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Selling Masculinity at Warner Bros.: William Powell, A Case Study

Abstract

William Powell became a star in the 1930s due to his unique brand of suave charm and witty humor—a quality that could only be expressed with the advent of sound film, and one that took him from mid-level player typecast as a villain, to one of the most popular romantic comedy leads of the era. His charm lay in the nonchalant sophistication that came naturally to Powell and that he displayed with ease both on screen and off. He was exemplary of the success of the new kind of star that came into their own during the transition to sound: sharp- or silver-tongued actors who were charming because of their way with words and not because of their silver screen faces. Powell also exercised a great deal of control over his publicity and star image, which is best examined during his short and failed tenure as a Warner Bros. during the advent of his rise to stardom. Despite holding a great amount of power in his billing and creative control, Powell was given a parade of cookie-cutter dangerous playboy roles, and the terms of his contract and salary were constantly in flux over the three years he spent there. With the help of his agent Myron Selznick, Powell was able to navigate between three studios in only a matter of a few years, in search of the perfect fit for his natural abilities as an actor. This experimentation with star image and publicity marked the period of the early 1930s in Hollywood, as studios dealt with the quickly evolving art and technological form, industrial and business practices, and a shifting cultural and moral landscape.

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Cementing his status as a screen villain for the next seven years, William Powell made his debut in Goldwyn Pictures Corporation's production of

Sherlock Holmes with John Barrymore in 1922 as one of Moriarty's henchmen. He signed to Famous Players-Lasky in 1925 and played a variety of both menacing and comedic villains, roles he was cast in based on his less than traditional leading man looks: large, heavy lidded eyes, high forehead, thick, expressive brows, prominent nose, and his signature razor-thin mustache. Despite the typecasting, Famous Players-Lasky (which became Paramount in 1927) was a studio that nurtured Powell, developing him from anonymous villain to popular character actor to leading man. The first Paramount sound film, *Interference*, opened in early 1929 with Powell in the lead. Though the true star of the film was the Movietone sound technology, Powell's elegant voice and stage-trained elocution instantly changed the image that fans had imagined of him, elevating him to a classy gentleman. In 1929, Powell was given his first true leading role as the detective Philo Vance in *Canary Murder Case*, which was the first of many times



William Powell in a publicity shot.

Powell would go on to portray Vance—a character whose name eventually became interchangeable with his own—throughout his career. Paramount was able to transition him successfully to the dapper leading man persona that he maintained for the rest of his career in *Man of World* (1931), the film on which he met his second wife, Carole Lombard.¹

In 1929, an up-and-coming agent from an industry family, Myron Selznick, sought out Powell as a client, despite Powell’s comfortable status as a Paramount contract player. Selznick’s influence on Powell’s career cannot be understated, both in his business and creative instincts and powerful Hollywood connections, as well as in his legal role in the contractual power Powell exerted over his career. In search of a more lucrative, star-making contract, Selznick arranged Powell’s move to Warner Bros., a studio eager for a well-established star, someone who did not need nurturing or development through the often years-long process (as Paramount had already done for Powell).² Paramount could not match the extravagant offer from Warner Bros., and Powell arrived at the studio as a romantic leading man and one of the highest paid stars at the studio. His 1931 contract established a forty-

week work schedule, for three films per year, at a salary of \$300,000 per year. Powell was also granted unprecedented control in his contract in regards to the billing of each of his films.³

Powell (and Selznick, as his representation) garnered a contract that was not only lucrative but also gave Powell definitive star status regarding the way he was to be billed in the promotion of all his Warner Bros. pictures. The specific billing language of Powell’s 1931 contract in Article 12, page 7 read:

Artist shall be the sole star in each of the pictures produced hereunder, and in all exploitation and publicising thereof, within the control of Producer, he shall receive star billing, and shall not be joined with any other artist as a co-star. In all paid advertising, screening credit or publicity within the control of the Producer, the name of the Artist’s shall appear prior to and in type at least equal in size to the title of the production present, and the name of no other person shall appear therein in type larger than fifty per cent (50%) the size used for the Artist’s name. On the film no name other than that of the Artist shall appear on the main title card. Billing of said productions shall be made in substantially the following manner:

WARNER BROS PICTURES INC
 (or such other producer or associate
 producer as it may designate)
 Presents
 WILLIAM POWELL
 In
 “Name of Photoplay”⁴

