“They [comedians] are a much greater and far more valuable commodity than all the gold and precious stones in the world. But because we are laughed at, I don’t think people really understand how essential we are to their sanity. If it weren’t for the brief respite we give the world with our foolishness, the world would see mass suicide in numbers that compare favorably with the death rate of the lemmings.”

Groucho Marx

“The comedian is the first person to point out the elephant in the room or that the emperor has no clothes, despite the consequences”

Eric Idle, 92nd Street Y Interview, Eddy Friedfeld, February 22, 2005

“Dying is Easy. Comedy is Hard”

Attributed to each of Actors Edmund Kean, Edmund Gwenn, and Donald Crisp on their Deathbeds

“On the Whole, I’d Rather be Living in Philadelphia”

Attributed to W.C. Fields on his Deathbed

The history of comedy in 20th and 21st Century America is the history of America. Comedians provided a funhouse mirror as well as a perceptive lens for American society and culture. The history of American comedy is a touchstone for every time we live in. Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and the other silent movie comedians helped create the movie industry. Vaudeville was largely physical humor, because the majority of the multiethic and multilingual audience did not speak English and introduced a diverse group of stars ranging from Eddie Cantor to Fanny Brice, and Bert Williams.

Comedians have been social philosophers and commentators: The outsider looking in and the insider looking sideways. Humor became the grease for the wheels of communication and enlightenment. A well-established democracy allows comedians to take shots/criticizing the government on all forms and levels. We now live in a time where talk show hosts can make fun of the government every night without any fear of recrimination, only ratings. Comedy is also music. It is about timing: It has rhythm and melody. It is evocative like jazz. Great comedians are like jazz musicians because they have their own signature riffs and melodies and they look for nuances or variations on a theme.

We will discuss the evolution of comedy, its place in history, and its similarities in time, including the great comedians and greatest moments and scenes from film, radio and television. Beginning with Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton Harold Lloyd, and the other great silent era
comedians, Vaudeville, radio, the screwball comedies of the 30’s and 40’s, the great comedy teams,(including the Marx Brothers, Burns and Allen, Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, through to Cheech and Chong, Key and Peele and Harold and Kumar), Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, Lucille Ball and The Golden Age of Television, modern comedians, the controversial and groundbreaking comedy of Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Richard Pryor; the political comedy of Mort Sahl and The Daily Show, and sessions on auteurs Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Barry Levinson, Kevin Smith, Amy Heckerling, Tyler Perry and Wes Anderson, with clips and segments from classic television and movies, discussing the evolution of comedy, its place in history, and its similarities in time.

This seminar is a history class with a laugh track: We will be taking the significant periods and players of the 20th and 21st Century and analyzing them against their historic context and legacy, using humor as the platform. We will discuss how comedy was shaped by and responsive to American society, and how comedians, in turn, influenced and shaped American life and culture. We will also focus on how comedians and comedy built and continue to build bridges between gender, culture and racial and ethnic groups. Clips and segments from classic television shows and movies, as well as standup performances and concerts will enrich our discussion of the evolution of comedy, its place in history, and its similarities in time. We will study how and why America laughed in each generation, and how the change in American character and persona shaped how they laughed and what, and whom they laughed at. How Lucille Ball, Joan Rivers, Mary Tyler Moore, and Tina Fey broke through glass ceilings; how sitcoms including All in the Family, Sanford and Son, and The Jeffersons, Cheers, Will and Grace, and The Carmichael Sow changed how America looked at and continue to look at family, race, and gender, and how they often exclusively or otherwise predominantly facilitated discussions of formerly taboo subjects; and impacted and accelerated positive communication and tolerance within our culture.

Equally important, we will discuss the genesis and evolution of the comedic persona and performance: What worked, what did not work, and why. We will break down and analyze the performances to determine how performers did what they did, what choices they made in response to changing and evolving history, demographics and technologies, and how their work evolved and grew over the course of their careers, what has withstood the test of time, and why.

A. Syllabus.

Session 1. Overview- The Origin and Evolution of Comedy in America, Monday, January 25.

The first session will be an overview and a discussion of comedy in America: What is American about American comedy. Tying the history of comedy to both the historical framework, from the late 19th and 20th centuries and how immigration flows; the growth of local and regional theaters; Vaudeville theater chains; The Great Depression; World War II; and Vietnam/Watergate impacted comedy, and in turn how technology- ranging from the stagecoach to the train; radio; film; television; home video; and the Internet affected the development of comedy. Why America needs to laugh as parts of its heritage, and how comedy developed and evolved in the 20th and 21st century. There will be discussion of what people like and why, and what determines what is funny and important in American society. Also included in this session
is an analysis of how an artist finds their voice and an evolution of comedy using standup comedians and sitcoms as examples.

Screening: Auntie Mame, Groundhog Day (all films, readings, and other materials will be in the Dropbox set up for the corresponding session).

Reading: An Introduction to American Movies, Chapter 17- The Comedy Film (~20 pages)

For all my students, whether they are actors/performers and writers, or people who just love comedy (Yes, I am claiming ownership to you are in the best metaphoric and academic sense possible for this semester, and I promise to return you intact and better for wear and effort at the end of the semester):

Please submit the homework assignment on the day before each class not later than 6 PM. I have learned that if you write about it, you come to class even more focused and more eager to discuss. Reading your answers ahead of time also gives me a better sense of what points to touch on during the discussion and how to tailor the session specifically to the needs and interests of this group.

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss how comedy flows from relationships between characters. Pick two sets of characters and discuss.
2. Start thinking about “normal” lines. When and how do we get comfortable with suspension of disbelief, whether the storyline is fantastical or unusual, connecting with characters who are living lives that we are not used to, and characters whose behavior is so outrageous and/or eccentric that we find it funny until it crosses a line where that behavior makes us feel uncomfortable. Give two examples.
3. Who/what is your favorite comedian, comedy film and/or sitcom? How were you introduced to that favorite? Did you discover it yourself or did someone else introduce you? Has such favorite endured over time? Why? If this is a recent favorite, was there an earlier favorite and why was it replaced?
4. Moment of euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewings that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

Session 2. The Silent Era Monday, February 1.

The session will focus on the early history of movies and the creation of Hollywood, how Vaudeville stars transitioned into film, and how producers Mack Sennett and Hal Roach developed slapstick comedy, including The Keystone Cops, which was rooted in challenging authority, and how that comedy was developed into more dramatic storylines. We will focus on Charlie Chaplin's comedy that dealt with social issues of immigration and poverty; how he was the first to combine comedy and pathos and became the first international star. We will look at Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd and the development of their individual careers; and the contrast of their different overarching styles: Chaplin’s’ man versus-society, Keaton’s man-versus- nature, Lloyd’s man-versus-himself.
Screening: City Lights, Charlie Chaplin 1931
Paul Merton’s Silent Clowns 1 Buster Keaton
Safety Last, Harold Lloyd
Documentary: Hollywood Comedy: A Serious Business
Reading: Richard Schickel- Chaplin
Austerlitz, A Fine Mess, Chapters 1-3, Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd
Chaplin Autobiography- 20 pages (just to get a feel of his voice)
Groucho Marx Letter to Warner Brothers (see below in Syllabus) (~75 Pages)

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS:

1. The Groucho Letter: (i) what is the tone? (ii) What are the underlying messages-intended and unintended; (iii) How is humor used as a tool/weapon? (iii) Is it the right length? (iv) Would you have added/changed anything?
   For City Lights and the other film segments:
2. What are the constraints and the advantages of performing without dialogue?
3. What role does the music play in the pieces?
4. In what ways are these artists, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, different, and how are they the same?
5. What comic devices and formulae (“pieces of business”) do you see that are still used today? (e.g., dressing in drag, hiding from police, authority figures getting injured).
6. How do you create a character- physically and emotionally? What do the performers and filmmakers convey to the audience and how do they do it as quickly as possible?
7. How are we as an audience different and how are we the same? What are our expectations (e.g. pacing)?
8. Who are the successors? Not just to the silent film performances per se, but to Chaplin’s grace and social conscience, Keaton’s athleticism and courage, and Lloyd’s humanity and skill.
9. Moment of euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewings that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.


The first part of the session will cover the origins, history, and impact of Vaudeville and Burlesque: How the voice of American comedy developed through national circuits of theaters and how comedians traveled the country developing their own style and entertaining a multi-ethnic audience base and how immigration flows, the growth of the big cities and the language and cultural barriers influenced the era and the medium. Performers discussed will include W.C Fields, Eddie Cantor, Fanny Brice, George Burns and Gracie Allen, and Bert Williams.

The second part of the session will cover the development of radio as the first populist medium in America, and the sociocultural aspects of radio comedy that taught Americans to
speak and hear a unified voice. How The Great Depression was directly connected to the rise of the radio comedian, and how Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Bob Hope, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Beulah, Abbot and Costello, and Amos ‘N Andy’s comedy, among others, adapted and developed to serve the new larger audience of a national America. 1932, the height of The Great Depression, coincided with the height of the radio comedian. Because when a man was unemployed and dejected, Bob Hope and Jack Benny were making fun of his bosses and telling him that he was not alone in his plight.

**Screening: American Masters Vaudeville Documentary**
**Listening: Radio Programs**: Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Amos ‘N Andy, Beulah, Fred Allen, You Bet Your Life (Groucho Marx)
**Johnny Carson College Thesis on Radio Comedians**
**Reading: Listening In- Radio and the American Imagination, Susan Douglas, Chapter 5- Radio Comedy and Linguistic Slapstick pp. 100-123**
**Tucker, Women Who Made Television Funny, Chapter 1, Gracie Allen**
**Abbott and Costello Routines at the end of Syllabus**
**George Burns Monologue at end of Syllabus (~60 pages)**

**HOMEWORK QUESTIONS:**

1. What are the challenges in performing in front of a multi-lingual audience?
2. What is the foundation of a comedy routine- slapstick/confusion/violence?
3. If you were a writer for Abbott and Costello or Burns and Allen, and you were asked to construct a routine for them, what would be the fundamentals you would build the routine on? What would have to be in the routine? What would you think about in terms of the transition from the page to the stage?
4. What do you want the audience to think and feel, aside from laughing?
5. How is Vaudeville similar/different in impact and influence to The Internet?
6. How are characters developed on radio? What are the devices used to build and sustain an audience? How was the English language used and misused? What is the core of linguistic slapstick?
7. If you are now a writer/performer/producer on a radio program, now that you have to appeal to an entire country at the same time, what do you think about? What are your concerns/goals?
8. Johnny Carson Senior Thesis on Radio Comedy. Discuss two things you learned about radio comedy from Mr. Carson. What insight do we get into the young Mr. Carson, his passions and aspirations? What grade would you give him for this project and why?
9. If you had your preference- which would you have preferred to be- a Vaudeville Act or a Radio performer? Why?
10. Moment of euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewings that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

**Session 4. The Depression, Screwball Comedy, and Gender Equality. Monday, February 15.**
During the era of the Screwball Comedy which began during The Great Depression and ended with the beginning of World War II, women had the vote for a little over a decade. Many, if not their only, role models of strong, smart women came from these films. The session will cover the impact of The Great Depression, class warfare, and gender equality, and the development of the Hollywood Studio System on talking pictures and the genesis and development of the great comedy filmmaker. Primary focus will be on Preston Sturges, Kaufman and Hart, Howard Hawks, Frank Capra, and Billy Wilder and how each developed their own themes and comedic voices, which very often were comedy combined with pathos and were platforms for social commentary.

Screening: Sullivan’s Travels, His Girl Friday, Some Like It Hot
Reading: The Man Who Came to Dinner- George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart
Romantic Comedy, Claire Mortimer, Chapter 4, the Comedy of Romance
Austerlitz, Chapter 12, Billy Wilder
(~80 pages)

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS:

1. How were Romantic/Screwball comedies influenced by the Depression and relationships between men and women of that time?
2. Sullivan’s Travels: What is still funny; what is not? How does director/writer Preston Sturges make John Sullivan a sympathetic character?
3. His Girl Friday- Does it still work? Why or why not? How do you balance comedy, plot, social message, and romance?
4. How do you advance social issues through comedy? Give two examples. Where is the line between advancing a social message and beating the audience over the head? What makes us enjoy contentious romantic relationships? What is it about the fighting and the uncertainty that is appealing as an art form?
5. The Man Who Came to Dinner- what comedic devices does George S. Kaufman use? Pick two characters and analyze how they were effective and entertaining. Does that play hold up? Why or why not?
6. How does Billy Wilder (Some Like it Hot) tell a story? How does Wilder balance comedy and pathos?
7. How are men and women depicted in these films and play? What is integral to their relationships? How have this relationship evolved/changed over time and how have they remained the same? Pick two female characters from any of the films or play. Where does the romance come from? How is the romance developed? Who are you rooting for? Why?
8. Moment of euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewings that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

Session 5. Comedy in the Gene Pool/ Comedy Teams/ Comedy on Film. Monday, February 22.
There is something particularly wonderful and satisfying a successful collaboration, whether it is a “family business” or two or more people becoming partners and combining their gifts. The session will focus on the work of The Marx Brothers, The Three Stooges, The Ritz Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour, Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks in the 200-Year-Old Man, and how they got started, how their art developed and their impact and legacy. The session will also discuss the evolution of comedy teams, and how The Civil Rights and Feminist Movements, impacted not only comedies but also action movies in the 80's and 90's, including Mike Nichols and Elaine May, the “buddy comedies” of Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder, Cheech and Chong, Key and Peele, Harold and Kumar (Kal Penn and John Cho), and Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer’s Broad City.

