

Here Under False Pretenses

The Marx Brothers Crash the Gates

DANIEL LIEBERFELD and JUDITH SANDERS

Think "Marx Brothers" and a composite of oddly dressed pranksters comes to mind, complete with greasepaint mustache, curly blond wig, and phony Italian accent. First associations, though, don't usually include the Marx Brothers' Jewishness. Audiences are not invited to pay much attention to it since the Marx Brothers' films contain few overtly Jewish allusions. Critics also have not explored the links between the Marx Brothers' ethnicity and their comedies of (bad) manners. Their Jewish immigrant heritage is worth highlighting, however, because it animates their unique and complex comic vision.

The children of German-Jewish immigrants, the Marx Brothers grew up in a lower-middle-class immigrant neighborhood on Manhattan's East Side. Yet their seven classic films are set in the world of America's Anglo-Protestant upper class, including a resort hotel (*The Cocoanuts*, 1929); a Long Island mansion (*Animal Crackers*, 1930); a luxury liner (*Monkey Business*, 1931); a private college (*Horse Feathers*, 1932); high government office (*Duck Soup*, 1933); the opera (*A Night at the Opera*, 1935); and a private sanitarium (*A Day at the Races*, 1937).

In each comedy the Marx Brothers play ethnic outsiders trespassing in the preserves of Gentile elites. They are gauche, lower-class gate-crashers who don't know the rules of polite society and, furthermore, don't care. They are rootless scavengers who lack families, jobs,

and a permanent address. Their apparent reason for being is to mock, cheat, and insult the cultured well-to-do.

In each film the Marx Brothers infiltrate elite realms under false pretenses. Groucho's Captain Spaulding, the celebrated African explorer in *Animal Crackers*, has clearly never set foot in Africa. Nor has his Doctor Hackenbush ("high blood pressure on the right side and low blood pressure on the left") ever been near a medical school. But once within the gates of privilege, these flagrant frauds neither tiptoe nor toady. Instead they break up the banquet, pilfer the silver, undo the opera, and hijack the horse race. Meanwhile, in a saccharine subplot, a young couple launches a family or career and gains bona fide social acceptance, as the three Marx Brothers' characters never will.

With these consistent plot elements, the Marx Brothers enact comic parables about Jewish immigrant experience in America. Their comedy incorporates the physical and psychological trajectory of immigration: the voyage over, fears of exclusion, pressures for assimilation, and the hopes placed on the next generation. In particular, the pervasive themes of trespass and belonging, of pretense and legitimacy reflect immigrant anxieties about acceptance into American society and ambivalence toward the costs and rewards of assimilation.

As native-born Americans, the Marx Brothers had enough perspective on immigrant experiences to reinterpret them humorously. But as the children of immigrants, they continually felt assimilationist pressures intrude in their own lives. From their earliest years, their mother, Minnie Marx, tried to disguise

◆ DANIEL LIEBERFELD is a doctoral candidate at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. JUDITH SANDERS is a graduate student in English at Tufts University. Their article on Buster Keaton's comedy appeared in the Summer 1994 issue of *Film Quarterly*.

her family's ethnicity. She gave her sons names associated with British aristocracy—Leonard, Arthur, Julius, Herbert, and Milton—names so overused by parents of her generation that they became identified with Jews. She also bleached her sons' dark, curly hair. For her work as a theatrical agent, she took the goyish pseudonym "Minnie Palmer."

Insecurities shared by many Jewish immigrants inspired many such attempts at ethnic disguise. Fleeing both poverty and ethnic violence, most European Jews had come to America as refugees. Although about one-third of all immigrants between 1908 and 1937 returned to Europe, only about 5 percent of Jews did so. With no national homeland to which they could reliably return, Jewish-Americans were strongly attracted to the "melting pot" ideal of assimilation. But while far more secure than they had been in Europe, Jews in America still had cause to worry about their newfound refuge. Congress restricted Jewish immigration in the 1920s. That decade and the next—the Marx Brothers' most prolific—were the most blatantly anti-Semitic in American history.

