

By Might of His Right (1915)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Vitagraph. DIRECTORS: Sidney Drew and Lucille McVey. WRITER: William B. Courtney. CAST: Sidney Drew (Henry), Mrs. Sidney Drew (his wife), Donald Macbride (his wife's brother). RUNNING TIME: 14 minutes.

By Might of His Right premiered at the Vitagraph Theater in New York City on December 26, 1915, before being released nationally on December 31, as Vitagraph's latest "Sidney Drew Day" one-reel comedy. Originally attached to Vitagraph's December and January feature releases, such as *The Wanderers* and *The Crown Prince's Double*, the film continued to circulate throughout North America until mid-1916. While it was commonly exhibited alongside the newest Vitagraph releases, in some cases, such as at the Virginia Theater on April 21, 1916, it was included as part of a live vaudeville program.¹

This attachment to vaudeville programming, though rare, was fitting since one of the film's stars, Sidney Drew, a relative of Ethel and Lionel Barrymore, was among the first vaudevillians to make their way into moving pictures. In *By Might of His Right*, Drew teams, as he often did, with his second wife, Lucille McVey (who is often credited as Mrs. Sidney Drew), in one of their signature domestic comedies. Although Mr. Drew is often given production, direction, and writing credits, Mrs. Drew, an accomplished screenwriter under the pen name George Cameron, did the majority of the work behind the scenes. In a *Photoplay* feature on the couple, Frederick James Smith even suggested that Mrs. Drew be credited for 75 percent of each film.²

Together, the Drews came to signify a brand of genteel comedy that was the middle-class alternative to the slapstick tradition. If slapstick was a comedy of the body, the Drew films were comedies of the mind. As Sidney Drew wrote in an article for the *Moving Picture World*,

1. *Daily News-Record* (Harrisonburg, VA), "The New Virginia Theater," April 21, 1916, 6.

2. Frederick James Smith, "Seeking the Germ," *Photoplay*, September 1917, 28.

“humorous action does not mean gross horseplay.”³ Drew was supremely confident in the competencies of his audience: “It is unreasonable and decidedly uncomplimentary to those who support the silent stage to suggest that they have the mental equipment of a child of seven or eight. . . . There are many who prefer knockabout work, but since there is a field amply able to support an appeal to more refined intelligence, we cater to that clientele and find it profitable.”⁴

To appeal to the more refined classes, the Drews emphasized that comedic gags must be embedded in, and must emerge from, a strong plot based on realistic domestic situations. Sidney Drew made this explicit in an interview, arguing, “No matter how interesting comedy incident may seem to be at the moment, or in what proportions it is assembled, there **MUST** be plot [at the] back of the incident if it is to have excuse.” Continued Drew, “Few authors write real comedy. They write much farce and more knockabout, some comedy drama, and very little comedy, for real comedy is not stressed.”⁵ Indeed, as Drew later made clear in *Photoplay*, when it came to his comedies, a sense of real, human situation was second only to “cleanliness in idea and thought.”⁶

For this reason the Drews always played husband and wife and the humor of their stories so often involved larger familial problems. In *Fox Trot Finesse* (1915), for instance, the story, which focused on Mr. Drew’s character, Ferdie, faking an injury to get out of dancing with his wife, is resolved when his wife threatens to have his mother-in-law visit until he heals, at which point Ferdie is miraculously cured. *By Might of His Right* was no exception to this trend, and its premise even seemed to inspire the 1917 Drew comedy *The Pest*, which revolved around one of Mrs. Drew’s obnoxious brothers, who had a penchant for borrowing everything in sight.

3. Sidney Drew, “Comedy Picture Production,” *Moving Picture World*, July 21, 1917, 412.

4. *Ibid.*, 413.

5. Epes Winthrop Sargent, “Sidney Drew on True Comedy,” *Moving Picture World*, August 19, 1916, 1226.

6. Smith, “Seeking the Germ,” 28.

In *By Might*, Henry (Sidney Drew) and his wife are visited by Henry's brother-in-law (Donald MacBride, who would go on to have a long career, even appearing in 1946's *The Killers* and 1955's *The Seven Year Itch*), who does everything in his power to be a terrible guest. Not only does the brother-in-law sit in Henry's chair and steal Henry's cigarettes and cigar, but in an attempt to display his boxing prowess, he even knocks Henry out cold. Fed up, Henry decides to take matters into his own hands and prove his superior strength by staging a boxing match between himself and the intimidating boxer "the Battler."

