

## SESSION ONE



# Assault on Authority: *Animal Crackers*

Feature film, 1930

Producer: Paramount Pictures

Director: Victor Herman

Screenplay: Morrie Ryskind, from a musical play by George S. Kaufman, Bert Kalman, Morrie Ryskind, and Harry Ruby

Capt. Spaulding: Groucho Marx

Signor Ravelli: Chico Marx

The Professor: Harpo Marx

Jamison: Zeppo Marx

Mrs. Rittenhouse: Margaret Dumont

Arabella: Lillian Roth

John Parker: Hal Thompson

Mrs. Whitehead: Margaret Irving

Hives: Robert Grieg

Roscoe Chandler: Louis Sorin

Length: 98 minutes

Loved around the world, the classic Marx Brothers films manage to keep making us laugh. Viewers of Marx Brothers films may complain that they miss some jokes and gags because they're already laughing too hard to hear.

One of the most successful comedy teams in the history of American stage and film, the Marxes were five brothers in all. The three eldest – known as Chico (Leonard, 1886-1961), Harpo (Adolph, also known as Arthur, 1888-1964), and Groucho (Julius Henry, 1890-1977) – comprised the core of the team, which occasionally included Zeppo (Herbert, 1901-1979); another brother, Gummo (Milton, 1893-1977) did not appear in their films. Their energetic artistry combined slapstick, burlesque, expert delivery, insult, wit, commotion, and great timing.

The Marx Brothers developed their comic personas during years in vaudeville and on Broadway, and their characters were well-defined by the time they began making films. Each brother had, in addition to his nickname, a standard costume, comic personality, and style of humor.

Groucho, wearing a painted-on mustache, glasses, and chomping a cigar, usually wore an oversized tailcoat and performed exaggerated walks and dance steps. Mixed in with his withering put-downs were puns, ranging from the clever to the farfetched, and sly sexual innuendo, usually delivered with eyebrows raised over a broad, leering grin.

Chico, in an Old-World pointed hat and double-breasted jacket, usually played an Italian character who spoke in comically accented English with occasional outbursts of pseudo-Italian. In their films, Chico served as the more genial and sillier foil to Groucho and was usually trying to hustle money.

Harpo, always dressed in a curly blond wig and

**Captain Spaulding:** *Hello, I must be going. I cannot stay, I came to say I must be going. I'm glad I came, but just the same, I must be going.*

**Mrs. Rittenhouse:** *For my sake you must stay. If you should go away, you'd spoil this party I am throwing.*

**Captain Spaulding:** *I'll stay a week or two, I'll stay the summer through, but I am telling you, I must be going.*

crumpled top hat, never spoke; he communicated by honking horns, through pantomime, and by pulling an outrageous assortment of unlikely objects from his baggy costumes. With the wide-eyed glee of a child, he grabbed people, picked pockets, devoured food, jumped on tables, and stopped whatever he was doing to chase after a pretty young woman.

Zeppo, who appeared in the first five of the Marx Brothers' films, usually played a romantic juvenile or functioned as Groucho's attendant. Although Zeppo had no comic persona, he often served as the liaison between his brothers' characters and the rest of the ensemble.

The Marx Brothers were the American-born sons of Samuel Marx, an immigrant Jewish tailor, and his wife, Minna Schoenberg, whose parents and brother were entertainers in Europe. Both their parents came to the States as teenagers, their father from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France, in 1878, their mother from Germany, in 1880. The brothers grew up in Yorkville, a neighborhood on the upper east side of Manhattan populated largely by German-speaking immigrants, both Jewish and gentile.

At their mother's initiative, the boys studied music and pursued a career in vaudeville, first as a juvenile musical act, later as a comedy team, and spent 25 years traveling around the country. At first they were known as "Six Musical Mascots"; their mother was the sixth member. In 1924 they moved from the vaudeville circuit to the Broadway stage, where they appeared in a series of shows, including *The Cocoanuts* (1925) and *Animal Crackers* (1928), both written by George S. Kaufman. They made their film debut in the screen version of *The Cocoanuts* (1929), which was the first in a string of thirteen comedies in which they starred, first at Paramount and later at MGM. Following *Love Happy* (1950), the last film they made together as a team, Chico virtually retired, while Harpo made occasional guest appearances on television. Groucho continued to appear in films, on radio, and as the host of the television game show *You Bet Your Life* (1950-1961), in which he brought his brand of comic insult into American homes.