Industrial-strength bigots such as Henry Ford, radio priest Charles Coughlin, and the Ku Klux Klan fulminated against Jews and the threats they purportedly posed. More insidious were systems of exclusion in housing, employment, and education that barred Jews from mainstream routes to security and influence. According to historian Carey McWilliams, many Jewish-Americans adapted by turning to new, high-risk enterprises such as the entertainment business, which lay outside the bounds of social respectability.

It was in this context of social and economic marginalization that, in Neal Gabler's phrase, "the Jews invented Hollywood." Hollywood in its early years was a largely Jewish enclave. The founders of Paramount, MGM, Warner Brothers, Columbia, and other major film studios were, like the Marxes, Jewish immigrants. They were attuned, Gabler notes, to "the dreams and aspirations of other immigrants and working-class families, two overlapping groups that made up a significant portion of the early moviegoing audience." Because of their fierce cravings for assimilation, and because they were prominent targets for American anti-Semites, studio executives tried to dissociate themselves from their

Jewishness. Films about Jews were considered taboo. Their productions instead interpreted Anglo-Protestant America with an idealism and simplicity that perhaps only outsiders could provide.

Fortunately, the Marx Brothers managed to escape the producers' assimilationist strictures. They arrived in Hollywood in the late 1920s with their comic vision already formed and their commercial potential proven on-stage. Because the Jewish content of their work was mainly covert, they could obey the letter of Hollywood's unwritten law while trashing its spirit.

The Marx Brothers' uniqueness lies in their unorthodox treatment of immigrant insecurities over acceptance and assimilation. Instead of trying to "pass," they exaggerate their ethnicity. Instead of repressing the immigrant's shadowy fear of exposure and censure, they turn a glaring spotlight on it.

The Marx Brothers' enactment of Jewish-immigrant insecurity, although mainly coded, sometimes sticks out like Groucho's cigar. In *Monkey Business*, for example, they are stowaways on an ocean liner bound for America. They hide below decks in barrels ostentatiously labeled "kippered herring," a self-mocking symbol of the immigrant Jew. Rather than keeping to their place, they send the captain insulting notes and invade his quarters. When the boat docks in New York, they collectively impersonate Maurice Chevalier, a more acceptable foreigner. When the absurd, transparent disguise fails, Groucho gaily informs an official, "We're just trying to sneak off the boat!"

In *A Night at the Opera*, they again play stowaways bound for America. This time they don enormous beards—exaggerations of those worn by Old-World Jews—and impersonate a trio of Russian aviators. A suspicious official declares, "These men are in the country under false pretenses!" The Marx Brothers are thrown in jail in what amounts to a comic exaggeration of the immigrant's nightmare of rejection and exclusion.

By playing bearded stowaways who reek of herring, the Marx Brothers seem to have internalized nativist stereotypes of immigrants, particularly European Jews. But they simultaneously defang anti-immigrant, nativist attitudes by parodying them. In *Monkey Business*, Groucho snidely informs an Indian chief, "If you don't like our country, you can go back

where you came from." Earlier in the film, after a horrendous pun by Chico, Groucho turns to face the camera and declares, "There's my argument—restrict immigration!"—this at a time when the patrician Immigration Restriction League had warned against the corrupting influence of physically, morally, and politically "degenerate" Jews.

Yet some of their films stereotype other ethnic groups without ironic distance. As fugitives in *A Day at the Races*, they hide out in the black part of town. Poverty and social marginality, as well as music, seem to ally them with a similarly outcaste group. But the mass of dancing, grinning darkies is voiceless and reified, while the Marx Brothers are endearingly personalized.

The Marx Brothers concocted their comic personalities on the stages of immigrant neighborhoods in New York and Philadelphia. From the outset they adopted explicitly ethnic roles, in part because of the large immigrant audiences for ethnically based material. In 1910 when the Marx family moved to Chicago to be closer to the small-time vaudeville circuits they were working, immigrants and their children made up roughly 80 percent of the city's population.

