

Room Service

March 14 - April 20, 1996

by John Murray and Allen Boretz

Directed by James Dunn

Rocky
Mountain
News

TWA

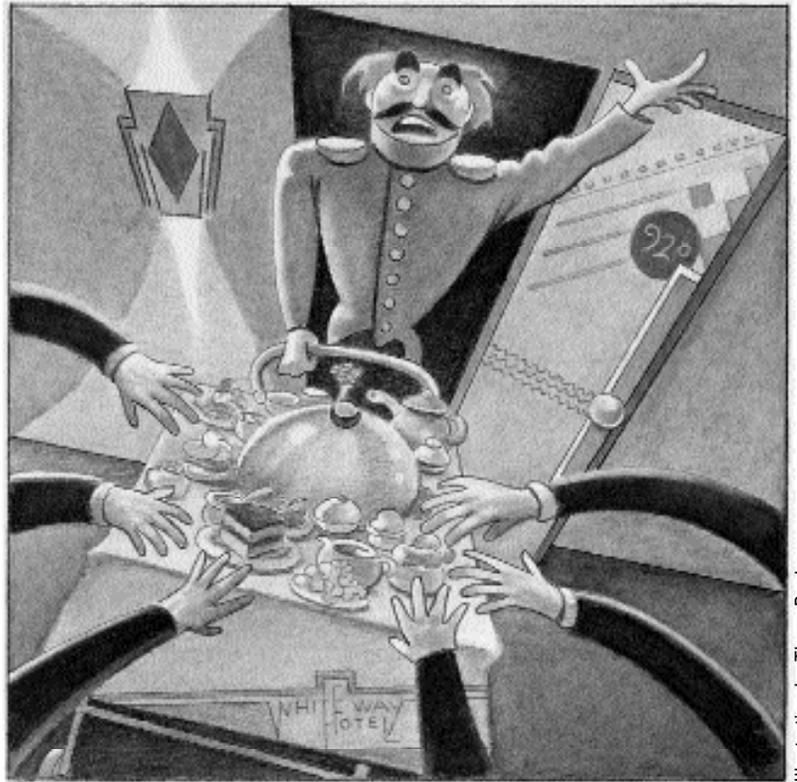


Illustration by Thom Buchanan

Study Guide

prepared by the Education Department of the Denver Center Theatre Company
and contributing writer Sally R. Gass



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In order to find more information about farce, screwball comedy, Depression-era theatre, or *Room Service*, take a trip to your school or local library. There is a wealth of material on these subjects for both adults and children. Ask your librarian for help in finding the books, videos, records, tapes and magazines you need. Become familiar with your library and you will find that a world of information will be at your fingertips. Most libraries are not restricted by their own collections but can borrow from other libraries to satisfy your informational needs. Become a skillful library consumer. Never hesitate to ask questions. Planning is important, however, and the farther you plan ahead, the more time you give your librarian and yourself to find the best resources.



Each show the Denver Center Theatre Company produces has its own unique informational needs. We here at the theatre, use the resources of our own and other libraries continually. Without access to information, it would not be possible to do what we do whether it is searching for the costumes of a particular period, defining the language of a specific time, discovering the customs and culture of when and where the play takes place, or finding technical information to produce the special effects on stage. Our people have to be well informed. We also think it's important that we share some of the resources we have discovered with you. In fact, this study guide has taken many hours of research, writing and editing in order to help you enjoy the production you are about to see and enrich your theatrical experience at the DCTC.

—Linda Eller
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The Denver Center for the Performing Arts has used its share to fund *Free For All* performances to Denver Center Theatre Company shows, scholarships to the National Theatre Conservatory and the Denver Center Theatre Academy for artists of color, additional Student Matinees at the DCTC, and much more.

The SCFD has been recognized as a national model for the enhancement of community quality of life through the arts: cities from California to Pennsylvania have sought to replicate this special funding District. The residents of the Denver Metropolitan area benefit every day from its programs.

SYNOPSIS OF ROOM SERVICE

Room 920 of the White Way Hotel, somewhere in New York City's Times Square in 1937, is the setting for *Room Service*, a farce in three acts. This second-rate hotel room is the temporary home of Gordon Miller, an energetic, intelligent young man. Gordon, a smalltime producer, has a play, a cast of actors, a technical staff, various hangers-on and the promise of a theatre, but no money to produce the play. He has sold a ten percent interest in the play to the resident manager of the White Way, Joseph Gribble, and has moved the whole company into the hotel, but his big problem is to keep the company together until he can find some "angels" to back the play.

