



GREAT HOLLYWOOD COMEDIANS

“We never see ourselves as others see us.”
– Oliver Hardy

“And awaaay we go!”
– Jackie Gleason

The Universal Maniac

In 1999, an Australian gentleman told me about an interesting experience he and his family had at Universal Studios. They were on the backlot tour passing one of the theme park's main attractions, the Bates Motel used in the 1960 horror classic *Psycho*, about a murderous young man named Norman Bates who loved his mother a little too much. As the guide gave out information about how director Alfred Hitchcock shot the picture, a tall man, dressed in drag and carrying a large knife, emerged from behind the old set and charged toward the tram. The narrator seemed to know nothing about the Norman Bates look-alike and clammed up completely. The make-believe killer wore such a convincing maniacal expression that some of the paying customers were frightened and screamed when he raised his weapon. Then the "fiend" pulled off his wig and he turned out to be comic Jim Carrey; the thirty-seven-year-old star was clowning around during a work break. After his laughing "victims" calmed down, Jim was happy to pose for pictures and sign autographs.

Extra: Jim Carrey's second wife, actress Lauren Holley, once complained that her husband freaked her out because he couldn't pass a mirror in their mansion without stopping, staring into it, and making funny expressions for at least fifteen minutes. The same face-changing habit helped the Canadian-born comedian earn the praise of directors, adoration from his fans and millions of dollars.

Extra: Jim Carrey's big break came in 1982 when fifty-two-year-old Mitzi Shore, the owner of the famed Comedy Store on the Sunset Strip, took a mother-like interest in his career. Three years earlier, Shore's world was rocked when her unpaid performers went on strike. After all, if the waiters and the bartenders got wages, why not the talent? Why should Shore get rich while they made nothing? In Mitzi's eyes, she gave comics a showcase to hone their acts and move on to bigger venues. She even provided some of them with free food and housing. How could they do this to her? It had been especially galling that thirty-two-year-old David Letterman, one of her favorites, had joined the work stoppers. When a car struck a disgruntled picketer who ended up in the hospital, Mitzi decided to settle up before someone got seriously hurt. (It turned out the "victim," David Letterman's three-years-younger friend and future late-night

TV rival Jay Leno, faked his injuries in a successful attempt to end the conflict.) The whole ugly incident left a bitter taste in Shore's mouth; she banned several of the labor dispute's instigators from the club.

When Carrey arrived on the scene, Mitzi thought the newcomer was someone special. He had an elastic body that seemed to be made of Silly Putty, was respectful and (unlike many of the other comics who the proprietor saw) looked good and always wore suits. Out of hundreds of comedians who auditioned at the Comedy Store each week, Shore gave Jim prime opportunities to perform nights at her club, publicly gushed over him and important people in Hollywood took notice.

Extra: A knife-wielding "Norman Bates" charging the tram later became a feature on some of the Universal Studios' Tours.

The Breakfast Prank

George Burns loved playing tricks on his best friend and fellow comedian Jack Benny. Once, they were getting lunch at the famed Brown Derby restaurant in Hollywood. George ordered Jack's favorite dish, bacon and eggs, and wondered why his friend settled for cereal. Benny explained his wife Mary had been giving him a hard time at home about his diet and would kill him if he had bacon and eggs. The exasperated Burns shook his head. How pathetic! What was the point of working hard to become rich, famous and powerful if you were going to be henpecked? And Mary wasn't even present. The inspired Benny nodded and changed his order. When they finished their hearty meals, George declared to the waiter that Jack would pick up the tab. The famous cheapskate turned red. "Why the hell should I pay it?"

"Well, if you don't I'll tell Mary you ate bacon and eggs."

The Three Stooges' Pain

In the early 1930s, when Moe Howard of The Three Stooges decided childlike violence would be their trademark, it caused decades of repercussions for both the comics and their followers. After appearing in some two hundred films, middle Stooze Larry Fine lost all feeling on one side of his face. Curly Howard, the junior member of the team, wore a disguise in public to avoid being kicked in the shins by fans. Shemp Howard, who left the act and came back after younger brother Curly suffered a stroke in 1946, almost got knocked out by a young actress that he criticized after several takes for being too ladylike with her punches. Moe led his partners through orchestrated mayhem aimed at

adult movie audiences for twenty-five years. He never imagined that beginning in the late fifties, the Stooges shorts would constantly replay on TV in front of impressionable kids. A sentimental family man in real life, Moe traveled throughout the country to teach youngsters the techniques of harmless, two-fingers-to-the-forehead eye poking.

Extra: One evening in the late 1920s, Shemp Howard (1895-1955) accused Larry Fine (1902-1975) of cheating at cards and poked him in the eyes. As Larry rolled on the floor writhing in pain, and Shemp apologized, Moe Howard (1897-1975) held onto his sides laughing. The eventual leader of The Three Stooges thought the incident was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, and incorporated similar violence into their act.

Extra: By the late 1930s, Jerome "Curly" Howard (1903-1952) had become the most popular Stooge. A skilled basketball player and ballroom dancer, Jerry's athleticism came in handy for his energetic antics on the big screen. Unlike Moe, who learned his scripts to the letter, the childlike Curly was a spontaneous performer. One time during filming, the youngest Howard brother suddenly got down on the floor and spun like a top for a few minutes until he remembered his lines.

Young Frankenstein Follies

Director Mel Brooks and the cast of the 1974 parody *Young Frankenstein* almost went overboard with their ad-libbing. British comic Marty Feldman, who played the dim-witted lab assistant Igor, came up with a running bit where his hunchback kept moving. Several days passed before Marty's co-workers noticed; the displaced hump gag was added into the script so the other characters could react to it.

