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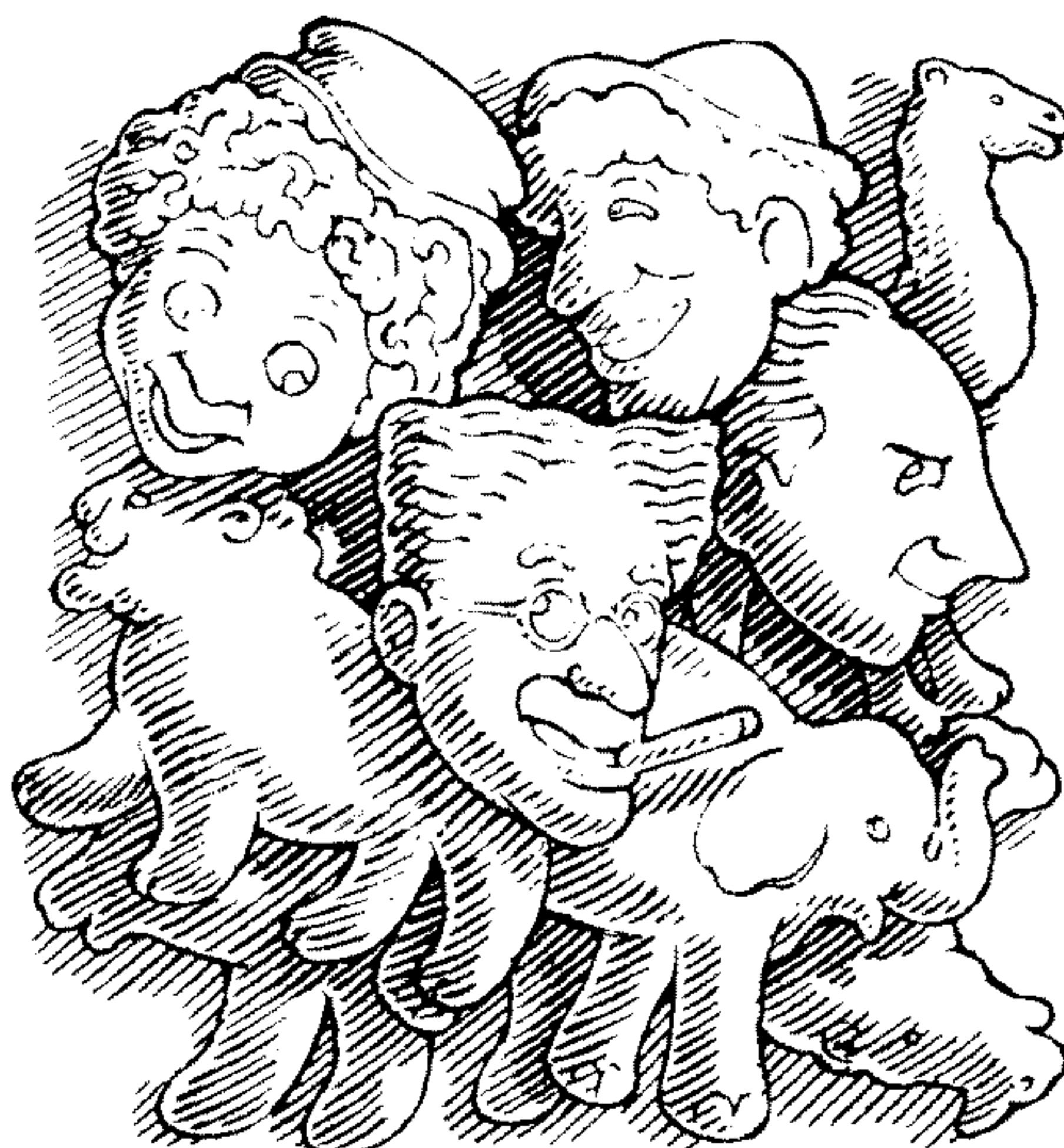
Movies/Judith Crist

WHERE ARE YOU, CAPTAIN SPAULDING, NOW THAT WE NEED YOU?

“...Some of the *Animal Crackers* footage has disappeared, but what's left shows what the Marx Bros. were about at their peak...”

“You go Uruguay and I'll go mine. . . . I'm fascinated—right on the arm. . . . Have you ever seen a habeas corpus? No, but I seen Habeas Irish Rose. . . . The door swung open and a Fig Newton walked in. . . . Pardon me while I have a *Strange Interlude*: How happy I could be with either of these two if both of them just went away. . . . What this country needs today is a 7-cent nickel. . . . Shall we get married? That's bigamy! Of course it's big of me. . . . What? From Africa to here, a dollar-eighty-five? I told you not to take me through Australia! . . . You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, which doesn't say much for you. . . .” And so it goes.

All those superbly awful lines which have haunted the back of our brains from childhood on are now legally back for the hearing, with the first legitimate release since 1956 of the Marx Bros.' *Animal Crackers*. And Captain Spaulding (also known as Captain Yard of Scotland Spaulding), Signor Ravelli (a musician whose rate for playing is \$10, \$12 for not playing, \$15 for rehearsing—and for not rehearsing, “You can't afford it—if we donta rehearse, we donta play and that runs into money”), the Professor (chasing blondes and shaking hands to the tune of stolen silverware gushing from his sleeves), and Horatio Jamison (the secretary instructed to “make two carbon copies of the letter, throw the original away, and then throw the copies away and just send the stamp air-mail”)—otherwise Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo—are rampant in one of the least “movie” and most Marx of their films. Twenty-three of the original 98 minutes of the movie the brothers made at the old Astoria Studios in 1930, while they were still appearing in the



original stage version on Broadway, have disappeared in the course of the film's withdrawal from circulation while the legalisms of the movie rights were debated. But what's left demonstrates with startling purity what the Marx Bros. were all about at the peak of their powers.

Animal Crackers doesn't bear discussion in movie terms. Despite a “screenplay” by Morris Ryskind, based on the musical play by George S. Kaufman and Ryskind, with Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby providing the music and lyrics, the film is little more than a photographed stage play, with Victor Heerman's direction primitive at best. What shines through, however, is the Kaufman-Ryskind wit that the brothers made so authoritatively their own, and the purities of their particular skills, presented forthrightly with a stage setting's restrictions, without supplementary camerawork for diversion. And how young and fresh everyone is—not the least Margaret Dumont, so very lovely a young woman,

as the foil supreme, and even Lillian Roth as ingenue and perfectly dreadful actress! The plot, typical of the era's Broadway musicals, neither submits to nor merits description; it's an all-star vehicle and what you get are Groucho's triumphant monologues, Chico's delightful malapropisms, Har-

po's faunlike madness, and Zeppo's standby good humor. New generations may well miss many of the then-topical or “in” references (the basing of the Roscoe Chandler ex-fish-peddler-millionaire character on Otto Kahn, the *Strange Interlude* takeoff, the Texas Guinan and “companionate marriage” bits), but the classics—the social satire, the brilliant takeoffs on bridge, art, explorers, after-dinner speakers, business letters, and lots more—are there to be revealed in. It would indeed, as Groucho notes, be a better world for children if the parents had to eat the spinach.

After *Animal Crackers*, the Marx Bros. departed for Hollywood and didn't rejoin Kaufman and Ryskind until their triumphant *A Night at the Opera*, in 1935. But the purity and peak of talent, as noted, are to be seen in the 1930 movie, in all its primary form—what cineastes would call a root film. It's what turned us into Marxian addicts. So hurrah indeed for Captain Spaulding—and everyone else on hand.