In the meantime the unpaid hotel bill is escalating. Of course, Gribble wants payment now because an investigator of the hotel company is threatening to evict the actors and company.

Amidst this chaos, the young playwright, Leo Davis, arrives to see his play; instead he complicates matters. Miller and his cohorts persuade Leo to pretend being deathly ill in order to hold the hotel room until a potential backer can be found. When this scam fails because Dr. Glass, the hotel physician, is called in, they have Leo fake a suicide. Even this isn't enough. Miller and company finally must announce Leo's "death" and conduct a service over him to stave off eviction.



DAVIS WITH A LOCALIZED CASE OF THE MEASLES.
Zimmerman, Paul and Burt Goldblatt. The Marx Brothers at The Movies.
New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1968. p. 143.

NEW YORK AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

**"Once I built a railroad, made it run
Made it race against time.
Once I built a railroad
Now it's done—
Brother can you spare a dime?"**

~ Jay Gurney and E.H. Young. Harms, Inc. 1932

The 1929 stock market crash saw the country sink into despair and apathy. For many, life became grim and hopeless. Millions lost everything they owned because they invested their savings in the speculative stocks. Banks failed, factories shut down, stores closed and business seemed paralyzed.

New York became a different city than it had been in the wild living of the 1920s. Gone were the gloss and tinsel of fancy speakeasies and the crowd rushing into the town for night-clubbing and parties in suites at the Waldorf Hotel.

Physically, the city was in decay. Great weathered girders of unfinished luxury hotels rusted along Central Park South. Long lines of unemployed men stood outside soup kitchens and flophouses. The entire city was rimmed by settlements and squatters' communities called Hoovervilles, named after President Herbert Hoover.

**"It was sad Hoover got most of the blame.
When he became president, he said there was gonna be
a chicken in every pot, but the chickens were all missin'."**¹

When Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1933, he provided federal relief through the Works Project Administration (WPA) and the Federal Arts Project. The latter was designed to foster creativity and help artists, writers, actors, dancers and journalists. Out of this came the Group Theatre and the Federal Theatre Projects.

THEATRE IN THE THIRTIES

The Depression of the 1930s radically altered the theatre in the United States. It was a matter of survival, for the theatre was threatened with a partial loss of audience. In the 1930s half of New York theatres were closed; and in some cases, tickets were reduced to 25 cents minimum and a dollar tops. Paradoxically, the time when Americans were poorest, was the time when our theatre was at its most exciting, when the nation's deepest spiritual values were revived and strengthened on stage. The most exhilarating experiments of the thirties were the political dramas produced by the Group Theatre and the Federal Theatre Project, but other kinds of drama and comedy drew audiences, too.

The Group Theatre was a spin-off of the Theatre Guild and they dreamed of a true theatre company—a permanent troupe of actors, directors and set designers with a point of view and a fresh ensemble acting style. The Group found its voice in playwright Clifford Odets. His first play, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), was about a union meeting of striking taxi drivers. Also in 1935 came *Awake and Sing*, a gentle tale of the struggle for dignity amid poverty. Odets' plays were about the American Dream gone sour, the worship of tawdry success in terms of money and status, and an open wrestling match with conscience.

For the first time, federal support of the theatre arts came in the thirties. The Federal Theatre Project started in 1935 as an activity of the Works Project Administration (WPA). They presented the classics, as well as new, daring productions. Under the leadership of Orson Welles and John Houseman, they presented an all black *Macbeth* and a *Julius Caesar* in modern dress. They ran into trouble with the government, however, when they produced Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle will Rock*, a cartoon musical about the unionization of the steel companies. Washington would not authorize the premiere, so the performers and audience marched to an empty theatre where they staged the play without scenery, costumes, etc. The event became legendary.

Besides political drama, poetic drama also flourished. Robert E. Sherwood wrote *Waterloo Bridge*, *Reunion in Vienna* and *The Petrified Forest*. Maxwell Anderson wrote verse plays; *Winterset*, *Mary of Scotland*, *Elizabeth the*

Queen and Valley Forge and showed his love for the luminaries of history. Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* also explored poetic drama.