Most of these immigrant families were struggling to learn English and take advantage of expanded public education. Not coincidentally, classroom comedy became a favorite Marx Brothers theme. In 1910 they staged *Fun in Hi Skule*, with Groucho as a wisecracking German schoolteacher; Harpo, in a curly red wig, as an Irish troublemaker and clown; and Chico as an education-proof Italian. Groucho's character became Yiddish as hostility toward Germany grew around World War I. These stereotyped characters—a European Jew (Groucho), an Irishman (Harpo), and an Italian (Chico)—were broadly representative of the major immigrant groups at the time and were essentially the same characters the Marx Brothers would later play in their films. Their characters' ethnic diversity broadened the Marx Brothers' appeal beyond that of traditional Jewish acts and may also have provided some cover against anti-Semitism.

The Marx Brothers spent twelve years of what Harpo termed "unmitigated hell" touring the South and Midwest, where offstage they often encountered anti-Semitic bigotry.

They finally arrived on Broadway in 1924 with a hugely successful revue called *I'll Say She Is!* The proceeds enabled Groucho to move to Long Island, where he hobnobbed at the poshest mansions and grew queasy on the swankest yachts. He paid five thousand dollars to join an exclusive country club, but reported that his first tee-off smashed the window of the club president's car, while the second streaked into the clubhouse, nearly braining the club president himself. Although this story is probably apocryphal, it conveys the insecurities that distracted a son of relatively poor immigrants on the playgrounds of the social elite.

The malaise Groucho felt at decamping from his Jewish neighborhood in Manhattan to a Great Neck estate pervades *Animal Crackers*, the Broadway show that became the Marx Brothers' second film. In it, they invade a weekend party at the Long Island mansion of Mrs. Rittenhouse (played by Margaret Dumont). This is just the sort of social event to which most immigrants could only dream of being invited. In this fantasy, Groucho is the guest of honor. As the heroic Captain Spaulding, he is accepted by the Gentile elite. But despite the other guests' acclaim, the "explorer" feels out of place. He frets, "Did someone call me 'schnorrer'?" No sooner has he arrived than he sings, "I must be going." Groucho's ambivalence toward Mrs. Rittenhouse's world reflects the tensions immigrants felt between ethnic pretense in the service of assimilation and assertion of ethnic identity at the risk of not being invited to the party.

The Marx Brothers occasionally acknowledge this tension by dropping their disguise. In *Animal Crackers* Chico and Groucho sit by themselves at Mrs. Rittenhouse's party. Chico says, "I'm a stranger here myself." Groucho replies, "What do you think I am? One of the early settlers?"

When Chico and Harpo enter as hired musicians, Chico's crudeness is obvious from his first words: "How are you. Where's the dining room?" The butler removes Harpo's cape, revealing him in his *gathes*. Mrs. Rittenhouse's guests panic and scatter. Through their outrageousness, the Marx Brothers seem to reject the melting-pot strategy of seamless assimilation, and, instead, they model an almost militant ethnic assertiveness. In the process, they gleefully embrace crude, even repellent, stereotypes.

There is something embarrassing about Groucho as soon as one thinks of him as a Jew, instead of just a brilliant wise guy of no particular ethnicity. He is a scrawny, smart-mouthed cheapskate—an anti-Semite's caricature of a Jew. Although his Jewishness is never stated outright, his appearance and demeanor broadcast it unambiguously. His trademark mustache and eyebrows exaggerate Jews' supposed hairiness. The only character with glasses, Groucho simultaneously reinforces the stereotype of the effeminate Jewish male. He underscores his unmasculine appearance with lines like "Afraid? A man who's licked his weight in wild caterpillars? You bet I'm afraid!" When taunted with the rhetorical question, "Are you a man or a mouse?" he responds, "You put a piece of cheese down here and you'll find out." In his absurd courtship of the ample dowager played by Margaret Dumont, he becomes what the historian David Biale has termed a "sexual *schlemiel*" (and a prototype for Woody Allen).

Groucho also flaunts the prime anti-Semitic stereotype of economic predatoriness. There can be few greater skinflints in the movies. As a singer's manager in *A Night at the Opera*, for example, he calculates how much of the star's thousand-dollar-per-night salary he will actually pay:

Chico: How much you pay him?

