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"ANIMAL CRACKERS" (Paramount, 1930) Directed by Victor Heerman
From the play by George S. Kaufman, Morris Ryskind, Harry Ruby and
Bert Kalmar; scenario and dialogue, Morris Ryskind and Pierre Collings;
camera: George Folsey. 10 reels.

With The Four Marx Brothers, Lillian Roth, Margaret Dumont, Lewis Sorin, Gerry
Goff, Margaret Irving, Robert Grieg, Edward Metcalf, Hal Thompson,
Katheryn Reece.

For years, "Cocoanuts" used to be the most elusive "lost" Marx Brothers film;
now the distinction has passed to "Animal Crackers", which had its last US
showing almost 20 years ago, and which is held off tv and theatrical revival
for a number of alleged or actual reasons, including sub-standard sound quality
and legal complications on rights.

With less sight gags than usual, it has also has less of a "story" than usual -
if that is possible. It's little more than a single situation, something of
a nightmarish dress rehearsal, sans character or plot development, for
Kaufman's later "The Man Who Came to Dinner". It soon develops into a series
of insane and unmotivated verbal exchanges. Groucho's onslaughts against
Margaret Dumont are among the longest, best and most merciless he's ever
given us. And those long surrealistic "discussions" that begin nowhere and
retrogress from befuddlement to idiocy are also some of the most enjoyable
that the comics have ever done, with less outrageous punning than usual. And
when there are puns, they're usually quite brilliant ones -- as with Groucho's
assertion that he prefers shooting elephants in Alabama because the Tuscaloosa
there! Groucho's leering sexual innuendoes are wildly unhibited too, and
the double-entendres, to quote Oscar Wilde, are so doubtful that there is no
doubt at all!

Basically "Animal Crackers" is a matter of sustained patter, with occasional
moments out for song -- from Robert Grieg in the Lubitsch manner, and from
Lillian Roth in her own manner. The film does rather run out of steam at
the midway point -- the insanity remains, but it becomes repetitions rather
than innovational insanity. And it's more of a show and less of a film than
any of their other vehicles. But Marx Brothers fanciers will surely offer
no complaints. Non-Marx Brothers fanciers shouldn't be here tonight, and
will deserve all they get! The sound quality is below-standard, especially
when characters move out of microphone range, but luckily all of the Marxian
exchanges are done in close takes, and even at its weakest the sound is
acceptable. You can help it along by keeping coughings, floor-scrappings,
mutterings and analyses of "Red Desert" down to a minimum.

----- Wm.K.Everson -----
~~Friday February 18th has been set as the date for the next Film Group meeting --
out at Bob Lee's theatre in Nutley, N.J. The program will include some 35mm
silent Polish film, 8mm silent German, and 16mm of indeterminate origin.
More details later -- or from Bob Lee.~~