

Judge Dennis Davis and Professor David Peimer | The Marx Brothers, Part 1

- So now we are looking forward to a wonderful presentation to lift our spirits, and we know that we can count on you two illustrious gentlemen, so thank you. Over to you.

- [David] Thank you.

- And sending lots of love and saying hello to all participants. Here we go.

- Okay, should I introduce Dennis?

- So can we start, David?

- [Wendy] Yes.

- [David] Yeah.

- Okay. Let me begin and then I'll hand over to you as we planned.

- Okay, you go.

- So David and I are going to do two sessions on the Marx Brothers, which given all the despondency that's going on in the world with regard to COVID, particularly where I come from where it was announced tonight to be a very tough lockdown with not really much sight of vaccines, I think the Marx Brothers are a wonderful antidote to all of this. And many of you, or I hope, would have actually have watched the Marx Brothers over time. I feel, on a personal note, almost a kind of tribute to my father who was the one who drew my attention to the Marx Brothers many years ago, and then of course, as a student, I started to watch them in the 1970's as did many other people. My job at the beginning here is to play the straight guy, as it were, and to tell you a little bit about the Marx Brothers.

- That's impossible, Dennis! You couldn't play the straight guy, but thank you.

- His father was Simon Marx, but actually his name was Merricks, and what is interesting about that, David, which I'm sure we're going to talk about, is the way Groucho is obsessed by puns. So even their name was a pun from Merricks to Marx, and he came from Alsace-Lorraine like so many other Jews, came to New York and married Minnie Schonberg. Very briefly, they had their first child, Manfred, died of tuberculosis in 1886 and thereafter, the Marx Brothers as we know them were then born. The first was Leonard, we all refer to him, of course, as Chico, in 1886. Then Adolpho, we'll refer to him as Harpo, in 1888. Then came Julius Henry, otherwise known as Groucho, in 1890. And then the clan grew Milton, otherwise known as Gummo, in 1892. And Herbert, otherwise known as Zeppo, was the last in 1901.

I should just say that their names, their nicknames, became the following: Chico was given to him because of his relentless pursuit of women. Harpo became Harpo because of the love of the harp. Milton was saddled with the name Gummo because of his preference for gumshoes. And of course, Groucho because of his cynical nature and he was regarded as a grouch bag. So he got the name of Groucho. Very briefly, they settled in Manhattan's upper East side, working class neighbourhood. The mother actually was interested in dance and in effect, from that moment on, their trajectories were essentially preordained. Chico apparently had an aptitude for mathematics, but he applied that to street gambling and developed an addiction of his own. On the other hand, Harpo also dropped out of school.

He had been effectively bullied in the most terrible way. The one Marx brother who did enjoy his studies and really wished to be a doctor but had to drop out because of family economic circumstances was, of course, Groucho. And the simple point about it was that their mother basically compelled them into a whole range of Vaudeville and dance activities. It appeared that Groucho showed promise with a sweet singing voice and after a stint in the Episcopal church choir, he then scored a role in 1905 in a particular performance, and slowly but surely, the mother pushed them into performing so that eventually three of the brothers formed a group called the Three Nightingales, which ultimately then expanded. It expanded to such an extent that their singing acts began its transformation into comedy during a performance in Texas when a local burst into the place that they were performing to announce that a mule had gotten loose.

Groucho was incensed by the idea that the audience could be interrupted by some mule going loose and he started to excoriate the audience only to find, to his amazement, that they began to laugh more and more at his insults, and there was born, as it were, the beginnings of this extraordinary group. I'm not going to go much further than that to say that effectively, as I say, they came from a working class stock, none of them had any formal educations, which is particularly important and we can ask David about that in a moment. I should say that they then gravitated in the 1920's, just to complete the picture, to Broadway, and those Broadway shows, The Cocoanuts and Animal Crackers, then became films.

They had a whole long history of films, some of which we will explore, and the last two, with A Night at the Opera in 1946, and Love Happy in 1949. And the real question I have for you, David, obviously I'm going through this quickly because I feel that there's so much we've got to cover and so much more humour to cover, but I am interested, it seems to me that that background of theirs, living in poverty, on the margins, all leaving school early, essentially not being particularly well educated, which didn't make them incredibly smart, had a real effect on the way in which, as it were, their output emerged and in a sense, particularly Groucho and how he related to the world and how their productions were shaped by their background, which then counted in the upper East side. I'd just be interested in your view on that.

- Thank you so much, Dennis, for that, and thanks so much also to Judy and Wendy for all your help with getting these clips together for us. And to dive in, as Dennis is saying, for me also it was a childhood addiction to just marvel, as a kid in Durbin, at the ability for physical comedy

and the ability for, obviously, the verbal. The witty, quick fire connections that not only Groucho but Chico at times, an extraordinary sense of these three brothers and you get such distinct characters, and their timing, their ability to feed off each other, so much of all of that which we'll get into in a little while. And also just simply how on Earth are they still so funny, if not sometimes maybe more funny, than nearly 100 years ago?

To just respond to what Dennis is saying, I do think it's very important that it's Jewish immigrants' world coming into New York, which is the outsider/insider, the classic Jewish dilemma, which *The Merchant of Venice* captures, which we'll talk a little bit about later. The insider, the outsider, one of the almost endless conflicts for any Jewish individual or obviously, fictional characters as portrayed and that is their archetypal character almost. I think that on the one hand. Second, I think that the poverty of the upbringing, and also Groucho had an aspiration to be a writer and often wanted to be taken seriously as a literary type of writer and hence, we'll talk a little bit later about his friendship with TS Eliot and many others.

But I think that not only was, obviously, the economic limitation, as you mentioned, and therefore frustration but what it led to, the two combined, the small guy up against the power and authority of any kind, which is the Jewish immigrant, outsider/insider, and their working class borderline economic situation. Small guy up against the system, up against the big guy. Whether it's the wealthy, whether it's the rich, whether it's the power, the elite, always I think so much of their comedy can be framed in that almost eternal conflict, and I don't think they lost sight of that for a second no matter how famous they became or rich or whatever. They kept those personas which were not only performance personas but true to their own lives, and that's what informs, I think, so much of how their comedy is still so resonant. Charlie Chaplin had a similar thing. The small guy up against the system, whether it's the cops he's chasing after or whoever, and it's also absurdly a very American theme of the small guy up against authority of whatever kind. And Groucho later alludes to it in an interview of this very theme.

