

# **POSTER EXHIBIT:**

## **COMEDY PART 2, FEATURING THE MARX BROTHERS (“THERE AIN’T NO SANITY CLAUSE”)**

Welcome to my Second Exhibit devoted to Comedy. Cinema is capable of bringing much joy, and the most direct way is through laughter. Comedy has been a part of film history from the very beginning. In the days of silent film, we had comics like Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd who created memorable screen personas for audiences to relate to. This time, I would like to give special attention to one of my favourite comedy teams, THE MARX BROTHERS, whose film career as a team lasted from 1929 to 1950. The first Marx film I ever saw was MONKEY BUSINESS, which I saw on late night TV one New Year’s Eve back in the 70’s. I was hooked right away. I could not believe how funny this movie was. But back in the days pre-home video and pre-internet, it was left entirely by chance whether you would see a particular film you were interested in on TV. Luckily, during the 1970’s, there was a resurgence of interest in the Marx Brothers among college students, which created a demand (The Marx Brothers’ spirit of rebellion seemed to fit in with the times). Some of their movies were even re-released to movie theatres during this time, so I got to see ANIMAL CRACKERS, A NIGHT AT THE OPERA and AT THE CIRCUS on the big screen. Other titles would crop up on TV from time to

time, allowing me to fill in some gaps. As well, numerous books about them were published throughout the 70's, so it was a good time to be a fan.

Fans of the Marx Brothers will argue about which film is their best. There is a definite demarcation between the films they made at Paramount (1929 – 1933) and the ones they made at MGM (1935 -1941). A NIGHT AT THE OPERA (1935) is generally considered to be the high point of their career, but some choose DUCK SOUP (1933) to be their funniest. Their films made at MGM brought about a taming of their characters. Groucho was often shown backing down in confrontations, Chico was no longer looking to make a buck for himself, but instead to help the young lovers who became a standard part of the plot, and, distressingly, they tried to make Harpo more sympathetic by having him get beaten up by the bad guys. This never happened in the earlier films. Groucho would get thrown down a long flight of stairs twice – in NIGHT AT THE OPERA and GO WEST – and he would never have been made the butt of the joke before. There's a general agreement that everything made after A DAY AT THE RACES (1937) showed a drop in quality, but you can still find things to enjoy.

**BARRY YUEN**

**JANUARY 2023**

## **ANIMAL CRACKERS (1930)**

The Marx Brothers 2<sup>nd</sup> film, based on their hit Broadway play. The brothers had honed their comedy act in vaudeville and became Broadway successes. Their first Broadway hit (which was later filmed) was THE COCOANUTS, which introduced each brother playing a sharply defined character with a distinct comedy style: Groucho, the master of insult comedy and wordplay, Chico, playing a stereotypical Italian immigrant character who mangles the English language and delivers puns so bad they're hilarious, and Harpo, whose comedy style fell under the category of mime- completely non-verbal, but with a more aggressive edge to it. The 4<sup>th</sup> Brother, Zeppo, often functioned as a straight man or romantic lead, but would leave acting to become the agent for his brothers. The Brothers' careers peaked during the Depression years, and the characters they created were a reflection of those times, hustling, always looking to make a buck somewhere, somehow. The slight plot has the brothers being invited to a party at the home of the wealthy Mrs. Rittenhouse (Margaret Dumont), where they behave in the most disruptive and undignified manner humanly possible, butting heads with the guests and sometimes with each other. Meanwhile, there are some shenanigans about a valuable painting being stolen and replaced with a forgery. Groucho would perform 2 of the songs from this show for the rest of his career: "Hooray for Captain Spaulding" and the nonsensical "Hello, I must be Going".

## **MONKEY BUSINESS (1931)**

The Marx Brothers' first 2 films, **THE COCOANUTS (1929)** and **ANIMAL CRACKERS (1930)** were both based on Broadway plays that they had performed in for lengthy runs. Their 3<sup>rd</sup> film had to be created from scratch, and the writing turned out to be a lengthy process, until a script was completed that met with everyone's satisfaction. One of their funniest films, the plot is very slight. The 4 brothers are stowaways on an ocean liner, hiding in barrels of Kipperred Herring – a nod to their Jewish roots - and spend most of the movie running away from the ship's officers, causing trouble and eventually becoming entangled with rival factions of gangsters. A high point is Harpo taking over a Punch and Judy show by masquerading as a puppet. The card I have on display shows Harpo & Chico playing Barber and “snipping & snooping” an officer's mustache until nothing is left. The final third of the movie has them off the ship and carrying on at a house party (a similar situation to **ANIMAL CRACKERS**).

## **A NIGHT AT THE OPERA (1935)**

Under the guidance of MGM producer Irving Thalberg, the 3 Marx Brothers (Zeppo had left the act to become their agent instead) had a film that was a huge hit (their biggest hit to date, but the goodwill generated by this film meant that it would be surpassed by A DAY AT THE RACES). This would be a rare instance where the plot and the comedy bolstered and strengthened each other, rather than one being subservient to the other. They would never find that perfect balance again. The plot was a minor consideration in the Paramount films, but the comedy became subservient to the plot in the later MGM films.

