

FAMILY MATINEES

Saturday and Sunday afternoons

DUCK SOUP

Saturday, January 15, 2011

12:30 p.m.

1933, 68 min.

35mm print source: Universal Pictures.

Directed by Leo McCarey. Screenplay and songs by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby. Produced by Herman J. Mankiewicz. Photographed by Henry Sharp. Production design by Hans Dreier and W. B. Ihnen. Edited by LeRoy Stone.

Principal cast: Groucho Marx (as Rufus T. Firefly), Harpo Marx (Pinky), Chico Marx (Chicolini), Zeppo Marx (Lt. Bob Roland), Margaret Dumont (as Mrs. Gloria Teasdale), Raquel Torres (Vera Marcal), Louis Calhern (Trentino), Edmund Breese (Zander), Edgar Kennedy (street vendor).

From *The Marx Brothers* by William Wolf, Pyramid, 1975:

Duck Soup, the Marx Brothers' last film for Paramount, looms as among the most important in their careers. It is a pivotal picture, which reveals the social satire of which they were capable, and seeing it again raises anew the question of why this avenue of expansion was closed to them. The picture is now a special favorite of Marx aficionados and for very good reason. It is surrealistic comedy which neatly blends barbs at government, charlatan officials, and diplomatic intrigue, with the usual Marxian mayhem, and it was made at a time when its comments had relevance to the international scene in which Adolf Hitler was gathering power.

The comedy, which Groucho, in retrospect, called the best they made for Paramount, should have excited those shaping the film industry into recognizing new facets of the Marx talents. But despite their fame, the brothers were up against the same commercial dogmas others had to grapple with. *Duck Soup* went against the conventional desire for pictures with clear-cut story lines, the kind of film the public was being programmed to enjoy.

Satire has always been a virtually dirty word in Hollywood. Anything that smacks of intellectualism has mostly been shunned by executives who find "entertainment" a more magical word. Therefore, one must take with a grain of salt the protestations that *Duck Soup* was meant only to be funny, and that it was merely a case of finding a new environment for the routines of the brothers, who just happened to do a comedy that spoofs sacred cows. This is not to say that everything film buffs now read into the film was planned that way. But surely the satirical events that take place in the mythical kingdom of Freedonia evolved from a combination of writing, directing, and acting that was blessed with an acute perspective on the world and its excesses. Groucho, nevertheless, credits director Leo McCarey with being responsible for the film becoming anti-war satire.

Released in 1933, *Duck Soup* came at a very critical time for the Marxes. They had already completed four pictures for Paramount. They were enjoying prestige, success, and an enormous following. They had been signed to do a radio series. Inevitably there would be arguments about financial arrangements with the studio. Their old contract was drawing to an end and the need for negotiating a new one was on the horizon. In fact

there had been a split before the making of *Duck Soup*.

The director whom the Marx brothers wanted for their new picture was McCarey. He had directed Laurel and Hardy in some of their best silent films, and was considered skillful at comedy and a creative filmmaker. McCarey didn't relish any such prospect at first because of the Marx reputation for being so difficult to manage. The stories about their endless disruptions and other evidence of potential chaos were enough to make a director balk. But McCarey was enlisted, and there was the customary round of joint efforts to put together a script that would continue the brothers' success streak and solve the problem of the ever-demanding need for new material. Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby came up with a screenplay again, as well as with music and lyrics, and Arthur Sheekman and Nat Perrin, by now old Marxian hands, added "additional dialogue." Margaret Dumont was back again as the haughty foil, this time playing Mrs. Teasdale, the wealthy power-center who makes Groucho otherwise known as Rufus T. Firefly, the dictator of Freedonia, which would never be in more trouble.

Duck Soup looked even better by the 1970s, what with the protests about the Vietnam war and the exposure of corruption in high places. At the time it was released, it could be related to the rise of Hitler. (Marx Brothers films were banned in Germany because the Marxes were Jewish and the films were not shown there until after WWII.) *Duck Soup* received a lukewarm reception when it was released in 1933. Mordaunt Hall wrote in *The New York Times* that "this production is, for the most

part, extremely noisy without being nearly as mirthful as their other films."

Despite the appreciation of *Duck Soup* by many, the mixed notices left the Marxes in an uncomfortable situation with Paramount. Now their next contract would be negotiated against the background of a film that was not successful and the rule in Hollywood was that you were as good as your last picture. Unfortunately, instead of the Marxes being lauded for making a film that heightened the significance of their original style of humor, the pressure was on for them to avoid such identification. They wanted to discover how to achieve wider acclaim and larger box office grosses within the framework of a system that didn't put a high value on anarchy, however inspired.

There were also advantages to the direction in which they were heading, as anyone who ever laughed through *A Night at the Opera* or *A Day at the Races* will attest. But never again were the brothers to display as much unbridled lunacy, free-form style, and satirical thrust that combined to make *Duck Soup* a film that has gathered stature as a comedy classic. This was a moment of truth, and had the Marx brothers been able of continue making pictures more in the spirit of *Duck Soup*, they might have left us an even richer legacy and could even grown as artists.

By 1946, Groucho was to lament in an interview with Mary Morris of *PM*. "The movies don't recognize any real heavies in the world. You don't dare make a joke that implies anything wrong with Franco. The poor public is smothered under tons of goo."

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