The one other point that I just wanted to mention from what you're saying, Dennis, which we'll come onto more, in a very interesting interview with William Buckley, it was a TV interview, it's fascinating to watch if anybody has the time and wants to Google it. It's the most revealing that I could find about Groucho talking about their work and where he says in 50 years, they never once made a Jewish joke. Not once to make jokes about the Jews or a Jewish name. Never once about the Irish or the blacks or the Protestants, the Catholic, the Jew, the Muslim, whatever, and it's fascinating to get into that and why, which I think we can touch more on a little bit later.

- It's why I think that famous statement of Groucho's, I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member, in a sense reflecting exactly what you say, and it fuels that anarchic character in which they do parody all of the pomposity, and we're going to see that, of upper class people. The William Buckley interview's a classic example of that. A snotty, pompous that's smart guy thinks because Groucho Marx comes from this other side of the tracks, what the hell does he know? But I think perhaps with that in mind, David, perhaps we can actually move on just to one

of the clips that we've prepared for A Night at the Opera, which is particularly interesting because that performance, that film, in a sense, does incense, if not attack, but certainly is reflective of higher class art and the way in which they deal with it. The entire story is hilarious because it's all about the idea of going to essentially get somebody appointed to be a tenor at the New York opera and in fact, El Pagliacci and Il Trovatore are the two operas that actually come out in the opera, so they really are engaging with opera but in a manner in which it really parodies it in a whole range of ways.

So what we wanted to show you is this extraordinary clip, and we can talk about it thereafter, when they're on the boat going off to New York to, as it were, assist to ensure that the tenor friend of theirs gets the role at the New York opera and of course, they're on this very fancy boat but in a very, very small cabin, and the scene that now unfolds is surely one of the classic scenes of all comedy. So Judy, if we could see the first one.

Video clip plays.

- Well, that's fine. If that steward is deaf and dumb, he'll never know you're in here.

- All right, sure, that's all right.

- Yes?

- We've come to make up your room.

- Are those my hard boiled eggs?

- I can't tell until they get in the room. Come on in, girls, and leave all hope behind. You've got to work fast because you got to get out in 10 minutes. Hey Tomasso, wake up, they're going to fix the bed. Say, I'd like two pillows on that bed there, eh?

- All right, bring them in.

- See, there's a slight misunderstanding here, I said the girls had to work fast, not your friend.

- He's still asleep.

- You know, he does better asleep than I do awake?

- Yeah, he always sleeps that way. Now he's half asleep.

- Yes, he's half asleep in a half Nelson.

- All right, come on.

- Yes?

- I'm the engineer. I'm here to turn off the heat.

- Well, you can start right in on him.

- Wake up, Tomasso. Tomasso, we're going to eat soon.

- You know, if it wasn't for Gottlieb, I wouldn't have got this room? Just hold him there a second. Yes?

- Did you want a manicure?

- No, come on in! I hadn't planned on a manicure, but I think on a journey like this you ought to have every convenience you can get. Hey listen, I'm getting the manicure, get out of here, will you?

- Did you want your nails long or short?

- You better make 'em short, it's getting kind of crowded in here. I don't know, this isn't the way I pictured an ocean voyage. I always visualised myself sitting in a steamer chair with a steward bringing me bouillon.

- Come on, Ricardo!

- You couldn't get any bouillon in here unless they brought it in through a keyhole.

- I'm the engineer's assistant.

- You know, I had a premonition you were going to show up. The engineer's right over there in the corner, you can chop your way right through. Say, is it my imagination or is it getting crowded in here?

- [Chico] I got plenty of room.

- Yes?

- Is my aunt Minnie in here?

- Well, you can come in and prowl around if you want to. If she isn't in here, you can probably find somebody just as good.

- Well, could I use your phone?
- [Groucho] Use the phone? I'll lay you even money you can't get in the room.
- How do you do, miss?
- This boat will be in New York before you can get to that phone.
- I came to mop up.
- Just the woman I'm looking for, come right ahead. You'll have to start on the ceiling, it's the only place that isn't being occupied.
- You can clean my shoes if you want to.
- Operator.
- Tell aunt Minnie to send up a bigger room too, will you?
- Steward.
- Ah, come right ahead.
- Hey Groucho, the food!
- We've been waiting all afternoon for you.
- I want my aunt Minnie!

Video clip ends.

- That is one of the great classic scenes of all time in comedy. You're the theatre man, I'm just a schlepper lawyer so you can comment on it.
- Thank you. I think just a couple of things that come out there. Obviously, there's so much to read into all of these clips, but first, as you were saying Dennis, that these are the working class characters, most of them, and the lady at the end is the rich financier or potential financier, and that's when they all come tumbling out. But what's fascinating for me is not only the class and that all of these people are going in, but they're all going in and just taking it seriously. Nobody is responding to the comedy. Groucho makes a few comments about it's all getting squeezed and flipped and everything, et cetera, but they're all carrying on doing it, and it's that they're taking it as something almost normal or that it's not out of the norm.

So that's number one. That dichotomy is part of the comedy. And they're all just going in and expecting to do their normal job or expecting to do what they're there for, deliver food, electrician, do a nail polish. So anything, just carry on and it's as if the world around doesn't matter. I'm happy to be accused of stretching the point, but it's about, for me, how people can be squashed and pushed and kicked into a small space of a certain working class or class structure only to then tumble at the feet of the upper class but see it as normal because they have no choice, they have to do the job, it has to get done.

