

Robert Benchley

“I don’t think we found a bad word said about the guy,” says Campbell Scott, referring to his onscreen character in *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*, the legendary humorist **Robert Benchley**. “Everybody in the Algonquin Round Table had something at least *barbed* to say about everyone. Except for him.” Benchley was, in the heyday of the Algonquin Round Table, its most famous member. He starred in a series of Hollywood shorts (screening at Film Forum December 18–January 2) that brought him fame and fortune, as well as a chronic sense of failure. “He was a drunk who basically stopped writing ten years before he died,” says Scott. “He considered himself a sellout but couldn’t stop taking the money.” Regardless of the self-loathing they inspired, many of the shorts (he made more than 50) were hilarious. Based on his essays, and sporting titles like *How to Become a Detective* and *The Sex Life of the Polyp*, these droll works feature him as an amiable goofus offering advice or insight on the strangest topics (digestion, for instance, and newts). One of them, *How to Sleep*, even won an Oscar. “Alan Rudolph calls Benchley the first Dada humorist,” says Scott. “Without Benchley, there’d be no Robin Williams, no Steve Martin. He was the first comic monologist without punch lines. People didn’t even know if he was joking; then someone would laugh and they’d catch on. It was nonsense humor, but really *sharp*.”