Screening: Horsefeathers, Marx Brothers (1933), The Music Box (1932) Laurel and Hardy, Three Stooges Shorts Austerlitz, Chapters 4-5 Laurel and Hardy, Marx Brothers Articles, Marx Brothers, Stan and Ollie, Syllabus (~40 pages)

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS:

1. Groucho as a writer versus a comedian: What did you learn about him, what do you see as most important about him as writer, a person, and as an artist (two paragraphs)
2. Comedy teams- Pick two teams: What is the underlying relationship between the team members and how does is impact the comedy?
3. Anything unique about sibling revelry (Marx Brothers, Three Stooges)? (Pun intended) How does having the teams be actual real-life siblings impact the comedy? Why?
4. What are the similar dynamics between the teams and what are the differences?
5. Three Stooges and Others- Class Struggle/social commentary- how are the themes of rich versus poor developed?
6. What is going on beside/around the comedy? Does it enhance the comedy/distract from it, or both?
7. When and how does the outrageous comedy become acceptable to the audience?
8. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

Paper 1 Due (see description below in Section D)


This session will explore the development of television, how it replaced radio and how some radio comedians transitioned successfully to the new medium and why. How the new technology allowed for a new type of comedy to develop that transcended radio, spawning a new type of comedian and writer, and how the post-World War II era of economic growth and progress created a larger and more demanding audience, the result of which was that comedy for the first time in history became a product of an optimistic generation, as opposed to the darkness
and despair of world wars and depression. We will look at how live television was initially theater performed in front of an audience of millions and how that evolved into its own specific arena. How the demands and limitations of live television enhanced creativity and created perils of no second chances. Also, how the new technology allowed comedians like Ernie Kovacs to exploit the visual medium and allowed Sid Caesar to go from Vaudeville on television to sketch comedy. How and why certain sitcoms like I Love Lucy, The Honeymooners Sgt. Bilko, and The Dick Van Dyke Show have thrived in reruns for almost 70 years. How Milton Berle began and how Carol Burnett perpetuated and revolutionized the comedy variety format.

Reading: Neil Simon, Laughter on the 23rd Floor
Caesar, Friedfeld, Caesar’s Hours- Chapter 9, “The Art of Sketch Comedy,” pp. 170-193
Tucker, Women Who Made Television Funny, Chapter 3- Lucille Ball
Edgerton, Columbia History of American Television, Chapter 4, Here Comes Television (~80 pages).

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS:

1. Compare and contrast My Favorite Year to Laughter on the 23rd Floor. How does each piece capture the warmth and humor of the period? How are characters developed? Which does a better job and why?
2. How specifically does Mel Brooks (My Favorite Year) and Neil Simon (Laughter on the 23rd) Floor romanticize their own memories of the period? (Benjy Stone is based on Brooks; Lucas is based on Simon) Please provide examples
3. Positions of strength- Radio and Vaudeville and the performances and talent that grew out of it were largely influenced by waves of immigrants, congestion, economic hardship, and subsequently The Great Depression. Early television was an era of post-World War II economic growth, and cultural and political optimism- how does that change the outlook and subtext of the creativity and the performances?
4. This new invention of television- what do these artists do to maximize the creative capability of the new medium and the available technology?
5. What happens to the pace of the performance and dialogue in this new era?
6. What else do you notice about television development and its impact on the comedy specifically and the performance in general?
7. Discuss the beginnings of modern sketch comedy, specifically satire and parody- pick one show/sketch and deconstruct the elements- what worked and what did not work?
8. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

There are some comedians whose work evolved and expanded over decades, where certain comedians became writers, directors and producers, and developed a unique voice and signature work. The session will discuss the collective works of Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, as well as Jerry Lewis, Amy Heckerling, Barry Levinson, Kevin Smith, The Farrelly Brothers, and Wes Anderson, and how each artist developed their signature voices and how those voices grew and evolved and impacted audiences.

Screening: Annie Hall, Blazing Saddles
Reading Austerlitz, Chapters 15, 19, 20, Jerry Lewis, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen
Mel Brooks- Music Man and other articles (in Syllabus) (~60 pages)

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS:

1. Compare Blazing Saddles and Annie Hall- what is similar about the movies- what is different? How do they get their laughs- what are they underlying social themes? (Two Paragraphs)
2. What does creative control do for an artist/How do each of Brooks and Allen develop their own persona- what do you think of when you see each of them?
3. How does Mel Brooks develop parody? (Two examples)
4. How is Woody Allen’s anger/passion manifested?
5. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS MARCH 15


There have been certain eras and meccas of comedic growth and prosperity, where comedians could develop and nurture their craft. The session addresses comedy incubators and how they influenced comedy during their eras: First, the Catskills and the Chitlin Circuit: How different ethnic groups reached a mainstream audience and how a generation of comedic storytellers developed and evolved. Second, how did The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s help comedians of color move into mainstream America, how their comedy changed/evolved as a result of the movement, and how did they in turn influence American audiences.

We will also discuss the “monologist,” the early standup comedian and how venues like the Ed Sullivan show and Las Vegas offered incubators including the lounge, an intimate forum for the development of the standup comedian, as well as the main room for headliners. There will be a review and discussion of the history of late-night talk shows and their impact on Comedy: Steve Allen, Jack Paar, Johnny Carson, Dick Cavett, David Letterman, Jay Leno, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, and Steven Colbert, and how the late-night television format helped advance the comedic form and advance the careers of many comedians.
Screening: It’s a Mad Mad Mad Mad World, The Kings of Comedy
Reading: The Standup Comedians on TV, by David Bushman
Caesar’s Hours- Chapter 3, “From Sax to Comedy,” pp. 28-37.
On the Real Side, Mel Watkins, Chapter 9, The Theater Owners Booking Association and
The Apollo Theater, Changing the Joke and Slipping the Yoke (~80 pages)

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:

1. Pick two actors in Mad World and analyze their characters/performances. Are they believable/credible? Are they funny? How and why?
2. How do comedians interact in a serio-comedic setting?
3. In Kings of Comedy, how does director Spike Lee make the comedians appealing to both the live audience and the film audience?
4. How were the Catskills and the Chitlin Circuit incubators for comedians?
5. How did comedians use their race, gender, and ethnicity to create their comedic personas and entertain audiences?
6. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

Paper 2 Due (see description below in Section D)


Standup is the purest form of comedy and one of the purest forms of entertainment- no orchestra, cast, scenery, set changes or script, there are no layers between the performer and the audience. The stakes are significant: When a comedian succeeds, he or she “kills,” and failure is referred to as “dying” onstage.

The modern standup comedian is not only entertainer, but also philosopher and social commentator. The first part of the session will focus on Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Robert Klein, Joan Rivers, Steve Martin, Rita Rudner, Garry Shandling, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams, Whoopi Goldberg, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Sarah Silverman and Louis CK, and Second City and Saturday Night Live. The new breeds of predominantly college educated comedians that faced a changing world and society, including Vietnam and Watergate. The seventies produced a generation of comedians that became as famous and as influential as rock stars and redefined the art. The generation was about reinventing and testing comedic forms and making a statement, with social and moral issues intertwined with observational humor that has a political edge and angst, with comedians from this generation owing as much to The Beatles and The Rolling Stones as they did to Alan King and Danny Thomas.

Other than The Sitcom, standup comedy is still the most enduring form of comedy, even as it evolves to respond to the changing times around it. The modern comedian is as much jazz musician as wordsmith, doing variation on themes, and has been able to break social barriers, functionally redrawing “the line.” The comedian is now full-fledged social philosopher, expressing desire and angst better than and in ways no one else can. “Invite the awful- because
that’s where the soup is made…if you want to see your material work, you have to see it fight upstream.” Louis CK.

This session will focus on younger comedians, as representative of the current state of American comedy. The themes that will be developed will include what the current group has taken from the older generation and made their own, and the innovations to the forms and style to satisfy a now more “narrowcasted” audience with multiple sources of information and entertainment available to them; and how we currently have the most diverse group of comedians and artists entertaining America than ever before. We will also look at how cable television, the Internet, and various streaming technologies both created new opportunities for comedians, and become the new Vaudeville, and also potentially diluted and saturated the marketplace

**Screening:** Chris Rock, Never Scared; The Best of George Carlin
**Reading:** Comedy at the Edge, Chapter 1 After Lenny, Chapter 3 Race.
Steve Martin, Born Standing Up, pp. 71-97
Tina Fey, Bossypants, Sarah, Oprah, and Captain Hook, pp. 142-160 (~80 pages)

**HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:**

1. What did you learn about Steve Martin’s journey/experiences that you think most impacted him? Do you like him more or less now that you know the back story? Also, in general do you find that the more you know the performer’s background and history do you appreciate them more? (2 Paragraphs)
2. Please think about the development of the individual voice in comedy- how armed with a microphone and wits the lone comedian takes on the audience. What are the choices he or she makes? How do they strive to connect with the audience? How do they succeed/fail?
3. Comedy at the Edge: What was unique about the time period that launched the new era of comedians, and how did it impact on their development and comedy (two paragraphs)

For each question below- pick at least two comedians and answer the following for each:

4. What are the goals (in addition to the obvious, “Make ‘em Laugh”), and the relationships/connections that are forged with the audience?
5. How is storytelling important in this new era?
6. Profanity: Is it appropriate in context, over the top, distracting from the joke/story, and/or offensive to the audience? Take a position and explain.
7. Whose acts hold up over the test of time, whose do not- why? (two paragraphs)
8. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

The session will address the rise of the blockbuster comedy, spawned by the first blockbuster film “Jaws” in 1976 (pardon the pun) and how Hollywood has learned to develop and bank on blockbuster comedies.

**Screening:** Animal House, Beverly Hills Cop  
**Reading:** Austerlitz, Chapter 30, Judd Apatow  
**Animal House Script**  
A Stupid and Futile Gesture, Josh Karp, Animal House Chapter 11- F the Proposal  

**HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:**

1. How does Animal House capture the college experience and what does it do to exaggerate it? Does Animal House still hold up after 43 years? Why and why not? What changes would you make regarding characters/plot in order to make it more relatable?
2. In Beverly Hills Cop, how does Eddie Murphy balance playing both hero and comic relief?  
   For each question below- pick at least two comedians and answer the following for each:
3. What are the goals (in addition to the obvious, “Make ‘em Laugh”), and the relationships/connections that are forged with the audience? (2 Paragraphs)
4. How is storytelling important in this new era?
5. How does that persona carry into a film presence where there are other characters to react against?
6. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

**Sessions 11. The Situation Comedy Part I- The Second Golden Age of Television – from All in the Family to Modern Family. Monday, April 12.**

Sitcoms have been the bellwether at the forefront of cutting-edge discussions, using the laugh track as a barometer and calming influence on sensitive topics of race, religion, poverty, upward mobility, civil rights, gay rights, woman’s rights, and other significant family issues.

A discussion can get more intense in comedy than its dramatic counterpart because you can bring the audience back with a well-crafted laugh at the end of the scene. The session will focus on the sitcom evolving into an aggressive mirror of a changing America and the groundbreaking sitcoms that addressed politics, race, war and family, including The Norman Lear factory: All in the Family, Maude, Sanford and Son, The Jeffersons; women in the workplace from Lucy Ricardo, Mary Richards, Murphy Brown to Liz Lemon and The Golden Girls; LGBTQ characters from Soap to Ellen to Modern Family; the alternative family structure- from The Odd Couple to Two and a Half Men; and the dramedy and military comedy- MASH, Bilko, and F-Troop; ethnically driven comedies that have mass appeal, like The George Lopez Show and Blackish, and race in the workplace- Barney Miller, WKRP in Cincinnati.
Viewing: All in the Family: Episode: Writing the President  
MASH: Episode: Sometimes You Hear the Bullet  
Cheers: Pilot: Give Me A Ring Sometime

Reading: Scripts: “The Good Son” script for the pilot episode of “Frasier;” 
Seinfeld: “The Chinese Restaurant;” and “Sports Night- Pilot” 
Janet Staiger- Blockbuster TV, Chapter 4, All in the Family 
Mike Sacks- And Here’s the Kicker- Interviews With Larry Gelbart and Buck Henry (~50 pages)

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:

1. Larry Gelbart- Analyze his MASH experience  
2. Buck Henry- What were his approaches to writing comedy?  
3. Seinfeld- what works or does not work about the Chinese Restaurant script? 
4. How do comedy and pathos blend in both the Sports Night and the Frasier scripts? 
5. How many of you liked a sitcom because someone in your family introduced you to it and/or because they liked it? How did that influence/impact your appreciation of it? 
6. Pick two of the sitcom episodes you just watched- what worked or didn’t work about them and why? 
7. How has the sitcom progressed/evolved? What are the essential components of character development and the relationship between characters? How is that crucial to the plot? 
8. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

Sessions 12. The Situation Comedy Part II. Monday April 19

Viewing: The Carmichael Show: Grandma Francis  
Sanford and Son: Blood is Thicker Than Junk  
Murphy Brown: Pilot  
Whoopi: Pilot  
Everybody Loves Raymond: Therapy

Reading: And Here’s the Kicker, Mike Sacks- Interview with Stephen Merchant 
Bossypants, Tina Fey, 30 Rock-An Experiment to Confuse Your Grandparents  
Working Class Stiffs, by Elvis Mitchell  
Sanford and Son- Televising African American Comedy (~60 pages)

HOMWORK QUESTIONS:

1. Essence of sitcoms- is it junk food, a good meal, or both? How do they balance those dichotomies?  
2. Discuss Stephen Merchant’s experience in creating The Office.  
3. How have women’s roles changed and evolved in sitcoms?  
4. How are racial and ethnic stereotypes debunked and reinforced? Give examples.
5. What makes a good sitcom? What makes a great sitcom? What would most sitcoms be like without the comedic component?

6. Pick two of the sitcom episodes you just watched- what worked or didn’t work about them and why (2 par) What do you learn about character development?

7. How has the sitcom progressed/evolved? What are the essential components of character development and the relationship between characters? How is that crucial to the plot?

8. Moment of Euphoria: Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.


Every generation of comedians has had members who have tried to protect people by mocking or satirizing the government. The Fifth Estate could be one where comedy watches over politics and politicians in a way that the press cannot- where the press can report a story once or twice, comedians can tell versions of the same joke over and over, as long as it stays relevant and funny, keeping a story in the public eye. Since Mark Twain, every political comedian has worried about the future of America. The sessions will address the history of political comedy with primary focus on how humor impacts the political process and the way Americans think/react to politics. The profiles will be twofold: First a review of “political comedians” and filmmakers: Will Rogers, Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, The Smothers Brothers, Laugh-In, Dennis Miller, Dick Gregory, Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, Jon Oliver, Stephen Colbert, Lewis Black, Al Franken, Samantha Bee, Paddy Chayefsky, and Robert Altman. Second, an analysis of Presidential humor- including the JFK wit, and the significance of Richard Nixon appearing on “Laugh-In,” how presidential candidates have increasingly utilized comedy as a means of communicating with the electorate, and how politicians generally use humor to inspire, encourage and calm the populace, from Winston Churchill to The Al Smith and White House Correspondent Dinners.

