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## The Marx Bros' *Animal Crackers*: A Classic For Our Time

by Barbara Nord

The Marx Bros. *Animal Crackers* may be the best comedy movie ever made. Now over sixty years old, it contains comic material that is so good it has become a classic in our time.

Originally done as a play, and later made into a movie in 1930, it was the perfect vehicle for the Marx Bros., particularly for Groucho. *Animal Crackers*, a musical comedy written by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind with lyrics and music by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, was first performed on the New York stage by the Marx Bros. on October 23, 1928. It featured the inimitable dowager, Margaret Dumont, who was the perfect foil for the Marx Bros. and was to appear in several subsequent movies with them.

The play was a great success. On opening night, New York *Times* critic Brooks Atkinson wrote: "Here come the Marx Bros. again with their uproarious slapstick comedy in a new fury of puns and gibes . . . most of those who had squeezed into the bulging theater last evening were obviously in the flattering mood of expecting the Marx Bros. to redeem in one evening all the dullness of the current theatrical season. (They) . . . were not disappointed."

*Animal Crackers* ran for two years on Broadway. Groucho (in sun helmet and tails) had the starring role of Captain Spaulding, a famous explorer who returns from Africa, and is the guest of honor at a fashionable Long Island party at the home of Mrs. Ritten-

house (Margaret Dumont). He delivers a madcap chronicle of his adventures of Africa:

Groucho: Well sir, we left New York drunk and early one morning of Feb. 2nd. After fifteen days on the water and six on the boat, we finally arrived on the shores of Africa . . .

From the day of our arrival we led an active life. The first morning saw us up at six, breakfasted and back in bed at seven. This was our routine for the first three months. We finally got so we were back in bed at 6:30.

One morning I was sitting in front of the cabin . . . when I bagged six tigers.

Dumont: Oh Captain, Captain, did you catch six tigers?

Groucho: I bagged them—I bagged them to go away but they hung around all afternoon. They were the most persistent tigers I've ever seen.

Chico plays Senior Emanuel Ravelli, a musician, and Harpo is the professor. Groucho and Chico make some insane verbal transitions together.

Groucho: I used to know a fellow by the name of Emanuel Ravelli who looked like you.

Chico: I am Emanuel Ravelli!

Groucho: No wonder you look like him. But I still insist there's a resemblance.

Chico: Ha Ha! He thinks I look alike!

Groucho: Well, if you do it's a tough break for both of you.

As this scene comes to a close, Dumont asks the butler to remove the professor's

(Harpo) hat and coat, which leaves Harpo standing hideous in trunks!

During *Animal Crackers'* two year run on Broadway, you could be sure that the performance did not get stale. The Marx Bros. did not strictly adhere to the written word. Particularly Groucho, who was constantly ad-

libing, using topical humor of the day. If something did not get a laugh, it would be thrown out. Many people would come to see the show three or four times, just to see what Groucho would come up with, or to hear the jokes they missed because of the laughter. By the time the show had finished its run on Broadway, it had evolved into a classic. Every joke had been tried out, and everything worked. When it came time to make the movie, they basically filmed the play. A nice added attraction to the movie version was actress Lillian Roth, who played the love interest. She was at the height of her beauty and popularity, and sang a wonderful song called "Why Am I So Romantic."

There is so much that is appealing about a



Margaret Dumont with Groucho Marx in *Animal Crackers*



A Night at the Opera. Sig Rumann, Margaret Dumont, and Groucho

Marx Bros. movie for many different people. Groucho's humor can be very intellectual, with his topical fast talking jargon and puns. Harpo, who never speaks, is full of wide eyed innocence as he breaks every rule of society, and Chico, is the charming con artist who exudes warmth and personality. There is no violence, and no dirty language. The comedy is on a very high level. There is no need for censorship, and Groucho always prided himself that he didn't have to stoop to using foul language to get a laugh. The musical numbers with Chico shooting the piano keys, and Harpo playing beautiful glissandos on the harp, are a sheer delight.

Among the other Marx Bros. movies, *Duck Soup*, *Monkey Business*, *A Day at the Races*, and *A Night at the Opera* are also available on video tape, and are well worth watching. However, in my opinion, these do not come up to the level of *Animal Crackers*. I am very grateful that *Animal Crackers* is now available on video tape for us to enjoy. In over sixty years time, the film hasn't lost any of its comic brilliance. It just needs to be taken off the shelf!