The musicals were represented by *Pins and Needles*; Harold Rome's revue of the clothes manufacturing business; *Babes in Arms* by Rodgers and Hart; and the political satire of Pulitzer Prize-winner, *Of Thee I Sing*, by George Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind, and George and Ira Gershwin.

The drawing room or high comedy also found an audience. This genre "chooses as its protagonists cultivated men and women of the privileged class because it is in those who have been most completely emancipated from

material concerns that abstract human nature is most clearly revealed."² Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse's *Life with Father* ran for seven and one-half years on Broadway. The urbane Phillip Barry created high-style in *The Animal Kingdom*, *Here Come the Clowns* and *The Philadelphia Story*. S.N. Behrman was represented by *Biography*, *Rain from Heaven* and *No Time for Comedy*.

The most popular type of thirties theatre was the farce, especially those of George Kaufman, Moss Hart and director-collaborator George Abbott. *You*

Can't Take it With You, *Once in A Lifetime* and *The Man Who Came To Dinner* are plays of wit and speed. Abbott took the concept of rapid movement and developed it into an art of raucous and high energy farce. J. T. Grein's description of farce sums up *Room Service* and all of its fellow farces of the thirties:

"The actors work with a will – ; they rush about the stage as if panic had stricken them; they blurt out their wild bits of dialogue as if under pneumatic pressure; they shout, gesticulate, play tricks, gambol with the irresponsible abandon of an amiable lunatic asylum let loose; they give us no time to think, to analyze or to criticize; somehow they laugh and will make us respond!"³



HIS GIRL FRIDAY. Sikov, Ed. Screwball. New York: Crown Publishers. 1989. p. 156.

AN INTERVIEW WITH RANDY WEEKS

Executive Director of Denver Center Attractions

Interviewed by Daniel Renner, Director of Education, Denver Center Theatre Company

Renner: What does it take to put on a show in America today? What is involved as a producer?

Weeks: I guess the definition of a producer is the one who puts all the pieces together. He sort of stirs the soup and watches the recipe and hopes the product comes out cooked to perfection. But it is true, our producing with Denver Center Attractions doesn't sound anywhere near as frantic as *Room Service* mainly because we are in total control of all the aspects. We have theatres; we have the financial resources to mount the small productions that Center Attractions does. But the fun part and sometimes the difficult part is finding the creative element: the actors, the director, the musical director and choosing the piece. We currently do not do new works; we produce cabaret pieces that we hope are going to run for a long time; pieces that have a very broad appeal to the Denver market. So a good part of my time is searching out that material, travelling, looking at them, seeing how they are playing in other cities and then licensing their rights in order to produce them. Then I start that kitchen scenario of putting all the ingredients together.



Renner: So a producer in the thirties is a very different animal from a producer in the nineties.

Weeks: Yes.

Renner: In New York during the thirties, it was all about finding the new show, finding a theatre space, everything was at risk. It is more complex now?

Weeks: Truly, it's much more complex and yet sometimes it's much simpler. Those would have been really the fun times to be a producer because then there really were many producers that were a one man show. He (the producer) would find the material and believe in somebody and work with someone. Producing nowadays has become... I call it corporate producing. It's several major organizations with huge staffs that get together and put on a show. I had a long conversation with a good friend of mine who is going through a career shift in New York. She is leaving one of these corporate giants to go to a smaller producer's office, which will give her much more hands-on ability to do those creative things. Over the period of the forties, fifties and sixties, the theatre owners became major producers because they controlled the houses. They knew where the spaces were and would throw somebody out if their weekly gross was dropping. They had a lot of control and a lot of power; they still do.

Renner: Who are the big producers doing Broadway shows now? You said there were several.

Weeks: Pace Theatricals is becoming a big player; they're

bringing the clout of the road. They control the 28 markets around the country to New York and have the financial wherewithal to be investors in a lot of the shows that are being done now. Obviously the Shubert organization is still around and continues to be a major player.

Renner: They started as a one or two man operation, didn't they?

Weeks: Yes, they were two brothers, starting in the thirties. They became landlords. There was a concern, a developed concern, maybe now a lost concern that the Broadway theatre was being controlled by landlords. I don't hear it talked about much anymore that they weren't very concerned about the product or the deals with stage hands. They were just concerned with keeping their houses full and the revenue sources coming in. The Nederlander's are big players, another big landlord in the New York and surrounding area.

