

Pass the Gravy

By Steve Massa

Max Davidson had appeared in movies since the early teens – acting at Biograph, supporting Fay Tincher in her Komic Comedy and Fine Arts comedy, and briefly headlining in his own Izzy Comedies” – usually portraying stereotypical Jewish tailors and merchants. After scoring a notable success co-starring with Jackie Coogan in the features “The Rag Man” and “Old Clothes” (both 1925) he was hired by producer Hal Roach to be part of his stable of supporting comedians.

Proving himself in the service of Roach star comics such as Stan Laurel, Charley Chase, and Mabel Normand in the shorts “Get ‘Em Young,” “Long Fliv the King” (both 1926), and “Anything Once” (1927), Max was bumped up to the leading role in his own series and given the opportunity to flesh out his standard screen persona. The first entries were directed by Leo McCarey, then director-general of the Roach Studio, who laid the ground work with shorts such as “Why Girls Say No,” “Jewish Prudence,” “Don’t Tell Everything,” and “Should Second Husbands Come First?” (all 1927).

Since Davidson was already well into middle age, the shorts weren’t built around his quest for success or obtaining the leading lady. Plus as a performer he didn’t move with the balletic grace of a Chaplin or do tremendous stunts and falls like Buster Keaton – instead his comic focus was on his face and shoulders where he had developed a repertoire of shrugs, lifted eyebrows, and tilts of the head. McCarey surrounded Davidson with a dysfunctional family that kept him in cinematic hot water so that he could portray the mounting frustrations of a put upon papa.

Chief among the irritants in Davidson’s movie life was Spec O’Donnell, who bedeviled Max in eight episodes and always lived up to his “Call of the



Cuckoos” (1927) introductory description of “Love’s Greatest Mistake.” Screen freckles usually denote fresh and fun-loving characters, but Spec’s spots came with an icy heart, a malevolent grin, and beady eyes that loved to see his screen father squirm.

In contrast to his sons like Spec, Max’s screen daughters are always his pride and joy, but still cause him a lot of aggravation, particularly when they take up with boys he doesn’t approve of or assumes aren’t Jewish (whom he refers to as “Irishers”). Vivacious Martha Sleeper played his daughter in four shorts and drove him to distraction in entries such as “Flaming Fathers” (1927), where Davidson follows her to the beach to keep her from eloping and of course suffers one embarrassment after another. Other regular salt in Max’s wounds were played by Lillian Elliott, Jess Devorska, and Gene Morgan as the series continued through 1928.

“Pass the Gravy” (1928) is widely considered the comic peak of the Davidson series. Overlooked for many years, it was championed by film historian William K. Everson, and was re-discovered and a smash hit when shown as part of Le Giornate del Cinema Muto’s Forgotten Laughter retrospective in 1994. Directed by Fred Guiol and supervised by Leo

McCarey, in addition to the usual family landmines Max has to maneuver in this one he also has to contend with a roasted prize-winning rooster and its murderous owner from next door.

The series ran its course by 1929, and “Hurdy Gurdy” (1929) was the last Roach comedy with Davidson as “papa.” He finished his days at the studio the way he had begun – supporting comics like Charley Chase and Harry Langdon in two-reelers such as “Great Gobs” (1929) and “The Shrimp” (1930). His voice and accent fit his already established screen persona perfectly, so Max did well as support in the early days of sound in features like “So This is College,” and “The Lottery Bride” (both 1929), but oddly was soon demoted to bit parts, rarely having lines, for the rest of his career. But while it lasted, his starring series following the misadventures of an American Jewish family ranked alongside the likes

of “The General” (1926), “The Kid Brother” (1927), “Big Business” (1929), and “City Lights” (1931), as part of the very peak of silent film comedy.

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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