Screening: In the Loop, Irresistible
Reading: Strange Bedfellows, How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke, Russell Peterson, Chapters 3-5
John McCain- Al Smith Dinner Transcript (~80 pages)

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:

1. Discuss comedy in the political context. What are the goals besides laughter?
2. In the Loop. Choose two characters and discuss their relationship and the impact on the plot of the film.
3. In Irresistible, how does writer/director Jon Stewart balance comedy, drama and social message. Does it work? Why?
4. How does late night political comedy help or hurt political discourse?
5. **Moment of Euphoria:** Choose two scenes from the readings and/or viewing that had an impact on you. Describe the scene and the impact. Then describe what you think the connection is between the two scenes.

Paper 3 Due (see description below in Section D)

B. **Class Length:**
   Two and a half hours

C. **Class Size:**
   Up to 20 Students.

D. **Class Assignments:** Three Papers

   **Paper 1:** Select two comedians, troupe, movies, or television shows from different periods and compare and contrast its/their social significance (e.g. Jon Stewart and Will Rogers; MASH and Scrubs). Choice one should be a personal favorite and choice two should be specifically out of your “favorite” zone, that you do not know much about (7-10 pages).

   **Paper 2:** Interview an older relative/friend about a favorite comedian, television show and/or movie that they were influenced or moved by, and/or a program that they shared with their own parents- discuss something you learned about them that you did not know and that they did not know about themselves. Was there any comedy that connected them to their own parents- and to their political and social ideology? The goal is to connect memory to meaning and establish the evocative and visceral effects of American comedy on your own/family life (2-3 pages).

   **Paper 3:** Select a historical period or genre (e.g. The Depression; The Vietnam War; the birth of television, and how comedy/comedians was influenced and in turn influenced that period. (12-15 pages).

E. **Grading:**

   Paper 1- 20%
   Paper 2- 10%
   Paper 3- 40%
   Homework 15%
   Class Participation- 15%

   Attendance and class participation will be a factor in the final grade. Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will adversely affect your participation grade. If you cannot make it to class for any reason, you are expected to contact me by email to explain your absence. For religious holidays, please consult NYU policy, and notify me in advance.

   Your health and safety are a priority at NYU. If you experience any health or mental health issues during this course, we encourage you to utilize the support services of
the 24/7 NYU Wellness Exchange **212-443-9999**. Also, academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

NYU College of Arts and Sciences is dedicated to providing its students with a learning environment that is rigorous, respectful, supportive and nurturing so that they can engage in the free exchange of ideas and commit themselves fully to the study of their discipline. To that end, NYU College of Arts and Sciences is committed to enforcing University policies prohibiting all forms of sexual misconduct as well as discrimination on the basis of sex and gender. Detailed information regarding these policies and the resources that are available to students through the Title IX office can be found by using the [this link](http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/equal-opportunity/title9).

**Books**

1. Introduction to American Film, Steven Earley
2. Another Fine Mess, Saul Austerlitz
3. Listening In - Radio and the American Imagination, Susan Douglas
4. Johnny Carson College Thesis on Radio Comedians
5. Women Who Made Television Funny, David Tucker
6. The Man Who Came to Dinner, George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart
7. Romantic Comedy, Claire Mortimer
8. Caesar’s Hours, Sid Caesar, Eddy Friedfeld
9. Columbia History of American Television, Gary Edgerton
10. The Standup Comedians on TV, David Bushman
11. On the Real Side, Mel Watkins
12. Comedy at the Edge, Richard Zoglin
13. Born Standing Up, Steve Martin
14. Bossypants, Tiny Fey
15. A Stupid and Futile Gesture, Josh Karp
16. Blockbuster TV, Janet Staiger
17. And Here’s the Kicker, Mike Sacks
18. Strange Bedfellows, How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke, Russell Peterson

Assignments Reading
Letter to Warner Brothers: A Night in Casablanca

Groucho Marx

Abstract: While preparing to film a movie entitled A Night in Casablanca, the Marx brothers received a letter from Warner Bros. threatening legal action if they did not change the film’s title. Warner Bros. deemed the film’s title too similar to their own Casablanca, released almost five years earlier in 1942, with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. In response Groucho Marx dispatched the following letter to the studio’s legal department:

Dear Warner Brothers,

Apparently there is more than one way of conquering a city and holding it as your own. For example, up to the time that we contemplated making this picture, I had no idea that the city of Casablanca belonged exclusively to Warner Brothers. However, it was only a few days after our announcement appeared that we received your long, ominous legal document warning us not to use the name Casablanca.

It seems that in 1471, Ferdinand Balboa Warner, your great-great-grandfather, while looking for a shortcut to the city of Burbank, had stumbled on the shores of Africa and, raising his alpenstock (which he later turned in for a hundred shares of common), named it Casablanca.

I just don’t understand your attitude. Even if you plan on releasing your picture, I am sure that the average movie fan could learn in time to distinguish between Ingrid Bergman and Harpo. I don’t know whether I could, but I certainly would like to try.

You claim that you own Casablanca and that no one else can use that name without permission. What about “Warner Brothers”? Do you own that too? You probably have the right to use the name Warner, but what about the name
Brothers? Professionally, we were brothers long before you were. We were touring the sticks as the Marx Brothers when Vitaphone was still a gleam in the inventor’s eye, and even before there had been other brothers—the Smith Brothers; the Brothers Karamazov; Dan Brothers, an outfielder with Detroit; and “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” (This was originally “Brothers, Can You Spare a Dime?” but this was spreading a dime pretty thin, so they threw out one brother, gave all the money to the other one, and whittled it down to “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”)

Now Jack, how about you? Do you maintain that yours is an original name? Well it’s not. It was used long before you were born. Offhand, I can think of two Jacks—Jack of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and Jack the Ripper, who cut quite a figure in his day.

As for you, Harry, you probably sign your checks sure in the belief that you are the first Harry of all time and that all other Harrys are impostors. I can think of two Harrys that preceded you. There was Lighthouse Harry of Revolutionary fame and a Harry Appelbaum who lived on the corner of 93rd Street and Lexington Avenue. Unfortunately, Appelbaum wasn’t too well-known. The last I heard of him, he was selling neckties at Weber and Heilbroner.

Now about the Burbank studio. I believe this is what you brothers call your place. Old man Burbank is gone. Perhaps you remember him. He was a great man in a garden. His wife often said Luther had ten green thumbs. What a witty woman she must have been! Burbank was the wizard who crossed all those fruits and vegetables until he had the poor plants in such confused and jittery condition that they could never decide whether to enter the dining room on the meat platter or the dessert dish.

This is pure conjecture, of course, but who knows—perhaps Burbank’s survivors aren’t too happy with the fact that a plant that grinds out pictures on a quota settled in their town, appropriated Burbank’s name and uses it as a front for their films. It is even possible that the Burbank family is prouder of the
potato produced by the old man than they are of the fact that your studio emerged “Casablanca” or even “Gold Diggers of 1931.”

This all seems to add up to a pretty bitter tirade, but I assure you it’s not meant to. I love Warners. Some of my best friends are Warner Brothers. It is even possible that I am doing you an injustice and that you, yourselves, know nothing about this dog-in-the-Wanger attitude. It wouldn’t surprise me at all to discover that the heads of your legal department are unaware of this absurd dispute, for I am acquainted with many of them and they are fine fellows with curly black hair, double-breasted suits and a love of their fellow man that out-Saroyans Saroyan.

I have a hunch that his attempt to prevent us from using the title is the brainchild of some ferret-faced shyster, serving a brief apprenticeship in your legal department. I know the type well—hot out of law school, hungry for success, and too ambitious to follow the natural laws of promotion. This bar sinister probably needled your attorneys, most of whom are fine fellows with curly black hair, double-breasted suits, etc., into attempting to enjoin us. Well, he won’t get away with it! We’ll fight him to the highest court! No pasty-faced legal adventurer is going to cause bad blood between the Warners and the Marxes. We are all brothers under the skin, and we’ll remain friends till the last reel of “A Night in Casablanca” goes tumbling over the spool.

Sincerely,

Groucho Marx

Unamused, Warner Bros. requested that the Marx Brothers at least outline the premise of their film. Groucho responded with an utterly ridiculous storyline, and, sure enough, received another stern letter requesting clarification. He obliged and went on to describe a plot even more preposterous than the first, claiming that he, Groucho, would be playing “Bordello, the sweetheart of
Humphrey Bogart.” No doubt exasperated, Warner Bros. did not respond. A Night in Casablanca was released in 1946.

Dice

Abbott: Did you ever play dice?

Costello: No.

Abbott: (Turns to friends and winks) Oh well I'd like to show you Lou.

Costello: O.K.

Abbott: There's numbers on these dice from one to six. You roll them out on the blanket and if you get a six and a one, that's a natural. You win. A four and a three, that's a natural. You win.

Costello: Well that's all you do. Win.

Abbott: Well, no.

Costello: You mean you can lose too.

Abbott: Yes, once in a while. If you roll a two and a one, that's craps. You lose. If you roll two sixes, that's craps. You lose. In other words--

Costello: You can win and you can lose.

Abbott: That's all there is to it. Now is that simple?

Costello: Can I play?

Abbott: You wanna play?

Costello: Yeah.

Abbott: O.K. Here you are. (hands Costello the dice)

Costello: What are these?

Abbott: Dice.
Costello: What do I do with those?

Abbott: Well you roll them out on the blanket.

Costello: O.K.

Abbott: Now what happens if you roll a seven? What do you win?

Costello: I win.

Abbott: Well what do you win?

Costello: Nothing.

Abbott: You don't want to win nothing. So we'll put some money on it just to make it interesting.

Costello: I don't like to gamble.

Abbott: We'll call it bank night.

Costello: If my mom found out I was gambling, she'd put soap in my mouth.

Abbott: Call it bank night. Your mother plays bank night. All right. Put your money down.

Costello: O.K.

Abbott: Alright. Seven you win, craps you lose.

Costello: O.K. Here I go. (Covers his eyes and rolls dice) WHEE! (rolls a seven) I WIN!!! (goes to pick up the money)

Abbott: Wait. You don't pick it up right away.

Costello: I don't?

Abbott: Not right away.

Costello: But i do get to pick it up?

Abbott: Oh yes.

Costello: you mean i leave it lying there.
Abbott: Just for the time being.

Costello: Until it gets up to my chin.

Abbott: oh yes.

Costello: Then i send it down by truck.

Abbott: You can do it anyway you want. So you like it so far?

Costello: Oh it's a good game.

Abbott: How much do you want to shoot for now?

Costello: Fade that.

Abbott: (smacks costello as if he's hustling him) What's this "fade that"?

Costello: What did i say something wrong?

Abbott: You said it too darn right.

Costello: I heard it at the Rinky Dinks.


Costello: The club where i belong.

Abbott: Have you played before?

Costello: They wouldn't let me play. i'm too young. i saw the guys at the Rinky Dinks. They had sugar and they put black marks on them and i heard a kid go "WHEE" and i heard "fade that". Is that a bad word?

Abbott: No, it's alright. Just as long as you didn't play the game before.

Costello: No, too young. Starting Tuesday i'm going out with girls.

Abbott: Oh, sure. I thought you played the game. O.K. go ahead.

Costello: My turn again?

Abbott: Yep. Seven you win, Craps you lose.
Costello: (covers his eyes and rolls dice) WHEE! (rolls seven) SEVEN AGAIN!

Man #1: I think it's beginners luck.

Abbott: Hey that's it. Beginners luck. How much do you want to shoot for now?

Costello: Let it Ride.

Abbott: (smacks Costello again as if he was hustling him)

Costello: What's the matter i heard that at the Rinky Dinks. I heard a guy say that. Is that bad?

Abbott: Have you played this game before? don't lie to me louie.

Costello: They won't let me play.

Abbott: I hope not. O.K. There's your dice. (hands costello dice)

Costello: I'm winning fair. ain't I?

Abbott: I don't know i have my doubts now.

Costello: (Covers his eyes and rolls dice) WHEE! (rolls eleven) Eleven.
what about that?

Abbott: That don't count. I don't know why they put those numbers on the dice. don't mean anything but i'll give you another chance.

Costello: (Covers his eyes and rolls dice) WHEE! (rolls four)

Abbott: Four.

Costello: Little Joe.

Abbott: (smacks costello again)

Costello: i heard it at the rinky dinks.

Abbott: I ought to give it to you. If you roll a seven befrooe you rolls that four you lose.
Costello: (Covers his eyes and rolls dice) WHEE! (rolls three)

Abbott: you lose.

Costello: How come?

Abbott: What did you roll the first time?

Costello: Four.

Abbott: What did you just roll?

Costello: Three.

Abbott: Four and three is what?

Costello: Seven.

Abbott: That's all.

Costello: He didn't say anything about adding them up.

Abbott: Well you do that. Now we'll bet all the money. (rolls dice and rolls eleven) Eleven's a natural.

Costello: ELEVEN DON'T COUNT! You were nice to me and i'm nice to you so I'll give you another chance. (smacks Abbott in the butt) That's the only place i can hit you.

Abbott: (rolls dice and rolls a six) Alright now six is my number. (rolls another six)

Costello: SIX AGAIN! YOU LOSE! YOU LOSE! YOU LOSE!

Abbott: i got my point.

Costello: What did you roll first?

Abbott: six.

Costello: What did you just roll?

Abbott: Six.
Costello: Six and six is twelve. CRAPS, BOXCARSES, BIG BENIES!!!

George Burns Monologue

George: I hope I find those baby pictures before the show is over. I'd like to show them to you. There's one of me you'll get a kick out of. I'm stretched out on a bearskin rug smoking a cigar. . . . You don't believe it, huh? Well, you're right. It was actually a rabbit skin rug. We were very poor. . . . But the people down the street didn't have to use any rugs. They had a Shetland pony. They were very rich. No children . . . just four Shetland ponies. . . .

Nowadays when they take pictures of babies, they don't pose them anymore. It's all candid shots. The baby has to be doing something. The trouble is that most of the things a two-month-old baby can do don't make for a good picture. . . . And these candid photographers must take about eight thousand pictures. . . . And by the time you pick out a picture that you like, the kid is old enough to take a picture of his own baby.