And the second point for me is a Kafka phrase where Kafka said the office is not a boring place, the office is full of fantastical metaphorical opportunity, it's the site of love and war and compassion and hate and jealousy and envy, in the same way, an ordinary cabin in a ship can be seen not as a banal, boring place. With the imagination of these brilliant, anarchic comics, it can be seen as an opportunity to create fantastic comedy and comment on working class and upper class pomposity. Do not underestimate for a second the amount of physical comedy and the physical control in this.

It ain't easy to choreograph, to act, or get into, especially as none of these are trained gymnasts or dancers. So the amount of choreography that I imagine gone into this is huge and at the end, of course, the fall so that nobody is injured. I think on a technical level of theatre and performance, an extraordinary level, and then Groucho having the running commentary overall. And just to say one more thing, Groucho's moustache is painted always. So for him, and for me, I love that idea. Compared to Charlie Chaplin in the Great Dictator or so many other famous moustaches of this era, for him, it's painted, it's a joke, it's a mockery. He's not scared to ridicule anyone at any time and he says it in interviews and in writings. Anybody, any situation, except for a few, which we'll come to, is up for ridicule, for parody and satire, and that's the outsider/insider, that's the small guy looking at all the symbols of power of the elite, in a way. Dennis?

- Yeah, as you watch that scene, every time I watch it, bearing in mind that the Night at the Opera is supposed to be about the sole idea of signing the tenor to sing at the Met and therefore, in a sense, the backdrop to it is, as it were, higher class culture. This is Margaret Dumont, who of course features in so many of these films as the punchbag for Groucho's lines. He opens the door and they all fall out. She, of course, has got a huge cabin in this particular very posh boat. So it's this wonderful counter position, if you watch the film, of her very luxurious accommodation and Groucho and Harpo plunked in this little cabin, and then all of the, as it were, pertinencies of first class travel.

The nail polisher and the lots and lots of food and masseurs all coming in to check on a small cabin, which makes it even more absurd at the same time, and it's the way in which they spin absurdity to reflect upon the condition in which they are in compared to the condition that others are in, which makes it an absolutely staggeringly brilliant scene apart from the fact that it's just physically very, very funny. Of course, Groucho's always at the centre of it as the commentator.

- Yeah, and what's fascinating for me about Groucho is that he's in the scene and he's also, in a way, narrating or commentating to us, the audience. He's our link between what's happening there and the audience, the narrator and also a character in the scene, and that makes it brilliant for the three of them, 'cause the other two are completely, Chico and Harpo, completely in it, but it adds a whole layer to the comedy that he can comment and be a character inside the scene.

- So if we move on to another scene from *Night at the Opera*, bearing in mind that any of the Marx Brothers' films, the plot was incidental to everything else, but strangely *A Night at the Opera* was one which had a slightly more coherent plot and part of the reason, apparently, for that was that they had this incredible wonder boy called Irving Thalberg at MGM who was, apparently, a real boyhood genius, and just to give some sense of it, I think in one of those interviews, David, that we were watching in preparation for this, they talk about the fact of going to see him for one of the films that he did for them, and he told them to be there 10:00 in the morning and then literally they wait 'til 5:00 in the afternoon and he hadn't yet seen them, so they left. And he rushed out saying are you going?

They said we're not waiting seven hours, we'll come back tomorrow morning. So they came at the agreed to 10:30 in the morning and again, Thalberg wasn't there. So Harpo went out, according to what Groucho said, and bought a package of walnuts. They then went in to Thalberg's massive office, lit the fire, and toasted the walnuts. So that when he came back two hours later, here they were munching burnt walnuts which they basically barbecued on his fire and as Groucho said, he never ever kept us waiting again, which again reflects on them.

But in this film, which is more coherent plot, of course, we get to the point where Chico, on the left here on the photo, is now negotiating with Groucho for the service of Ricardo the tenor, and the scene that we're about to see is shown very often, I should tell you, David will talk more about it later, but just to give you some sense, many lawyers who I know teach courses in legal drafting show this scene to show just how, as it were, superfluous so much of the writing is for legal contracts, how absurd it all is and here, in some extraordinary way, they reflect on precisely that. The way lawyers make huge sums of money by complicated contracts which are utterly meaningless. There is no more classic parody of that particular problem than the scene you're about to watch.

Video clip plays.

- Here, here, here we are, now we got it. Now, pay particular attention to this first clause because it's most important. Says the party in the first part shall be known in this contract as the party in the first part. How do you like that? That's pretty neat, eh?

- No, it's no good.

- What's the matter with it?

- I don't know, let's hear it again.
- Says the party of the first part shall be known in this contract as the party of the first part.
- That sounds a little better this time.
- Well, it grows on you. Would you like to hear it once more?
- Just the first part.
- What do you mean, the party of the first part?
- No, the first part of the party of the first part.
- All right, it says the first part of the party of the first part shall be known in this contract as the first part of the party of the first part shall be known in this contract and look, why should we quarrel about a thing like this, we'll take it right out, eh?
- Yeah, it's too long anyhow. Now what do we got left?
- Well, I got about a foot and a half. Now it says here, the party of the second part shall be known in this contract as the party in the second part.
- Well, I don't know about that.
- Now what's the matter?
- I don't like the second part either.
- Well, you should've come to the first party, we didn't get home 'til around 4:00 in the morning. I was blind for three days.
- Hey look, why can't the first part of the second party be the second part of the first party? Then you've got something.
- Now look, rather than go through all that again, what do you say?
- Fine.
- Now I've got something here you're bound to like, you'll be crazy about it.
- No, I don't like it.

- You don't like what?
- Whatever it is, I don't like it.
- Well, don't let's break up an old friendship over a thing like that, ready?
- Okay. Now the next part I don't think you're going to like.
- Well, your word's good enough for me. Now then, is my word good enough for you?
- I should say not.
- Well, that takes out two more clauses. Now, the party of the eighth part should-
- No, that's no good, no.
- The party of the ninth-
- No, that's no good too. How is it my contract is skinnier than yours?
- Well, I don't know. You must've been out on a tail ass night. But anyhow, we're all set now, aren't we?
- Oh sure.
- Now just put your name right down there and then the deal is legal.
- I forgot to tell you, I can't write.
- Well, that's all right, there's no ink in the pen anyhow. But listen, it's a contract, isn't it?
- Oh sure.
- We've got a contract, no matter how small it is.
- Hey wait, wait, what does this say here? This thing here.
- Oh that? Oh, that's the usual clause, that's in every contract. That just says that, it says if any of the parties participating in this contract are shown not to be in their right mind, the entire agreement is automatically nullified.
- Well, I don't know.