Groucho: [Aside] Let's see—a thousand dollars a night. I'm entitled to a small profit. . . .

[To Chico] How about ten dollars a night?

Chico: Ten dollars! We take it.

Groucho: All right, but remember, I get ten percent for negotiating the deal.

Moreover, Groucho is a Pushy Jew. "I have an appointment to insult Ambassador Trentino," he announces, as if it were all in a day's work. Not content merely to crash Mrs. Teasdale's garden party, he goes out of his way to dunk his doughnut in a legitimate guest's coffee. His persistent rudeness ("With this insurance policy, you're well provided for in your old age, which will be here in a couple of weeks now if I'm any judge of horseflesh") spurs his victims to satisfying exclamations of dismay, such as, "Of all the colossal impudence!" and "I've never been so insulted in all my life!" (Groucho: "Well, it's early yet.")

While Groucho carries anti-Semitic stereotypes to comic extremes, his brothers keep

pace with negative stereotypes of other immigrant groups. Chico the Italian is a shiftless petty criminal with a childlike love of food and music. His feigned stupidity and mangled English stymie anyone who tries to order him around. Brother Harpo's character shed much of its stage Irishness, but his crumpled hat and coat peg him immediately as a bum. Completely lacking in social grace, incapable of speech, and more at ease among animals, Harpo is a sub-human leprechaun and skirt chaser, polite society's worst nightmare.

Remarkably, the Marx Brothers succeed in converting their characters' seediness into strength. While their crude ethnic caricatures are playful and vital, members of the establishment appear as dull as prize sheep. As musicians and exotic raconteurs, the ethnic outsiders leaven the stodgy world of the rich and bored. In *Duck Soup*, for example, Gloria Teasdale (Dumont), whose money and influence run Freedonia, insists that Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho) is the one man who can save the fictional nation.

Freedonia, according to its anthem, is the "land of the brave and free"—an obvious play on "the land of the free and the home of the brave." But Freedonia is no golden America of greenhorn dreams, with equal opportunity for all. Rather, it is an enclave of pseudo-European aristocrats, where ethnics like the Marx Brothers will be forever on the margins.

The Marx Brothers' portrayal of American elites reflects idealization of the sort common to groups on the social periphery. As Isaiah Berlin observes, Jews, like other minorities who are heavily discriminated against, desperately sought to be integrated with "the enviable part of humanity." Minorities who are excluded from the central life of the community, Berlin notes, tend to develop either exaggerated resentment of or admiration for the dominant majority. Marx Brothers' comedy displays a similar mixture of idealization and contempt for social elites. Their grubby immigrant characters look like they sleep on park benches. And yet they are talented, unpretentious, and altogether more likable than the snobs who humiliate them and on whom they, in turn, are revenged.

Ambivalence toward elite society was likely reinforced in the Marx Brothers' case by their own transformation from social zilches to celebrities who moved in the sophisticated social

circles of New York and Hollywood. Harpo (whose résumé included a stint as a piano player in a Long Island brothel) became the darling of the self-styled Algonquin wits, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman, and the rest, whose humor was more rarefied than vulgar.

Duck Soup is fraught with ambivalence toward social status. As Freedonia's President, Groucho is absurd. He looks and acts all wrong. Besides, no real leader would have a name like Rufus T. Firefly. The film's plot actually turns on this name and its low-status connotations. The haughty Trentino from neighboring Sylvania insults Firefly by calling him an "upstart." While Firefly has ignored Trentino's previous insults, he cannot tolerate this one. He retorts, "The man doesn't live who can call a Firefly an upstart. Why, *The Mayflower* was full of Fireflies, and a few horseflies, too!" It is this insult to Groucho's origins that sends the two countries to war in the film. It takes a lot of fuss to drown out the truth: Groucho really is an upstart. He is ultra-immigrant, a Jew through and through, and will never pass for anything else. Groucho's celebrated remark, "I wouldn't want to join any club that would have me for a member," should also be interpreted in this context of ambivalence toward assimilation and social acceptance. (When Groucho was refused membership in a Beverly Hills swimming club because he was Jewish, he reportedly asked whether his daughter, who was only half Jewish, could go in up to her waist.)