I haven't found the pictures yet, but I sure found some useful stuff that I've saved through the years. Like a menu from the Swedish Restaurant at the St. Louis Exposition -- thirty-three keys with no locks . . . and a mother-of-pearl banjo pick. And they'll come in very handy if I ever run into a Swede who can't unlock his banjo. . . .

I also found a penny that I've kept for sentimental reasons. It was the first penny I ever got when I started singing on street corners as a kid. I didn't save the penny because it was the first one I ever earned. I saved it because it was given to me by the Indian whose picture is on it. . . . The Indian didn't really give me the penny. He heard me sing and he hit me with it. . . .

Everybody collects useless things. I knew a fellow who couldn't throw out a piece of wrapping paper. His basement was full of wrapping paper -- saved it for years. His wife told him to stop, but he said sometime it might come in handy for Christmas presents . . . and it did. Last Christmas he gave each of his friends fifteen pounds of wrapping paper. . . .

But women are sentimental about the stuff they keep. A friend of mine has been married about twenty years, and he told me that his wife kept the first flower he ever gave her, pressed in a book. It fell out of the book last night when she hit him over the head with it. . . .

Gracie is sentimental, too. She saved the first piece of candy I ever gave her. I'd like to show it to you. But I can't open the book. . . .

Then there are some people we know back East who lived in a big house on Long Island. They lived there for thirty years, and finally they sold the place. And when they moved, they went down in the basement and they couldn't get over all the junk they accumulated. Not only that -- they found out their son hadn't run away from home in 1940, after all. . . .

Created: 11th February 2003
The Marx Brothers

Considered to be among the greatest comedy geniuses of the 20th Century, the Marx Brothers utilised wit, satire and slapstick to make them notorious the world over, both as individuals and as a family.

Family History

The Marx name was in fact originally 'Marrix'. The brothers' father (Simon Marrix, a tailor, born in 1860 in the Alsace region of France) changed the family name from Marrix to Marx because he hoped it would be easier to find a job in America if he made his surname sound more German. Some readers might recognise Simon Marrix as the 'Sam' in the Groucho song, 'Sam, You Made the Pants Too Long'. It's also believed that Chico often pawned off his dad's tailor's shears so he could gamble.

I never forget a face, but in your case I'll be glad to make an exception.

The brothers' mother was Miene Schönberg (born in Dornum, Germany on 9 November, 1864) who also changed her name - from Miene to Minnie. Her family moved to the USA when she was 15, in 1880, where they settled in New York. She met Simon and married him on 18 January, 1885. Their first baby, Manfred, was born in 1886, though he died seven months later, most probably from influenza.

Their other children were:

- Leonard, who took the name Chico (1887 - 1961)
- Adolph, aka Arthur, who became Harpo (1888 - 1964)
- Julius Henry - the infamous Groucho (1890 - 1977)
- Milton, who became Gummo (1892 - 1977)
- Herbert, better known as Zeppo (1901 - 1979)

Mother Marx died on 13 September, 1929, and out of respect for their mother all the Marx Brothers named their daughters with a name beginning with 'M'. Their father died less than four years later, on 11 May, 1933.

Formation of the Marx Brothers

Remember men, we're fighting for this woman's honour - which is probably more than she ever did.

The first sign of the Marx Brothers as a performing group came on 24 June, 1907, when Groucho and Gummo, with Mabel O'Donnell, made their debut performance as 'Ned Weyburn's Nightingales' in Atlantic Garden, Atlantic City, New Jersey. On 1 June, 1908, Harpo became the fourth Nightingale at an
appearance in Henderson's Theater, Coney Island, New York. When the Marx family moved to Chicago in late 1909/early 1910, the Four Nightingales became known as the Six Mascots. Chico joined the Mascots on 26 September, 1912, for the first performance of 'Mr Green's Reception', at the Family Theater, Lafayette, Indiana.

In 1918, Gummo left the act in order to join the army, and his place in the team was taken by Zeppo.

So, Who Was Who and Where Did the Names Come From?

Groucho Marx was the moustachioed, cigar-chomping leader of the foursome, alternately dispensing humorous invective and acting as exasperated straight man for his brothers' antics. Chico was the unbelievably stupid pun-happy Italian, Harpo the non-speaking whirling dervish and Gummo (and later Zeppo) was the proper 'straight man' of the act.

The name 'The Marx Brothers' was coined by comic Art Fisher on May 15, 1914, and the inspiration for having all the brothers change their names so they had an ‘o’ on the end came from Gus Mager, a cartoonist who did the same thing with most of his characters. Groucho name came about from the ‘grouch bag’ that he used to carry around his neck under his clothing. Harpo got his from the harp that he played and legend has it that Chico got his from his love of 'chicks'. The reason Gummo was so called was that he had gum-soled shoes, which meant no-one could hear him enter a room, while there are three accepted reasons given by the brothers for Zeppo's nickname, which are:

- Harpo claimed that Zeppo received his name after the other brothers spotted him unintentionally mimicking the pull-ups of a very active circus chimp called Mr Zippo. This angered Herbert so they changed it to Zeppo.

- Groucho's suggestion was that it came from the Zeppelins used against England by the Germans in World War I.

- ... while Gummo and Chico agreed that 'Zeppo' was a variation of the rural nickname Zeb, which Herbert later acquired while working on the family's Illinois farm.

When They 'Hit it Big'?

After ten years playing the circuit and refining their skills, the Marx Brothers accepted work with a Broadway-bound 'tab' show called *I'll Say She Is*. The play was a surprise hit when it eventually opened in 1924, and the Marx Brothers became the toast of Broadway. They followed this success with 1925's *The Cocoanuts*, in which playwrights George S Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind helped to refine the Groucho character into the combination of con man and perpetual wisecracker that he would continue to portray until the Marx team dissolved. *Cocoanuts* also introduced Groucho to his perennial foil and straight woman, actress Margaret Dumont.
Films of the Brothers

As a unit, the Marx Brothers made 14 films:

- **Humor Risk** (directed by Dick Smith, 1920/1) - An improvisational piece, based on their stage show of the same name. This silent film is sadly missing from the archives - indeed it's likely it hasn't been seen since it was shot. Groucho later claimed he wasn't sure the film was ever processed, let alone ever shown.

- **The Cocoanuts** (Directed by Robert Florey and Joseph Santley, 1929) - The earliest available Marx Brothers film premiered in New York City on 23 May, 1929, and while a version of it had been seen on stage, there was considerable fiddling with the script during the pre-production of the film version. Considering that the brothers never quite did anything the same twice6, their movies at best could only be an approximation of one night out of a long stage run. Shot in New York, sound films were so new that soundproofing was not installed, so the film had to be shot in the early hours of the morning to reduce outside traffic noise. The plot, for want of a better word, is that during the Florida land boom the brothers run a hotel, auction off some land, thwart a jewel robbery and generally act in character.

- **Animal Crackers** (director Victor Heerman, 25 August, 1930) - In this film the Marx Bros help to retrieve a stolen painting... well, sort of. Incidentally, during rehearsals for the film, a test was made for a colour movie process called 'Multicolor' (a predecessor of Cinecolor). Though the result is silent and lasting just 15 seconds, it's the only known colour footage of the Marx Brothers in action. After making this film the Marx Brothers decided to move to California.

- **Monkey Business** (directed by Norman Z McLeod, released on 19 September, 1931): *Monkey Business* had the Bros on board a transatlantic crossing, managing to annoy nearly everyone on the ship. The Marx Bros’ father, Sam, makes a rare cameo in this film, seen sitting on the crates behind the Brothers in a scene where they're carried off the ship.

- **Horse Feathers** (directed by Norman Z McLeod, released 10 August, 1932) - This time the Marx Bros experimented with an actual plot, placing themselves in Huxley College, with Groucho acting as the newly-installed president, Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff. His cavalier attitude toward education is not reserved for his son Frank, who is courting the college widow, Connie Bailey. Frank influences Wagstaff to recruit two football players who hang out in a speakeasy7, in order to beat rival school Darwin. Unfortunately, Wagstaff mistakenly hires the misfits Baravelli (Chico) and Pinky (Harpo). Finding out that Darwin has beaten him to the 'real' players, Wagstaff enlists Baravelli and Pinky to kidnap them, which leads to an anarchic football finale.

- **Duck Soup** (directed by Leo McCarey, released 22 November, 1933) - Perhaps the brothers' most well known work, this was also the last film
to feature Zeppo, as, on 30 March, 1934, he quit the act. It’s only 66 minutes long, but it crackles with jokes from beginning to end, and in this film the Marx Bros had the good fortune to work with a great director, Leo McCarey (who went on to win two Oscars, for *The Awful Truth* and *Going My Way*).

- **A Night at the Opera** (directed by Sam Wood, released 1 November, 1935) - This was the first film the brothers made after signing with MGM and the first one without Zeppo. Here, a sly business manager of two opera singers (Groucho) are helped by two wacky friends (Chico and Harpo) to achieve success while humiliating their stuffy and snobbish enemies. The original storyline for the film was to have Groucho as the producer of the opera. The idea was dropped but it subsequently appeared many times as a story idea for later Hollywood movies, most notably in Mel Brooks’s *The Producers*, which won an Academy Award for its script.

- **A Day at the Races** (directed by Sam Wood, released 11 June, 1937) - A vet posing as a doctor (Groucho), a race horse owner and his friends struggle to help keep a sanatorium open with the help of a misfit racehorse. The racetrack in question was Santa Anita Racetrack, Los Angeles, California.

- **Room Service** (directed by William A Seiter, released 21 September, 1938) - The Marx Brothers try and put on a play before their landlord finds out that they have run out of money.

- **At the Circus** (directed by Edward Buzzell, released 20 October, 1939) - Jeff Wilson, the owner of a small circus, owes his partner Carter $10,000. Before Jeff can pay, Carter lets his accomplices steal the money, so he can take over the circus. Antonio Pirelli (Chico) and Punchy (Harpo), who work at the circus, together with lawyer Loophole (Groucho) try to find the thief and get the money back.

- **Go West** (directed by Edward Buzzell, released 6 December, 1940) - The Marx Bros search for gold and skulduggery abounds. One of the more complex Marx Bros movies, everyone is tricking or stealing from everyone else. The name of Groucho’s character, ‘S Quentin Quayle’, caused a stir when the film was first released due to the subtle but clear joke: the use of the term ‘San Quentin quayle’, which means ‘jail bait’.

- **The Big Store** (directed by Charles Reisner, released 20 June, 1941) - The Phelps Department Store is about to be sold by its new part owner, Tommy Rogers, with the permission of Martha Phelps, the dowager co-owner. The current manager doesn’t want this as irregularities in the books will be exposed. When an attempt is made on Tommy’s life, Martha enlists the worst private eye in the world, Wolf J Flywheel (Groucho) to protect him. This film has been criticised as many of the scenes appear to be re-works of previous great moments and MGM didn’t allow the brothers to experiment with their jokes on a live audience.
- **A Night in Casablanca** (directed by Archie Mayo, released 10 May, 1946) - The first Marx Brothers movie in five years, and set in post-war Casablanca, Ronald Kornblow is hired to run a hotel whose previous managers have all wound up being murdered. French soldier Pierre suspects the involvement of ex-Nazis, specifically Count Pfefferman, in reality the notorious Heinrich Stubel. But Pierre himself is accused of collaborating with the enemy, and attempts to clear his name with the help of his girlfriend Annette and cagey buddy Corbaccio. They enlist the aid of Pfefferman's beleaguered mute valet, Rusty, and discover a hoard of war booty the Nazis have cached in the hotel.

- **Love Happy** (directed by David Miller and Leo McCarey, released 30 March, 1949) - The final Marx Brothers film, in which they help young Broadway hopefuls while thwarting diamond thieves. Groucho Marx informed Marilyn Monroe that he had a role which called for 'a young lady who can walk by me in such a manner as to arouse my elderly libido and cause smoke to issue from my ears.' Monroe obliged and was quickly cast.

### The Radio Series

*Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.*

In the 1930s Chico and Groucho had a radio show, *Flywheel, Shyster and Flywheel*. Not only were a lot of the jokes recycled from previous films, but a lot of the jokes from the series also turned up in subsequent films like *Duck Soup*. Sponsored by Esso, the reason why the show only lasted one 26-week season is now a subject of conjecture, with reasons including low ratings (they didn't have the best time-slot, so the ratings were comparatively pretty decent), and the fact that the Marx Brothers moved on to their next movie pretty soon after *Duck Soup*.

### After the Success of the ‘20s and ’30s...

In the 1950s, three of the brothers (Harpo, Chico and Groucho) made *The Story Of Mankind* (directed by Irwin Allen, released in 1957). Harpo played Isaac Newton, Chico played a monk and Groucho played Peter Minuit, who buys Manhattan from the Native Americans. Unfortunately they don't appear with each other.

*I shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got into my pyjamas, I'll never know.*

In the 1960s, their images had become more popular than their movies; the video revolution was still 20 years away, but posters, t-shirts and books were everywhere. Unlike the Three Stooges or Laurel and Hardy, they didn't have any shorts to go around the local TV stations and the 16mm rental clubs. You had to go to an art house to watch bad prints of their movies. It is possible that two whole generations had grown up without seeing a Marx Brothers movie. All they had seen were their wrinkled images on the TV guest appearances, the finest of
which was Harpo's guest shot on Lucille Ball's TV show *I Love Lucy*, in which she and he redid the mirror sequence from *Duck Soup*.

**Miscellaneous Facts**

- On 16 January, 1977, the Marx Bros were placed in 'The Motion Picture Hall of Fame'.

- Minnie's brother, Abraham, became known as the comedian Al Shean and Jack Benny's wife (Mary Livingston, previously Sadie Marks) was a distant cousin of the Marx Bros.

- There was a Broadway musical based on the early career of the brothers called *Minnie's Boys*. It starred Shelley Winters as Minnie.

- The Marx brothers also get a mention in Ian Dury and the Blockheads song 'Reasons to Be Cheerful'.

- It's claimed that the character of Hawkeye Pierce on the TV show *M*A*S*H* was strongly influenced by Groucho's screen persona, and the role of Banjo in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1951) was apparently based on Harpo.