Although the dingy boxing arena set, and the notion of boxing in general, may seem out of place in a genteel comedy, it is unsurprising that boxing figured into the plot, since in 1915 boxing was a hot topic in the news and in the film industry. Not only had controversial heavyweight champion Jack Johnson lost his title earlier in the year, but efforts to enforce a federal ban on the interstate trafficking of fight films had also resulted in a major case being taken to the Supreme Court.⁷ Apart from being topical, the emphasis on boxing also allowed the Drews to reinforce their commitment to gentility. Even though boxing had largely been integrated into the middle class by 1915, it was still associated with working-class conceptions of power and masculinity.⁸ In typical Drew fashion, Henry claims the benefits of masculinity while staying true to his middle-class values. Without even removing his tuxedo, Henry floors the Battler with a single punch. Of course, this outcome has nothing to do with Henry's strength but with having paid his opponent to take a dive. Nonetheless, this is enough to frighten the brother-in-law into cutting short his stay, proving once again that in boxing, as in family affairs and comedy, (middle-class) brains always triumph over (working-class) brawn.

7. Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 261.

8. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 17.

This privileging of brains over brawn was built into the fabric of the Drew films, which were known for their liberal use of intertitles, especially in comparison with other comedies. *By Might of His Right* was no exception, featuring more than 20 title cards over its 15-minute running time. Mrs. Drew even attributed her films' success to their "direct and human subtitles," which "make the story mental rather than physical."⁹ Indeed, the Drews could find class implications even in their stance on title cards. As they noted, their practice "has developed from a study of our own work and a belief that the intelligence should not be insulted."¹⁰

Because of films like *By Might of His Right*, the *Moving Picture World*, which had long argued for a more respectable form of comedy in which gags were integrated into the narrative, celebrated the Drews above all other comedians. The trade publication's leading critic, Epes Winthrop Sargent, declared, "'Drew Comedies' is as much a definition as a distinction. It stands for a type—the highest type—of comedy production."¹¹ Sargent was not alone in his acclaim. The *Syracuse Herald's* "Film Girl," for instance, responded to a reader's claim that Keystone films had no equal by arguing that Keystone comedies "are, as a rule, very good. I'll admit that, but for more clever examples of comedy, I should like to mention a few of the Sidney Drew comedies by Vitagraph."¹²

A typical Drew comedy in terms of content, *By Might* is perhaps most notable in terms of form for its depth staging. Almost all of the interior house scenes feature a maid setting a kitchen table in the background. Interestingly, in no way does the film explicitly call attention to the maid's presence. In many instances, her actions are completely obstructed by the action in the foreground. Still, there seems to be a twofold explanation for the maid's presence. In terms of

9. Smith, "Seeking the Germ," 29.

10. Smith, "Seeking the Germ," 29.

11. Sargent, "Sidney Drew on True Comedy," 1226.

12. Film Girl, Seen on the Screen, *Syracuse Herald*, March 23, 1916.

aesthetics, her presence and her movement in the background add depth to a flat interior space. In itself this was not unique for the period—after all, the film was made during what David Bordwell called the “golden age of depth staging.”¹³ More interesting is that the maid has no narrative function apart from reminding the audience of the class status of the protagonists and by extension, of the film. In her lack of specific narrative function, she reinforces the Drews’ position as middle-class, genteel comedians.

If, through both form and content, *By Might of His Right* contributed to the “touch of real class” that film historian Barry Salt identifies with Vitagraph,¹⁴ it would also signal the end of the Drews’ contribution to Vitagraph’s appeal to gentility. In unfortunate news for Vitagraph, *By Might of His Right* premiered almost concurrently with the Drews’ signing with the Metro Company—a move that the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, using a war analogy, called “quite the largest 42 centimeter shell that has been exploded in moving picture circles.”¹⁵ As stated in their contract, the Drews would produce films for Vitagraph until late February, at which point they would begin producing a series of 52 one-reel comedies for Metro,¹⁶ beginning with *Childhood’s Happy Days*, which premiered on March 6, 1916.¹⁷ While the new year brought no guarantees as to what the Metro-Drew productions would look like, the *New York Daily Telegraph* made an educated guess, claiming that the new films “will be high-class comedies, not farces or burlesque.”¹⁸ What else could the Drew brand of comedy possibly mean?

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13. David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 177.

14. Barry Salt, “Vitagraph Films: A Touch of Real Class,” *Screen Culture: History and Textuality*, ed. John Fullerton (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing, 2004), 55.

15. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, “Drews Go to Metro,” January 8, 1916, 2.

16. *New York Daily Telegraph*, “The Drews Now Metro Players,” January 9, 1916, C5.

17. *Syracuse Herald*, Seen on the Screen, March 1, 1916.

18. *New York Daily Telegraph*, “The Drews Now Metro Players,” January 9, 1916, C5.