In comparison, looking at the billing clauses of other Warner Bros. stars demonstrates diversity in the language regarding the control they were granted in terms of their billing. Dick Powell, a popular male musical star and contemporary of William Powell’s at Warner Bros. at the time, had very generic, anonymous language about his billing, simply stating in both his 1932 and 1935 contracts, “[...] the Artist shall receive screen

credit and publicity usually accorded for work of the same type and character as performed by him hereunder.”⁵ Additionally, all of the contracts of *Robin Hood* star Errol Flynn contained the same generic language about billing in 1934, 1935, 1938, and 1940.⁶ Because these contracts surveyed were after William Powell’s 1931 contract, one has to wonder if Warner Bros. was hesitant to grant as much power to their stars as they did to Powell upon his entrance to the studio.

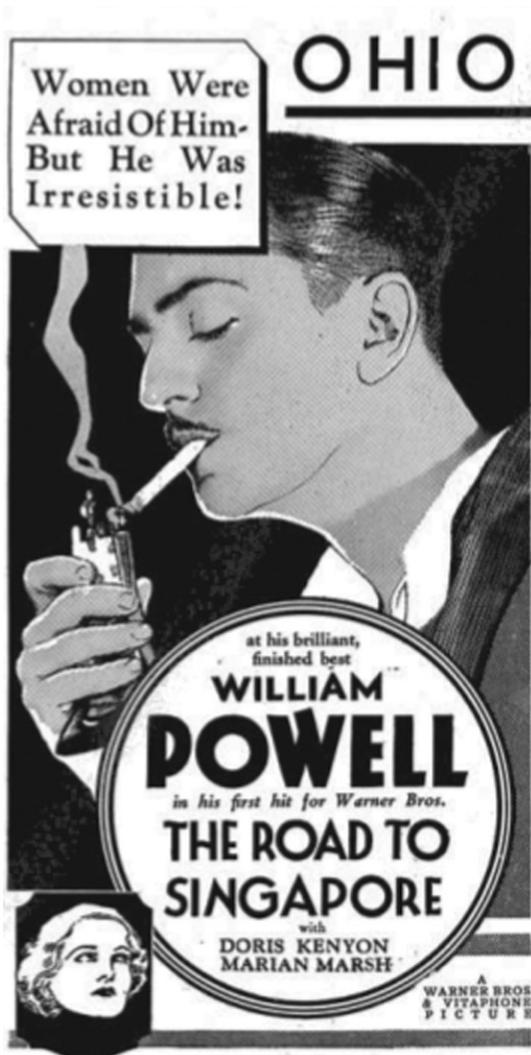
The degree of power Powell wielded in regard to his billing is demonstrated in interoffice memos between the heads of the studio regarding his very first film at Warner Bros., *Road to Singapore*. The studio sought Powell’s approval to include the names of the writers and director on the main title, despite the contracts of the writers, which established their billing status on the main title. This was an issue that traversed the coasts, from the office of Warner Bros. president Harry Warner in New York to that of his brother, studio executive Jack, in California, via a telegram dated June 16, 1931:

BILLING FAILS TO CONFORM
 POWELLS CONTRACT WHICH
 PROVIDES MAIN TITLE CARD READ
 QUOTE WARNER BROS PICTURES
 INC PRESENTS WILLIAM POWELL
 IN NAME OF PHOTOPLAY
 UNQUOTE FURTHER POWELLS
 CONTRACT CONFLICTS WITH
 PERTWEE ROBINS GREEN AND
 ALEXANDER BECAUSE POWELL
 CONTRACT FORBIDS ANY
 OTHER NAME ON MAIN TITLE
 AND PERTWEE ROBINS GREEN
 AND ALEXANDER CONTRACTS
 CALL FOR CREDIT ON MAIN
 TITLE STOP THEREFORE PLEASE
 PROCURE POWELLS CONSENT
 PRESENT BILLING OR FORWARD
 REVISED BILLING WITH
 PERTWEE ROBINS GREEN AND
 ALEXANDER OFF MAIN TITLE
 AND OBTAIN CONSENT OF
 EACH THIS DEVIATION THEIR
 CONTRACTS STOP KENYON
 MARSH CAN RECEIVE NO MORE

THAN FIFTY PERCENT BECAUSE
 POWELLS CONTRACT FORBIDS
 ANY OTHER PERSON APPEARING
 IN TYPE LARGER THAN FIFTY
 PERCENT HIS SIZE.⁷