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1. For some reason his last name has also been recorded as Marks' in the 1900 census, 10 years after it is given as 'Marx' on Groucho's birth certificate.
2. They later claimed they married in 1884, so that they could pass off a cousin, Pauline, as their own.
3. Minnie and the boy's Aunt Hannah rounded out the sextet.
4. There is also a 'Groucho the Monk' in a Gus Mager cartoon and Chico sometimes claimed it came from Groucho being 'grouchy'.
5. Old-fashioned term for women.
6. Which meant that their rehearsed stage show was just a framework for ad libs and running gags.
7. A speakeasy was an illegal bar, open during the time of the American prohibition.
8. Played by Kenny Baker, though not the guy who plays R2-D2 in *Star Wars*.
9. Warner Brothers, makers of the classic film *Casablanca*, allegedly threatened the Marx Brothers with legal action for using the word 'Casablanca' in their film, which inspired Groucho to threaten a counter-claim against Warners for using the word 'Brothers' in their name, asserting: 'Professionally, we were brothers before they ever were.'
10. Originally called 'Beagle, Shyster and Beagle' until a real lawyer called Beagle threatened legal action, leading to Groucho's character being renamed Flywheel. The name was later used in 'The Big Store', but with a different first name.
11. Some of them, like *Duck Soup*, had not been available since their original run.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A908958](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A908958)
Groucho Marx - Writer and Actor

Born Julius Henry Marx on 2 October, 1890, Groucho Marx is a 20th Century icon. His iconic status stems from his distinctive appearance; the bushy eyebrows, the cigar, the funny moustache and thick glasses.

Stepping into the Limelight

After leaving school aged just 11, Groucho got his first job in showbusiness in the summer of 1905 as a boy soprano with the Leroy Trio. From this he joined Gus Edwards' Postal Telegraph Boys at the Alhambra Theater, New York City on 23 April, 1906, performing in many different shows and revues. It was shortly after that the Marx Brothers first appeared on the scene.

Where His Act Came From

Groucho's characteristic style came from him being fed up with his early audiences and so he began throwing jokes and insults into the act, directly addressing the crowd in as hilariously nasty a manner as possible. His painted-on moustache comes from the time when he was unable to find his prop moustache and so he rapidly painted one on with greasepaint. He stuck with the look and this is how he would appear with his brothers ever afterward, despite efforts by certain film directors to make his moustache look realistic.

A Marriage of Marx

I've had a wonderful evening, but this wasn't it.

On the 4 February, 1920, Groucho married Ruth Johnson and on 21 July, 1921, Groucho and Ruth's child, Arthur, was born. The pair divorced on 15 July, 1942, after 22 years together. The saucy devil then married Kay Gorcey on 21 July, 1945, and had Melinda with her the following year. The two then divorced on 12 May, 1950 and on 17 July, 1954, Groucho got hitched yet again to Eden Hartford. Surprise, surprise, on 4 December, 1969, Groucho and Eden divorced.

Dipping his Ink

Groucho always considered himself a writer first, a comedian second, and over the years turned out several witty books and articles. He was gratified in the '60s when his letters to and from friends - funnily enough called The Groucho Letters - were installed in the Library of Congress, quite an accomplishment for a man who never finished grade school. From time to time Groucho also wrote articles and books including Memoirs of a Mangy Lover and Groucho and Me. He also contributed to The Marx Brothers Scrapbook.

Groucho Goes Solo from the Brothers
Please accept my resignation from your club. I cannot be a member in a club that accepts members like myself.

In the 1940s, after the Marx's heyday was over (the brothers were to appear only a few times together after 1941) Groucho kept himself busy with radio appearances and a stint with the Hollywood Victory Caravan.

In 1947 producer/writer John Guedel asked Groucho to host a radio quiz show called You Bet Your Life. Groucho at first refused, not wanting another failure on his résumé. He accepted the assignment when assured that, instead of being confined to a banal script or his worn-out screen character, Groucho could be himself, ad-libbing to his heart's content with the contestants. Groucho's initial run of You Bet Your Life on the radio was so successful for the sponsor, Elgin American, that they ran out of powder compacts and cigarette cases. The first radio runs (then later TV runs) of You Bet Your Life lasted from 1947 to 1961, winning high ratings and several Emmies in the process. While he was doing You Bet Your Life, he also became involved during 1953 in The Big Show, an NBC attempt to generate more interest in radio variety, hosted by Tallulah Bankhead. The frisson between Bankhead and Groucho was monumental and the bits they did are legendary. After You Bet Your Life Groucho hosted another TV game show, Tell It To Groucho. However, this only lasted a few weeks before being pulled.

Groucho was on television until 1963 and, in the late sixties, the syndication of You Bet Your Life took off. Groucho, before the advent of home video recorders, used to take a nap so he could stay up and watch You Bet Your Life. By that time he'd forgotten most of the answers, many of the questions and almost all of the guests, so it was vastly entertaining to him. Groucho was also the guest host on The Tonight Show in 1962, on the night Johnny Carson took over.

The 1970s and Groucho

Groucho worked less and less as the 1960s came to an end, but he came back into the limelight in the early 1970s when his old films were rediscovered by the young anti-establishment types of the era, who revelled in Groucho's willingness to deflate authority. By this time, Groucho's health had been weakened by a stroke, but through the encouragement of his secretary/companion Erin Fleming, Marx returned to active performing with TV guest appearances and a 1972 SRO appearance at Carnegie Hall. In 1974 Groucho accepted a special Oscar at the Academy Awards ceremony.

The End...

Groucho died on 19 August, 1977 from pneumonia, aged 86. By this time all the other Marx Bros were dead, except Zeppo, who died two years later.

Want to hear a classic Groucho quote? Go to The Groucho Random Quote Generator.
The Marx Brothers’ film released the year before was generally considered a failure and none of the radio shows Groucho was part of during the 1940s took off.

http://laurelandhardycentral.com/

The "Universality" of Stan and Ollie

By Thomas J. Shea

In the realm of the Laurel and Hardy mystique, perhaps the most difficult question to answer is: why are they so loved and revered all over the world? The reason it is so difficult is that most comedians or comic teams are enormously popular in some cultures while they are reviled or simply misunderstood in others. But, for Stan and Ollie, the appeal is universal. One need only look to the internet to see web sites from incredibly diverse populations.

At first we can look at the pablum fed to us by publicists about how likeable these guys are, how their child-like personas appeal to our inner child, how we can¹t help but laugh at all their vaudeville antics etc. etc. But that begs the question: why do we, and all those others, laugh? Some of those ideas may not fit all the cultures that year after year return to these two brilliant comedians and laugh themselves silly. I have a thesis that may or may not answer this question: all of us relate to these two IQ challenged individuals.

At first you might balk at this concept. Me? Relate to those bunglers? Spain, The Netherlands, Germany, Japan, Mexico, relate to a person who uses his thumb to light a pipe; to a person who cannot address a woman without twiddling his tie? Relate to the pratfalls, the illogical logic that they use to promulgate doomed schemes? Come on! But wait, let me explain.

We can¹t imagine ourselves doing any of those inexplicably dumb things that The Boys do - but we do. We have all tripped, if not over a suitcase getting onto a train, then over words we tried to use but were unable to. We have gone on at length to explain, in intricate detail, the unquestionable logic of some idea we have cooked up, some heretofore unanswerable question about the universe to a child, some reason why we botched some easy task. And we wind up sounding exactly like Stan
telling Ollie why they should start their own fish business, only the SECOND time around when syntax, order, and logic departed like the boat they worked on. We have all become as tongue tied and embarrassed as Ollie in approaching the opposite sex, especially when we remember the awkward adolescent years we would all like to forget.

So we, universally, recognize ourselves in Stan and Ollie and the wondrous thing is, they don't make us look foolish, they make us laugh at them, and ourselves in turn. We don't feel embarrassed, because they don't. They make us feel human. They do not dwell on the disastrous results of their ineptitude, they simply sigh and go on. They reveal our weaknesses but give us hope that we can do better. And ultimately that makes us love them. They reveal all that we are but that revelation is never as bad as we thought it would be.

And they do it like no others. They always forgive each other in the end. They treasure the universal brotherhood of all men and women. The Marx Brothers, wonderful and brilliant though they are, give us the very mixed blessing of cynicism; there isn't a cynical bone in Stan and Ollie's bodies. Abbott and Costello do not have the kind of universal trust and friendship that The Boys do; Stan and Babe would never, ever, try to cheat one another and there is never any meanness about their banter.

And so we view them as the people we really are, faults, and all. We are forgiven for our transgressions, we are transported to a simple world where we can all "Go Down to Dixie" (oh for some possum and yams and some fish and chips!), we can leave and come back again and find ourselves in the company of friends who cannot wait to please us, who understand us, who know all about us, and still forgive us and remain our friends.

That's why everyone, all over the world, loves Stan and Ollie.


Thomas J. Shea: "I am a Professor of Economics at Springfield College, Springfield, Mass. I have been a lifelong fan of Stan and Ollie, and students often comment on my collection of stills of "The Boys" that decorate my office." He is also an enthusiastic letter writer to Laurel and Hardy Central.

**STAN AND OLLIE:**

**THE TWO CLOWN ANGELS**
Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, described by J.D. Salinger as "two Heaven-sent artists and men", described by Kurt Vonnegut as "two angels of my time", are known the world over as the world's greatest comedy team and the most recognizable comic icons this side of Chaplin - more importantly though, Stan and Ollie are characters who have entered into the vast mythology of the world's good-humoured creations in the name of fun, along with Punch & Judy and Pop Goes the Weasel, along with Mickey Mouse and Oliver Twist, Jack and the Beanstalk, Sir Arthur Aguecheek, Santa Claus, and Popeye. As we get further away from them in history we are better able to appreciate the immensity of this achievement - an achievement which would have amazed, befuddled, yes, gladdened, but perhaps also embarrassed the two comedians who for the most part regarded themselves as a couple of journeyman workers - far below the lofty heights of Chaplin, never knowing the intellectual critical acclaim of Keaton, Fields, or the Marx Brothers, they saw their star fade and diminish in their time, till they were cast-off from Hollywood, unwanted, passe - forced to mount arduous tours through drafty theatres in the British provinces in their sixties and in ill health. Yet it is this very lack of presumption and pretension which makes their art like no others' in its simple purity, for there was a genuine humility about the two men, by all accounts there was an unaffected sweetness about them (a deeply-rooted gentleness that can't be faked) which informs their screen creations - these being two bumbling nitwits undone by their goodheartedness, struggling through this world and flailing within its complexities as if enmeshed in an underwater net - setting chirpily off at the beginning of another two-reeler, beaming with innocent jubilation on a sunny black and white morning that could be the first morning of all the mornings of the world - then sitting dismally twenty minutes later within the reeking confines of another nice mess, Ollie's features pursed into an expression of frustrated, exasperated resignation, the dimples on his plump round cheeks arranging themselves into the quintessence of last-ditch despair, his tiny tired eyes beseeching us and making their irresistible appeal for empathy and sympathy and communion with us all in the shared understanding of the mysterious force which wanders the world undoing all our most prized plans and hopeful endeavours - and which leaves us sitting in the midst of the wreckage, grimly staring into the distance as brick after brick plunges down the chimney one after the other in a meticulous rhythm and with impeccable timing bonking and clonking on our heads till we heave a sigh as the cascade of bricks ceases for a moment - we peer hesitantly, fearfully upwards, hoping with a tenuous hope that the last brick has fallen (could it be true?) - and get one more emphatic CLONK! square in the middle of the forehead for the effort (no, it is never for pity.
that Ollie stares at us, it is for understanding, an understanding that we share the basic knowledge of how unendurable life can be). And Stan beside him, the architect of this disaster, the unthinking conduit of mayhem, this oblivious causer of catastrophe and insentient instigator of disharmony and disgrace, sitting there with his face screwed into a mask of horrified bewilderment, the corners of the mouth pointing in the direction of his shoes, his eyes tiny slits of hysterical agony - gulping and weeping in his squeaky high-pitched voice - "Well, I couldn't help it!" - weeping not because he fears his situation but because he does not understand his situation and this makes him feel afraid - Stan weeps in confusion. How could it be that just a moment ago everything was going so fine and now all of a sudden we find ourselves in this gigantic mud puddle/ridiculously misshapen car/sitting here with our legs wrapped around our necks? - how could it be and how did it happen? Oh, I don't understand - oh and now Ollie's mad at me - oh - "Well I couldn't help it!"

And yet, only a few minutes later in the next two-reeler we unspool, there's Stan and Ollie again, their batteries apparently recharged, puttering down the road in their Model T, setting off on a brand new endeavour with all the hope in the world on their faces, with not one scintilla of doubt in the pure souls of these two angels that fate will treat them kindly, that their heartfelt plan is destined for anything but the greatest possible success, that the future happiness which awaits them and which they believe in so thoroughly that they are already happy in its anticipation - is eminent and just around this very next corner. And in the sublime confidence of this anticipation they grin and beam with excited goodwill at their fellow creatures - Stan smiling idiotically, his dull eyes half-closed, his lips curling up at either side of his nose, perhaps doffing his derby and scratching up the electrified patch of sagebrush on the top of his head - Ollie at his side, coyly bowing his head down into the folds of his double chins, grinning up at the world with coquettish embarrassment, delicately fingering his necktie and perhaps hazarding a slight simpering chuckle (Hmmh! Hmmh! Hmmh!) of abashed friendliness (and if ladies are present, maybe even chancing a bit of daring blushing flirtation!). In a moment Stan will say "Ollie", Ollie will say "What, Stan?", Stan will say "I've just had an idea . . . "

Like great folk and blues songs, the films of Laurel and Hardy revolve around one basic structural premise - (with the thudding and unvarying inevitability of all great art) - Stan and Ollie attempt to do something - they fail to do it -
repeatedly, noisily, and finally, irrevocably. The execution of the simplest of tasks can, in the hands of these two men, lead to earth-shattering explosions, entire buildings being burnt to the ground, orgies of destructive chaos which are apt to engulf and decimate an entire city block - not to mention cars which get twisted and deformed into unspeakably bizarre perversions of their former utilitarian selves. Stan has never had an idea that has not flung them headlong into catastrophe - yet Ollie never fails to consider each of his ideas with the greatest sobriety - his forefinger disappearing into the dimple in his chin as his face assumes the countenance of careful meditation: "That's a GOOD idea!" he concludes - and so it goes. That only a few frames prior to this, Ollie had been asking us to join in his vehement disgust at being saddled with the world's stupidest man as his partner is apparently of no concern to Ollie - Stan now has an idea and it is only right that it be heard out - and if the idea is acceptable, which it invariably proves to be, then it is only right that it be acted upon with the greatest possible alacrity.

