

# STAGE

(Date?) 1937

# LAUGHING STOCK

## Common *and* Preferred



The Marx Brothers don't select their gags—you do

By TEET CARLE

Groucho Marx is washing his hands in a basin.

Then he discovers Siegfried Rumann eyeing his wrist watch. With one of his looks which speak a million words, Groucho takes off the watch and deliberately tosses it into the water.

"I'd rather have it rusty than gone," he sniffs.

Then he cocks his head to one side and shouts to someone sitting in the darkness.

"Say, Al, where are the notes on this scene?"

Three cameramen remove their eyes from the finders through which they have been desperately trying to follow Groucho during a rehearsal. Al Boasberg, the writer, drags out a notebook—the treasure book to the company. In it is contained the secret of how the Marx Brothers really select and reject comedy scenes and gags.

The notes were made during one hundred and forty performances which the comedians gave in trying out the script for *A Day at the Races* on human test tubes in five cities last summer. The notes reveal the word Groucho should use was not *gone*. Nor was it *disappear*. It was *missing*.

So, in the actual scene, Groucho says, "I'd rather have it rusty than missing."

All three words were tried out on the tour. *Gone* and *disappear* were each used forty-four times; *missing* got fifty voicings. Every time, the latter word brought the biggest laugh. Why? The Marx Brothers don't know.

It is merely one of the mysteries of comedy, a bigger mystery, says Groucho, "than who killed Cock Robin." No one, they say, knows for sure what will make people laugh. Yet they've been doing just that for some twenty-five years. With such a record, one would think that the theory of laughter can be explained by the Marxes. All right, go ask them.

"Well," says Groucho, "we read all of our jokes to Zeppo, who once was the Fourth Marx Brother but now is our agent. If he laughs, we throw out the joke."

The truth is that they rely on a "nose for comedy," a sort of sixth sense that came from experience and usually proves right for some unexplainable reason. Actually they don't select and reject jokes. They let audiences do that. It's the only safe method.

OldMagazineArticles.com

## Joke-Testing

"Comedy is hard to define and harder to script in conferences. They don't rush it; don't believe in rushing. It took eleven months to write, try out, and rehearse *A Day at the Races*.

In conferences everyone works his "nose for comedy." If all noses agree, they keep the comedy. If all turn it down, out it goes. Yet they never cry, "It's awful." Instead, they say, "I don't think it will go, but we can try it." If opinions are divided, they set forth to make "comedy guinea-pigs" of laymen.

For example, in *A Night at the Opera*, Groucho sits down in the dining-room of a steamer and asks for French pastry.

"But," protests the waiter, "this is an Italian boat."

"All right," snaps Groucho, "what is the rate of exchange?"

You never heard that joke in the picture. Groucho told it to a mail carrier, his gardener, and the boy who delivers groceries. None of them laughed. The joke wasn't "down to earth." Few people have traveled on boats. An alternate joke was slipped in. Eleven out of eleven butchers laughed, and on the road seventy-eight audiences roared.

The joke went:

**GROUCHO:** Have you any milk-fed chickens?

**WAITER:** Certainly.

**GROUCHO:** Squeeze the milk out of one and bring me a glassful.

Sometimes the Marxes are fooled in their testing with the public. Not often, however. When they were preparing *Duck Soup*, Groucho got an idea. It was the line about stuffing spaghetti with bicarbonate of soda and "thereby causing and curing indigestion at the same time."

On the way to the studio, before one story huddle, he sprang it on a filling-station worker named Hilton and got a dead-pan. It was such a total failure that Groucho never even mentioned it to the others, although he couldn't figure why it had flopped.

Several months later, after *Duck Soup* was finished, he stopped into the same station; Hilton came forward. "You know, Mr. Marx," he said, "I've laughed a hundred times over that joke you told me about spaghetti. It didn't register when you told it because I had such a terrible toothache all I could think about was that tooth."

After months of digging for new and original material, arguing every line—in fact, every word—and every bit of action, the Brothers Marx eventually get their script into shape for what will serve as an hour of stage entertainment.

Then comes the real selection and rejection process.

Standing as much like a sack of flour as is possible, Groucho would crack forth with such a line as "Marry me and we'll dine in any restaurant you can afford." There was none of that eyebrow business or eye-rolling trickery. For all purposes, he might as well have been an amateur making his stage debut.

On the recent trip this amazed writers Robert Pirosh and George Seaton, making their first trip with the Marxes.

"What was the matter with you, Groucho?" they asked after the first time the Mad Marx-

### Joke-Testing

man did that. "You didn't give it a thing."

"I didn't intend to," Groucho replied. "I know I can get a laugh on almost any line with my eyebrows or eyes. But I was testing the line and not my brows."

Another word example may stand repeating. To Chico, in one scene, Groucho retorts, "That's the most nauseating proposal I've ever had." How important would you think the word *nauseating*? Is it universally understood—by the children who attend matinees just as much as by the stay-up-lates who catch the ten o'clock performance? It is important and it is understood. Groucho tried *obnoxious*, *revolting*, *disgusting*, *offensive*, *repulsive*, *disagreeable*, *distasteful*, and a half dozen other adjectives time and again. The last two words never got more than a titter. The others were received with varied amounts of laughter. But *nauseating* brought a roar. Do you know why? The Marx Brothers don't and little do they care. They only know that audiences have told them so.