Jack Warner then sent this telegram via memo to production head Darryl Zanuck with the instructions, “Investigate the above and advise me.” By the next day, Powell had approved the inclusion, communicated in a memo from Zanuck with the text for the wire to go to New York, reading “POWELL WILL CONSENT TO PERTWEE ROBINS GREEN AND ALEXANDER NAME ON MAIN TITLE BUT ALL OTHER BILLING CLAUSES MUST STAND.”⁸ Powell’s contract was so rigid as to even displace other artists’ contractual billing clauses, with any exceptions subject to his personal consent. It is apparent from Powell’s final say on the matter and deference to him by the Warners and Darryl Zanuck that they were especially eager to keep their top star happy.

The publicity materials created and distributed by Warner Bros. to promote Powell’s films in theaters around the country offer a bounty of information about how the studio envisioned and imagined their star—what they wanted from him and how they sold him as a unique male star within their stable of rough and tumble gangsters, like James Cagney. These press books were an important tool for the studio in the promotion of their films in regional theaters, especially during the Great Depression. As studio publicists developed the publicity and marketing campaign, they needed to create tools that maintained their message in every theater where the film played, regardless of who was carrying out the execution of the promotion in regional theaters. These press books put the highly specific message directly into the theater manager’s hands, so that exhibitors did not need to do anything outside of what Warner Bros. provided them—hence the amount of pre-written stories, prepared reviews, gossipy tidbits, lifestyle pieces, suggestions for newspaper exploitation, pre-made ads, and publicity stunts. The press book for *Jewel Robbery*, Powell’s second film at the studio, contains a note entitled “This is Important,” which explicitly explains how the film should be exploited, with



William Powell in an ad for *Road to Singapore* from the Warner Bros. press book.

care toward maintaining the tone of its “light, saucy, highly seasoned comedy-romance” and not as a “heavy drama.” This note provides insight into just how much control Warner Bros. wanted in communicating the message of the film in their promotions all over the country.

Another crucial part of these press books is the exploitation and publicity stunts suggested to the theater owners to entice audiences to buy tickets to the movies. Studio publicists dreamed up lists of “ballyhoo” stunts for staged pranks, stunts in or outside the theater lobby, as well as ideas for fashion shows, partnerships with jewelry stores, and demonstrations of the latest

beauty treatments. In addition to these publicity stunts, the focus of these press books was also on promotional materials like posters and life size cut outs.⁹ Pre-written newspaper articles and pitches as well as studio-designed ads make up the bulk of these detailed publicity materials. Some feature large banners across the top of each page with explicit reminders and instructions to: “Be Sure to Plant the Many Good Feature Stories Here! Powell Has a Great Role—Give Him A Big Ad Campaign! Women Will Rave About This Film—Appeal to Them! It’s An Important Picture—Give It An Important Plug!”¹⁰ These materials were imperative in maintaining a consistent message while promoting the film in a nationwide publicity campaign, an issue that remains a marketing challenge in today’s crowded landscape.

With Powell’s star billing intact, Warner Bros. made sure to capitalize on their investment, and the actor was front and center in the *Road to Singapore* press books. Warner Bros. pulled out all the stops in selling the dangerous sexuality of William Powell. As a former villain with a silver tongue and suave style, he was positioned as the “Man of Many Loves” in the film’s press book. The film stars Powell as a cad who seduces the fiancée of a doctor and a young eighteen-year-old girl on a tropical vacation in the Ceylonese jungle. The sample ads proclaim “Suavity at its height!” “At the glamorous height of his dramatic power,” and “the man men remembered and women couldn’t forget!” The caption, “Women were afraid of him but he was irresistible!” accompanies an image of Powell lighting a cigarette, explicitly illustrating his dangerous sexual appeal. The film is a true example of uncensored, pre-Production Code sexuality, and the publicity for the film is anchored around this theme. The entire book is plastered with images of his face, while his costars Doris Kenyon and Marian Marsh appear only a few times. The ads also take care to specify that this role is “His Greatest!”¹¹ Warner Bros. took no chances in how they marketed the film to Powell’s fan base: this was a film not to be missed for female fans of his distinct brand of masculinity: suavity laced with a hint of danger.