- It's all right, that's in every contract! That's what they call a sanity clause.

- You can't fool me, there ain't no Santy Clause.

- Okay, great.

Video clip ends.

- I just think in terms of the way which we draught contracts, this is just a fantastic depiction of what, as somebody said on the chat log, just a brilliant parody of that, but over to you just to make some comments.

- Everybody knows this kind of experience, and what they do, so they're obviously taking it to an absurd extreme, which is going to heighten the comedy, it doesn't stay in being naturalistic, they push it as far as possible so it becomes more and more absurd and therefore, more and more funny and satirical, and it's part of Groucho's thing of when you're ridiculed, go all the way, don't go half and stop. Secondly, notice they don't mention the name of the lawyers, the firm, which could have a Jewish or an Irish or whatever connotation through a name, goes back to what Groucho is saying, they would never take on a group and then stereotype them by focusing on one characteristic.

So for example, they would talk about, this is separate obviously to any film, but in the Buckley interview, why is the Jew Shylock, the name Shylock the Jew, linked with being avaricious and greedy and money? And they talk about it in the interview, think of the Yankee being called thrifty. Think of the Scottish person being called a Kenny with money. So all these different stereotyped connotations with other groups can be seen in a more malignant or more benevolent light as opposed to the Jew, it's always the stereotype of greedy, avaricious, dirty, et cetera, money, money, money. And yet, they hold back, and not only in this movie, in this piece, but in all their work, from ever using, which can be seen a quick option, where you go to stereotype a group. What they always choose, they will choose lawyers, they will choose scientists or doctors, or they would choose the rich or the powerful, the politician, the marriage, husband and wife, the restaurant.

So it's always a social situation and it's a society framing, in this case the lawyers, and that, I think, is a huge distinction and where Groucho phrased it, he would never want to disparage a group. And later talking about it, he was asked would he ever parody or ridicule minstrels, for example? 'Cause he spoke about minstrels growing up and loving the minstrel comedy and performance, and he said no. He said maybe in his day when he was a kid, but growing older he would say no because he says now in his time, in the 50's, that no, I would not do a piece on the minstrels because of what black people have been through and suffered, et cetera, and they don't like it, so I'm not going to because it will be seen as discriminatory or disparaging black people. So I would never do a piece on the minstrels, the same way I would never do a piece

about the Jews or the Irish, et cetera, the Italians, and so on.

And I think this is a classic example because I think it's so superbly written and acted, and they are being ruthless with the writing and the acting and the editing to not take the easy route of taking a group and stereotyping them through one characteristic, which they could easily do here, money, contract, lawyers. And Groucho speaks against some of the Jewish comics who make jokes about Jews, et cetera, and he says he wouldn't make a joke about any of that, certainly not touch on the holocaust, certainly don't touch on Eichmann or many others for all these very reasons. Yeah, over to you, Dennis.

- No, no, no, no, I agree. What is so wonderful about this is, particularly this film, why I love this film is because it basically, and if you understand the history as I indicated, where they come from, they literally are mocking a whole range of people but not for their ethnic qualities, it's more for their class quality, interestingly enough. The idea of the wealthy woman on the big boat, you have the cabin scene, or the lawyers who basically over complicate, or the idea in which high culture should be the culture for, opera shouldn't necessarily be the high culture. They're taking the mickey out of it in a manner which is both wonderful and without, in a sense, doing anything cheaply.

There's no cheap ethnic joke, you're utterly correct about that. We could spend the whole evening talking about just Night at the Opera, and it begins in that fashion, there's the very, very famous scene where Groucho, in a moment of depression, without any money and he's sitting with the particular woman and then the waiter comes and he says scandalous, I wouldn't pay this if I was you and gives her the bill. It's all about precisely looking at the way in which people act pretentiously because of the class in which they come from. But let us move on if we may to Duck Soup.

- Just to add one thing there, Dennis.

- [Dennis] Please, please do.

- I also want to mention what you and I said before, where we spoke about how the Marx Brothers can appeal to so-called low brow and high brow art, and it's an extraordinary achievement that these three guys are loved from the TS Eliot's of the world to the Churchill's of the world and many others, and the so-called high brow and low brow, Groucho, which we'll come to another time, gave the speech at TS Eliot's funeral, one of the speeches. But anyway, how they could appeal to both is a remarkably unique achievement. I think very few artists are able to, and I think it goes to exactly what you're saying, it's precisely because they keep away from ethnicity and then focus primarily on class and social categories, not religious or ethnic categories. Okay, if we could go to the next one.

- Now we come to a particular clip, and I'm so delighted, David, I've taught this before, I've taught this on my own, and I'm not joking, it's much better to have the maven who knows about

theatrical matters because I think this is one of the classic scenes of all comedy for a whole range of reasons that I'll come to. But let me just give everybody the background to Duck Soup, to the extent that there is any background. But it's not uninteresting because the film was made in 1933, by that stage we know, because of the course that we've all been studying in lockdown university, we know that Hitler's really in power, Mussolini's around, the dictators, and the film is about a country which they refer to as Freedonia, and the absurdity of it all is Freedonia's president, President Xander, needs a significant sum of money in order that he can reduce taxes.

So I'm not entirely sure if this is a parallel with ordinary democratic societies now, but he goes off to the character played by Margaret Dumont again, Mrs. Teasdale, this extraordinarily wealthy woman, and says we need \$20 million so we can then reduce taxes for the country, and she then says no, no, no, no, I'm only prepared to do that if a new leader is installed, and that new leader is Rufus T. Firefly, referred to by Mrs. Teasdale as a progressive, fearless fighter. It's wonderful, in a sense, even though it's hard to define any serious plot, which most commentators would regard as an exercise in futility because the movie exists in moments and sequences. It is interesting because Freedonia is supposed to be built on a sense of order until Groucho shows up, and of course, once Groucho shows up, Harpo and Chico can't be far behind, and somehow, of course, Groucho's now not only friendly with Rufus T.