The quintessential representative of the upper classes is, of course, the character almost always played by Margaret Dumont. Dripping with pearls and intoning queenly banalities, she is a poor person's fantasy of a rich one. Her silk-swaddled girth advertises that she's never missed a meal and contrasts perfectly with Groucho's lean and wolfish look.

Slipped among the insults Groucho pitches at Dumont's straitlaced Gentile are proposals of marriage. Intermarriage was a subject of keen interest for Jews in America and a popular theme of Jewish-American literature. A pathway to social advancement, intermarriage was also a transgression that threatened the ethnic community. Groucho's ambivalent courtship of Dumont is a comic response to this problem. Through their ludicrous wooing of leisure-class shiksas, the Marx Brothers permit the release of communal tension over exogamy.

The tensions between pretense and legitimacy, between assimilation and separateness, propel *Animal Crackers*. The plot is about Roscoe Chandler's exhibition of a valuable painting by François Jacques Dubois Gilbert Beaugard—an artist whose main credential seems to consist in possessing almost every conceivable French name. The painting is a trite rendering of a horseman and his hounds. Its only possible appeal is its expensive whiff of European aristocracy. Harpo uses it as a blanket.

When a copy is substituted for the original, the bogus Beaugard fools all the socialites. The interchangeable canvases are a metaphor for the malleability of social status. Like his prize painting, Chandler himself turns out to be a pretentious fraud. Chico and Harpo expose him:

Chico: I've seen you someplace before. . . . Wait, wait. Somewhere I meet you before because you face is very familiar.

Chandler: Well, I am, after all, one of the most well-known men in America. The newspapers *will* keep running my photograph.

Chico: You're Abe Kabibl.

Chandler: Nonsense. Chandler is the name. Roscoe W. Chandler.

Chico: You're Abie the fish peddler from Czechoslovakia. Aha, there's the birthmark—Abie the fish peddler. A-bie the fish man! A-bie the fish man!

Chandler: All right, I confess! I *was* Abie the peddler.

Chico: Well, how did you get to be Roscoe W. Chandler?

Chandler: Say, how did *you* get to be Italian?

Chico: Never mind. Whose confession is this?

Despite his British pseudonym and phony French accent, Chandler is just an ordinary Kabibl from Czechoslovakia. He reeks of fish as pungently as the Marx Brothers. Chico spots the immigrant Jew by his telltale birthmark, the ugly stigma that Kabibl-turned-Chandler hides beneath his starched white shirt. But fantastically, this mark of (foreign) birth proves detachable. At the end of the scene, Harpo steals it. He and Chico happily claim the token of Chandler's discarded ethnicity, unaware that they have stolen something that nobody ought to want.

Few immigrants could afford to be as uninhibited in the real world. Although their film fantasies relieve them of the consequences, the Marx Brothers' outsider status consigns them permanently below decks. None of the younger characters in the films will aspire to

be like them, although they may find them diverting. Groucho, Harpo, and Chico will watch from steerage as the next generation climbs to the upper decks on the ladder of assimilation.

This brings us to the sub-plot of the young couple. The young man is poor, but energetic and talented. Given a chance he will certainly succeed, but an older generation's conservatism blocks his progress and the pair's chances for marriage. In *A Night at the Opera*, Gottlieb, the pompous impresario, rebuffs a request that he give young Riccardo a role. Chandler likewise ignores the gifted young painter in *Animal Crackers*. But in the end, the young artist's copy fools the connoisseur; the youthful singer replaces the established star in the opera and brings down the house. In each case, the younger man's talents are recognized so that he and the young woman can marry.

The all-American couple represents the more assimilated younger generation on whom immigrant families pinned their fond hopes. Like first-generation parents, the Marx Brothers uphold and abet the young couple's triumphant assimilation, but they also stand apart from it.