The featured articles in the *Singapore* press book focus on two main themes that continue to reverberate throughout the rest of his Warner

Bros. publicity: first, his ability to straddle the line between good and bad and, secondly, his speaking voice. The headline of one of the studio-written newspaper articles reads, "William Powell Says Fans Ban Bad Men That Are All Bad Or Heroes That Are All Too Good." The first line of the article reads, "Take a tip from Bill Powell: 'Don't be too darn good, if you want to hold public interest!'" Then, the piece goes on to quote Powell extensively about his background playing villains. Powell ultimately says, "that it is difficult to tell where he [the bad man] stops being bad and begins being good. Most of us in life go along balancing dangerously on this narrow dividing line. ...Maybe it has something to do with whatever success I have had." In these quotes, Powell demonstrates his awareness not only of his own appeal, but perhaps his own agency in his good/bad image.¹² Warner Bros. took his popular villainous image and used it to create a new kind of leading man, one who is slightly dangerous, an irresistible cad, and possessing of sexual intrigue simply because of the underlying threat that he represents.

Another featured article has the headline "Powell Owes His Stardom To His Talkie Voice and Not to A Rather Sinister Physiognomy." This emphasis on his voice, and not on his looks, as the genesis of his popularity is a theme that is repeated many times throughout the Warner Bros. press books for his films. The aforementioned article takes a wider look at how the industry's transition to sound reshaped the public's appetite for certain kinds of stars who were appealing not because of their looks, but rather their speaking or singing voices. Powell is quoted about the "amazing upset" that led to the success of talkie character actors like Edward G. Robinson or James Cagney. The press book article also states, "The ugly mugs have the best of things in motion pictures just now and the collar-ad boys are taking back seats or playing villain roles, according to William Powell," and "when the human voice became a part of screen entertainment, looks faded in importance and personality came into its own," and "handsome is as handsome talks in talking pictures."¹³ This drastic restructuring of the components that make up attractive and compelling stars in the transition from silent to sound is an element in the evolution of Hollywood that cannot be overstated, and it

Suavity At It's Height!



More Intriguing,
more fascinating
than ever before!

**WILLIAM
POWELL**

in the finest play of his career

**The ROAD TO
SINGAPORE**

with
**MARIAN MARSH
DORIS KENYON**

Newest screen sensation!

Another ad provided by the Warner Bros. press book for *Road to Singapore*.

**POWELL OWES HIS STARDOM
TO HIS TALKIE VOICE AND NOT TO
A RATHER SINISTER PHYSIOGNOMY**

Star of Warner Bros. "The Road To Singapore,"
Now at the.....Theatre, Entertainingly
Discusses Changes in Film Personnel
Brought About by the Talkies

(Interesting Feature for Sunday Paper)

The ugly mugs have the best of things in motion pictures just now and the collar-ad boys are taking back seats or playing villain roles, according to William Powell, who is starred in Warner Bros. "The Road to Singapore" now at the Theatre.

"This amazing upset dates from the advent of talking pictures but it has been gathering momentum at a tremendous rate the past two years, culminating as it has in the starring of such players as Wallace Beery, George Bancroft, George Arliss, Walter Huston, Jack Oakie, Edward G. Robinson and others of us who do not exactly qualify as models for neck wear advertisements," Powell declares.

An article describing William Powell's appeal from the *Road to Singapore* press book, generated by Warner Bros.

is apparent in this article that this issue was very much on the surface of Hollywood production practices and publicity as the industry attempted to keep up with changing modes of appealing to audiences. Powell is one of the best examples of the kind of male actor who never would have been a superstar without his voice.

To emphasize the locus of his appeal, the press books repeatedly make mention of how Powell is not traditionally handsome in order to demonstrate that his relaxed nonchalance, witty urbane quality, and debonair flair created his dapper charm. The publicity department is blunt in its assessments, stating, "Powell though not a handsome man is an intelligent and devilishly attractive one. The air of assurance which he affects on the screen is not affectation. He is the only man I ever saw who appears to really be as nonchalant as the cigaret [sic] advertisers would have him be." This quote signifies two things in the presentation of Powell: a continuing association of his appeal with an element of danger ("devilishly attractive"), but also an emphasis on his nonchalance, something Powell himself imbued in the upper class playboy with a heart of gold image constructed by Warner Bros.¹⁴