Firefly, the dictator of Freedonia, but with Mrs. Teasdale, and Harpo is trying to find out something about this because they're supposed to be spies, Harpo and Chico, spying on the dictator. They break into Mrs. Teasdale's bedroom and Harpo dresses up as Groucho in night clothes and then he's caught by Groucho and pretends that, in fact, all Groucho is seeing is a reflection onto a mirror which doesn't actually exist. So here is one of the great scenes, I think, of all comedy with Groucho and Harpo both playing Groucho.

- Okay, it's fantastic.

- I gather that was quite spontaneous in it's own way, I'm told, but I mean ...

- Yeah. I think what's amazing, it's really incredible, and is often minimised with the Marx Brothers, obviously there's the verbal wit and the brilliance with Groucho and how he plays with puns and twists words and language and does it perfect, basically, and what people say in order to respond, but how the physical comedy, which is quite a bit minimally spoken about. Because to do this ain't easy, this is many hours of rehearsal, choreography. To get those moments where they're not fitting exactly each other and you've got to take a double take 'cause you're looking twice, but you want to imagine it's a mirror but you know it isn't, that's the first moment of ironic madness and beautiful satire. And the second one, of course, is when they're copying each other and they're just a few seconds out but it doesn't matter to them, they carry on.

The third thing, and what we spoke about before, Dennis, is with this scene and others, when they make comedy, they don't do it with malice, they don't do it with a maliciousness, they do it

somehow with a gentler insult, because comedy needs insult, it needs abuse and insult, you can't do it otherwise, the way John Cleese is one thing, brilliant, these guys, they hold back on the malice and with each other and even when they're with other characters. The other thing for me is how it's the essence of theatre, it's suspension of disbelief because we know there's no mirror but we want to believe, and even when it's out of sync with the joke, and there's no music, there's no sound, not even vague comments or anything, and that's a ruthless choice for these guys to make. Easy to add in sound to heighten it.

So the core of it is just the body and the body interaction, for me the essence of theatre always is about human relationships in whatever the context, more political, less, love, jealousy, hate, whatever the theme, the poetry, the language, and this is classic and it works because they're feeding off each other so much, and the acting jargon is offer and accept or impulse to impulse. They're feeding off every second, they don't miss one little beat between the two of them, so we're riveted. It's a classic of human relationships.

- In the first part of the scene, the mirror breaks.

- [David] Yeah.

- In a way, if you're behaving completely rationally, you know there can't be a mirror there anymore, and yet when they start playing each other from the beginning, you're not entirely sure if there are two people there or one or et cetera. They play with themselves and with the audience in the most incredible way. It's a remarkable piece of comedy and of acting. I'm conscious of time and I wanted to just make one other point if I may, it's very interesting that after Duck Soup was made in 1933, Harpo Marx went to Russia in November '33 and he had a whole series of ventures there, and when he came back, he said the following, which is so illuminating, it seems to me, about what we're talking about, he said I never saw anybody do anything just for the hell of it, I never saw anybody pull a spontaneous gag, and what I think he was saying, particularly in light of something like Duck Soup, is Duck Soup funny 'cause there's no reason for it to be funny? It doesn't operate on a level of rationality. What Harpo was saying in Russia, everything operated on a planning level, a rationality, there was nothing spontaneous, nothing anarchic, nothing just for the hell of it, and it seemed to be an extraordinary illuminating comment for what they themselves were doing in this film and in others. I think if I'm right-

- If I may, Dennis, just to add on to that, it's so classic that in so many dictatorships, the first people, or amongst the first to be banned are the comics and the satirists.

- The comedians, yes, absolutely.

- Because to bring in anarchic absurdity is immediately going to take leaders off their pedestal and they have to be seen in all their human folly and foible. .

- I also think they are the people who keep us sane.

- Exactly! And that's what I'm coming to finally.

- Sorry, carry on.

- Without that, there wouldn't be the sanity, which comedy and humour allows for, to take people or anybody or anything off its pedestal and just see it on an ordinary human level, and the irony of human nature, for me, is that we need extreme absurd comedy and satire to remind us of ordinary humanity.

- Yeah. And in fact, if I think about it, I know not everybody no doubt will agree with me, but for me, during this bleak time when I used to watch Trevor Noah and Stephen Colbert, they made an incredible amount of sense to me and their brilliant humour, their wit was such that not only did it make politics more sensible, but somehow life seemed to be, if you had people like that, somehow life seemed bearable, it seems to me in relation to this. And of course, talking about that, the other part, no, we are going to do two sessions, but we can't end this session without some reference to some of the great insults and comments that Groucho has made, before we got a special treat to end the evening.

- [David] Yup.

Video clip plays.

- I want to be near you. I want you to hold me. Oh, hold me closer! Closer! Closer!

- If I hold you any closer, I'll be in back of you. Oh, why can't we break away from all this? Just you and I and large with my fleas in the hills? I mean flee to my larch in the hills. And you can say it was a real love match. We married for money, hey, my shrinking violet? Hey, it wouldn't hurt you to shrink 30 or 40 pounds.

- Oh, you impudent cad!

- Why you're one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen and that's not saying much for you. Why don't you marry me?

- Why, marry you?

- You take me and I'll take a vacation. I'll need a vacation if we're going to get married.

- But you're the man I've been dreaming of.

- Beep me before you go to bed. Yes, I don't think I've ever seen in my life. Well, three anyway. 'Til the cows come home.