No-one becomes more excited, inspired, and industrious with the arrival of a good idea than Ollie, and no-one is left more crestfallen, disillusioned, and heartbroken than he when it inevitably blows up in his face. Stan's far more resilient - if their jalopy's dismembered he can at least receive comfort from the fact that the horn's still in good working condition. If one of their misadventures had culminated in them detonating an atom bomb and blowing up the entire world, Stan, floating weightless in the ether of the universe, would likely find some curious piece of unexploded matter wafting past him and begin toying with it, giddily celebrating the fact that at least THIS has survived. In any case, Stan can walk away from any failure not too much the worse for wear (chiefly because he does not comprehend the meaning of the concept), easily distracted by even the promise of his next meal, his flat clown's feet slapping against the floor, with that ridiculous arm-swinging tread he uses to hoist himself from one scene to the next. For Ollie there are no such consolations, no such distractions - the hurt goes deeper for him.

Their situations have entered our collective memories like snatches of old songs, nursery rhymes, folk tales, like the remnants of a farcical dream we share that mirrors the world we know and at the same time seems more real than that which it mirrors - a chronicle of human aspiration in reverse, a world that ends with a bang AND a whimper as well as the seat of your pants set afire into the bargain. They move through a surly, miserable universe, trying only to do their best and make everything better, but only making everything worse - till someone clobbers them on the head and then the whole film's pace slows to a snail's crawl, they roll up their sleeves and enter into a leisurely round-robin of retribution, putting off their pretense of middle class decorum at last and drenching the interloper with a bucket
of water/ripping his coat up the back/shoving a plate of cottage cheese up his nose - all done at an excruciatingly unhurried pace, with, one might say, delicacy, a stately, royal formality, a sombre politeness which one must assume as one has one's necktie amputated at one's collar while awaiting to perform the same action upon one's opponent - after all, as the world has its Geneva Convention to ensure that countries can blow each other to bits in a civilized, gentlemanly manner, so do the denizens of the world of Laurel and Hardy have their codes and regulations to guarantee the civilized, gentlemanly manner by which acts of violence and humiliation will be exchanged. Their way is no crazier than ours - only seems to be, and laughably so, through the lens of comedy - in much the same way that our scuffles and conflagrations undoubtedly provide endless amusement for the Venusians.

Stan and Ollie are our friends, our brothers, our helpmates, our fellow accident victims, our co-workers, companions, and compatriots in this terrifying, out-of-control avalanche/mudslide that is called Life. They do not stand outside of society and thumb their nose at the cop like Charlie - no, like us, they try to appease the psychopathic cop in every way possible, they TRY to play the game again and again, for they believe in the game, but the game does not want them - it kicks them in the teeth every time. The game, lest we forget, is a rabid, insane, gyrating, foaming-at-the-mouth beast that no-one can ride except the beastly. Stan and Ollie haven't received this information yet, they hasten towards the beast, still believing that good intentions, cordiality, and impeccable manners will win the day. Comedy is not tragedy plus time but rather tragedy taken to a level no-one would dare take it in a mere tragedy - it's tragedy taken to the place where one has to laugh, otherwise the weeping, once begun, would never stop. Laurel and Hardy dance their intricate ballet upon this precipice, they shuffle their tanglefooted minuet here upon the gravesite of our crushed ambitions, the trickling follies we indulge in and are destroyed by, the delicate affectations and rituals which comfort us and make us all the more ridiculous, yes, Stan and Ollie are here, they live, and they are us. Here they are advancing towards the door, Stan dumbly striding ahead with his witless blank expression, for the hundredth time trying to enter the door before Ollie, only to be preempted by a pointed tap on the shoulder by his portly friend, Ollie's wry and condescending expression, the dismissive jerk of his thumb dispatching him back to the rear, his magisterial air, all freshly reminding Stan of his true and rightful place in the world, a place to which he repairs with meek submission (and perhaps relief), a place which is always and everywhere behind Ollie, who now can stride boldly ahead, having restored the proper balance and order of things, who now can draw himself up with sublime dignity and almost unimaginable pomposity - can gather himself up imperially with the knowledge that all is right in his world and can lead his friend confidently forward - into disaster.
es, and though it is Stan who at first glance marshals our sympathies most directly, Stan the put-upon, Stan the beaten-down and pushed, Stan the silenced and the shoved, with his slight frail body and his sad face, though it is Stan in his timeless and obvious clownishness who most quickly tickles our funnybone, Stan, with the unimaginably blank mind and the bleak eyes echoing the desolate poverty of a hundred English bedsits, though it is Stanley who is the pixieish otherworldly bizarre alien (no more or less at home here than he would be on Mars), though it was the pulsing genius of Stan Laurel behind the scenes which gave such vivid life to these more-real-than-real characters, let it be put down here that it is always Ollie who in the end must break our hearts most completely, Ollie who commands our loyalty most fiercely, for it is Ollie who believes in happiness ahead most fervently, it is Ollie holding onto the tattered rags of his dignity amidst the onslaught of humiliation, it is Ollie who most earnestly, desperately yearns for just one solitary thing to go right in his world, Ollie whose appreciation and genuine thirst for order, symmetry, and, yes, beauty are themselves beautiful things to observe, Ollie who seeks to lift the cup of all worldly delicacy to his lips time and time again (with pinky finger extended) only to have it dashed shattering to the floot in the moment before he is able to imbibe (he looks balefully at us sideways and sighs), it is Ollie, with his wonderful trilling baroquely embroidered finger gestures, with his warm, winning voice, his lighter-than-air grace, it is that great actor and clown Oliver Hardy, it is Ollie who is the engine of despair and humanity in the act, the darker shadow that makes us look again, the counterpoint and counterweight to the airy hilarity of Stan, it is Ollie, the big heart.

Yet why divide them anyhow? They are united as one - and united they fall. Born to be clowns, born to clown together, born to join and mirror the world and make it laugh by doing so, so seamlessly do they fit together, like egg & yolk, yin and yang, each one entirely complementary to the other, perfectly formed, like a pistachio nut, one of God's good works. They are bound inseverably by love - Ollie bemoans Stan's stupidity yet never thinks once of going without him, Stan suffers under Ollie's bossiness, yet life beyond him is an incomprehension - each other is all they got, for better or worse, so they muddle on, thereby expressing something profound and tender about all human relationships. Their marvel and their miracle is the utter rightness and potency of their partnership - the simple fact that a comic from Ulverston, England and one from Georgia, U.S.A would come together to form a comic entity so complete and holistic to set the world awash in laughter - for as long as it has hearts and mouths to laugh with. If fate kept them unduly underappreciated in their lifetimes, perhaps it was just to preserve that sweetness in them as men and artists, the sweetness of the genuinely humble and the thoughtful, the gentleness of
the ones who know better than to take anything for granted, who are so very rarely heard from and who, like most of us, are more acquainted with failure than success, the patient and the kind ones who are always being asked by the world to wait (yet for whom no-one waits), the meek who are supposed to inherit the earth - and to transmit and express that sweetness into their films so as to make them sunny documents of that portion of humanity for all time to come. Who knows? They are funny and endlessly lovable - Stan and Ollie - who could doubt that these clowns are angels?

THE END

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Kyp Harness is the author of several unpublished books and is currently working on a book about Laurel and Hardy. He is also a singer-songwriter who’s released several independent CDs.

MEL Brooks

April 15, 2001

THEATER

The Music Man in Mel Brooks

By MEL BROOKS
ONG, long ago. The early summer of 1935. I was 9 years old, happy as a lark, and living with my widowed mother and three older brothers in an $18-a-month fifth-floor walkup in a tenement at 365 South Third Street in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

We lived in the back. Though it was the depths of the Depression, there was music in the air. Music everywhere. Not Vivaldi or Verdi, but the popular music of the day — Bing Crosby singing "From Monday On" on the radio, the Millers in the next apartment playing Russ Columbo records on their wind-up Victrola, a wannabe Benny Goodman practicing "Don't Be That Way" on his squeaky clarinet in the apartment across the backyard, a piano player in the open window of Heller's Music Emporium down the street, knocking out Broadway tunes as a come-on to peddle sheet music.

There was music coming out of me, too. A kid who grew up with his ear glued to the radio, I knew the lyrics of all of 1935's biggest hits and loudly sang them all day long as I happily danced along the sidewalks. Actually, I was a pretty good singer, on pitch and usually able to hit all of the top notes, and I always got 'em at family parties with my imitations of Jolson singing "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" and Eddie Cantor doing "If You Knew Susie."

And then there was whistling, which I was also pretty good at. But the greatest whistler I ever knew was my mother's brother, my Uncle Joe, a taxi driver who seemed to know every song ever written. He was a happy-go-lucky little guy, Uncle Joe, and I mean little, barely 5 feet tall. When you saw a cab coming down the street without a driver, that was Uncle Joe. In fact, he'd had to put in specially built-up "Adler's Elevator" clutch and gas pedals in order for his feet to reach them, while to see over his steering wheel, he sat up on a
stack of five or six telephone books. (In the Depression, when practically nobody could afford a phone, the books were a lot thinner than they are now.) And he always whistled while he worked, 12 hours a day driving his clunky Checker cab all over Brooklyn and the lesser boroughs, like Manhattan.

My father died when I was 2 years old, and Uncle Joe, keenly aware that I was missing a dad, always took a special interest in me — bounced me on his knee, pulled my sled through the show, and bought me chocolate creams at Loft's.

And it was Uncle Joe, one famous Friday evening, who breezed into our apartment with the news that one of his fares, in exchange for a free ride out to Coney Island, had given him two tickets to what was then the biggest hit musical on Broadway — Cole Porter's "Anything Goes," starring William Gaxton, Victor Moore and none other than Miss Ethel Merman.

The tickets were for the next afternoon, Saturday matinee, and Uncle Joe announced that if I wanted to go along with him to the show, he'd take me.

Did I want to go? You never heard a louder or faster "Yessss!" in your life! I hadn't ever seen a musical, on Broadway or anywhere else, but in those days when most of America's most popular songs were from Broadway shows, I already knew the tunes and the lyrics to a whole bunch of the numbers from "Anything Goes."

Even in 1935 it was illegal for a New York taxi driver to carry a passenger in his car when he had his off-duty flag up, and so whenever Uncle Joe took me anywhere in his cab I had to hide on the floor in the back. And that's how, on that long-ago Saturday afternoon in June of 1935, I went to my first Broadway show — scrunched down in the back of Uncle Joe's bumpy old taxi. I could tell by the hum of the tires on the steel grid when we were crossing the Williamsburg Bridge, but the rest of the ride was pure guesswork as we journeyed from South Third Street to West 52nd Street in Manhattan and the Alvin Theater (now named after my longtime friend Neil Simon), where "Anything Goes" was playing. Uncle Joe sat up on his phone books as he drove, whistling one Cole Porter tune after another, while I sang along with him from the back floor.

SO our seats weren't exactly two on the aisle in the fourth row of the orchestra. How about in the next to the last row at the top of the balcony? But I couldn't have been happier. I was actually listening to Ethel Merman herself
singing "I Get a Kick Out of You" on a stage, live, with me there. There were no microphones in theaters back then and we were miles away, but Uncle Joe and I nonetheless agreed that Merman sang just a little too loud. But, wow, I still thought she was the greatest thing since chocolate milk. I had goose bumps. I almost fainted. And what a score by Cole Porter! Soaring melodies, astonishing lyrics, one great song after another — not only "I Get a Kick Out of You" but also "You're the Top," "It's Delovely," "All Through the Night" and, of course, the show's wonderful title song, "Anything Goes."

And, oh, the glory of the sound that came from that orchestra pit, led by the brass section, those blaring trumpets and thrilling trombones reaching for the moon. "Anything Goes" was funny too — falling-down funny. When the final curtain fell, I leaped to my feet and cheered my 9-year-old head off; way up there at the top of the balcony, I figured that I was as close to heaven as I'd ever get.

I fell in love forever with Broadway musical comedy that afternoon and also began a lifetime of admiration for the music and lyrics of Cole Porter, who is still my all-time No. 1 favorite songwriter. (Years later, when I discovered to my amazement that Cole Porter wasn't Jewish, I was taken aback for a moment but then quickly forgave him. I'd become a practicing Episcopalian, too, if I could write songs like his.) I remember thinking while lying awake in bed that night after seeing "Anything Goes" that when I grew up I wanted somehow to be involved in a musical comedy, maybe even as the writer of its songs. Being a Broadway songwriter, I decided, would be even better than playing shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers, which up until then had been my most fantastic dream.

Something happened. Life got in the way of my becoming the next Cole Porter. At the age of 14, I got a paying job in music, but as a drummer rather than a songwriter, playing in a band every summer at a place called the Butler Lodge in the Catskills, where one night when I was 16 the comic M.C. suddenly took sick and I jumped in to take his place.

I got big laughs with terrible jokes like, "The girl I went out with last night was so skinny that when I took her to a restaurant the headwaiter said, 'Check your umbrella?' "

I never went back to the drums again — I was now a $25-a-week comic, and on my dressing room they'd hung a six-pointed star. In those days, every
Catskill comic had his own introductory song — "My name is Donny, they say I'm funny," etc. And so I did at last write my first song, which I'm proud and ashamed to say went like this:

*Here I am, I'm Melvin Brooks,*

*I've come to stop the show,

Just a ham who's minus looks,

But in your hearts I'll grow.

I'll tell ya gags, I'll sing you songs,

Just happy little snappy tunes

That roll along.

I'm out of my mind, so won't you be kind,

And please love . . . Melvin Brooks!