The opera house setting, with its connotations of high culture and stuffiness, is the perfect backdrop from them to wreak havoc. Probably the most famous scene from the movie is the “crowded stateroom” scene, where they cram as many people into one tiny space that they possibly can. (Various comics and musicians have paid homage to this scene in the years since, like Bob Newhart, Cyndi Lauper, and Jerry Seinfeld. And of course Queen named one of their albums A Night at the Opera, which contained their opera-inspired hit “Bohemian Rhapsody”). Chico gets his funniest joke in this movie, with the line “There ain’t no Sanity Clause.” The card I have on display shows the brothers with Margaret Dumont, who appeared in so many of their films (as the High Society lady) that she was sometimes referred to as “The 5<sup>th</sup> Marx Brother.” She was the perfect straight man to Groucho’s insults, and even took a pummeling from Harpo & Chico in ANIMAL CRACKERS.

## **A DAY AT THE RACES (1937)**

After *A NIGHT AT THE OPERA* became a huge hit, MGM naturally wanted a follow-up, so *A DAY AT THE RACES* was the result. Like with *NIGHT*, the Marx Brothers were allowed the luxury of touring with the material prior to filming. As in their vaudeville days, they would travel from town to town, presenting a Sneak Preview of scenes from the upcoming film, but done live, onstage. This way, they could fine-tune the material, finding out by trial and error which jokes worked and which ones didn't, and modifying the lines night to night until they found the phrasing that got the biggest laughs. (For Harpo, this would not be such an issue.) This worked perfectly for *NIGHT AT THE OPERA*. Groucho himself went on record as saying *NIGHT AT THE OPERA* and *DAY AT THE RACES* were his 2 favourites out of all the films they made. My personal appraisal is that *DAY* is not as good a film as *NIGHT*. It feels a bit bloated and overlong because of all the musical numbers that MGM put in it. Also, there's a very non-PC moment by today's standards where the brothers put on blackface as a disguise. But you have to remind yourself that blackface was a common part of show business back in the 30's.

## **AT THE CIRCUS (1939)**

When the Marx Brothers starting working at MGM studios, the decision was made to soften their characters to make them more sympathetic to a general audience. Their final film for Paramount, DUCK SOUP (1933) was probably the funniest film they ever made, but it was not a financial success, and the executives at MGM deduced that this fall off in interest was because the mass audience couldn't relate to them, women especially! Some argue that this made their later films weaker than their earlier films, where they embodied the spirit of anarchy, and just seemed to go around raising hell everywhere around them. Instead, their characters are put in service of a romance plot, and they function as "helper figures" to solve the problems of the young lovers. If they clash against anybody, it's against the characters designated as the story's villains. This worked very well in A NIGHT AT THE OPERA, and A DAY AT THE RACES, but after that it started to feel formulaic and tired. But, second-tier Marx Brothers is still worth watching. AT THE CIRCUS has some good comedy bits, but the screenwriters seem more concerned with the plot, and nobody goes to a Marx Brothers movie for the plot. The 2 young lovers seem like typical 1930's characters, but they're pretty insufferable to watch. On the plus side, this is the film that gave Groucho one of his signature songs, "Lydia the Tattooed Lady". Groucho's best scenes are opposite Margaret Dumont, cast again as a wealthy widow. Groucho seems more in his element taking High Society down a peg or two. Some critics have pointed out that because the brothers "belong in a circus" that's not where the screenwriters should put them, since their comedy is more effective when they're tearing down high-brow institutions, like the Opera or College education. However, the circus setting is the only place you'll see Harpo riding an ostrich, which is awesome all on its own.

## **THE BIG STORE (1941)**

Originally announced as The Marx Brothers' final film, although they would eventually make two more. They had become tired of the grind and effort involved in filmmaking, and after the death of Irving Thalberg (a major producer at MGM) their films weren't being given as much care. Their previous film, GO WEST (1940) had shooting postponed several times because of problems with the script. THE BIG STORE is something of an uneven effort, but there are a number of good scenes, but especially the opening where Margaret Dumont visits Groucho's shabby office where he runs a detective agency and he attempts to impress her, and the grand finale, with the brothers on roller skates, bicycles and unicycles trying to avoid the police. It's very similar to the frenetic slapstick that THE GOODIES would do on their TV show some 30 years later. In between, there's a Super-elaborate musical number which seems to be a spoof of big musical numbers.



## **SCARED STIFF (1953)**

As the Marx Brothers' film career ended, there were other up and rising comics making careers of their own. One of these was the comedy team of Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis, who began as a nightclub act, where they created a sensation. Naturally, they were soon signed up to make movies. After a couple of appearances in supporting roles, they quickly became the stars of their own pictures. Dean was the handsome singer with the smooth baritone, and Jerry was the socially awkward, immature, nerdy "little brother". Jerry described their act as "the organ grinder and his monkey". SCARED STIFF is another example of a Haunted House Comedy (see also THE GHOST AND MR. CHICKEN) and was a remake of a Bob Hope/Bing Crosby comedy, THE GHOST BREAKERS. Hope & Crosby even make cameo appearances in the re-make. The Martin and Lewis team, after huge success, broke up over creative differences. Dean began to feel he was being sidelined more and more, and the balance was upset as Jerry took more control and became self-indulgent.

