

Erik Rhodes finds a Phi Beta Kappa key can be an asset in Hollywood.

Portrait of a Sooner

In Cinema

By RICHARD M. CALDWELL



ERNEST SHARPE, known as Erik Rhodes in the movies, has found that ownership of a Phi Beta Kappa key, ability to speak foreign languages fluently, and a conversational knowledge of Flaubert and Voltaire are assets in Hollywood, and not the liabilities that they have been labeled all these years.

Contrary to the belief that empty brain cells and a penchant for Trilby-ing under Svengali directors form a substitute for true talent, Rhodes has hewn out a path of merit in the cinema capital. He is considered one of the most versatile young actors in the picture making business.

But the movies are a more or less enlarged portrait of the days when Rhodes sang, acted and juggled foreign languages on the University of Oklahoma campus. If those student days that ended in 1927 seemed serious years, they were but a prologue to the profound ones that followed.

Things began happening to Ernest Sharpe even before he could graduate. In fact he completed his senior year by correspondence work and examinations, in order to join a Chautauqua unit. He gave Horner an audition one day and set out on tour the next.

Those were the days when Sharpe's tenor voice, alone, captivated his audiences. That he could act—that he could out-Italian the Venetian gondoliers and give a French flavor to Parisian cinema sets, developed much later.

And confidentially, Erik is looking to the day when studios will find dramatic roles for him with more singing features—costume, operetta and light opera. The clear tenor voice Sooners knew has already reached the ears of cinema impresarios, and pleased them.

Radio has recorded his voice many times. In 1931 Rhodes appeared on the Ziegfeld-Chrysler hour, giving Maurice Chevalier interpretations. He has appeared as guest artist on various programs since, including Sigmund Romberg concerts, with George Jessel and others. He did a

13-week series over NBC in New York and recently completed a long series for RKO studio in *Hollywood on the Air*.

If there is anything he likes better than acting, it is singing, "and the right combination of them both would be perfect," he adds.

The period from '26 to '36 was "not easy," Rhodes says now as he sits in the secure patio of his tasteful and decorative home in Beverly Hills. Chautauquas were brief-seasoned engagements and their itineraries were concluded at the time in the fall when the show business was just getting under way.

"Unknown singers came for ten cents a dozen—until some 'angel' either discovered or found an emergency that one could fill," Rhodes recalls.

It was a long grind after Chautauqua for the young Oklahoman—warbling in honkytonk eating places, night clubs and other rendezvous in New York, Chicago, New Orleans and elsewhere.

"Moonlight and Roses," one of Sharpe's earliest success tunes on the campus, picked him up out of a lot of tight places on tour but one good tune couldn't be expected to last forever and it didn't.

And that was what took him to casting directors in 1930.

Shortly afterwards Sharpe and his associates decided that he should choose a stage name. Somehow or other, success was not in the stars for Ernest Sharpe—but it was for Erik Rhodes.

Such a change must have been significant for shortly afterwards he completed a contract for a role in *Gay Divorcee*, in the London production. This was in 1932. When the cast for the Hollywood production was being assembled Rhodes was easily the "only one for the co-respondent's part," according to the studio's cable to London.

And the Oklahoman scored such a tremendous hit that other foreign character roles followed—in *Top Hat*, *The Chef at the Ritz*, and *One Rainy Afternoon*, filmed with such movie luminaries as

Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Francis Lederer, Edward Everett Horton and others.

It isn't easy to put Rhodes in the mood for talking about himself. He'd rather play a few of the tunes he sings as the guest of Hollywood radio broadcasting stations.

Like most of the other movie colony people, the Oklahoman is busy, either on the studio lot or going places and doing things. But one thing is certain, Ernest Sharpe or Erik Rhodes, he is still the charming person in Hollywood that his friends remember him as being on the University of Oklahoma campus.

In June Rhodes flew to the Boulder Dam to be the first to swim across the lake. It was another studio publicity stunt. He had previously tried the Salton sea with near-disastrous results.

A chance meeting with Paderewski when Sharpe served as usher at the Shrine auditorium in Oklahoma City early in the 1920's had its echo only this year. The famous concertist asked specifically for the young Sooner to do a part with him in a London-produced movie. Rhodes traded the California Lido for a few foggy weeks in London and then the French Riviera. Not a bad temporary trade! His RKO studio contract runs until 1939, so new movie roles await him. His latest role was that of Bandini, Italian radio singer, in "Criminal Lawyer." Before that he sang an important dialect part in "Smartest Girl in Town," supporting Ann Sothorn and Gene Raymond.

He paid a brief visit to Oklahoma in December, visiting his parents, Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Sharpe, in Oklahoma City.

Possessing a keen business eye, personably suave, with definite ideas of what he wishes to accomplish, Erik Rhodes has made his name mean something to agents and studios alike.

Flipping his Phi Beta Kappa key on his watch chain, Rhodes says airily, "After all, they know out here in Hollywood that this isn't just another lodge emblem!"