*Animal Crackers* is a spoof of drawing-room romantic comedies set among the upper classes – in this case, the

**Roscoe Chandler:** *What do you think about South America? I'm going there soon.*

**Captain Spaulding:** *Where are you going?*

**Roscoe Chandler:** *Uruguay.*

**Captain Spaulding:** *You go your way. I'll go mine.*

Long Island estate of the wealthy Mrs. Rittenhouse. As in other Marx Brothers films, there is a plot of intrigue – here, the theft of a valuable painting – that links the characters and organizes the action. The story is punctuated by exchanges of jokes, physical clowning, and sight gags much like comic vaudeville routines. The action of the films is also expanded or diverted for musical interludes – Groucho's comic singing, Chico's piano-playing, and Harpo's virtuosity on the harp.

Although most of the characters they played were not explicitly Jewish, the Marx Brothers have been considered by many critics to embody many aspects of Jewish humor. They were, in all their films, outsiders not only challenging the establishment but turning it upside down with their zany antics. The speech of Groucho was a rapid-fire patter full of illogic and puns, while Chico delivered fractured, immigrant, half-Italian English. In *Animal Crackers*, the Marx Brothers' trademark onslaught of authority featured two main characters who were not only impostors but, a close viewing of the film suggests, Jewish.

The film was made during the Depression, one year after the stock market crashed. Many Jewish immigrants had recently arrived in the United States, fleeing persecution in Europe. At the same time, earlier generations of immigrants were becoming more Americanized, leaving the old neighborhoods for new vistas and new opportunities.

### **A Comic Assault on Authority**

An essential feature of this and all the great Marx Brothers films is its outrageous bombardment of figures and institutions of authority. In *Animal Crackers* the attack is directed at the wealthy New York social aristocracy who spend their weekends visiting the estates of their friends, where they enjoy such activities as riding horses and playing bridge, and hobnob with other rich, influential people. The film also parodies romantic musical comedies, often set among the idle rich and usually involving complicated plots of intrigue entwined with romantic complications, all of which are happily resolved. Like the play on which it is based, *Animal Crackers* takes place entirely in one location – Mrs. Rittenhouse's estate. It is

directed much more like a play than a film, the actors often playing to the camera as if it were a live audience; there are few close-ups and many lengthy shots with little or no camera movement.

The opening scene of *Animal Crackers* combines its comedy of assault with a parody of musical comedy, by first introducing the viewer to the romantic, escapist world in which such plays are conventionally set, and then using the intrusion of the characters played by the Marx Brothers as a means of disrupting, mocking, and eventually destroying all sense of order and artistic logic. Carried on a sedan chair by four men in “African” costumes, Groucho, who plays Captain Spaulding, supposedly a famous explorer, enters and begins to argue with one of the porters about his fare, as if he were getting out of a taxi in New York City.

Groucho insults his hostess and sings “Hello, I must be going.” Chico, in the role of Signor Emmanuel Ravelli, a musician, enters, and spars verbally with Groucho in a series of non sequiturs, absurdities, double entendres, and puns. Next comes Chico’s assistant, The Professor, played by Harpo, who “speaks” by tooting a horn, whistling, and blowing smoke rings, and pulls out of his underwear (all he is wearing under his cape) a pistol and rifle, then shoots at the guests and other sundry objects. When an attractive young woman enters, Harpo drops everything and chases her off.

*Animal Crackers* elaborates on this pattern as it moves between scenes that advance its complicated plot (involving the theft of Chandler’s painting, as well as the romance of Arabella and John) and scenes that showcase the comic and musical talents of the Marx Brothers. The Marx Brothers’ rebelliousness extends even to attacks on the conventions of the film medium itself. At one point in *Animal Crackers*, Groucho turns away from Chico and speaks directly into the camera, saying, “Well, all the jokes can’t be good. You’ve got to expect that once in a while.”

This film, as well as the other Marx Brothers films, were intended for a general audience. As humorist S.J. Perelman, who wrote material for them, explained, if jokes seemed obscure, Groucho would ask: “What’ll this mean to the barber in Peru?” The prototypical figure, “whose

**Captain Spaulding:** *One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas, I don't know.*

funny bone the Marxes sought to tickle,” was not from South America, but from Peru, Indiana – “a Midwestern square.”