- Yes?
- On second thought, I'd rather dance with the cows and you come home.
- I mean your eyes, your eyes! They shine like the pants of a blue .
- What?
- I will welcome you with open arms.
- Is that so, how late do you stay open?
- Why I've never been so insulted in my life!
- Well, it's early yet.
- He's had a change of heart.
- A lot of good that'll do him, he's still got the same face.
- I hadn't intended to make a speech at all.
- Well, you certainly succeeded.
- This lady is my wife, you should be ashamed!
- If this lady is your wife, you should be ashamed.
- of any woman I've ever met.
- You don't look at though you ever met a healthy woman.
- What?
- Haven't we seen each other somewhere before?
- I don't think so, I'm not sure I'm seeing you now, it must be something I ate. Remember, you're fighting for this woman's honour which is probably more than she ever did. Why don't you go home to your wife? I'll tell you what, I'll go home to your wife and outside of the improvement, she'll never know the difference. Can you sleep on your stomach with such big buttons on your pyjamas? Oh, you didn't think I was a real detective, eh?

- Well, if you're a detective, I'm a monkey's uncle.

- Keep your family out of this.

- Oh, please!

- \$9.40? This is an outrage! If I were you, I wouldn't pay it. Well, that covers a lot of ground. Say, you cover a lot of ground yourself. You better beat it, I hear they're going to tear you down and put up an office building where you're standing.

- I thought this cigar was in my other suit.

- I wish you were in your other suit and your other suit was being pressed. No, mangled. Anyone ever tell you you look like the prince of whales? I don't mean the present Prince of Wales, one of the old whales, and believe me when I say whales, I mean whales. I know a whale when I see one. Girls, go to your room, I'll be down shortly. Crooks, the crooks, they're escaping! Follow me, men! Nevermind the men, just the women! Hey.

- Yes, sir? Oh, no sir, this is special for Mr. Helton, sir.

- You see this? Come back in a half hour and I'll give you another look at it.

- Can you tell me the price of this bed?

- \$8,000.

- Well, that's preposterous. I can get the same bed anywhere in town for \$25.

- Yes, but not with me in it. A lady's diamond earring has been lost. It looks exactly like this. In fact, this is it.

- I've been sitting right here since 7:00.

- Yes, with your back to me. When I invite a woman to dinner, I expect her to look at my face. That's the price she has to pay.

- What experience have you had at a department store?

- I was a shoplifter for three years.

- Captain, good gracious!

- If you weren't smaller than me, I'd flog the daylights out of you.

- But I'm bigger than you!

- Well, that's another reason.

- Are you sure you have everything ?

- I've never had any complaints yet.

- Are you a man or a mouse?

- Put the cheese down there and you'll find out.

- goes around with a black moustache.

- So do I, if I had my choice, I'd go around with a little blonde. Right down in the kitchen, bending over a hot stove, but I can't see the stove. This magnificent chest, no, this mag, no, this magnificent chest. I'm the plumber, I'm just hanging around in case something goes wrong with her pipes. That's the first time I've used that joke in 20 years. Is it true you're getting a divorce as soon as your husband recovers his eyesight? Is it true you wash your hair in clam broth? the flea circus?

- This is outrageous!

- No thanks, bad luck, three on a midget. We took some pictures of the native girls but they weren't developed, but we're going back again in a couple of weeks.

- Why, look at that face.

- Well, look at that face.

- I'm going to pick up a couple of the boys!

- And I'll stay here and pick up a couple of dames. Women, this is no time for women. On to the bar!

- Hunga dunga, hunga dunga, hunga dunga and McCormick.

- You've left out a hunga dunga. I made one too.

- You might have some tomato juice, orange juice, grape juice, pineapple juice.

- Hey, turn off the juice before I get electrocuted. A four year old child could understand this

report. Couldn't find me a four year old child, I can't make head or tail out of it.

- What do you think of that slide?

- . You know conductor Hennessy, don't you?

- Inspector.

- Inspector yourself. But look at me, I worked myself up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty. Now, what do you say?

- What are you doing with that cigar in your mouth?

- Why, do you know another way to smoke it? What do you think of at night when you go to bed, you beast?

- Well, I'll tell you-

- I'd rather not discuss it any further. Remember, there are children present. I'll see you at the theatre tonight, I'll hold your seat as you get there. After you get there, you're on your own. And don't point that beard at me, it might go off!

- Oh, throw me the lifesaver! Oh professor , please hurry, professor!

- The father?

- Anything play the father? That can't be right. Isn't it anything father further? Barabelli, you've got the brain of a four year old boy and I bet he was glad to get rid of it.

- You're awfully shy for a lawyer.

- You bet I'm shy, I'm a shyster lawyer.

- I'm going there soon.

- Is that so, where you going?

- Uruguay.

- Well, you go Uruguay and I'll go mine. Well, all the jokes can't be good, you've got to expect that once and a while. Hm, fancy seeing you here. Well, it's a small world after all. Boogie, boogie, boogie! You mind if I don't smoke? One morning I shot an elephant in my pyjamas, how he got in my pyjamas, I don't know.

Video clip ends.

- Thanks, Judy. I think some of the ideas here, what's striking is that Groucho is not shy to go the whole way, say things that people will think, in our politically correct time and in his time as well, and not to be scared and just say it and let it out. I think that's such an important, in the debate of political correctness or not in our times and so on in his times, the ability to just say it and do it, I think is something that everybody can empathise with. He also made a joke about the royal family and going to England. He said well, what do they do? They put down flowers and statues the same as the pigeons do, and to say that in England about the royal family is huge but again, it's about the royal family, royalty, it's not about ethnic or religious or other topics. Even in all this, there's sharp, anarchic jokes here. It's not about ethnic and other groups like that, it's more the social context and the power structures. I think also just the sheer speed, the quick, the wit, the timing of the acting is amazing. To make the lack of political correctness work and so quickly.

- And of course, we listen to it all now with the benefit of hindsight, you realise that people like Peter Sellers, Beyond the Fringe, John Cleese, The Monty Python Circus, all of the comedians who came after borrowed from these. All of these comments have resonances in so much of the comedy that followed. These guys really, particularly Groucho who's a real heartbreaker in his own way, and so much of these have resonance in so much comedy that we regard as hugely funny in the modern era, it's utterly remarkable what this put together.