## **THE GHOST AND MR. CHICKEN (1966)**

Many, many comedians have done haunted house parodies, maybe because there's a thin line between what is scary and what is funny. This is one of the all-time best, and I'm actually hard-pressed to think of one that I like better than this one. The whole thing was tailor-made for the talents of Don Knotts, well-known to audiences as Barney Fife from *The Andy Griffith Show* (and Andy Griffith even had a hand in shaping the screenplay). As Luther Hegg, his ambition is to be a reporter and he gets his chance when his boss asks him to do a report about a night in a haunted house. Hilarity ensues, with Don's priceless range of comical reactions to the quite spooky shenanigans, but only a small portion of the film takes place in the haunted house. A good deal of the comedy comes from the off-center behaviour of the people living in this small town. So it's kind of an expose of the eccentricity of life in small-town America.

## **WHO'S MINDING THE STORE? (1963)**

Some 20 years after the Marx Brothers made *THE BIG STORE*, Jerry Lewis tries his hand at the same situation, using the setting of a big department store as a fertile ground to mine numerous comic set-pieces. Lewis films were a big hit with kids because they looked like live-action cartoons. The climax of the movie has a Super-powered vacuum cleaner run amok in the store, sucking up everything in sight, including a small dog, until the vacuum cleaner bag becomes the size of a weather balloon. Lewis saves the dog by puncturing the balloon with a big knife. You can guess what happens next. Kids related to Lewis because he was like a small child who can't help getting into trouble. What kid hasn't gotten in trouble with his parents for making some kind of a mess? Well, Lewis would make messes on a grand scale! Kids could live vicariously through Lewis, without punishment.

## **THE PATSY (1964)**

In this film, Jerry plays a nobody who's being groomed for stardom, even though he has no talent. The big joke about Jerry Lewis is that everyone keeps bringing up that the French critics think that he's a genius. North American audiences find this hard to swallow because of Lewis' gawky, childish-to-the-point-of-being-grating persona. But the truth of it is, looking beyond that, Lewis is capable of staging comic set-pieces that actually show a lot of ingenuity. For example, in *THE NUTTY PROFESSOR* he emphasizes the awkwardness of a situation by wiping the soundtrack completely clean, so that the scene plays out in total, unnatural silence. Or the scene with dozens of shopping carts barrelling around in all directions and causing all kinds of destruction in *THE DISORDERLY ORDERLY*. *THE PATSY* has several really well-conceived scenes, like Jerry knocking over several fragile vases but managing to catch them before they hit the ground, but my favourite is his horrendously bad attempt to lip-sync to a pop record, combined with the off-key singing. It cracks me up every time. Notable for a weird, breaking-the-4<sup>th</sup>-wall ending where the illusion is shattered and we're made aware that this is only a movie. *BLAZING SADDLES* and *MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL* would do the same thing, but Jerry Lewis did it first! So maybe he *is* a genius!

## **DID YOU HEAR THE ONE ABOUT THE TRAVELLING SALESLADY? (1968)**

Phyllis Diller was something of a phenomenon in the 1960's. Apart from Lucille Ball, she seemed to be the only female comic in show business at the time, mainly working on television and doing stand-up live. Her comic persona of not giving a crap about what people thought of her feels inspired by Groucho. Her movie career was somewhat short-lived. She mainly appeared in supporting roles in Bob Hope's films. This is the only movie that was intended as a star vehicle for herself alone. It's been decades since I've seen this one –it's never had a home video release - but from what I remember, it was not the best use of her talents. A lot of mileage is gotten out of her walking into a room wearing silly, outlandish costumes and going "Hi!" The funniest gag is where she's groped by a robotic milking machine with multiple mechanical hands and says "This reminds me of the office Christmas party!"

## **MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL (1975)**

As far as absurdist comedy goes, you could argue that Monty Python were the successors to the Marx Brothers. But the Marxes stuck to a certain level of reality, although Harpo could magically produce any object from his coat pockets, including a candle burning at both ends. But in their day, audiences would not have accepted such surreal sights as a knight who keeps on fighting after he's been dismembered or a killer bunny rabbit that's able to decapitate people with it's teeth. HOLY GRAIL is a bona-fide comedy classic that never stops being funny no matter how many times you see it. Somehow the Python team were able to create hilarious comedy while filming under physically uncomfortable and arduous conditions.

## **BEETLE JUICE (1987)**

The spirit of the Marx Brothers lives on in Tim Burton's film, mainly via the off-the-wall, totally uninhibited performance of Michael Keaton, who seems to be free-associating and going off-script here and there. Surrealism abounds in this vision of the after-life. Keaton never did anything this wild and wooly again, and I suppose the really surprising thing is that they never made a sequel.