

# Big Business

By Randy Skretvedt

“Big Business” is regarded today as the greatest of all the Laurel and Hardy silent comedies. That may be open to debate, but there’s no disputing that it is a beautifully constructed comedy. Based on a very slight premise, the film’s one basic gag is sustained and built, with the tempo gradually building to a frenzy.

Stan and Ollie are Christmas tree salesmen in sunny California. They have been angrily rebuffed by two would-be customers (one wielding a hammer) when they meet a particularly surly prospect (Finlayson). A simple argument escalates into a full-scale war, as the boys destroy Fin’s house and its furnishings, while he demolishes their car and merchandise. A burly cop halts the fracas; Stan’s gesture of apology to the homeowner is a cigar—which gives the boys the winning salvo in the war when it explodes.

Although many writers have stated that this film takes place in the summertime, it was actually shot from December 19 through December 26, 1928, at the start of a typically sunny Southern California winter. The studio was eager to get the film finished, before closing on December 29 for the installation of sound-recording equipment. (Admittedly, the idea of selling Christmas trees in the summer sounds like something Stan and Ollie would do, and in 1964 even Stan Laurel believed that this idea was part of the film when describing it in a phone call to an admirer. “Who in the hell would buy a Christmas tree in July?” he asked. “That was the humor in it.”)

Most of “Big Business” is taken up with what the team’s official biographer, John McCabe, called a “reciprocal destruction” battle, in which each of the combatants deliberately and politely allows the other to take his turn in destroying his opponent’s property. This device had been used in Laurel and Hardy’s earlier comedies “Hats Off” (where the primary objects being destroyed, or thrown, were hats), “The Battle of the Century” (pies), “You’re Darn Toot-in” (trousers), “The Finishing Touch” (rocks), “Two Tars” (automobiles) and “Should Married Men Go Home?” (mud), but the device reached its apogee in “Big Business.”

Although none of the three customers visited by Stan and Ollie is terribly friendly, the prime adversary here is played by bald, squinting James



*The Boys as Christmas tree salesmen. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

Henderson Finlayson, born in 1887 in Larbert, Stirlingshire, Scotland. He studied business management in college, planning to take over the family iron foundry, but got the acting bug when he met actor-producer John Clyde and his son Andy. Finlayson played on Broadway in 1912, toured in vaudeville, broke into films in 1916, signed with Mack Sennett in 1919, and broadened his horizons by signing with Hal Roach in 1922. Eventually he performed in about 250 films through 1951; of these, 33 were Laurel and Hardy comedies, with particularly memorable roles in the features “The Devil’s Brother,” “Our Relations” and “Way Out West.” He died at 66 of a heart attack in Hollywood on October 9, 1953.

The policeman who looks upon the antics of Stan, Ollie and Finlayson as they develop from a skirmish to a full-scale battle is Stanley John “Tiny” Sandford, born in Osage, Iowa in 1894. After working in stock companies, he debuted in movies in 1916, with small roles in four of Chaplin’s Mutual comedies. Of his 145 films, 23 were Laurel and Hardy comedies, most of which cast him as an officer of the law. He also had memorable roles in Douglas Fairbanks’ “The Iron Mask” (1929), James Whale’s “Show Boat” (1936) and Chaplin’s “Modern Times” (1936). By the early ‘40s he was running a construction business; he died in Woodland Hills, California in 1961 after surgery for colon cancer.

The prospective lady customer who coyly admits she has no husband is played by Lyle (pronounced as "Lily") Tayo, born Lyle Shipman in Elmdale, Kansas in 1889. She made about 50 films between 1921 and 1934, almost exclusively for Hal Roach. She's best remembered in the Our Gang comedy "Shivering Shakespeare," as the embarrassed mother of Chubby, who's onstage in a school play about ancient Rome and who keeps lifting up his toga to see what his next line is.

The house supposedly owned by James Finlayson was actually owned by William H. Terhune, a film editor at the Roach lot from 1926 through 1938. Terhune worked at MGM in 1939, before heart disease claimed him at 41; he died on December 15, 1940 in the same home that had been used for "Big Business", which still stands on Dunleer Drive in Cheviot Hills.

The "Big Business" crew included two future directors who would rank among Hollywood's finest. George Stevens, Laurel and Hardy's primary cinematographer from 1927 through 1930, was hand-cranking the camera. Leo McCarey, who had joined the Roach studio in 1924 and had worked his way up to supervisor of all the studio's releases, left soon after the filming of "Big Business," having gotten a contract to direct features for Pathé. The credited director, James W. Horne, was in the film business from 1912, and in later years directed a number of serials notable for their high-spirited comedy and action.

After having released the previous five Laurel and Hardy shorts with elaborate synchronized musical scores, MGM issued this one strictly as a silent, letting individual exhibitors provide whatever accompaniment they wished. This was a wise financial decision, as the howls of laughter that this film invariably provokes would have drowned out even the most thunderous of orchestras.

Laurel and Hardy made only three more silent comedies before switching exclusively to sound films in March 1929. Their first sound films were rushed into theaters, while several of the remaining silent pictures languished on the shelves for months. (Their last silent, "Angora Love," wasn't released until December 1929.) Despite being artists who worked mainly in pantomime, they adapted very well to sound and were among the few silent-era film stars who became even more popular with the introduction of spoken dialogue.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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