

## Duck Soup

By William Wolf

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When Paramount released "Duck Soup" in 1933, the reviews were mixed and the film's lack of commercial success ended the Paramount-Marx Brothers relationship. Yet appreciation for this anarchic, hilarious movie has grown through the years, and many justifiably regard "Duck Soup" as the ultimate Marx Brothers work, the film that best reveals the essence of their talent and originality.

No matter how much we laugh at "A Night at the Opera" and "A Day at the Races," or subsequent Marx Brother films, we would never see another that captures their comic style with the utter abandon and purity found in "Duck Soup." The film represented a fork in the road in their careers, which veered into a more structured, commercial environment under the aegis of MGM's "boy-wonder," producer Irving Thalberg. He apparently believed that the brothers could be packaged with broader appeal if their antics were occasionally relieved by un-Marxist musical production numbers.

But did the brothers Marx really need the singing of Allan Jones and Kitty Carlisle? Did they need the racist dance number that intrudes upon "A Day at the Races" and is an embarrassment when we watch it now? Artistically, if not commercially, it was a mistake to mold their free spirit into more of a Hollywood formula. A mistake, but hardly surprising.

When we revisit "Duck Soup" we can appreciate anew the unfettered brand of comedy that made Groucho, Harpo, and Chico unique. (This was the last film which Zeppo, never more than an adjunct, appeared.) Besides featuring the kind of horseplay that made the brothers stage stars before they became film stars, "Duck Soup" is rich in political satire, a rare commodity in Hollywood at the time and not all the frequent even at the millennium. No matter what wars are being waged around the world, when we watch the crazy-quilt war enveloping the mythical Freedonia, we are reminded to be ever-skeptical of whatever reasons politicians and statesmen trumpet to justify the carnage.

In a 1976 interview with me, Woody Allen called "Duck Soup" "probably the best talking comedy ever made."



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But some, including Allen, have rejected the idea that it was intended as political satire. Whatever the intent, the satire is certainly there. The comedy makes a shambles of a government going to war and depicts a zany battleground of total chaos.

While the comedy appears freewheeling, there was nothing haphazard about the film's creation. Many contributed, including Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, who collaborated on the screenplay, with additional dialogue credited to Arthur Sheekman and Nat Perrin. Herman Mankiewicz, who received no credit, spent a brief turn as supervisor but was fired. Kalmar and Ruby also did the music and lyrics that enhanced the satire with pertinent numbers quite different from the diversionary music and lyrics used in the subsequent MGM concoctions.

At the insistence of the Marx Brothers, the director hired for "Duck Soup" was Leo McCarey, whom they wanted because of his experience directing some of the best silent comedies of Laurel and Hardy. He was reluctant at first. The Marx Brothers had a reputation — not unjusti-

fied — of being difficult on the set. But he accepted, and Groucho later credited McCarey with giving “Duck Soup” its antiwar aspect. McCarey also worked out the classic scene in which Groucho thinks he’s looking at himself in a mirror when he’s really looking at Chico in disguise, with Harpo in a similar disguise showing up for a topper. Hans Dreier and Wiard B. Ihnen teamed to create the imaginative art direction that enhanced the visual inventiveness, complemented by Harry Sharp’s black-and-white photography.

“Duck Soup,” virtually nonstop in its deflation of pomposity, authority, or any semblance of order, has a framework not to be dignified by anything as specific as a plot. Groucho as Rufus T. Firefly is appointed the ruler of the mythical Freedonia (with Zeppo as his aide) by the wealthy Mrs. Teasdale, played with delightful aplomb by Margaret Dumont, the inimitable grande dame of Marx Brothers films and straight-woman to so many of Groucho’s disrespectful lines. The essence of their repartee can be found in the following exchange:

Mrs. Teasdale: The future of Fredonia rests on you. Promise me you’ll follow in the footsteps of my late husband.

Firefly: How do you like that? I haven’t been on the job five minutes and already she’s making advances to me. Not that I care, but where is your husband?

Mrs. Teasdale: Why, he’s dead.

Firefly: I’ll bet he’s just using that as an excuse.

Mrs. Teasdale: I was with him to the very end.

Firefly: Huh! No wonder he passed away.

Mrs. Teasdale: I held him in my arms and kissed him.

Firefly: Oh, I see. Then it was murder.