- And also to add to it, in the history of theatre, there are very few plays where the trickster or the court jester, or the comic is the central protagonist, and what they did way before most of the playwrights and novelists and any of the others of the 20th century, they put the court jester and the fool, if you like, at the centre as the main protagonist, and all the rest are antagonists. And so the court jester is not a side kick that you get in so many other Shakespearian and all the other plays and novels, et cetera, written afterwards. Shrek, so much of this is influenced by the Marx Brothers where the three of them are, in a sense, almost one protagonist, and that's a huge shift in writing for theatre and for film as well, and they initiated all of it.

- So what we're going to do is we're going to play out with one of Groucho's classic songs, Lydia the Tattooed Lady, you can't resist that, and then on Saturday, I think it is, we've got a whole feast of further Marx Brothers delights for you including some classic letters that Groucho wrote and all manner of other wonderful parts to this incredible career that they had for more than 40 years, 40 years in the movies and Vaudeville, but of course, Groucho went on way beyond that. But here to end for tonight, from At the Circus is an absolute classic that Groucho loved singing throughout his career even long after the film.

- And from the Dennis and David show, thank you.

- Yes, absolutely. And thank you to the Marx Brothers.

- Yeah, exactly.

Video plays.

- Ah, memories. romance! My life was wrapped around the circus, her name was Lydia. I met her at the World's Fair in 1900, marked down from 1940. Ah, Lydia. ♪ She was the most glorious creature under the sun ♪ ♪ Dice, DuBarry, Garbo ♪ ♪ Rolled into one ♪ ♪ Oh Lydia, oh Lydia, say have you met Lydia ♪ ♪ Lydia, the tattooed lady ♪ ♪ She has eyes that folks adore so ♪ ♪ And a torso even more so ♪ ♪ Lydia, oh Lydia, that encyclopaedia ♪ ♪ Oh Lydia, the queen of tattoo ♪ ♪ On her back is the battle of Waterloo ♪ ♪ Beside it the wreck of the Hesperus too ♪ ♪ And proudly above waves ♪ ♪ The red, white, and blue ♪ ♪ You can learn a lot from Lydia ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ When her robe is unfurled ♪ ♪ She will show you the world ♪ ♪ If you step up and tell her where ♪ ♪ For a dime you can see Kankakee or Paris ♪ ♪ Or Washington crossing the Delaware ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ Oh Lydia, oh Lydia, say have you met Lydia ♪ ♪ Oh Lydia, the tattooed lady ♪ ♪ When her muscles start relaxin' ♪ ♪ Up the hill comes Andrew Jackson ♪ ♪ Lydia, oh Lydia, that encyclopaedia ♪ ♪ Oh Lydia, the queen of them all ♪ ♪ For two bits she will do a Mazurka in Jazz ♪ ♪ With a view of Niagara that nobody has ♪ ♪ And on a clear day you can see Alcatraz ♪ ♪ You can learn a lot from Lydia ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ Come along and see Buffalo Bill with his lasso ♪ ♪ Just a little classic by Mendel Picasso ♪ ♪ Here is Captain Spaulding exploring the Amazon ♪ ♪ Here's Godiva but with her pyjamas on ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ La la la la la ♪ ♪ Here is Grover Whalen unveilin' the Trilon ♪ ♪ Over on the West coast we have Treasure Island ♪ ♪ Here's Najinsky a-doin' the rumba ♪ ♪ Here's her social security number ♪ ♪ Oh Lydia, Oh Lydia that encyclopaedia ♪ ♪ Oh Lydia the champ of them all ♪ ♪ She once swept an Admiral clear off his feet ♪ ♪ The ships on her hips made his heart skip a beat ♪ ♪ And now the old boy's in command of the fleet ♪ ♪ For he went and married Lydia ♪ ♪ I said Lydia ♪ ♪ They said Lydia ♪ ♪ La la! ♪

- Thank you very much to everybody.

- [David] Thank you so much.

- Thanks, David and thanks, Dennis. Are you open to taking questions?

- Yeah, sure.

- Sure.

- Are there questions, Judy? That was fabulous, thank you. That was great.

- There was one thing I could answer.

- That was so much fun.

- Yeah, I'll just answer immediately is there were quite a few about where you can get these clips. All of them are on YouTube. Anybody who wants to go and play them again for themselves or longer ones, just onto YouTube, you'll find them all.

- That's fabulous. You've brought some joy into our lives.

- The Marx Brothers always do, yeah, absolutely.

- Absolutely, Wendy.

- Thank you. Thank you very, very much.

- Pleasure.

- Wendy, you've brought joy into many people's lives now.

- I'm glad.

- That's true too.

- And likewise. So I do see that there are some questions, are you able to see them yourselves? Judy, are you there?

- [Judy] I am here but if you could just have a look at the Q&A, Dennis and David, and then there's a couple of things in the chat as well.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: David, there are quite a few about whether they wrote their own scripts.

A: Yeah. To answer that, a lot of their scripts were written by scriptwriters but they certainly ad libbed and they certainly contributed to the scripts enormously as well. So I would say it's more of a classic collaboration.

- Yeah, that's quite right, and one of the things that directors always found was the amount of hard for them sometimes, but it was always a script, you're dead right. And that's why the ones that Thalberg did because he demanded that. I agree about Sasha Baron Cohen, actually. So many of these comedians were influenced by the Marx Brothers one way or the other, sure.

- Yeah, there's another really interesting question, thank you from Lawrence. So many of the bits of the Marx Brothers come from commedia dell'arte. In their films, the camera is usually fixed with limited editing, fixed focal lengths, it allows us to focus on the content, and so the film

audience sees the work as if in a proscenium arch, as if it's on stage. Lawrence, that's great and that's absolutely spot on.

- It's a very perceptive remark, yeah.

- It's very, very insightful. Exactly, because it is a fixed camera usually, and so what it does is it enables their physical comedy to almost explode on the screen for us, and the influence of commedia dell'arte is huge, and I would say the other massive influence is Vaudeville, which combines musical, comedy, singing, physical comedy, quick gags, jokes, quick scene changes, and so on. I think Vaudeville brings it all together and Vaudeville is a huge influence on Chaplin, Marx Brothers, and others.

