

# The Black Pirate: how we restored Douglas Fairbanks' early colour swashbuckler



On World Silent Film Day, we talk to James Layton, manager of the Celeste Bartos Film Preservation Center at the Museum of Modern Art, about their new restoration of the classic Douglas Fairbanks swashbuckler *The Black Pirate* (1926), which receives its [world premiere at the BFI London Film Festival](#) on 15 October.

One of the great adventure films of the silent era, Fairbanks' classic, directed by Albert Parker, has influenced almost every pirate movie that has followed, from *Captain Blood* (1935) and *The Black Swan* (1942) through to *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), while the famous scene in which Fairbanks slices his way down a ship's sail has been referenced in films including *The Goonies* (1985). I can't wait to see it in its fully restored glory – and am thrilled that the BFI National Archive could help with some of the preserved materials

that contributed to MoMA's magnificent project.

Bryony Dixon, curator of silent film, BFI National Archive

The swashbuckling romp *The Black Pirate* is not only one of Douglas Fairbanks' most rousing silent features of the 1920s, but it is also one of his greatest creative triumphs. Inspired by classic pirate adventure stories by Robert Louis Stevenson and others, Fairbanks' film was one of the first major Hollywood productions to be photographed entirely in Technicolor. It also features some of the actor's most memorable stunts, from abseiling down a ship's sail with his sword to an underwater ambush by the governor's guards.

*The Black Pirate* has been accessible to audiences for many years, but most copies in circulation have failed to do justice to the film's delicate colour palette and intricate design. The film used an early version of Technicolor that captured a limited part of the spectrum in red and green colour records – an obsolete technology with an aesthetic that has been hard to recreate authentically in the past.

This new restoration by The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and The Film Foundation goes back to the original two-colour Technicolor camera negatives for the first time in 50 years, to faithfully and respectfully reconstruct the film's original colour scheme using modern digital restoration techniques.

*The Black Pirate* (1926)

Restoring the film was a huge undertaking due to the sheer amount of material that survives, albeit in varying forms of completeness. *The Black Pirate* was originally shot with five cameras simultaneously, exposing four separate colour negatives and one back-up black-and-white copy. The master A negative was not known to exist, but the B, C and D negatives have all been conserved by the BFI National Archive, although they mostly consist

of unedited raw footage across hundreds of film cans. These cans were shipped to the United States for careful review at MoMA. Amazingly, several missing or incomplete shots were located across these negatives that had not been seen in previous reissues of the film. But most surprising was the discovery of three cans of the edited master A negative – previously misidentified – containing Fairbanks's preferred camera angles and takes.

These three reels of A negative became central to the restoration, with the remainder of the film ultimately sourced from the secondary B negative, along with a few previously missing shots from the C and D negatives. Several missing intertitles were also digitally recreated. After the film was pieced back together, and the original red and green colour records were carefully realigned, the film went through a full 4K digital restoration.

No complete original colour prints of the film are known to survive, and if they did exist, they would likely be colour faded by now. Fortunately, one reel of miscellaneous shots surfaced that was printed using an early version of Technicolor's famous dye-transfer process. These shots contained the film's original colours, unfaded, and along with original documentation and correspondence in Technicolor's archives, were essential in restoring the film's original look. Fairbanks was famously inspired by the work of Dutch old masters like Rembrandt and Vermeer in crafting the film's lighting, textures and use of colour. The costumes and sets were created at great expense in minute detail. Shades of brown and muted colours predominate; flashes of bolder colour only come forth during moments of violence or a flash of gunpowder.

The Black Pirate (1926)

The Black Pirate doesn't feature the bold colours one might expect from a 1940s or 50s Technicolor feature like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), but this new restoration should nonetheless prove a revelation to many. The subdued colour scheme is expertly coordinated; with

this film, Technicolor became another tool in the filmmaker's toolkit, rather than a gimmick.

This complex restoration would not have been possible without the support of The Film Foundation and the British Film Institute, and laboratory partners Blackhawk Films and Cineric. MoMA is excited to bring the film back to the big screen where it belongs.

– James Layton, manager, Celeste Bartos Film Preservation Center, Museum of Modern Art

The restoration of [The Black Pirate gets its world premiere](#) at the 67th BFI London Film Festival.