Renner: Once again, a single person.

Weeks: Yes, but once again a landlord, they own the buildings. Jujamcyn, a relatively new player, is buying theatres and doing producing. There was a big wave that happened ten years ago that is dwindling a bit. Japan's corporations became a big investor. There are the record companies looking for the rights for the sound tracks. But it is not that one guy, that David Merrick that would go out..., he had 400 or 500 angels that would send him 200 bucks and that's how he would raise the money and do the show.

Renner: They don't just produce the show anymore, they produce the merchandising that goes with it.

Weeks: Oh, that's true; it's so much different than it used to be. Marketing has become such a major part of the business that even if it wasn't before, our society has changed and we have to compete for audiences with so many other things. Do you want to go skiing, do you want to go to a football game, or soccer? We are competing with a lot of other things. We are competing for audiences that don't consider going to a theatre as something that they would normally do. In a marketing term, going to the theatre is not in their "hat." It's like buying a car – if your car is fine, you go through a magazine and don't look at the car ads. It's not something that you consciously do. Have you ever noticed when you are buying a car, you see the car ads? If you don't think about going to the theatre on a regular basis, we can spend a "cazillion" dollars on advertising and it just goes right through you.

Renner: So the job of the producers now is how do you attract their (the audience's) attention.

Weeks: Different ways of attracting people's attention. Right. There is a producing team in New York; it's Fran and Barry

Weisler. They are national artists and they currently have a production of *Grease*, and *Grease is Grease*. It's nothing that I think is terrifically wonderful, but they have kept it open for a long time with really creative casting. They spin stars through there like crazy. The whole thing with Brooke Shields, Rosie O'Donnell and John Sedaka. They keep taking little turns and each bring a different niche of people to the theatre.

Renner: Why does a producer go through all these incredible machinations and capers? Why do you go through this each time? Why do you do what you do?

Weeks: Because it is something that I really enjoy doing. You sit here and my desk is covered with piles and piles of paper

and you can get bogged down in it, but there is something about the fact that the piles of paper disappear when you are in the theatre and the lights go down and the curtain goes up and you are just transported to another place, just seeing the magic of what we do and there is something magic about live theatre. And it's like nothing else that I have ever been involved with. And to be in a position where you can create, that you know really be the person who puts all the pieces together and it's opening night and you are pacing, you are going crazy and then people love it and actors are happy...it is very exciting.

FINANCING A PLAY

Q: What are the most important qualities that you feel a producer must possess.

A: The ability to stay alive during the failures and after the failures.

~ Morton Gottlieb, producer⁴

Like Gordon Miller in *Room Service*, a producer requires production money. While Gordon goes about getting it in a haphazard, comical process, most producers rely on a formula for capitalization—the actual raising of money.

First the producer must have the money to cover the expenses necessary to getting things started—the front money. Scripts must be printed, office expenses such as phone bills and rent must be paid, attorneys are needed to work out legal details and financial advisors must prepare the budget. The amount of front money required and the subsequent sums necessary to produce a show have made it increasingly common for producers to work together in a joint effort. Such an agreement is called a joint venture and requires a legally binding contract.

A type of company developed specifically for play production is called a limited partnership, created by a legal document and approved by an appropriate government agency limiting partnerships to protect investors while giving them certain tax benefits. A document called an offering circular is prepared for potential investors telling them the particulars of the show: plot synopsis, biographies of producers and key artistic personnel, a description of the financial and structural organization and, most important, the risks to the investor. Because the theatre is such a fickle business, the novice investor must be prepared for the possibility that a failed play may cause a total loss of his/her money.

In a limited partnership, there are two categories of partners. The general partners are the producers in fact; the individuals that the theatre-goers associate with the show. They make all the day-to-day decisions about the operation of the production and receive 50 percent of any profits made. The limited partners are the actual cash investors, who are responsible only for their agreed-upon investment.