- Yeah, I think that you're right about the Goon Show. Of course, they were absolutely wonderful. They were geni that those people, but the truth was that the Marx Brothers themselves essentially, I think, inspired so much of that kind of zany, anarchic humour which came thereafter.

Q: Great, and then from Deon, is it true that only their mother, Minnie, could control the brothers collectively? Well, that's a Jewish mama.

A: In one of the books that I read, the answer to that is yes, probably true.

- Yeah, exactly.

- There is one thing, but perhaps we should deal with it on Saturday, David, which is to deal with the engagement between TS Eliot and Groucho because the question is well, TS Eliot was an anti-semitic, what then happened? I think there's a complex relationship there that deserves a longer explanation that we can do on Saturday.

- I think, Dennis, I think a whole session with TS Eliot and the Marx Brothers because that's very, very interesting.

- It is very interesting. We are going to devote time to that, Wendy, I promise, on Saturday.

- Yeah, there will be a lot of that.

- Yeah, a long session because it's not to be glossed over.

- Yeah.

- No, it's a very important-

- The great TS Eliot.

- Yeah, and it went on for years until they eventually met for dinner and then Groucho actually giving one of the main speeches at Eliot's funeral. So we'll cover it on Saturday as well, absolutely Wendy.

- Yeah, we will do that, yeah. Okay.

- [Judy] Susie Brooks, she's going to be 69 on Thursday and she says I consider this my best present. So happy birthday for Thursday, Susie.

- Okay.

- That's nice, Judy, yeah, happy birthday.

- Happy birthday.

- Thank you.

- Happy birthday, yeah.

Q: A very interesting question from Barbara, was there a lot of competition or jealousy between the brothers?

A: From what I can gather, I don't know, Dennis, you've done research as well, there wasn't very much.

- No.

- I don't think so. I think they got on extraordinarily well.

- They really were a team and they regarded themselves as such, and that was why they had such a long career together if you think about it, and in fact, the last two films, A Night in Casablanca in particular, which we will talk about on Saturday, they did that in order to bail out, I think it was Chico who was in financial-

- Yeah, financial problems from gambling.

- Were really committed to each other in wonderful ways.

- Yeah.

- Because Harpo was a pretty good harpist and Chico played the piano as I indicated, so they were always interposed. And of course, the early films had come from Broadway and that's why the thing about the commedia is so interesting because in a sense, they're transposed from the

one medium to the other and you're right, that was how you can concentrate on the content, but because they played those instruments, there were these little interludes in the middle of each of these films. Some people like them, some don't.

- Sure, and also the interesting interview with Groucho where he said in seriousness that he and the other brothers thought that Chico was the most intelligent of all of them.

- Yes, that's right.

- And he says that with no malice. He says it with generosity of spirit and I think that quality, again, that lack of malice, comes through in their interactions as performers in the movies and also in the way that they lived .

- I don't think you could have been able to do this for close to 30 odd years the way they did, which is why I believe the writings that they did actually get on well, yeah.

- Yeah, and then thanks for the other comments. And then there's an interesting, were their personal lives Jewish? Asks Monty with a really great question. As far as I know some of them, and Dennis will know more I think, they did have a certain amount of Jewishness, and Groucho in particular, spoke of being proud to be Jewish, but he never wanted, again, just to say what we were saying earlier, never wanted to do a Jewish joke or set up Jewish jokes or humour or even that as a theme. But they certainly had cultural and certain, I suppose, religious .

- He definitely regarded himself as a Jew but he didn't regard himself as a Jewish comedian.

- No. That's why he didn't like the others who did regard themselves as Jewish comedians, which is a very interesting take.

- Very interesting idea, yeah. Absolutely right. All right.

- Okay, did they get along, et cetera, okay. Yeah.

- There's a question from Martin , I have always considered the Goon Show as the greatest post-war quick fire comedy series paying tribute to the Marx Brothers, your comments? And that's from Martin.

- You're not going to find me disagreeing with that. I grew up with the Goon Show. It was on radio, even in South Africa, and to this day, I find myself using various clips from the Goon Show from Milli, Secombe, and Eckles, et cetera. They were just fantastic.

- Absolutely. I don't think that it's a competition, I think they are both equally brilliant. The Goon Show and Spike Milligan.

- To be honest, if I went to a desert island and I had the Marx Brothers Goon Show, I wouldn't exactly not be watching them all, they're fantastic.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Yeah.

- I'd take John Cleese's route.

- I'd agree with that too.

- But all of them. Groucho said what you were saying earlier-

- would say was so remarkable about, but the anarchic humour of the Marx Brothers unquestionably inspired the others. People bulldog the work of other people and the fact that the Goons were so brilliant doesn't take away at all from the work that the Marx Brothers did or vice versa.

- I think also that the absurd, anarchic wit and the ability to go so far with anarchic and absurd wit ironically reminds us about just being sane and human. I think that's the brilliance of humour when it really works. The great irony of human nature.

- Do you think, guys, do you think that perhaps we should send out a list of shows to watch? That people could enjoy and feel light after watching them. Enjoyable light hearted shows. Let's make a list of your 20 favourite or your 10 favourite.

- On one condition, Wendy, that Dennis and I can go through a contract scene where we cut out some things and we keep some things.

- We'll start off with a comedy, and then we can progress to other movies .

- It's our choice to perform, so we'll each have 50 things and we'll go through and choose what to strip out or whatnot.

- Okay.

- Okay.

- Very good. So on that note, I'm going to say thank you very, very much to both of you and lovely just to be together, lovely to laugh together, lovely to learn together. Thank you to everybody for being here with us this evening and we look forward to seeing you soon. Tomorrow.

- Yeah.

- Thank you.

- Thanks.

- Thank you and stay safe.

- Bye.

- Thanks for a brilliant presentation and thanks Judy, as always. Bye.

- [Judy] Thanks everyone, bye bye.