Powell's elocution and poise positioned him in this particular category; he was never going to play a rough and tumble cowboy or gangster at this time. With his nonchalance and devil-may-care attitude, Powell cut a figure that was both dashing and comforting in the time of economic depression

and turmoil, a calm in the face of the storm. Powell's ease in this persona allowed him to walk the fine line between hero and villain, sensuality and safety. A quote attributed to Powell around the 1931 production of *Ladies' Man* (Paramount) reflects his commitment to authenticity in his star persona: "There's no use putting a square peg in a round hole. Not that I always have to be the same kind of peg, you understand. But there are plenty of square pegs for square holes—so keep the round pegs for the round holes."¹⁵

Powell reunited with his co-star from the Paramount days, Kay Francis for *Jewel Robbery*, in which he portrayed a cat burglar, known only as "The Robber." Once again, his approval was sought to go outside his contract billing clause and have Kay Francis co-billed with him, which he granted, via a letter dated April 19, 1932.¹⁶ Powell may have granted this permission because of his previous onscreen relationship with Francis at Paramount, and she too was part of the group of stars raided by Warner Bros. in 1931.

Many of the ads in the *Jewel Robbery* press materials continued to sell both the promise of sex and danger to audiences, and the tag lines are masterful euphemisms, declaring "He Stole Her Jewels—But That Wasn't ALL!" "Intimate confessions of a boudoir bandit who stole more than jewels!" and "Thrilling confessions of a romantic robber who entered where husbands feared to tread." The same tack is taken in the selling of this film and *Road to Singapore*, emphasizing the dangerous sexual lothario character of Powell. One of the featured headlines reads, "William Powell Finds Fans Like Him in Naughty Roles," once again bringing up the hint of danger that he brought to his sex appeal, but almost neutering that danger by describing it as "naughty" rather than truly threatening.¹⁷

In stark contrast to the willingness with which Powell shared the marquee with Kay Francis, in his 1932 film *Lawyer Man*, he did not approve of co-star Joan Blondell's name exceeding 50% of the size of his name. Warner Bros. general counsel R.J. Obringer explained the situation to Jack Warner via memo on October 11, 1932. The memo states that he prepared a letter for Powell's approval to have Blondell's name appear in 75% of the size of his, which Powell "refused to sign." Obringer's

memo also states, "I had quite a talk with Powell, but he seemed rather vindictive and commenced to tell me all the abuses that he had been subjected to, and he felt that he had done enough favors when there was none granted him in return, and stated he would abide by the contract, refusing to sign the letter."¹⁸ These "abuses" almost certainly refer to the Warner Bros. salary cuts made earlier in the year, which were publicly reported in the *Los Angeles Examiner* in August of 1932.¹⁹

The "abuses" could also refer to a misunderstanding regarding Powell's vacation and reshoots on one of his pictures in June of 1932. As per his contract, Powell was to be paid for forty weeks of work with twelve weeks of unpaid vacation. When he was called back from his vacation to do reshoots for *One Way Passage*, he asked to be paid for his work, which set off an avalanche of strained memos between Obringer and Jack Warner and culminated in Powell's not having to participate in the reshoots.²⁰ Warner sent a memo to Obringer on June 22, 1932, stating, "Whenever you hear anything like the case of WILLIAM POWELL where he wants to be put on pay for a retake, I can't understand why you don't immediately telephone me, or send a written memo by yourself and bring it up personally without waiting for a messenger boy, or even Scott. These things are important and I don't want to hear about them until they are second hand."²¹ Any concern regarding Powell, especially in terms of his salary and billing were of the utmost importance to the highest level of management at the studio because he was one of the highest paid stars during this difficult financial time. It is clear that, by 1932, Powell was disenchanted with his treatment by management and used the only power that he did have (his billing contract) to exert some control over his career.

The last few films that Powell did at Warner Bros. relied on the same masculine model of dangerous sexual intrigue that the studio created for him from the beginning of his tenure. He stopped playing cads and playboys, returning to his detective roles in such films as *Private Detective 62* (1933), and even to his Paramount persona, detective Philo Vance, in *Kennel Murder Case* (1933). It seems that Warner Bros. attempted to exploit the role that made him a star at Paramount with this film. In the ads for *Private Detective 62*,

the tag lines read "It's a Pleasure to Have Your Home Wrecked by a Man Like Him!" "It Takes A Whole Crew to Wreck a House...But How Can One Man Wreck a Home!" and "Back in the type of role that made him the idol of millions!"²² Once again, the publicity highlighted his danger and sex appeal, but was also mining old territory in an attempt to exploit Powell's past success in order to market the film to those fans.

