

So's Your Old Man

By Steve Massa

When people think of W.C. Fields what immediately comes to mind is his nasal bray of a voice and barely audible muttered asides. It's almost always forgotten that he first appeared on stage as a mime juggler, and had a sizeable career in silent films.

After working for years with a tramp juggling act, which was silent and had comedy added to it with planned mistakes and funny reactions of anger, Fields hit big time vaudeville in 1900 when he signed with the prestigious Keith Orpheum Circuit and toured the world. For the next fifteen years, while continuing to juggle, he developed more material, such as his famous golf and pool routines, and in 1915 made the leap to Broadway when he joined the Ziegfeld Follies.

That same year brought another milestone – his first films. Two shorts, "Pool Sharks" and "His Lordship's Dilemma," were shot in Flushing, New York for the Gaumont Company's Casino Star series. Although the second film is lost, "Pool Sharks" still exists and gives a fascinating look at the thirty-five year-old Fields. He's slim, but immediately recognizable with a high top hat, white gloves, and a cane and while most of the film consists of slapping, eye-gouging, and whacking with pool cues, there are a few flashes of his black wit and dexterity with props that gives us a glimpse of the Fields to come.

Unhappy with the results of these first shorts and under pressure from Ziegfeld about the moonlighting, he gave up on films and concentrated on his stage career. In 1923 he made a huge splash in the hit Broadway show "Poppy." The character of hustler and conman Eustace McGargle became a classic Fields persona and over his career would alternate with the character of the put-upon family man. When famous director D.W. Griffith filmed it in 1925 to highlight his protégé Carol Dempster, Fields was brought along to re-create his role. Re-christened "Sally of the Sawdust," he stole the picture and was brought in to provide comic relief for Griffith's next picture "That Royle Girl" (1925). Fields made such an impression that Paramount offered him \$4,000 a week to make three pictures a year for five years, and shooting soon began at Paramount's Astoria Studio and on a month's location trip to Ocala, Florida on "It's the Old Army Game" (1926).

Next was "So's Your Old Man" (1926). Not only is it the best of his surviving silent films, but also presents the first of W.C.'s downtrodden husbands. Director Gregory La Cava came from a newspaper cartoon background, and from 1916 to 1920 made Krazy Kat and Katzenjammer Kids cartoons for Heart's International Comic Films. In the early 1920s he moved to live-action comedies, directing the Chic Sale feature "His Nibs" (1921) and a number of the two-reel All Star Comedies like "Helpful Hogan" and "So This is Hamlet" (both 1923) that were produced



by C.C. Burr and starred Charlie Murray and Raymond McKee. By 1925 La Cava had become a staff director for Paramount and was helping a number of light comedies with Richard Dix when he was tapped to work with Fields. The two became life-long friends but argued constantly, usually about their theories on comedy. It's said that the two fought so much on next year's "Running Wild" (1927) that they decided to preserve their friendship by never working together again.

"So's Your Old Man" gives Fields full scope for his comedy and also the chance to deliver deftly played dramatic moments. He has solid support from players such as Alice Joyce, Charles "Buddy" Rogers, and especially Marcia Harris as his long-suffering wife, plus much of the picture was shot on atmospheric Queens locations around the Astoria Studio. W.C. also gets his famous Follies golf routine on film which gives us a glimpse of William "Shorty" Blanche, who was Fields' valet and stage stooge during his years with the Ziegfeld Follies. "Shorty" played the troublesome caddy in the routine, a role he repeats in the film. Said to have been originally hired after Fields found out that the superstitious Florenz Ziegfeld thought that dwarves were bad luck, "Shorty" seems to have passed away somewhere around 1930 and had also appeared with his boss in "Sally of the Sawdust" and "That Royle Girl." Fields followed

this film up in rapid succession with "The Potters" and "Running Wild" (both 1927). In the spring of 1927 Paramount closed its Astoria Studio and Fields was packed off to Hollywood where he was teamed with ex-Mack Sennett comic Chester Conklin in "Two Flaming Youths" (1927), a remake of "Tillie's Punctured Romance" (1928), and "Fools for Luck" (1928). Sadly none of these three are known to survive today.

Despite being given a lot of freedom and using large amounts of his tried and true stage material, 1920s audiences didn't warm up to Fields' silent Paramount features. Although many

of them were dry runs for his later talkies classics like "It's a Gift" (1934), with "So's Your Old Man" remade as "You're Telling Me" (1934), it may have been that his humor was too dark for Roaring Twenties audiences, or perhaps it was the unappealing clip-on moustache that he brought with him from the stage. His contract had a two-year option and after "Fools for Luck," Paramount chose not to renew it. Fields bitterly went back to the stage, blaming Paramount for all the films problems, but he would soon be back for a rematch when the addition of sound made it possible to capture him in all his three-dimensional glory.

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

*Steve Massa is the author of *Lame Brains and Lunatics: The Good, The Bad, and The Forgotten of Silent Comedy*. A librarian in the *Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center*, he has organized comedy film programs for the *Museum of Modern Art*, the *Library of Congress*, the *Smithsonian Institution*, and the *Portenone Silent Film Festival*. In addition to consulting with the *Eye Film Institute*, *Netherlands* and other archives, and writing for film journals such as *Griffithiana*, he is a founding member of *Silent Cinema Presentations* which produces NYC's *Silent Clown Films Series*. Steve has also contributed essays and commentary tracks to many comedy DVD collections such as "The Forgotten Films of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle," "Harry Langdon: Lost and Found," "Kino Video's Buster Keaton: The Short Films Collection," and co-curated "The Mishaps of Musty Suffer" DVD set.*