Most producers have previous show investors; they're the "angels" or backers. If a producer has been particularly successful and has had a number of hits, he/she has an easier time of obtaining backers than an unknown. There are lists of money sources. One of these is the *New York Law Journal*, which, by law, lists the names of all limited partners in production companies. Also, a publication listing all Broadway angels is published by the entertainment trade publication *Show Business*. Recently, producers have begun to reach out to the general public by placing advertisements in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

The most traditional way to raise money is through backers' auditions. Usually held in restaurants or large attractive apartments, potential investors are invited for cocktails by the producers. If a star has been signed for the show, he/she is present to add to the glamour of the evening by speaking, singing, or showing off talent in some way. The producers then proceed to explain their plans and the plot, display sketches of scenery and costumes, and make the potential investors feel involved in the ballyhoo of Broadway. However, a prudent investor will realize that all things change, and by the time the show opens (if it does), it may bear little resemblance to the production introduced at that backers' audition.

Because Broadway productions involve so much money and the costs keep escalating, large corporations come in as investors. For example, CBS financed the entire production of *My Fair Lady*; Columbia Pictures capitalized on *Annie*; and Universal Pictures underwrote *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. In addition, production companies have been formed, which both own and operate Broadway theatres adding a real estate advantage to the production. Prominent among these are the Shubert Organization and the Jujamcyn Theatres.

Theatre today is a big business, which requires all kinds of specialists who need all kinds of money. Needless to say, Gordon wouldn't have much of a chance now.

"Do you know anything closer to a crap game? The odds are ten to one—there are two hits out of twenty-two— You can walk across the hall to a Black Jack table and get two to one—better odds. So therefore, who functions in Theatre today?"

~ Alexander H. Cohen, producer⁵

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FARCE

“Comedy is the last refuge of the nonconformist mind.”

~ Gilbert Seldes⁶

Farce is probably the most consistently popular form of western drama. In farce, characters are subjected to various forms of indignity; they find themselves in compromising situations, lose items of clothing, suffer physically or from loss of face. But no one gets crushed; the characters preserve their youth and the old preserve their bounce. The characters of farce are often naive; they are unaware of other people's concerns and have a total obsession with their own. They overcome indignities, but trouble is always close and the game is to avert its every threat. Thus, a farce moves quickly. The characters are like jugglers and, as the situations grow more complicated, the actors juggle faster to keep the play, like a ball, in the air. There is no time for deep analysis or complex characterization.

The roots of farce are probably found in the kind of mimic plays with which primitive peoples celebrated the return of spring, with all its symbols—seed sowing, fertility and renewal of life. Aristophanes, the Greek playwright, is thought to have begun the use of masks and the similarity of human types and attitudes they depicted. When we come to Plautus of Rome in the 3rd century B.C., the various primitive farce forms and their more sophisticated derivations are brought together in a set of character types, situations, comic business and physical style of playing that would provide a model of the form.

In the middle ages, the farce fared better than the tragedy. Based on stock characters and common human foibles, farce required mainly physical skills and improvisation. It thrived upon the fairground arts of juggling, tumbling, singing and dancing; it could be performed on the back of a cart, on an inn-room table, or the great hall of a medieval mansion. Consequently, small groups of itinerant actors kept this popular drama alive for a thousand years.

The farcical instinct next found a permanent form in 16th century Italy. Here the commedia dell'arte developed—performed by troupes of about ten actors and based upon a stock set of characters and situations. The characters were identifiable by a mask and costume, which hardly varied from troupe to troupe. The basic commedia masks were Pantalone, a lecherous, miserly old man; Dottore, a pompous old teacher; Capitano, a swaggering, cowardly, amorous soldier; a couple of tricky servants known as zanni; and, of course, young lovers. The plots were similar in structure and the art lay in the improvisation of the actors within the character confines.

The commedia dell'arte lasted the better part of 200 years and influenced the work of Molière, whose plays, written in 17th century France, are sometimes called comedies of character. *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* and *The Knavery of Scapin* are full of tricky servants, lecherous old men, young lovers and other farcical intrigue. Even the more sophisticated plays such as *The Miser* and *The Imaginary Invalid* have similar formulas.

In the 19th century, the great French farces were created by

Labiche and Feydeau. They kept the inherited stock characters and situations that typified popular farce through the ages, but their characters took on the manners of the Victorian period. Drawing rooms, salons and hotel bedrooms became the environments for the intrigues of Labiche and Feydeau. Sex, marriage and money were the motivating factors of the plot and the members of the haute bourgeoisie, the upper middle class—lawyers, physicians, civil servants and others with a certain authority and position in society to uphold—were the characters doomed to being made ridiculous.