By subverting ethnic images, by satirizing elite values and institutions, and by raising, comically and covertly, anxiety-provoking themes such as intermarriage, the Marx Brothers relieved ethnic audiences' tensions over assimilation. Under the protective guise of humor, they also enacted immigrants' collective resentment toward elites whose prejudices they found threatening. By parodying anti-im-

migrant stereotypes, the Marx Brothers drain them of their potency. And because they are acting out a fantasy, they get away with all of it.

The Marx Brothers' humor is playful and anti-sophisticated. It is attuned with a foreigner's ear to the quirks and puns of English and to the parody-prone elements of legalese and other official discourse. Their humor elevates low-brow immigrant culture in response to the snobbish refinement and elitism of those insiders and sophisticates who define their social position by exclusion. Ethnic and class perspectives overlap in their films, most of which were made during the Great Depression. Their films affirm the essential strategies of immigrant and lower-class cultures: mutual aid, entrepreneurship and hustle, and a wry accommodation to the exigencies of day-to-day survival.

The Marx Brothers' response to social pressures on Jewish and other immigrant Americans was liberating. There was relief in acting outrageously, in dramatizing secret fears of exclusion. They did on-screen what immigrants generally are not allowed: to mock publicly the values of the host country and indulge in stereotypes about one's own group.

Marx Brothers comedies are also fantasies of liberation from social constraint: the freedom to be aggressive and impolite, to call attention to one's body, and yet to garner social rewards. This fantasy is no doubt universally attractive, but it was especially so for Jews and other immigrants contending with the pressures of assimilation into an alien and often unwelcoming culture.

MEMOIR

Album of Ages

Stanley Kauffmann

I

One of my troubles, through much of my life, has been that I was a bright boy. My brightness was clear before I began school. When I was four, my mother would read stories to me, and I was soon able to repeat them word for word, turning the pages at the right moment, so that visitors would think I was reading.

When I started school, in New York, in the early 1920s, no real system existed to accommodate precocious children. All that the schools could do was to skip them, as it was called. When I was in 2A, the first half of the second year, I was skipped to 2B before the term was out. When I was in 3A, I was skipped along to 3B, and so on. This happened so often in the eight years of grade school that I finished in five years.

My parents were proud. I was, too, and excited, although a bit embarrassed because some of my classmates, all of whom were boys, called me "teacher's pet." One point I didn't consider at first, and no adult mentioned it, either. Every time I was skipped, I was moved up into a group six months older than the group I had been in. Almost all in my graduating class were fourteen. I was eleven. This difference, in several ways, touched my whole life.

The first effects were obvious enough. As the skipping went on, since I was the youngest in a class, I was soon also among the smallest. This meant that when teams were being drawn up in the schoolyard or gangs were being or-

ganized, I was the last choice, grudgingly made. I tried to show my mettle. Fist fights frightened me, but I virtually invited one with a bigger boy in order to prove myself. My insides were iced with fear, but I plunged in, remembering some movie in which a man smaller than his opponent lost a fight but earned a place in a group because of his pluck. After some desperate swinging by me and some painful jabs by my foe, this happened for me, too.

When I graduated, I was spared a worse handicap in age. In those days New York had a high school for exceptional boys where they finished the regular four-year curriculum in three years. This school required an entrance exam. I was invited to take it, and I finished in the top sector. But my parents thought it over. By then they had seen my social dislocation, and they decided that the three-year difference between me and my schoolfellows was enough. By college it would have increased to four years. I had already been rubbed enough in age difference to agree with them. Fitting in had become at least as important as standing out. I went to an ordinary high school.

Adolescence arrived, and with it my full growth, which was nothing exceptional. In high school, three years younger than most and lighter, I tried out for track, but I wasn't fast enough. The junior varsity football team had a weight limit of 125 pounds, and I hung around there for a while before being cut from the squad. My sports career was channeled into cheerleading. In time I became the captain of the cheerleading squad. I led my school's cheers at our annual football game with our chief rival at the Polo Grounds on Thanksgiving Day, 1930.

Adolescence brought girls, too, of course. At least I wished it would bring them. Like my

❖ STANLEY KAUFFMANN, film critic for *The New Republic*, has contributed nine previous Albums to THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, three of which are included in *Albums of Early Life*.