Can this audience reaction be relied upon? Somewhere you may have heard that what's funny in Des Moines won't be in Galveston. Well, you've heard wrong. Comedy knows no geographical limitations, the Marxes have learned. The sticks are no more, and comedy is a universal language.

In leaping from Chicago to Cleveland last summer, the comedians almost went crazy. For one day, they thought this theory all wrong.

By the time they left Chicago, *A Day at the Races* looked set. They had practically an hour of laughs. But through four shows in Cleveland the next week, the act died. The number who laughed seemed like those answering a roll call of Civil War veterans.

The Marxes beat their heads, stomped on their wigs. They called Hollywood. They shouted they were failures. They ranted at Chicago. A big city had fooled them. It *was* true that comedy was provincial. And after all these years to learn that. They'd write the whole act over.

Then someone offered a suggestion. Could it be that the audience couldn't hear the jokes? There was no loud-speaking system, you know. Hurriedly, a system was installed. The next day, the act brought a solid hour of laughs; folks could hear.

There is the theory that everyone is a Marx Brother at heart. They enact our suppressed desires. Harpo is the Little Imp in all of us. It's a vicarious thrill to watch them.

"But," you may shout, rising up out of your overstuffed chair, "I never have a yen to leap upon an innocent bystander and tear him limb from limb."

They learned that audiences may laugh at but resent such action. If you'll recall, in *A Night at the Opera* you were on the Marxes' side. They were sympathetic. Everyone they mistreated had it coming to him. If a fellow steals your girl or your job, you have a tough time thinking of something bad enough to do to him. The Marxes think those things up for you.

It is the villains who get the works in Marx pictures. You say "it jolly well serves them right" as characters, but you may pity them as

### Joke-Testing

actors. Take Esther Muir, for instance. For one scene, she has a total of two entire barrels of paste dumped over her head and thrown in her face. But you will applaud because if, according to the story, she succeeds in her scheme, the heroine and singing hero, Maureen O'Sullivan and Allan Jones, are going to be very unhappy.

It's a tough job to make insanity realistic, but they do it. At least they start scenes sanely. When it is beyond control, they go berserk. But they never do the impossible. In *A Day at the Races*, there is a dousing scene with a bottle of fizz-water. A bottle was tried out. It spouted for two minutes only. That's all the scene is permitted to run.

It was suggested that Chico use a joke to the effect that his wife had just bought him six new pipes and thrown away his old ones. Pipe smokers would laugh heartily, but how many others? The joke wasn't used.



More universal is the quip by Groucho, "The picnic's off. We haven't any red ants." Haven't we all been there? That joke was topped by Chico who replied, "I know an Indian who's got a couple of red aunts." Pun? Yes, but one everybody can understand.

The world at large imagines it dislikes opera. So the Marxes didn't hesitate about having Groucho say, "I told you to drive slowly. On account of you, I nearly heard the opera. It's the narrowest escape I ever had in my life."

Even the Marx idiocy sounds realistic. We probably wouldn't, but we *could* say with Chico, "No, I'm not Italian; I just look that way because my mother and father are Italians."

And it isn't only the women who laugh to hear about a wife who got a washing-machine for Christmas but wants it returned because "every time I get into it, the paddles knock me down."

They have a rule: "Will it be understood by a seven-year-old child?" It's not that they think everyone who enjoys them has a mind of a seven-year-old. But if they strive for that point, they are sure of maximum comprehension. They will take care of getting in some mature tricks along with the gags.

It was a funny crack that was written for

## Joke-Testing

It was a funny crack that was written for Groucho to say to Rumann, the doctor. "Aren't you a fugitive from a mattress?" he was to say, eyeing the medico's full beard.

Out it went. They couldn't say with certainty how many know what a fugitive is.

The brothers realize they are running a risk of gag-lifting in their tryouts, but there is little they can do about this. The value of audience reaction far offsets the chance of losing a good joke.

For instance, in the examination scene, Harpo and Chico rush in. The manager of the sanitarium shouts, "Where did these men come from?"

"I don't know," says Groucho. "They must have come out of a test tube."

That version, tested in the theatre, seemed to lack general appeal. This was substituted:

MANAGER: Who sent for these men?

GROUCHO: You don't have to send for them. Just rub a lamp and they appear.

How many millions do you think remember Aladdin and his wonderful lamp far more clearly than the test tube in a school laboratory?

Harpo has one major rule regarding his pantomime. He won't use a gag which requires a close-up or insert to explain. The writers had a funny introduction for him wherein he is shown snagging a hot dog

By chance, the market was still crashing when the film came out. Then there was the time in *A Night at the Opera* when Groucho asked Chico, "Do you know what duplicates are?" "Sure," replied Chico, "those five kids up in Canada."

Not much of a gamble, you say, but just suppose some woman had brought forth sextuplets before the picture came out.

Just remember this last incident. The funniest scene the Marxes are credited with doing was that stateroom scene in *A Night at the Opera*. It was never intended to be funny, but was inserted merely to give an excuse for Groucho being in the hall dressed in shorts.

On tour, everyone was ready to toss it out, when along came a "supper show." That's the low-ebb performance when the Marx Brothers take a mental shot in the arm by doing wild things for their own amusement.

As a mad joke on everyone, the comedians began shoving writers, stage hands, electricians, innocent bystanders, chorus-girls and boys—anyone within grabbing distance—into the tiny set. The audience started laughing and as more people were pushed in, the louder they laughed. It became a panic.

Suddenly Harpo leaned over to Chico.

"I think we've got something here," he whispered.