World War II. Out of the Catskills and into the Army, which amazingly enough first sent me to college: I became a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute. (Talk about a little Jewish fish out of water, although I loved V.M.I., and the gracious Virginians couldn't have been nicer to the brash kid from Brooklyn.) But then the Army got serious and I was next a combat engineer being shot at by Germans in Belgium and the Rhineland, after which, when the shooting stopped, I was transferred into Special Services and became a G.I. comedian entertaining the troops with song parodies like Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine" morphed into "When we begin to clean the latrine."

Out of the Army, back in New York, and sticking with comedy rather than songwriting, on to a whole lot of frantically happy years spent turning out comic sketches for television's "Your Show of Shows." Fast forward to 1964, when I risked a steady paycheck from television to quit my job in order to write my first movie, "The Producers," a comedy that for plot purposes needed a couple of original songs.
I said to my then wife, the incredibly beautiful and incredibly talented Anne Bancroft, whom I'm happy to say is also still my now wife, that I needed to find someone to write the songs.

"I know who could write them," she said.

"Who?" I asked.

"You," she said. "You're musical, you're a good singer, and besides, you've been talking my head off ever since I met you about how much you want to be a songwriter. So take a pad, a pencil, go into the next room, and I bet within an hour you'll come out with a very nice song."

I did what she said. I took a pad, a pencil and went into the next room. And lo and behold, one hour and one month later came out with "Springtime for Hitler." (I had come up with not only the lyrics but also the tune, which I'd heard in my head, picked out on a piano, and then hummed into a tape recorder — a full 32-bar song that a musicologist friend of mine then transcribed into actual notes on actual music paper, a method of composing I've since used for all of my songs. (I went to V.M.I., not Juilliard.) I also wrote a second song for "The Producers" entitled "Prisoners of Love." I can't tell you how thrilled I was to see the first copies of the sheet music of my songs and the credit in the upper-right-hand corner: "Words & Music by Mel Brooks."

When it was first released, sad to say, "The Producers" was neither a critical nor a commercial success. As a matter of fact, it was slammed by critics all over the place, including even by the critic who wrote for the very newspaper you're now reading. Scathing reviews and the initial failure of the picture at the box office everywhere but in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles left me more discouraged than I can tell you. I nearly gave up show business and was seriously considering going back to college. I'd major in organic chemistry, I figured, become a pharmacist, and open a little drugstore back in Williamsburg, at the corner of South Third and Hooper.

Fast forward again, to three years ago, the spring of 1998, when I got a phone call in my office at the Culver Studios in Los Angeles. I hadn't become a pharmacist after all. I'd become a moviemaker. The call was from a very important man who shall remain nameless, David Geffen. David, in case you haven't heard, is a slightly well-off record-industry legend who together with
Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg founded and now runs Hollywood's newest movie studio, DreamWorks SKG.

I consider David to be one of the wisest men in all of show business, and so when he told me over the phone that he wanted me to turn "The Producers" into a Broadway musical comedy that he would personally produce, I didn't dismiss the notion out of hand but nonetheless ultimately gave him a polite no. (For years, a number of other producers had been after me to make a musical out of "The Producers" and I'd given each of them a polite no, too.) But David Geffen doesn't take no, polite or otherwise, for an answer. Every time I picked up the phone, he was at the other end. In fact, after the 16th increasingly persuasive call in eight days, my polite no all of a sudden turned into a resounding yes! Of course I'll do it! But when I suggested that I'd like to try to write the songs for the show, music as well as lyrics, he said he already had another songwriter in mind, none other than Jerry Herman.

I could scarcely quarrel with his choice — I'd been an admirer of Jerry Herman ever since his first Broadway show, "Milk and Honey," and I'd been in the audience marveling at his words and music at other memorable shows of his — "Hello, Dolly!" "Mame," "Dear World," "Mack and Mabel" and "La Cage aux Folles." So even though I wanted more than anything else to at least have a shot at writing my own score, I agreed to meet with Jerry. I went to his home in the hills of Beverly, where he led me into his music room and immediately told me two things — 1) how much he loved "The Producers," and 2) how sorry he was that he didn't think he was the right man to write the songs for it.

But, he went on, he knew of another songwriter who would be absolutely perfect.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Let me play you some of his songs," said Jerry, sitting down at his grand piano and first playing "I'm Tired," a song that the unforgettable Madeline Kahn sang in "Blazing Saddles," and then "Hope for the Best, Expect the Worst," from my second movie, "The Twelve Chairs."

"Wait a moment, hold it," I said. "I wrote those songs."
"Of course you did," said Jerry with a grin, "and you also wrote 'High Anxiety' — you're a very good songwriter."

"I am?" I asked.

"You are," he said. "What's more, you'd be crazy to do a Broadway musical of 'The Producers' without including 'Springtime for Hitler' and 'Prisoners of Love.' So you've already got two major songs written. All you have to do is write a dozen or so more and you've got yourself a Broadway score. Go, with my blessings, do it!"

And I did. In fact, I wrote 17 more songs. With a lot of help along the way from a lot of people, but especially three very special people. First, Thomas Meehan, an old friend and the Tony Award-winning writer of the book of "Annie," who wrote the book of "The Producers" with me, and who, during two and a half years of working at my side, showed me where the musical should sing and where it shouldn't, helped me to figure out what sort of songs I should write and what they should be about, and sat in with me on countless lyric-writing idea sessions.

Second, Glen Kelly, a musical genius and brilliant arranger who took my rude, simple 32-bar songs and turned them into — I'm both hoping and nervously believe — glorious Broadway show tunes.

AND finally, Susan Stroman, the show's incredible Tony Award-winning choreographer and director, whose innovative ideas for staging have made my score work in the theater in ways that I would never have imagined. My songs were, like Adam, crudely formed out of the clay of the earth, and just as God blew life into Adam, Stro, as she is known to one and all, breathed life into my score — made it sing, made it dance.

As things turned out, when we finished the first draft of the show, a year ago, and I was champing at the bit to get it onstage, David Geffen found himself far too busy with various projects at DreamWorks to be able to spend a year in New York as a hands-on Broadway producer and so graciously stepped aside to let other producers take over the show. "All I want is a couple of tickets down front for opening night," said David, "so I can stand up in the crowd and cheer you on!"

So now the long-ago dream of the 9-year-old Brooklyn boy who was once me has at last come true. This Thursday evening, a brand-new Broadway musical comedy called "The Producers" will open at the St. James Theater with the
credit line I'd imagined a mere 66 years ago: "Music and Lyrics by Mel Brooks."

And, uh-oh, I am once again facing the critics with something called "The Producers." I hope for the best, expect the worst, and of course there is always, waiting for me in Williamsburg, that little drugstore at the corner of South Third and Hooper.

Mel Brooks wrote the music and lyrics and co-wrote the book for the musical `The Producers.'

Mel Brooks Makes ‘Frankenstein’ Sing

By Max Gross
Wed. Dec 19, 2007

Article tools

Fans of the 1974 movie might not believe this, but Mel Brooks was forced to include the song “Puttin’ on the Ritz” in “Young Frankenstein.” The monster forcing him was Gene Wilder.

The soft-shoe dance by Wilder and a tuxedoed creature (Peter Boyle) to the old Irving Berlin song is a masterpiece — one of the funniest scenes ever put on film.

“I didn’t want to do it,” Brooks told The Shmooze in a phone interview from his offices in California. “It was all Gene Wilder hocking me. I said, ‘This is a salute to the gorgeous black-and-white Frankenstein pictures of the ’30s. It’ll kill the mood.’”

Nevertheless, Wilder hocked.

“He said, ‘Look, we’ll film it, and we can always decide what to do with it later.’”

After looking over the finished product, Brooks was duly impressed. “I said: ‘Gee, Gene Wilder. You’re a genius.’”
There was no way that “Puttin’ on the Ritz” was going to be cut out of the Broadway musical adaptation of “Young Frankenstein,” which opened last month. The four-minute number is the centerpiece of the show and has been greeted with cheering and with deafening applause.

“It’s a home run!” Brooks declared. “I’ve never seen an audience react that way!”

Brooks added: “I don’t mind sharing song credit with Irving Berlin.”

“Puttin’ on the Ritz” is the only song that Brooks didn’t have a hand in writing in the show and on the new cast album (Decca Broadway), which will hit stores next week. There’s more than an hour of other ditties and tunes in this extravaganza. Now that Brooks is no longer a one-hit wonder on Broadway — “The Producers,” his first musical, broke records at the Tony Awards in 2001 — you have to wonder: Is he trying to become the new Cole Porter?

“I wouldn’t mind!” Brooks said, laughing. “You know, Cole Porter was incredibly Jewish. He did so many songs in a minor key — just like klezmer songs.”

Brooks told the Forward about the first song he ever wrote: “It was an introductory song when I was in Borscht Belt,” he recalled, stopping to belt out the first few lines: “Here I am, Melvin Brooks! Just a ham, who’s flying on his looks!”

Back then, he had a band called Mel Brooks and the Five Wife Beaters and had serious aspirations of becoming a drummer. (Buddy Rich once said — to a teenage Brooks’s delight — “Okay, kid. You’re not good, but you’re not bad.”)

While Brooks took on Hitler in “The Producers,” he said he has no plans to tackle something more contemporary. So forget “Guantanamo Bay,” the musical. “Once you write a current story, ‘current’ becomes bad,” he said. “‘Current’ doesn’t stay.”

This reporter decided to ask one more question. (How often do you get to interview Mel Brooks?) “If you were stuck on an island with Woody Allen or Neil Simon, who would it be?”

Wed. Dec 19, 2007

PLAYBOY interview: Mel Brooks; excerpted for 35th anniversary retrospective issue

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HEADLINE: Playboy interview: Mel Brooks; excerpted for 35th anniversary retrospective issue

BYLINE: Siegel, Larry

BODY:
PLAYBOY: Mel, we'd like to ask you

BROOKS: Who's we? I see one person in the room. Not counting me.

PLAYBOY: By "we" we mean Playboy. BROOKS: In other words, you're asking questions for the entire sexually liberated Playboy organization?

PLAYBOY- Mel, can we begin now? BROOKS: Fine, do you gavotte?

PLAYBOY: Let's sit this one out. You've recently completed a series of radio commercials as Ballantine Beer's "2500-year old Brewmaster." It's a character quite similar to your famous 2000-year-old man, in that once again you jog satirically through the pages of history. But the big difference is: Now you're peddling been Why did you sell out to Madison Avenue, like they say?

BROOKS: I decided that I had given enough of myself to mankind. After all, my definitive 12-volume series on enlightened penology was completed; my staff and I had UNESCO
running in apple-pie order; and of course I had just come up with the vaccine to wipe out cystic fibrosis.

So I felt I could afford to allow myself a few monetary indulgences.

PLAYBOY: Why Madison Avenue? BROOKS: Frankly, they made me the best offer.

PLAYBOY: What were some of the other offers you received?

BROOKS: Well, Fifth Avenue offered me $4000 a week, Lexington Avenue offered me $3500, and the Bowery's offer was insulting.

PLAYBOY: Why Ballantine Beer? BROOKS: They gave me carte blanche. I had complete script approval. Akhough, truthfully, we never used scripts. My interviewer, Dick Cavett, and I started with a premise and then winged it. We made all kinds of tapes, but they used only the ones that we liked.

PLAYBOY: Do you enjoy working with Cavett as much as you do with Carl Reiner on your 2000-year-old-man records?

BROOKS: They're completely different types. Dick is a bright, young, incredibly gentile person, and the juxtaposition of texture—the gentile alongside the Jew—is very effective. Farshtey? By the way, I'm spectacularly Jewish.

PLAYBOY: We would never have guessed it.

BROOKS: Vraiment?

PLAYBOY: Why are so many top comedians and comedy writers Jewish?

BROOKS: When the tall, blond Teutons have been nipping at your heels for thousands of years, you find it enervating to keep wailing. So you make jokes. If your enemy is laughing, how can he bludgeon you to death?

PLAYBOY: Mel, you're co-creator of Get Smart. Since it violates every standard of tested TV comedy—a bumbling antihero, far-out satire, and so on—why is it so successful?

BROOKS: I'd say because of a bumbling antihero, far-out satire, and so on.

PLAYBOY: What do you mean by "and so on?"

BROOKS: What do you mean by "and so on?" PLAYBOY. Well, we meant that the public could identify with, and yet feel superior to, a nitwit like Maxwell Smart.

BROOKS: That's what I meant. PLAYBOY: How does a clod like Smart differ from the bird-brained protagonists in situation comedies such as Ozzie and Harriet?
BROOKS- Guys like Ozzie Nelson are lovable boobs. There's nothing lovable about Don Adams' Max Smart. He's a dangerously earnest nitwit who deals in monumental goofs. He doesn't trip over skates, he loses whole countries to the Communists.

PLAYBOY: And standard situation comedies, on the other hand, deal with dull people in petty situations?

BROOKS: Right. And in their supposedly true-to-life little episodes, they avoid anything approaching reality. For years I've always wanted to see an honest family TV series—maybe something called Half of Father Knows But. The other half of him was paralyzed by a stroke in 1942 when he suspected we might lose the war.

PLAYBOY: Living in New York, with a hit TV show being filmed on the Coast, you must be doing a lot of traveling.

BROOKS: I spend a lot of time in L.A. on business, but I also travel for pleasure. I just got back from Europe.

PLAYBOY: How did you like it? BROOKS: I love it. Europe is very near and dear to my heart. Would you like to see a picture of it?

PLAYBOY: You carry a picture of Europe? BROOKS: Sure, right here in my wallet. Here it is.

PLAYBOY: It's very nice. BROOKS: Of course, Europe was a lot younger then. It's really not a very good picture. Europe looks much better in person.

PLAYBOY: It's a fine-looking continent. BROOKS: It gives me a good deal of pleasure, but its always fighting, fighting. I tell you, I'll be so happy when it finally settles down and gets married.

PLAYBOY: So will we, Mel, most celebrities are asked questions Where do you get your ideas?"; "Are you as funny off stage as you are on?" and so on. What questions asked of you by the public, bugs you the most?

BROOKS: The one you just asked. PLAYBOY: Any others?

BROOKS: "How's your beautiful wife?" PLAYBOY: How do you answer it?

BROOKS-. I say "Haven't you heard? Her nose fell off."

PLAYBOY: Your wife, Anne Bancroft, is certainly beautiful, and a very talented actress as well. She's also very successful. Tell us frankly, Mel, is she making more money than you?

