

“WHY A DUCK?”

By Michael Ventura

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Groucho pursued his education almost ‘til the end of sixth grade. He wrote that Chico was “the only Marx brother to graduate from public school” As for Harpo: “At the age of eight I was through with school and at liberty.”

The brothers were self-supporting by their early teens. Chico was a barroom pianist, gambler, and petty thief; Harpo, a whorehouse pianist, and petty thief. Groucho said that the brothers “discovered early in life that steady and consistent lying was the only road to survival.”

In the rough and tumble of New York City circa 1905, Jews were targets for Italian and Irish toughs. The brothers Marx carried blackjacks and knew how to use them. Harpo, late in life, confessed he always felt and thought like a hustler.

When they matured as performers, theirs would be a comedy of hustling. In their films, they are grifters playing any angle for a buck, ferociously and happily contemptuous of the “large and uneasy jungle” (Groucho’s words) that society really is. As with all great clowns, they were funny but they weren’t kidding.

Not that the brothers were Marxists. Their comedy was ferocious without rancor. To them, society is unjust not because it’s evil, but because it’s crazy. Absurdity reigns evenhandedly over the corrupt and pure alike.

Critical opinion favors *Duck Soup* (1933) and *A Night at the Opera* (1935), but the film I relish is their first, 1929’s *The Cocoanuts*. I’ve watched it seven times just this month.

The picture opened nationally in the dog days of summer. No air conditioning. Theatres were hot, thick, and sweaty. Cigar and cigarette smoke clouded the projector beam. Cuspidors lined the floors for the manly art of spitting. The audience brought bags of fragrant food and flasks of Prohibition hooch. They came looking for a good time and got more than they bargained for.

The Cocoanuts opens on a soundstage version of a Florida beach. Young women in tight gym clothes dance calisthenics with the camera sometimes looking between their legs or lingering on other women who are fancily but scantily clad as they lounge in beach chairs, smoke, and extend legs of unusual length. A chintzy paradise is this Florida, its heavenliness belied by the dancers’ obsessively fixed grins and the bored pouts of the leggy people.

Cut to a hotel lobby. We see Groucho – Mr. Hammer, the manager – besieged by boisterous bellhops of both sexes.

“Money,” says Groucho, “you want your money?”

“We want to get paid!”

“Oh, you want my money. ... [Y]ou want to be wage slaves, answer me that! ... And what makes wage slaves? Wages! ... Be free, my friends, one for all, and all for me, and me for you, and three for five, and six for a quarter.”

It’s not that his words don’t make sense, it’s that they kind of do. Sequential but nonlinear, deftly and daftly his sentences snake from snotty sense to nonsense to something else: an inspired refusal to take communication seriously.

There’s more verbal acrobatics; the bellhops cheer; the hop boys inexplicably disappear (we don’t see them go); and the hop girls dance. They wear see-through

leotards that prove conclusively that the female posterior is equipped with an attractive crack. (These shots always mildly shock me.) This, in an era when respectable married folk often never saw each other naked and vaudevillians joked of never viewing a wife's navel.

There follows some exposition and one of Irving Berlin's worst songs. Soon we see the first exchange between Groucho and the magnificent Margaret Dumont, taller than him by a head. He riffs about alligator pears (known to us as avocados).

Groucho: "Do you know how alligator pears are made?"

Margaret: "I've not the slightest idea."

Groucho: "That's because you've never been an alligator. And don't let it happen again."

She tries to leave. He says, "Before you go, let me show you a sample of our sewer pipe." He pulls a length of pipe from his jacket. "Look at it. Nobody can fool you on sewer pipe, can they? A woman like you?"

Communication is so basic, you'd expect that the authority with which Groucho dismisses its importance would be shocking. But it isn't. It's thrilling. We laugh in recognition, without the slightest idea of what we're recognizing.

Don't worry. I won't try to explain that. Critics who've tried have done so in jargons more inexplicable than Groucho's.

Enter Chico and Harpo. Chico talks a lot and says nothing. Harpo doesn't speak. He honks a horn. And eats a bellboy's buttons. Then he's throwing pens like darts. Groucho objects with a mild "Don't do that." Then something remarkable happens. While Harpo continues throwing pens, Groucho becomes a carny barker. "Step right this way, boys, three shots for five cents! Ah, the boy wins a gold cigar!"

Chaos is inevitable. Throw in with it. Get on its good side.

Soon comes the bit I watch again and again, every time I play the film.

Harpo jumps over the front desk and perches on a file cabinet beside rows of cubbyholes stuffed with mail. His face is a study in delight as he takes letters from the cubbies and tears them in half.

For other clowns, the "biz" that ensues would be Groucho's outrage and a chase. Instead, Groucho steps into frame and hands Harpo more letters to tear, saying calmly and solemnly, like a preacher or butler, "Here you are. Let me help you here." He apologizes when Harpo runs out of letters to tear.

"I'm sorry, the afternoon mail isn't in yet."

In their era, mail was a basic form of communication. Its safety and privacy was inviolable.

Nevertheless, audiences howled and still howl.

Our laughter is a form of agreement. Our laughter says, "By all means, tear up our letters and befuddle our speech! 'Cause we don't really know what we're saying. Our words don't say enough or mean enough. We're talking at each other, not to each other. Most of what we speak is so damned automatic, and we're so tired of what we say that way."

Automatic speech, automatic reaction – that's what the Marx Brothers revealed and attacked.

Harpo refused speech utterly. Groucho and Chico juggled words like colored balls. Or they'd speak with brutal honesty, as though to confirm that no one was listening.

(Margaret Dumont was a wonderful foil. Her character always tried to listen and then was sorry she'd tried.)

Groucho shows Chico a map.

Groucho: "Now here is the main road leading out of Cocoanut Manor. That's the road I wish you were on. ... And, eh, here is a viaduct leading over to the mainland."

Chico: "Why a duck?"

Groucho: "I'm alright, how are you? I say, here is a viaduct leading over to the mainland."

Chico: "Alright, why a duck? ... Why'a no chicken?"

Groucho: "Well, I don't know why'a no chicken; I'm a stranger here myself."

But there's a moment when the picture sort of stops and Harpo plays the harp. Nothing prepares you for this madman's sudden, calm lyricism. Harpo's solo is pretty, not funny. It has nothing to do with the story but everything to do with the comedy. At the heart of chaos is no devil and no god, but a silent clown in a talking world whose harp expresses an airy wonder that cares for nothing except itself.

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