The film’s musical numbers play a major satirical role. Groucho was a Gilbert and Sullivan fan, and the affinity is present in the early production in which Firefly sings: “The last man nearly ruined this place/He didn’t know what to do with it. If you think this country’s bad off now/Just wait till I get through with it.” A later number, “Freedonia’s going to War,” gets wilder as it satirizes the way governments create a popular hysteria: “Oh, hi-de, hi-de, hi-de, hi-de, hi-de, hi-de ho/To war, to war, to war we’re gonna go ... They got guns/We got guns. All God’s chillum got guns ...” The sequence winds up with a square dance.

Louis Calhern, in other venues usually a more serious actor, makes the perfect villain as Trentino, the scheming, ever-thwarted ambassador from the rival power Sylvania. Trentino plots to marry Mrs. Teasdale, who holds Freedonia’s purse strings, and enlists the aid of dancer Vera Marcal (Raquel Torres) to help undermine Firefly.

He assigns Chicolini (Chico) and Pinky (Harpo) to spy on him.

When Firefly slaps Trentino with his gloves, it doesn’t mean a duel. It means war. There two lines that go to the heart of what happens when matters between countries get out of to the point of no return

Trentino: I am willing to do anything to prevent war.

Firefly: It’s too late. I’ve already paid a month’s rent on the battlefield.

This is probably the only war ever fought primarily indoors, mostly from a farmhouse kitchen, Firefly’s command center. But this is a war without logical boundaries. When Pinky isn’t parading with a sandwich board reading, “Join the Army and See the Navy,” Firefly is commanding Chicolini: “Now, go out in that battlefield and lead those men to victory. Go on, they’re waiting for you.

Chicolini: I wouldn’t go out there unless I was in one of those big iron things that goes up and down like this. What do you call those things?

Firefly: Tanks.

Chicolini: You’re welcome.

Or an exchange such as the following:

Firefly: “Chicolini, your partner’s deserted us, but I’m still counting on you. There’s a machine-gun nest near Hill 28. I want it cleaned out.

Chicolini: All right, I’ll tell the janitor.

Every fan of “Duck Soup” has favorite lines or situations. One of the prized non-sequiturs is the appearance of Mr. Slow Burn himself, Edgar Kennedy, operating a lemonade stand and involved in come shtick with Harpo and Chico. Among the line I recall fondly is Groucho’s rallying cry invoking Mrs. Teasdale. “Remember, you’re fighting for this woman’s honor, which is probably more than she ever did.” Or Firefly telling Mrs. Teasdale: “All I can promise you is a Rufus over your head.

And who can forget Harpo on his Paul Revere ride, interrupted when he sees a blonde in a window? Or the scene with Harpo popping up in the bathtub together with the husband he is fleeing, none other than Edgar Kennedy?

What’s thoroughly captivating about “Duck Soup” is the total lack of any effort to be logical even though barbs are thrust at a subject as serious as warfare. The mayhem is allowed to run rampant in service of the Marx Brothers’ talent for the ridiculous. Prior to “Duck Soup” a similar approach was evident, of course, in their Paramount films “The Cocoanuts” (1929), “Animal Crackers” (1930), “Monkey Business” (1931) and “Horse Feath-

ers" (1932), but each of those had more plot. With "Duck Soup," in reaching the apex of their free-form comedy of the absurd, the Marx Brothers demonstrated the latitude that could be taken with cinema as an art form. Their work could even be related to the surrealism of Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali in their "Un Chien Andalou" (An Andalusian Dog), made in France in 1928. Playwright Eugene Ionesco, the renowned practitioner of the Theater of the Absurd, said that the three greatest influences on him were Groucho, Harpo, and Chico.

In the years that followed there would be some wonderful Marx Brothers comedy in "Room Service," "At the Circus," "Go West," "The Big Store," and to a lesser extent in "A Night in Casablanca" and "Love Happy." But there's a certain sadness when one reflects on "Duck Soup" and wonders how much creativity of the Marx Brothers was stifled by trying to blend their talent with Hollywood box-office requirements to make them more marketable to a broader audience. We'll never know.

We can trace their influence on such successors as Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and Monty Python. But one

speculates how far they might have gone in experimenting with new forms instead of reworking their familiar territory. Would they also have been drawn to more topical satire? It's noteworthy that Mussolini was angry enough with "Duck Soup" to ban it. Groucho mused in a 1946 interview with Mary Morris of the newspaper *PM*: "The movies don't recognize any real heavies in the world. You don't dare make a joke that implies anything wrong with Franco. The poor public is smothered under tons of goo."

Not with "Duck Soup" it wasn't.

*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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