In the 20th century, farce came to the side of the “little man, embodied best in the art of Charles Chaplin. He was the best downtrodden, little everyman, alone against an usually unkind world, who survived on his wit and agility like the tricky servants of the commedia dell'arte. His out-witting maneuvers were usually physical and, though he got knocked down, he picked himself up, dusted himself off and started all over again.”⁷ This physical resilience was also shown in the work of the Marx brothers. Their energy was potentially aggressive and destructive as they attacked society's sacred cows. They also expressed anger at what we cannot understand or control or do, or our insecurities at the difficulty of functioning in a complicated world.



CHARLIE CHAPLIN AND JACKIE COOGAN IN THE 1921 *THE KID*.
Wlaschin, Ken. *The World's Great Movie Stars*.
New York: Bonanza Books, 1979. p. 17.

Why has farce persisted over two thousand years? First, farce takes a particular perspective upon certain unchanging qualities in human beings and their relationships. The characters are always pursuing either basic human needs or those that society has made desirable: love, sex, food, money, power, glory. They characterize greed, lechery, avarice, arrogance, or pomposity and suffer the results of the pursuit of same. Secondly, farce attacks all pretensions, all masks and tends to attack in the simplest way, with a kick in the pants or a knock in the head. In the world that farce inhabits, all usually get their just desserts. Finally farce goes for the belly and the backside. It makes us laugh at the fact that we look funny when we're at a disadvantage; when we're caught with our pants down.

Thus, “farce removes the polite masks and shows us the realities beneath, and asks us to laugh at the discrepancy between what we show and what we are.”⁸

COMPONENTS OF 20TH CENTURY FARCE: THE WISECRACK AND SLAPSTICK

DAVIS: You been in jail?

FAKER: It's not so bad. If you behave, they make you a trustee.⁹

Comedies of the 1930s used and perfected a kind of joke called the "wisecrack." Defined as "A flippant, commonly sardonic remark or retort,"¹⁰ it is known as a good comeback and a good comeback arises out of the moment, but is intended only for the moment. It is dependent for its effect upon timing or word order, sometimes in utter defiance of grammar any syntax. George S. Kaufman was the absolute genius of writing wisecracks in such plays as *Once in a Lifetime* and *The Man who Came to Dinner*, while George Abbott, the director and producer, intensified the comic effect through speeding up the action of the play.

An example of wisecracking from *Room Service* is in the scene where Hogarth tries to collect money for Davis' typewriter and is told the playwright is hospitalized for insanity.

HOGARTH: Well, in that case I'll have to take back the typewriter.

MILLER: He took it with him.

HOGARTH: To the madhouse?

BINION: He likes to hear the little bell ring.¹¹

A slapstick is literally a kind of paddle split down the middle so that two halves come together with a sharp noise when used to strike someone. But slapstick has become the essence of farce itself—exaggerated noise and effect, but no real pain. It's a symbol for a basic, impulsive human response—hitting. The acrobatic tricks of the commedia zannis, which were exhibited for skill alone, were still slapstick. Today it has become falls: out of chairs, over sofas, through windows; trips: over rugs or our own feet. The essential physical function is the same but transferred to a modern environment. In the farce of the silent movies and mid-twentieth century comedy, horseplay includes automobile chases, conveyer belts, electrical equipment—all the "slapsticks" of a modern technological society that goes berserk or drives us crazy through our inability to control them. At this moment, the computer is the ultimate authority figure that frustrates and infuriates.



BRINGING UP BABY.
Sikov, Ed. Screwball. New York: Crown Publishers. 1989. p. 103.



MONKEY BUSINESS.
Sikov, Ed. Screwball. New York: Crown Publishers. 1989. p. 73.



THE LADY EVE.
Sikov, Ed. Screwball. New York: Crown Publishers. 1989. p. 127.



TWENTIETH CENTURY.
Sikov, Ed. Screwball. New York: Crown Publishers. 1989. p. 175.

FUNNY MEN AND WOMEN OF THE 1930S

“My family was poor but dishonest.”

~ W.C. Fields¹²

America needed cheering up in the 1930s. Unemployment, poverty and breadlines weren't very humorous in themselves, yet the decade bred some individuals who overcame the social and economic unrest and made people laugh. Laurel and Hardy, Olsen and Johnson, Buster Keaton, Ed Wynn, Bobby Clarke, Victor Moore, Bob Hope and many others worked hard in this cause. The range of American comics went from the common man to the consummate con man.



