

Road to Morocco

By Richard Zoglin

“Road to Morocco” was the third of the famous Road pictures, the greatest buddy series in movie history. Beginning with 1940’s “Road to Singapore” — the first to team Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, with Dorothy Lamour as the ever-present love interest for both of them — the films brought a new kind of naturalness and improvisational spirit to Hollywood comedy.

Much of this was based on the unique, and uniquely charming, screen relationship between Hope and Crosby. They typically play small-time entertainers or hucksters of some sort, trying to earn money by duping the locals in the exotic places they turn up in. They are close friends, but always at odds. Hope is the patsy, Crosby the schemer. Hope is a worrier, brash but insecure, all nervous motion. Crosby is the cool customer: easygoing, self-possessed, unflappable. Hope is an overeager puppy with women, chasing but rarely catching them. Crosby merely has to take out his pipe and give them a bu-bu-boo, and the girls can’t resist.

The movies have farcical plots and silly slapstick gags (to get out of jams, the boys play a childlike game of patty-cake, distracting the villains just long enough to sucker-punch them and make their escape). But the laughs come mostly from the fizzy, freestyle repartee between the two stars, bouncing off each other in their idiosyncratic, jazzy slang — so natural that it sounds improvised, but so fast and perfectly timed that it can’t be.

There had been comedy teams in movies before, of course, and fast-paced dialogue, but the Road pictures introduced something new. The interplay between Groucho and Chico Marx, say, or George Burns and Gracie Allen, had an abstract, almost surreal quality. The witty repartee of 1930s screwball comedies like “My Man Godfrey” or “Bringing Up Baby” was too polished and stylized to be mistaken for anything but movie dialogue. Hope and Crosby seemed like ordinary guys — like Hope and Crosby, in fact — perfectly attuned to each other’s thoughts, moods, obsessions and vulnerabilities.



*Dorothy Lamour looks on as Bob Hope threatens Bing Crosby with a scimitar.
Courtesy Library of Congress collection.*

“Road to Morocco,” released in 1942, is probably the most fondly remembered of the entire series. One reason is the film’s title number, sung by the boys while riding on the back of a two-humped camel — the iconic image of the raffish camaraderie that sparked the films. The two, who have washed up on a desert shore after their ship has exploded and sunk (thanks to a match tossed inadvertently by Hope into the engine room), look as good as they ever have: sailor caps perched jauntily on their heads, Crosby trimmer and more animated than usual, Hope looking fit and manly in a white T-shirt and stubble of beard. Johnny Burke’s lyrics, batted back and forth by the two stars, are a high point of the Road films’ self-parodying, in-joke humor:

Where we’re goin’, why we’re goin’,
How can we be sure?
I’ll lay you eight to five that we meet
Dor-o-thy Lamour
...
For any villains we may meet
We haven’t any fear
Paramount will protect us ‘cause
We’re signed for five more years.

The entire Burke-Van Heusen score, which includes the standard “Moonlight Becomes You,” is probably the best of all the Road pictures. The comic plot — from a screenplay by Frank Butler and Don Hartman (who had also written the first two Road films) and directed by David Butler (who had worked with Hope

the year before on “Caught in the Draft”) — is a satisfying pile-on of schemes and counter-schemes. First, to make some money, Bing sells Bob into slavery. When Bob winds up being pampered in a harem and engaged to marry a desert princess (Lamour, naturally), Bing tries to horn in on the action. Then, when Hope finds out that any man who marries the princess is cursed to die, he tries to con Bing into taking his place. The thrust and parry of their back-and-forth has been polished to a fine edge:

Bing: “We’ll have to storm the place.”
Bob: “You storm, I’ll stay here and drizzle.”

Bing: “You got red blood, ain’t you?”
Bob: “Yeah, but I don’t want to get it all over strangers.”

Bing: “I wanna have a talk with you, man to man.”
Bob: “Who’s gonna hold up your end?”

“Road to Morocco” was the wackiest and most anarchic Road picture yet. There are talking camels (“This is the screwiest picture I was ever in,” one says) and fourth-wall-breaking gags, like a scene near the end in which an exasperated Hope quickly recaps all the troubles that Bing has gotten them into. “I know all that!” says Bing after he finishes. “Yeah,” Bob replies, “but the people who came in the middle of the picture don’t.” (Bing’s retort: “You mean they missed my song?”) And the movie has

one of the only truly ad-libbed moments in the entire Road series. In the middle of a scene with a camel they’ve found in the desert (the one they’ll hop onto for the “Road to Morocco” number), the beast suddenly spits in Hope’s face. As Hope reels back out of camera range, Crosby laughs and pets the animal: “Good girl, good girl.” The camel improvised the spit — but when director Butler saw the spontaneous reaction, he kept it in the film.

The Morocco setting turned out to be unfortunately timed — Allied troops invaded North Africa just days before the film’s release — but that mattered little. Road to Morocco earned \$4 million at the box office, the best yet for a Road picture and fourth highest for any film of 1942.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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