### **If These Were the Mahoney Brothers, Would This Be Jewish Comedy?**

Groucho Marx would say he was “not a professional Jew.” He was not someone who saw “everything from a Jewish point of view.”

The extent to which the Marx Brothers’ comedy may be considered Jewish humor has been the subject of some debate. A critic once described Groucho Marx as the “symbolic embodiment of all persecuted Jews for 2,000 years,” to which Groucho reportedly replied, “What sort of goddamned review is that?”

In most of the Marx Brothers’ films, there are few, if any, direct references to Jews or Jewish culture or any explicitly Jewish characters. Nevertheless, many consider their humor to be implicitly and even archetypically Jewish. Critic Patricia Erens stated that the Marx Brothers’ comedy “reflects a Jewish urban attitude toward life, a sense of street-smart language learned on the Lower East Side, and linguistic tours de force derived from Talmudic debates.” Sig Altman called Groucho “a recognizable Jewish con man” and his brand of humor that “of a certain ironic type of Jew still not fully at home in the secular Western World.” In the view of James Yaffe, “Nothing could be more Jewish than [the Marx Brothers’] desperate zany insults, designed to deflate their pompous enemies but eventually making nothing but trouble for themselves.” Michael Wood contends that the Marx Brothers are “a set of immigrants who refused to accept the customs of the new country, delegates of everyone’s resistance to the culture that is swallowing them up.” And Delia Temes observes, “Though Groucho’s words are English, the intonation is often the rhythmic singsong associated with Yiddish jokes.”

In *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe writes that the Marx Brothers diverged from earlier Jewish entertainers in that they weren’t merely interested in pleasing their audience; they “split open the conventions of stage entertainment into extremes of social satire and chaotic farce.” Even their silliness, he explained, had a point. “In

their films the dissembled world is treated with disrespect, an attitude close to the traditional feeling among Jews that the whole elaborate structure of gentile power is merely trivial.”

*Animal Crackers*, in the view of one critic, is in many respects a Jewish work, more so than the films that followed it. Charles Musser asserts that *Animal Crackers* represents a case of “sustained role-playing,” in which “the Marx Brothers are Jewish hustlers insinuating themselves into WASP high society.” He calls Mrs. Rittenhouse’s guests “a group of dissembling Jews who assume an array of non-Jewish disguises.” For example, when introduced as “Captain Spaulding, the African Explorer,” Groucho mutters “Did someone call me schnorrer?” and faints at the sight of a caterpillar. At one point in the film, after the Marx Brothers sing a barbershop quartet, Groucho announces, “This program is coming to you from The House of David.” Roscoe Chandler, the other distinguished guest, supposedly an art connoisseur, is unmasked as Abie the Fish Peddler from Czechoslovakia. Musser considers *Animal Crackers* to be an “aggressive assault on the exclusionary policies being applied to Jews by WASP-dominated universities” and other institutions. Groucho’s insults of Mrs. Rittenhouse are not only misogynistic (which present-day audiences may find offensive), but, he says, “they also reciprocate the insults and humiliations that were part of the Jewish immigrant experience.” Because the Jewish references, symbols, and themes were subtly interwoven with the mad, rapid-fire comedy, he argues, “the Jewish-centered humor could remain invisible to the uninitiated and be attributed to eccentricity.” Non-Jewish audiences, like Mrs. Rittenhouse, could fail to realize the players’ ethnic origins or the seriousness with which the established order is being mocked.

Other critics have pointed to the importance of the Marx Brothers in the development of American comedy. Scholar Gerald Mast, for example, writes in *A Short History of the Movies* that “The Marx Brothers films revealed the key elements of American sound comedy – comic physical types, suited to their comic personalities, suited to the physical – comic situations, suited to the verbal wit. Comic talkies had to move as well as talk.” Despite their

immigrant origins, the Marx Brothers never looked back, as critic William Keough explains in *Punchlines*: “It was America they always cared about and wanted to ‘beat’ in more ways than one. . . . Certainly, ‘Marxist humor’ was not only wild and wooly, but rough, and provides another link in that particularly American chain of violent comedy.” Keough sees the Marx Brothers’ rebelliousness as an appropriate response to American life during the years of the Great Depression – a response not unique to Jewish comedians.