Will Rogers. His greatest films were made for John Ford and Henry King during the depths of the Depression. *Wlaschin, Ken. The World's Great Movie Stars. New York: Bonanza Books, 1979, p. 144.*

Will Rogers was jocular, self-effacing and slapstick without sacrificing his integrity. His posture reflected a birthright that was simple and without apology; he strode across the whole universe and penetrated all levels of humanity. A writer, philosopher, wit, actor, skilled horseman and roper, he was a reflection of the common American of the first part of the 20th century. When the Great Depression of 1929 hit, Will was already a success from Ziegfeld's *Follies* and short films.

A sponsor paid \$77,000 for Rogers to make 12 nationwide radio broadcasts in 1930. (He donated the money to Depression victims.) These Sunday shows were generally used to tell bootstrap success stories about people like Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, Herbert Hoover, etc. When the Depression deepened in 1931, Rogers teamed with President Hoover to restore confidence in the economy. “We’re the first nation in the history of the world to go to a poorhouse in an automobile,” Will said in remarks that became known as “the bacon and beans and limousines” speech. Rogers’ solution to the unemployment was to cut work: cut weeds, fix fences, mow lawns. He then added that there were “filling stations to be robbed, gangsters to be catered to. There are a million little odds and ends” that paid no money, but the activity would keep people in practice of work “in case something does show.”¹³

Charlie Chaplin, a product of vaudeville, was the “little fellow” or “wise fool.” On one level, his anti-establishment tendencies and everyman vulnerability put him in an anti-hero camp. However, his inspired mime and physical dexterity made him a kind of slapstick heroic figure. His perennial outsider tramp appealed to the early 20th century urban, often immigrant have-nots, as did the minimal language demands of

the silent films. Like much of his audience, Chaplin, himself an immigrant, and his “little man” often seemed overwhelmed by the world. But his outwitting maneuvers, usually physical, allowed him to survive. Just when he believed himself to have gained the advantage, his naive pleasure at his cleverness led to his downfall. But—like the rest of us—he tries again.

Mae West was more than a movie star; she became an American institution, synonymous with the risqué and immortalized in the dictionary as “(an actress noted for her full figure); an inflatable life jacket.” She was already famous for her Broadway plays that the critics called vulgar and without merit, but the public loved. When she went to Hollywood in the thirties, she came into her own; within three years of her arrival in California, she was drawing the second highest salary in the country. Notorious for her one-liners, she wasn't kidding when she said, “My ego is breakin' records.” Describing her physical charms, she claimed, “My measurements are the same as Venus De Milo's only I got arms.” Once chided for not writing a good part for anyone



MAE WEST FINDS A MAN SHE REALLY LIKES, THE YOUNG CARY GRANT, IN THE SALVATION ARMY IN THE 1930S *SHE DONE HIM WRONG*. *Wlaschin, Ken. The World's Great Movie Stars. New York: Bonanza Books, 1979, p. 158.*

else in one of her movie scripts and told to look at *Romeo and Juliet*, she replied with great sincerity, “Let Shakespeare do it his way. I'll do it mine. We'll see who comes out better.” With her defiance of authority and morality, Depression-numbered audiences were stimulated by her unapologetic exhibitionism and her cynical love-'em-and leave-'em behavior.¹⁴

Carole Lombard was the queen of the screwball comedy, a wacky, wonderful, witty, uninhibited prankster whose off-screen personality perfectly fit her screen image and helped make her one of the top stars of the thirties. She emerged as a top-ranking comedy star in *Twentieth Century* (1934). It was the first of several hilarious screwball comedies that utilized her comic genius to great advantage. She was the highest paid film star in 1937 and starred in some of the best comedies of all time.



