



By Robert E. Tevis

### A Resurgence in Marxism

Before you think I have gone political, let me state categorically that I am not talking about Karl, but Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and sometimes, Zeppo. It all started with an evening at the Lambs Club in New York City where Noah Diamond, a Marx historian and arguably one of the finest living Groucho impersonators, had just given a presentation on *I'll Say She Is*—the lost Marx Brothers musical and their first Broadway production. You can be forgiven for not recognizing that title as that show, unlike *The*



Noah Diamond and Melody Jane (Photo courtesy of Don Spiro)



ISSI title treatment

*Cocanuts* (1925) and *Animal Crackers* (1928), was never filmed.

We talked about how parts of this little known show have made it into films. For example, the opening scene from the play was filmed as part of a film called *The House That Shadows Built* (1931). That film, which was made to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Paramount Studios founding, was also intended as early advertising for their upcoming film *Monkey Business* (1932).

In addition, a 1970's ABC television, animated special called *The Mad, Mad, Mad Comedians* (1970), also incorporated a sequence where Groucho played Napoleon—with the real Groucho Marx providing the voice. Noah also spoke about the first Marx Brothers silent film—more about that later in this article.

Meanwhile, If Noah gets his lifelong wish, he will be producing a revival of *I'll Say She Is* on the New York stage this year. They have been running



Noah Diamond as Groucho Marx (Photo courtesy of Don Spiro)

the play on stage this May at the Connelly Theater. If you think you can help, please go to [www.illsaysheis.com](http://www.illsaysheis.com) or contact him directly at [noah@illsaysheis.com](mailto:noah@illsaysheis.com). His Lambs Club presentation, which I do recommend, can be seen at [www.Youtu.be/eU8d-8FEYn0](http://www.Youtu.be/eU8d-8FEYn0).

Besides Noah's Marxian efforts, Universal Studios is currently in the process of restoring and remastering the first five Marx Brothers sound films—*The Cocanuts* (1929), *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Monkey Business* (1931), *Horse Feathers* (1932), and *Duck Soup* (1933). New 35mm preservation negatives are being created as well as DCPs (Digital Cinema Packages) for exhibition. Their first restoration, *Horse Feathers*, will be shown at this year's TCM Film Festival which will have occurred in April. Through Mike Feinberg, Manager of Film Preservation at Universal, I spoke to Peter Schade, Vice President

a crowd-funding campaign and are in the midst of fundraising. As we go to press, he hopes to have

of Content Management about the work. Peter is in charge of the group doing the restorations. It was great to hear from Peter that Universal is committed to not only maintaining its archives, but also funding the restoration and remastering of its “crown jewel titles.”

“Our goal is to find the most complete versions and make sure they look as close as possible to the day they were originally released.” says Peter. The work is very exacting. “In some cases where the film elements are in good shape, we can do a full blown restoration in a matter of three or four months, in more complex situations we can spend as much as five to eight months or longer. Each title is unique. In the case of *The Cocanuts* we started in the second quarter of last year and are, at this point, nine months into it.”

While most Marx Brother's aficionados are excited to have better looking copies, the real excitement arises from the rediscovery of lost picture elements. This will be the case with restored *Animal Crackers*. The existing copies of the film had displayed eight jump cuts—corresponding to



Noah as Groucho playing Napoleon (Photo courtesy of Don Spiro)



*Horse Feathers* frame before restoration and after (Photos provided by Universal Studios)

ensorship cuts made on the cusp of the Production Code era. According to Peter, “We were fortunate to locate a duplicate negative at the British Film Institute that was a pre-censorship version.” This version included elements which were excised in the US release. This includes several Groucho innuendos, a more complete “Hooray for Captain Spaulding” song as well as two scenes with Harpo and Margaret Irving that were significantly altered by censors. These lost elements will now be seen and heard in the newly restored and remastered film.

Content wise, the other four films do not have any additional footage, but will look much, much better

than anything that has been released in recent history. Dust and scratches have been removed, frame jitter has been corrected, and contrast has been improved. Universal is currently evaluating home entertainment opportunities for restored versions of each of its Marx Brothers films.

While *Animal Crackers* will be adding truly rare elements, you may be thinking that these five Marx Brothers films are some of the least-rare sightings, as these films have been available for years on television, tapes, discs, and streaming media. Nothing, however, can be rarer in the Marx canon than the film *Humor Risk* (1921)—the first and only silent film the brothers

made together.

The film, a play on the contemporary film *Humoresque* (1920) was the first silent film the Marx Brothers made together. It was also the first film written by Jo Swerling. Swerling, you may recall, wrote such notable films as *Lifeboat* (1944), *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) as well as contributing to *Pride of the Yankees* (1942) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Swerling was an initial investor in a company formed by the Marx Brothers called Caravel Comedies. *Humor Risk* was their initial, and though it had announce a few additional pictures, only production.

The film reportedly does not have the group performing their regular roles. Groucho reportedly plays a villain, with Chico as his henchman, Harpo as a detective, and Zeppo as a playboy. Although this is not known for certain. To know for sure we need someone to see the film and describe it.

Legend has it that the initial reaction from its premiere audience was so poor that Groucho vowed to destroy the negative and all prints. Of course, this legend was established by Groucho himself—whose veracity, as well as his falsity, is sometimes questioned by his fans.



*Monkey Business* frame before restoration (note projectionist cue mark) and after (with cue removed) (Photos provided by Universal Studios)

Noah pointed me to a website that had an excellent recent article, written by Matthew Coniam in late 2015, where Coniam writes a detailed and in-depth study of the rumors, facts and fictions behind both the production and the fate of the film. ([www.bretonfilm.com/articles/the-marx-brothers-lost-film-humor-risk-getting-to-the-bottom-of-a-mystery](http://www.bretonfilm.com/articles/the-marx-brothers-lost-film-humor-risk-getting-to-the-bottom-of-a-mystery)).

Coniam not only challenges Groucho's claim but puts forth a theory on how the film may have escaped Groucho's intentions through a company called Reelcraft. I encourage you to read his story and check those film cans you have to see if you can resolve the mystery once and for all.

Perhaps, 2016 will be the year when someone finds this rare film.

According to Noah Diamond, "One story has it that during the rage around *I'll Say She Is*, Alexander Wollcott, who was their biggest cheerleader in the press, found out they had made this silent film. He demanded a screening and assembled the New York smart set to see it. When they were ready to show it, however, they found that the film canister had just the negative, and no positive and so the film wasn't shown. I never heard anything else about that story, and, as Joe Adamson says, *Humor Risk* will probably remain a great film, until they find it." Sounds just like something Groucho would have said. "So long, I must be going...."

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