Powell's exit from Warner Bros. was in the works starting in early 1933, when the studio made him an offer to renew his contract at \$100,000 per year, a far cry from the \$300,000 salary he earned in 1931.²³ Myron Selznick began to maneuver Powell's move to MGM using his brother, David O. Selznick, newly installed as a producer there, as a connection. Despite Powell's reputation at MGM as washed up and past his prime, David O. Selznick cast him as the second lead in his film *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), with Clark Gable and Myrna Loy, directed by W.S. Van Dyke. The film was a hit and led to MGM signing Powell to a long-term contract.²⁴ Powell had to pay Warner Bros. \$16,333.33 to get out of the end of his contract.²⁵ Presumably, they did not fight him like they famously did with other stars (i.e., James Cagney, Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland) because Powell was such an expensive star on their roster and his most recent films had not been as successful as they hoped.

Manhattan Melodrama would prove to be a turning point in Powell's career in more ways than just the success of the film and the new lease it offered to his career at a different studio. The off-



William Powell and Myrna Loy in publicity materials for *The Thin Man*, provided by MGM.

SELLING MASCULINITY

screen chemistry between Powell and Loy inspired director Van Dyke to suggest them for the roles of Nick and Nora Charles in the screen adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's novel *The Thin Man*, even though neither actor was known onscreen as a comedian. In fact, Louis B. Mayer, the head of MGM, thought of both Loy and Powell as "heavies" who could not pull off comedy. Powell was so associated with the Philo Vance films that Mayer reportedly said, "theater managers have been putting the name Philo Vance on their marquees instead of William Powell."²⁶ Van Dyke persevered and Mayer allowed him to make the film if he could bring it in "quick and cheap."²⁷ Van Dyke, known as "One Take Woody," was given a B budget and schedule but was allowed to use his regular crew.²⁸ The film was shot in approximately two weeks, and despite the short shooting schedule, Van Dyke allowed room for improvisation on the set between Powell and Loy. In 1936, Van Dyke commented about the film that, "they played them beautifully because Powell was just Powell and Loy was just Loy."²⁹ Clearly, the fast and loose shooting style of Van Dyke and the rapid-fire, witty dialogue were the perfect match for Powell's natural abilities. Without shaping Powell into a certain kind of sexually dangerous cad, Van Dyke allowed the magic to happen between his two stars. The experiment paid off for all involved; the film went on to spawn five more sequels starring Powell and Loy.

In the small press book for the film, MGM sells Powell and Loy as "That Happy Pair in Hilarious Detective Thrills!"³⁰ They are equally billed in terms of their representation and name size: the focus is on the couple and not one star over the other. It was well within type for William Powell to play a detective, so it was the perfect vehicle to change his image to the charming, modern husband. Reviews of the film reflected the switch in his persona and his skill with the

lightning-fast dialogue. For example, a *New York Times* review claimed, "William Powell is by now a past master in the art of sleuthing. His performance is even better than his portrayal of Philo Vance. He has good lines and makes the most of them," commenting on his association with the detective role and his ability with a well-written quip.³¹ A *New York Post* reviewer wrote that he "plays the role of the insouciant detective Nick Charles, and Mr. Powell revels in a part which might well have been written for him."³² *Film Daily* also praised the film: "The rapid fire dialogue is about the best heard since talkies, and it is delivered by Powell and Miss Loy to perfection."³³ All of these reviews refer to the unique quality that makes Powell a star and to what makes this film so popular: the command of the witty dialogue between the pair. It is this quality that made Powell a star in the transition from silent to sound, and in this particular creative relationship where he was allowed to let this innate talent shine.

Powell's time at Warner Bros. was a short lived and turbulent period. Despite holding a great amount of power in his billing and creative control, Powell was given a parade of cookie-cutter dangerous playboy roles, and the terms of his contract and salary were constantly in flux over the three years he spent there. With the help of his agent Myron Selznick, Powell was able to navigate between three studios in only a matter of a few years, in search of the perfect fit for his natural abilities as an actor. This experimentation with star image and publicity marked the period of the early 1930s in Hollywood, as studios dealt with the quickly evolving art and technological form, industrial and business practices, and a shifting cultural and moral landscape. William Powell is the perfect example of how sound technology in this time could make or break a performer and how embracing his unique personal attributes could allow a new kind of Hollywood star to resonate with audiences.

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End Notes

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- 16 William Powell, letter to Warner Bros., 19 April 1932, Folder #2837A, Warner Bros. Archive, Los Angeles, CA.
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