PUBLICITY FOR ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S *MR. AND MRS. SMITH*. *Sikov, Ed. Screwball. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1989, p. 67.*

The tough times of the 1930s encouraged the comedy popularity of harder, older, cynical comedians like W.C. Fields. Fields' comedy characterization was often in the tradition of the late 19th century carnival show sharpies. His huckster (peddler, bargainer) was a second cousin to both the slick Yankee peddler and the comic charlatans of the old Southwest earlier in the 19th century. Fields loved the tall tale. In the movie *Mississippi* (1935), he told about his days as an Indian fighter when he took down his old Bowie knife and "cut a path through a wall of living flesh."¹⁵ Famous for a drawling verbal slapstick dripping with comically overstated language of the 19th century romantic novel, he complemented this with graceful visual slapstick from his early juggling days. He was also capable of the fully outrageous con or scam, from selling a "talking dog" at the opening of the sound film adaptation of *Poppy* (1935) to bilking his landlady out of rent money in *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934).



W.C. FIELDS WAS SO FOND OF HIS COMEDY STAGE SUCCESS *POPPY* THAT HE MADE TWO FILMS OF IT, IN 1925 AND 1936. *Waschin, Ken. The World's Great Movie Stars. New York: Bonanza Books, 1979. p. 77.*



"JUST WAIT 'TIL I GET THROUGH WITH IT"
Zimmerman, Paul D. and Burt Goldblatt. The Marx Brothers at The Movies. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1968. p. 86.

Groucho Marx was the updated 20th century huckster (much like Gordon Miller in *Room Service*). Groucho's shyster had a saturation comedy tongue that spewed assorted wisecracks at the speed of comic sound. In a Groucho world, the message was that nothing was as it seems and this was especially true of his language. As if to compensate for Groucho's verbosity, one brother, Harpo, said nothing. The brothers, Harpo, Chico and sometimes Zeppo, are comic absurdity bordering on the surreal. They are beating a world gone mad at its own game, and sometimes Groucho is the victim. In the film *Animal Crackers* (1930), Chico wants to question people in the house next door. When Groucho replies, "suppose there isn't any house next door," Chico answers, "well then, of course we got to build one."¹⁶ In their cynicism, worldliness, and lack of heart, the Marx brothers matched the bitter mood of the depression.

"If you write about yourself, the slightest deviation makes you realize instantly there may be honor among thieves, but you are just a dirty liar."

~ Groucho Marx¹⁷

NOTES

1. Kisselhoff, p. 138
2. Krutch, p. 162
3. Downer, p. 131
4. Seldes, p. 2
5. Fields and Kern.
6. Harrop and Epstein, p. 144
7. Boretz and Murray, p. 55
8. Morris, p. 1470
9. Boretz and Murray, p 30
10. Gehring, p. 40
11. Carter, p. 93
12. Bells and Musgove, flyleaf
13. Gehring, p. 4
14. Gehring, p. 6
15. Gehring, p. 3
16. Greenberg, p. 198
17. Langley, p. 166

ACTIVITY PACKAGE

FARCE:

1. What television shows or movies could be considered slapstick or as having elements of slapstick in them? Discuss.
2. What slapstick character types are used in entertainment programs today embodying greed, lechery, avarice, arrogance and pomposity? Are they similar to the historical characters? Match the modern characters with their commedia dell'arte counterparts. How have they evolved or changed?
3. What new stock characters has the 20th century bred? How about the computer nerd, used car salesman, superhero? Can you name others?
4. What farcical elements or scenarios has our technological age created? Describe. Create a scene using one of the following: the computer, the internet, the fax machine.
5. In the historical farce, the female did not play a huge role. Most of the women played the love interest or nagging wife. Has the 20th century bred any other stock female characters that would fit the farcical mode? How about the scheming female, the divorcee, the bossy supervisor, rich girl, poor maid or nanny? Has the nineties created a female with an "attitude" character type? Any others? Remember, stock characters usually exemplify a single quality or behavior.

CURRENT COMEDY:

6. The thirties bred a particular kind of entertainment and humor. Has the nineties also a humor of its own? Analyze movies and or television shows that are considered comedies and look at the characters and the type of humor. How is it different? How would you define current humor? Is it black humor, physical humor, sick humor? Are we more cynical, hopeful, silly?
7. Why do you think that these types of comedies exist today?
8. What do you think that these comedies say of the nineties?

PRODUCING:

Artistic and Development Decisions:

9. If you were in Gordon Miller's position, how would you go about raising money for a show that you thought would be a success? Take out a loan, find investors, write a grant? Remember you must convince your investors that there will be a return on or a benefit from their investment.

Artistic and Marketing Decisions:

10. How would you insure that you had an audience?

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