

100 Years Ago, Single Registration Marked Early Foray into Color Cinema

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On September 23, 1913, the Kinemacolor Company of America registered a film adaptation of *The Rivals*, a comedy of manners by Richard Brinsley Sheridan first performed in London in 1775. The film is probably the first color feature registered with the Copyright Office, estimates Zoran Sinobad of the Library of Congress' Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division. Motion pictures had been eligible for copyright protection for just a year in 1913, and color feature films were rare.

Kinemacolor was developed in England in 1906 by American expatriate Charles Urban and his partner, G. A. Smith, building on prior work by inventor Edward R. Turner. It was the first color motion picture process to find commercial success. Kinemacolor worked by exposing black and white film through alternating red and green filters. Screening it required a special projector.

"Kinemacolor looked much like the color film we see today, unlike the tinted and toned black-and-white film many were using at the time," said Sinobad.

Urban founded the Natural Color Kinemacolor Company in England in 1909. By the end of the year, Kinemacolor was fast becoming the "cinematic sensation of its time," writes Luke McKernan in *A Yank in Britain: The Lost Memoirs of Charles Urban, Film Pioneer*.

Urban's greatest Kinemacolor triumph was filming the "Delhi Durbar," a grand ceremony held in India in 1911 to mark

the coronation of King George V. The unprecedented two-and-a-half hour film screened in London for 15 months and toured elsewhere in England, making Urban a wealthy man.

In 1910, Urban sold his U.S. patents to the Kinemacolor Company of America, which reportedly produced hundreds of films in advance of a major 1912 publicity campaign. The trade journal *The Moving Picture World* publicized documentaries by the company in an April 1913 issue: *President Wilson Reviewing the Troops*; *Native Carnival Procession, Ceylon*; *Suffragette Parade in Washington*; and *Beautiful Butterflies*.

The same issue of *The Moving Picture World* announced a Kinemacolor plan to produce feature films based on the works of "world-famous authors." The next month, a film adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* came out, followed by *The Rivals* in September.

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The Rivals

KINEMACOLOR CO. OF AMERICA



"THE RIVALS."
The three-reel Kinemacolor film re-production of "The Rivals," staged from the prompt book of the late Joseph Jefferson, is announced ready for immediate release.
William Winter Jefferson appears in the role of Bob Acres, made famous by his father. The play was staged upon the estate of E. N. Smathers on Long Island and at the home of Mrs. Jackson Giroux at Larchmont. A particular quality of the new film feature is its member of prominent captures from recent Broadway regular productions, the list including besides Mr. Jefferson, George Staley (last season with "Broadway Jones"); Dallas Anderson (of the Marlowe-Sothorn forces); Samuel Hines (of "Arizona"); David Young (last season with "Little Miss Brown"); Lorraine Frost (recently of "Sunnybrook Farm") and Florence Stanley (of "The Witching Hour").
Gaston Bell, the Kinemacolor leading man, has a prominent role in the feature.



Clockwise from top: A publicity photo of the closing scene of *The Rivals*; a synopsis of the film published in the September 19, 1913, issue of *Variety* magazine; another publicity shot; and William Winter Jefferson as the character Bob Acres.



The copyright to *The Scarlet Letter* was not registered with the Copyright Office, nor was any other Kinemacolor production besides *The Rivals*. The three-reel film was assigned registration number LU 1287, and 15 publicity stills and a synopsis were deposited with it. The synopsis notes that Theodore Martin produced the film, and William Winter Jefferson starred as Bob Acres, a “part made famous by his father, Joseph Jefferson.”

The film’s length marks it as a feature. “In 1913, a three-reel film was considered a feature,” said Sinobad. “Just a few years later, the standard for features increased to four or more reels.”

No known copy of *The Rivals* exists today, which is not unusual. About 70 percent of silent-era feature films are believed to be completely lost,

according to a September 2013 report on silent feature films published by the Library of Congress.

As for Kinemacolor, its commercial success was brief. By 1914, the company was effectively defunct, writes Gorham Kindem in *The American Movie Industry*. Film historians dispute why Kinemacolor failed but concur that it was an important development in the early history of color motion pictures. ©



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Color plates published in *Kinemacolor, Film Catalogue, 1912–1913* (at left) include scenes from the films *Beach Drill at Hastings* (top) and *Change of Guard at St. James’s Palace*.