BROOKS: Right at this moment she is. She's not sitting for free interviews.
PLAYBOY. Would you like to be a director?

BROOKS: I'd love to be one. I think I'd be a great comedy director. As a matter of fact, I have just finished a screenplay called Marriage is a Dirty, Rotten Fraud. I'd like very much w direct it.

PLAYBOY: Is it based on your own personal experience?

BROOKS: No, it's based on a very important conversation I overheard once while waiting for a bus at the Dixie Hotel terminal.

PLAYBOY. What are the chances of a studio assigning you to direct it?

BROOKS: Very, very good. Well, let me amend that slightly: None.

PLAYBOY: What else are you working on? BROOKS: Springtime or Hitler.

PLAYBOY: You're putting us on.

BROOKS: No, it's the God's honest truth. It's going to be a play within a play, or a play within a film-I havelit decided yet. It's a romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden. There was a whole nice side of Hitler He was a good dancer-no one knows that. He loved a parakeet named Bob-no one knows that either It's all brought out in the play.

PLAYBOY: Enough of Hitler. Tell us how "The Mel Brooks Story" began.

BROOKS: I was the baby in the family. My job was to keep everybody amused and happy, and I was always content to be the family clown.
PLAYBOY: What did you think you'd be when you grew older?

BROOKS: Tall.

PLAYBOY: You didn't make it, did you?

BROOKS: What do you mean? I'm five-seven. My three brothers are all shorter than I am. At family reunions they call me "Stretch."

PLAYBOY: What was the first funny thing you ever said?

BROOKS: 'Lieutenant Faversham's attentions to my wife were of such a nature I was forced to deal him a lesson in manners.

PLAYBOY: That's pretty funny. Do you recall to whom you said that?

BROOKS: Very vividly. It was an elderly Jewish woman carrying an oilcloth shopping bag on the Brighton Beach Express.

PLAYBOY: What was her reaction to the remark?

BROOKS: She immediately got up and gave me her seat.

Say who's that guy that just walked into the room with a camera?

PLAYBOY: That's one of our photographer. He's going to take a few shots of you to run with the interview.

BROOKS: Should I undress?

PLAYBOY: It's not for the gatefold, Mel. You'll be shot fully
dressed. But while we're on the subject, do you think there's a sexual revolution going on in this country?

BROOKS: Yes, I do think there's a sexual revolution going on, and I think that with our current foreign policy, we'll probably be sending troops in there any minute to break it up.

PLAYBOY: In where? BROOKS: How do I know? We always send in troops when there's a revolution.

PLAYBOY: We hate to get personal, but, speaking of sex, why haven't you asked us to introduce you to a Playmate or a Bunny?

BROOKS: Three reasons: It would be impolite; it would be beneath my dignity; and besides, I'm a fag. Anyway the trouble with Playmates and Bunnies is that they're too openly sexy and clean-cut. I've been taught ever since I was a kid that sex is filthy and forbidden, and that's the way I think it should be. The filthier and more forbidden it is, the more exciting it is.

PLAYBOY- By those criteria, can you give us an example of someone you consider sexy?

BROOKS: To me anyone is sexy if they're not obvious about it. A 71-year-old man in a fur collar and spats could be enormously sexy under the right circumstances.

PLAYBOY: What would be the right circumstances?

BROOKS: Well, if you're in the moonlight, if you're by a lazy lagoon—and if you're a 71-year-old woman in a fur collar and spats.

GRAPHIC: Portrait; Mel Brooks. (portrait)
I Appreciate George S. Kaufman

Gail Anderson

A collection of comic writing by S. J. Perelman boasted on its jacket an introduction by Al Hirschfeld, followed by an appreciation by George S. Kaufman. Hirschfeld began with a few charming, laudatory paragraphs about his close pal, the great humorist Sid Perelman. Then came the heading titled: "An Appreciation of S. J. Perelman by George S. Kaufman." The page was blank save for one sentence that read: "I appreciate S. J. Perelman. Signed, George S. Kaufman."

That is pretty much the substance of what I feel about Kaufman. My appreciation (which was actually idolization) first blinked at the light when I was about 8 years old. There was something in our public school called a "library period," in which we were taught exactly how to use a library, and then we were expected to take out a book, read it and report on the chosen volume. Less than stimulated by the romance of the Dewey Decimal System and born lazy, I made for the smallest book I could find in the stacks, which by sheer chance was something called "Six Plays by Kaufman and Hart." I had never heard of either Kaufman or Hart, never heard of their plays or any plays for that matter, except for the leaden treacle we were forced to sit through at holiday time, extolling Pilgrims or Maccabees. (In today's Hollywood the
blockbuster would be "The Pilgrims Versus the Maccabees." Still, the school was run like a penal colony, and wanting to stave off punishment I thumbed the text of the collection when my eyes eventually hit on something called "You Can't Take It With You." The title drew my attention simply because that was a phrase used by my father to defend the inevitable results of his numbers habit. The first scene began with a stage direction that read: "The home of Martin Vanderhof -- just around the corner from Columbia University, but don't go looking for it."

As a boy of 8, force-fed the above-mentioned one-acters about George Washington's cherry tree or how Christopher Columbus outfoxed the flat-earth mavens, I found this stage direction refreshing, and so I delved deeper. I soon discovered myself immersed in what could be called (however trivial the life) a life-changing experience. Not only was the play truly funny and imaginative, but the agglomeration of hilarious oddballs cohabiting in surreal chaos was enormously warming and magical. My own household, while not populated by quite as colorful eccentrics as crammed the Vanderhof home, still sported a fairly combustible farrago of aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, cousins, all hunkered down in the same flat, pooling ingenuity against the Depression. The play captured our bedlam deliriously.

Hooked by the jokes, I read and reread "You Can't Take It With You," and its delightful cartoon lunacy never left my system. Its influence is painfully obvious in my first hapless attempt at theater, "Don't Drink the Water," which I labored over endlessly. Kaufman and Hart, on the other hand, took just a few weeks in 1936 to write their Pulitzer Prize-winning bauble, and one can see why, given the comic richness of the idea (and Kaufman's grasp of technique, which was formidable). I was relieved as a young writer to learn that "The Man Who Came to Dinner" (1939), another splendid comedy of theirs, in which the basic premise is delightful but less plot- and more character-driven, took months of hard labor before the two playwrights could contrive a sustaining story line.
Enchanted, as I got older I resolved that I would one day try to write comedies for the theater, and George S. Kaufman became an immediate role model. In retrospect it would seem it could as readily have been Moss Hart, who actually receives top billing on "You Can't Take It With You." (Kaufman made it a rule that whoever came up with the original idea would be first billed.) That it was Kaufman I glommed onto was probably because he was a more visible presence. It was his name that invariably appeared not just on Hart's work but on many another gifted comic playwright's sparkling hit. As sampled in the Library of America's "Kaufman & Co.," a collection of nine plays written with Morrie Ryskind, Edna Ferber, Ring Lardner or Hart, it seemed every important comedy involved Kaufman in some capacity, either as writer, director or play doctor (in which he sometimes quietly worked behind the scenes out of town to save someone's crumbling second or third act).

It was also that his wonderful sour puss began showing up on television, and as I morphed lugubriously into puberty I cherished his sardonic wit. He, more than anyone, seemed to grasp how phony the world and its pompous inhabitants were, and what could be more appealing to the adolescent mind, especially one who put a big premium on the attitudes of Groucho Marx and W. C. Fields. Kaufman (1889-1961) was homely but sharp as a matzo -- a combination I could identify with because I was homely and longed to be sharp. Also Kaufman was unsentimental in a culture submerged in the gooey ichor of societal piety.

In reality that intimidating facade was just that, a facade. From examining his written love scenes and hearing many anecdotes about him over the years (most notably in "Act One," Moss Hart's great autobiography), it appears this coruscating verbal shark was actually quite sentimental and very softhearted, very generous to employees, a maker of chocolate fudge. But this side of George S. Kaufman was unknown to me when he scandalized the prissy multitudes by daring to say on TV during the Christmas season, "Let's make this one program on which no one sings 'Silent Night.' " You just had to love a guy like that.
By my late teens I had read and studied all his plays and revue sketches, which not only crackled with sophisticated Broadway wiseguy dialogue but, more important, played. The plots were beautifully structured and were very performable. For those who have never tried fabricating a two- or three-act comic play, I can tell you it takes more than just the ability to write funny, it takes real discipline and mechanical know-how. Not only did Kaufman's one-liners explode like firecrackers, but the wit was truly authentic and full of wonderful vitriol. The puns were sometimes actually amazing. (Kaufman is credited with: "One man's Mede is another man's Persian.")

And the basic ideas were inspired. Example: A cantankerous urban egomaniac - modeled after the cruelly biting Alexander Woollcott, who was the quintessence of cosmopolitan intolerance -- finds himself trapped, because of a broken leg, in a middle-class, mid-American household in Ohio. He is surrounded by small-town philistines, whose home he turns into chaos and who in turn drive him mad. Is there any better opening line to delineate a character and foreshadow a promisingly delectable situation than the one delivered by Sheridan Whiteside, The Man Who Came to Dinner? The worthy small-town folk fuss nervously, hoping to please the great public figure forced to convalesce in their honored midst. Whiteside, entering in a wheelchair, surveys his adulating hosts and says, "I may vomit." Years later Blanche DuBois, upon seeing how her sister is living, says, "I think I'm going to be sick" and the scene ends. One can only imagine how Sheridan Whiteside would have made caustic comic history if he had been confined to the Kowalski household.

Over the years, the more I learned about comedy writing (not that there's much one can actually learn, but I suppose a little experience can sometimes help quell the panic) the more I appreciated George S. Kaufman. Appreciated and continued to identify with him -- our glasses, our tweed jackets, our glum mugs. And didn't he begin his career sending jokes to a Broadway columnist? (Franklin P. Adams.) Exactly how I began mine. And didn't he write, direct and even act? That was just what I wanted to do. And wasn't he an around-the-
clock worker, someone who collaborated, sitting home with Edna Ferber to write even on New Year's Eve, while the square haircuts partied? How like me, I thought. To boot he came from working-class Jewish parents -- his mother, born Henrietta, was always called Nettie. My mother was Nettie too! Superficial similarities, I admit, but intoxicating in my youth.

Hunched over my typewriter, I struggled to write a Broadway show. Each day I'd work for hours and then take a break and stroll past Kaufman's former town house on East 62nd Street for inspiration, remembering how it was glamorously described in accounts I'd read. The master, in his bedroom, meticulously fashioning some new theatrical dazzler; then, at the termination of the day's work, he'd go downstairs where all the iconic deities of Broadway would be admitted by his wife for cocktails and the exchange of perfectly formed aphorisms. Perhaps George Gershwin would sit at the piano and play. Perhaps Noel Coward would be there. Or is that Max Gordon next to Ethel Merman? I'd pause outside the town house in a reverie, convinced I could almost hear the latest tunes of Cole Porter being tried out, and brilliant curtain lines by Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin. Feeling invigorated, I'd scoot back to my single room and, with a burst of renewed creativity, turn out five brilliant pages for my play. Imagine how chagrined I was one day when my young wife explained to me that the Kaufmans had lived on 63rd Street, not 62nd, and I was drawing inspiration from the wrong house on the wrong block. Fortunately for the theater, the play I wrote went unproduced.

If Kaufman held sway over a young Manhattan wannabe, he also was a dominant figure among the face cards who ruled what is now called the Golden Era of Broadway. While Hollywood at that time ground out awful and foolish films for the most part, Broadway was a more cultivated venue. Despite the occasional wonderful movie that the studio system couldn't kill, overwhelmingly the Hollywood product was mindless junk supervised by the men properly eviscerated in "Once in a Lifetime" (1930), Kaufman and Hart's first collaboration. During the 1920's, 30's, 40's and early 50's, Kaufman's influence
could be felt all over the Great White Way. In addition to his own plays, which he staged, he directed "The Front Page," a real high point of theater comedy, in 1928, and "Guys and Dolls" in 1950. The characters of Kitty and Packard from "Dinner at Eight" (1932), written by Kaufman and Ferber, inspired Billie Dawn and Harry Brock in Broadway's finest comedy, "Born Yesterday." He wrote, with John P. Marquand, and staged "The Late George Apley" (1944), directed "Stage Door" (1936), written with Ferber and later made into a film with Katharine Hepburn. In drama, he staged the classic "Of Mice and Men" in 1937. As if all this were not impressive enough, he wrote, with Morrie Ryskind and George and Ira Gershwin, "Of Thee I Sing" (1931), a political satire and the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize. He and Ryskind also wrote "Animal Crackers" (1928) for the Marx Brothers, which was so hilariously successful that Irving Thalberg asked Kaufman to stage the comedy scenes for "A Night at the Opera."

Groucho Marx, who was not impressed by much in this world -- he told me he found it hard to keep awake at dinner at T. S. Eliot's and held a kind of reserved view of Perelman, whom I believe to be the single funniest human of my lifetime -- was in genuine awe of Kaufman. I think that was because in addition to Kaufman's comic talent, he had such a thoroughly rigorous command of stagecraft. Kaufman could work at home or late in hotel rooms under pressure and do the hard labor, the tedious, glamourless structuring and rewriting and merciless cutting that is crucial to making comedy breathe. Hart has written about Kaufman's ability to edit and pare to the bone, to throw out jokes should they dare to impede the plot -- to kill his children. Kaufman felt that while a drama could survive with a bit of slack, a comedy had to be airtight. The story is told of a playwright suffering with his opus in Philadelphia who asked Kaufman how he could improve it. Without seeing the failing play, Kaufman replied, "Make it shorter."

Did Kaufman have his flops and are the plays dated? To work in the theater is to strike out as often as not. A much-quoted line of his is "Satire is what closes on Saturday night." Alas, too, comedy dates, and there is plenty dated about his
plays, which were fabulous in their time, although a few still hold up quite well, when blessed with a good production. Given the state of the theater -- strangled by economics, mortally devastated by the maw of television and by the financial and artistic seductiveness of film -- it is hard to imagine a comedy-writing titan like George S. Kaufman coming along to dominate the Broadway season. On the other hand, there may be a figure equal or even greater just around the corner from Columbia University -- but don't go looking for him.

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