1870. During 1873-1874 he made successful tours, visiting the leading cities of the United States. He acted in London, England, in the years 1867, 1882, 1883 and 1884, with his fine portrayal of Cardinal Richelieu considered his best part. The 1875 season began with a magnificent revival of *Julius Caesar* at Booth's theatre, where he once more

appeared as Cassius and later as King Lear. Barrett wrote a biography of another renowned thespian of his day, Edwin Forrest, in the *American Actors Series* (1881), and an interesting sketch of Edwin Booth (1886), as well.

And, yes, he sometimes appeared in advertisements (as featured on the cigar sign below):

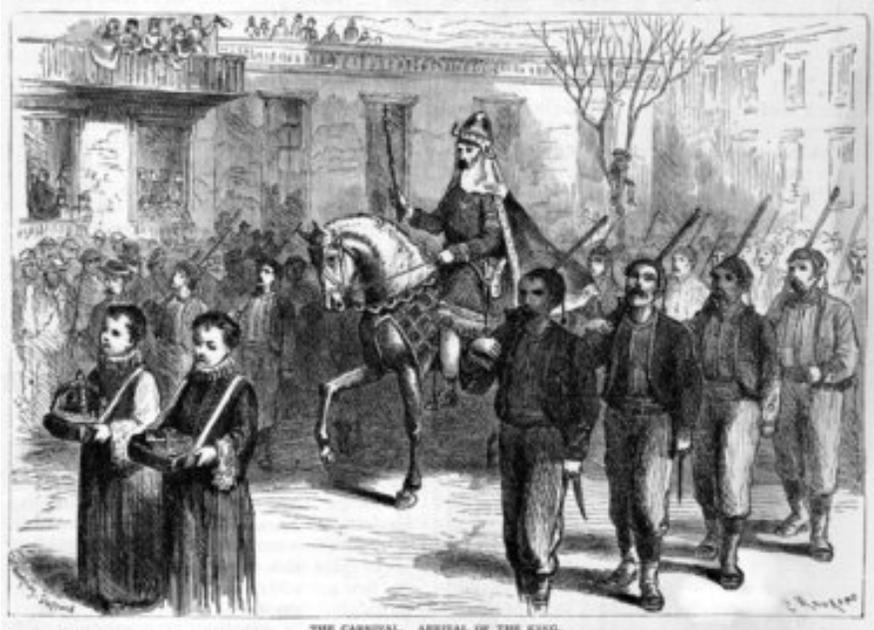


*Lawrence Barrett, who loaned his Richard III costume to Rex I*

Actress Edith Barrett (January 19, 1907 – February 22, 1977), nee Edith Williams, was the daughter of Marshall Sears Perry Williams and Edith M. Barrett (daughter of 19th-century American stage actor Lawrence Barrett). She, herself, took to the stage at age 16 in a staging of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. During the 1930s, she was a performer in Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre troupe. While appearing in the troupe's 1937 production of *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, she married leading man Vincent Price in 1938. The couple had one son, Vincent Barrett Price (born 1940), but they divorced in 1948.

Edith Barrett's film debut was in 1941, playing a half-witted half-sister of the homicidal Ida Lupino in *Ladies in Retirement*. Like her husband, Vincent Price, she did some horror movies. In *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), the voodoo version of *Jane Eyre*, she played the mother-in-law of Mrs. Holland. The next year she actually played in 20th Century Fox's adaptation of the real *Jane Eyre*.

History and culture come together in strange ways. Lawrence Barrett, while playing Richard III, loaned his kingly robes, scepter, cloak and crown to the very first Rex in 1872. His granddaughter became an actress, too, marrying actor Vincent Price, who also played Richard III.



*Lewis J. Salomon (Rex 1872): His kingdom was a horse  
Scribner's Magazine engraving (1873)*

At the end of Shakespeare's play, Richard is unhorsed on the field of battle, crying out, "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!" Richard is killed and a new king takes the throne. In 1872, New Orleans hailed a brand new king and called him Rex. He had neither floats nor a queen that year, but he *did* have a horse.

Eight years after Barrett loaned Rex I his Richard III costume and royal accessories, the theme of the 1880 Rex Ball was "The Four Elements". Also that year, New Orleans elected a new mayor – and his name was Shakspeare.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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