The Marx Brothers were part of the first American-born generation of children of the immigrants who began arriving in great numbers during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Their comedy encapsulated an anarchy that is, in one critic’s words, “the voiced solution to the immigrant dilemma of having to choose between the parent culture and the adoptive culture.” Through their odd, inappropriate clothes, their mocking presence in settings of wealth and respectability, and their motley accents and manic wordplay, the Marx Brothers spoke for – and to – the out-of-place, powerless newcomers and their children. They succeeded in getting the last laugh.

**Captain Spaulding:** *Didn't you ever see a babeas corpus?*

**Signor Ravelli:** *No, but I seen Abie's Irish Rose.*

#### **While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ When the film opens, what kind of story do you expect will unfold?
- ◆ What is each brother’s distinctive comic persona or character?
- ◆ Are there any characters who appear to you to be in some way Jewish?
- ◆ Are there any situations, jokes, verbal expressions, or dialogue that seem to you to concern or to be of special interest to Jews, either directly or indirectly?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ Who are the “outsiders” in this film? Do they see themselves that way?
- ◆ How do the brothers complement each other as a comic team?
- ◆ What aspects of *Animal Crackers* seem relevant to the experience of American Jews at the time it was made? Today?
- ◆ How do you think this film might have affected the Americans who saw it in 1930, the first year of the Great Depression?
- ◆ What significance might the unmasking of the art dealer Roscoe Chandler as “Abie the fish peddler” from Czechoslovakia have had for immigrants in the film’s first audiences?
- ◆ Why has this film remained popular, sixty years later?
- ◆ What is offensive to some people about the Marx Brothers’ humor?
- ◆ To many of the guests, Colonel Spaulding’s jokes seem foreign, incomprehensible. What does it signify when people don’t share humor? Can those gaps be bridged?
- ◆ Can you generalize from the film about how the Marx Brothers saw the world? Their role in the world?

**FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES**

1. Watch some of the other Marx Brothers movies. How does the humor in *Animal Crackers* apply to other films? In what other ways are the Marx Brothers portrayed as social outsiders? How do they play with the conventions of musical comedy, vaudeville, and film as part of their humor?

2. Compare the comedies of the Marx Brothers to those of some of their Hollywood contemporaries. How does the Marxes' combination of verbal and physical humor compare with that of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy? How does their mockery of war in *Duck Soup* (1933) compare with Charlie Chaplin's satire of Hitler's fascism in *The Great Dictator* (1940)?

3. Look for reruns of Groucho's television quiz show, *You Bet Your Life* (syndicated under the title *Best of Groucho*). Consider to what extent his comic persona from the earlier movies continues in this new setting, and to what extent it changes. How might these factors account for this change: the passage of time? the different genre? the different medium? the fact that he is performing without any of his brothers?

4. For books by and about the Marx Brothers, see "For Further Reading." The Marx Brothers are also the subject of two Broadway musicals: *Minnie 's Boys* (1970) and *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine* (1980), which includes a parody of their films.

5. Read *The Groucho Letters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967). Does the humor work as well on paper as through personal delivery?

**FOR FURTHER READING**

- ◆ Adamson, Joe. Groucho, Harpo, Chico and Sometimes Zeppo: A Celebration of the Marx Brothers. New York: Touchstone, 1973.
- ◆ Anobile, Richard J., ed. Why a Duck? Visual and Verbal Gems from the Marx Brothers' Movies. New York: Avon, 1971.
- ◆ Arce, Hector. Groucho. New York: Putnam, 1979.
- ◆ Chandler, Charlotte. Hello, I Must Be Going. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978.
- ◆ Gehring, Wes D. The Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography. New York: Greenwood, 1987.
- ◆ Marx, Groucho. Groucho and Me. New York: Geis, 1959.
- ◆ Marx, Groucho. The Grouchophile: An Illustrated Life. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976.
- ◆ Marx, Groucho. The Groucho Letters: Letters to and from Groucho Marx. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967; 1987.
- ◆ Marx, Groucho, and Richard J. Anobile. The Marx Brothers Scrapbook. New York: Darien House, 1973; Grosset and Dunlap, 1974.
- ◆ Marx, Harpo, with Rowland Barber. Harpo Speaks! New York: Random House, 1961; Limelight, 1985.
- ◆ Musser, Charles. "Role-Playing and Film Comedy." In Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema, ed. Lester D. Friedman. Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press, 1991.
- ◆ Perelman, S.J. The Last Laugh. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981.
- ◆ Zimmerman, Paul D., and Burt Goldblatt. The Marx Brothers at the Movies. New York: Putnam, 1968.