Gene Hackman shone as a kindly blind man who abused Peter Boyle's creature by spilling scalding hot soup on his lap, breaking his wine glass during a toast and accidentally lighting the cigar-smoking demon's thumb on fire. As the screaming monster ran off in pain, Hackman topped off the scene by making up the line, "Wait! I was gonna make espresso."

Brooks himself provided a yowling cat sound when Gene Wilder's Frederick Frankenstein threw an errant dart off camera. The players had so much fun creating extra material they ended up with a ponderous three-hour picture. Some hasty editing by Brooks removed the flat jokes, which cut *Young Frankenstein's* length in half thus resulting in a comedy classic.

Larry David's Job Security

When comedian Larry David joined the writing team of the weekly TV comedy program *Saturday Night Live* in 1984, he lamented it was the first time in his life that he couldn't make a friend. No one seemed to notice him or even wanted to go have coffee with him. Even worse, very few of Larry's sketches were used. The volatile performer, who sometimes screamed at unresponsive audiences during his stand-up routine, finally reached a breaking point. One Saturday night right before show time, Larry told producer Dick Ebersol that *SNL* stunk and he quit! But when David got home, he realized that he would miss his fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year salary. On Monday morning, Larry returned to work pretending nothing had happened. The incident later inspired David to create a similar episode for his alter ego, George Costanza, on the hit TV show *Seinfeld*.

Extra: When forty-three-year-old Larry David co-created the *Seinfeld* TV show (1990-1998), the comedian stated that he was a nice guy, but if he did all the rotten things he'd really like to do, he would be George Costanza. Thirty-one-year-old Jason Alexander who played the neurotic, selfish and self-loathing George on the small screen, sometimes questioned the credulity of David's writing. Like the time George bought a cashmere sweater for a female friend as a thank-you gift and then she accidentally found out it was a hand-me-down. Or what about when Costanza quit his real estate job because he was forbidden to use his boss's private bathroom? What happened to George could not possibly take place in real life. And even if it did, no one would react like he did. David told Alexander that the wild things in the *Seinfeld* scripts really did happen to him and that George's reactions to them were exactly like Larry's.

Stop Complaining About Being a Virgin

Comedian Steve Carell had an idea about a nerdy guy who plays poker with three buddies and is unable to keep up with their sex talk. The premise grew into the 2005 summer comedy *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Screenwriter and star Carell subscribed to the theory that men will laugh at other men in pain. Steve insisted that an excruciating scene, where some body waxers ripped off his ample chest hair, be real. During the one and only take, the other guys on the set tried to stop from snickering while the women offered him Advil. But one lady had no sympathy. When Steve complained about how hard the shoot was, his wife reminded Carell that he wrote the scenes that required him to spend

hours kissing beautiful women, while she stayed at home with their kids and she didn't want to hear it.

Laurel after Hardy

After Oliver Hardy's death in 1957 at the age of sixty-five, his long-time partner Stan Laurel refused to perform publicly again. The British-born Laurel was far from reclusive. He lived in a small apartment in Santa Monica and was listed in the phonebook. Well-wishers would call up and ask to visit. Stan would welcome them with great stories and belly laughs that made him seem very different from the quiet, sad sack people saw onscreen. But why didn't he live in some big mansion in Bel Air? The comic explained that his divorces plus bad business investments had not left him well off. Ownership of the Laurel and Hardy screen characters belonged to producer Hal Roach who teamed the two of them together in the late 1920s. With a smile, Stan told the sad tale of the time he and his partner wanted to buy Laurel and Hardy dolls as gifts for their families; they received no royalties and had to pay full price.

Extra: In his later years, the very friendly Stan Laurel (1890-1965) was better off financially than he let on. After his comedy partner Oliver Hardy (1892-1957) died, Stan and his wife bought a large seven-room house in Santa Monica. It was too big for two retirees; they soon moved into a one-bedroom beach apartment. Stan was happy to welcome guests into his home whether they were famous or not. The smaller living space helped to discourage younger, lesser-known comics from hitting Laurel up for money.

Extra: Stan and Ollie were not always close off the screen. Laurel would spend his after hours in the editing room where he had a reputation for drinking and carousing. The Harlem, Georgia, born Hardy, who was more actor than funny man, would usually leave to play golf as soon as the workday was done. Then in 1932, the two men hit on the idea of a joint vacation in England. Stan planned to see his family and Babe Hardy looked forward to checking out the British golf courses. The journey was meant to be private, but Hal Roach and some MGM Studios public relations men let the cat out of the bag. Both members of the comedy team, used to working in the relative isolation of the studio, were amazed at the crowds of people that greeted them abroad. Nine fans were injured in a mob scene when the two movie clowns disembarked at a train station. When Stan tried to return to his childhood home, the small market town of Ulverston, throngs of admirers prevented him from getting to the front door. The shocking realization of their worldwide stardom drew Laurel and

Hardy much closer together as friends, especially after their bosses, who benefitted greatly from the international publicity of Stan and Ollie's trip, docked their salaries for the time they missed work.

Extra: In the early 1920s, Oliver Hardy's Italian barber patted his face with talcum powder and said, "Nice a baby."

Ollie's friends heard about it and the actor became known as Babe.

Milton Berle, Picture Snatcher

Director Stanley Kramer was surprised how well his all-star cast of comedians got along while making *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* in 1964. The funny actors, who played a bunch of greedy motorists in search of stolen treasure, enjoyed the challenge of making each other laugh. Only the scene-stealing antics of Milton Berle threatened to disrupt the company's harmonious relations. The renowned joke thief found irritating ways to be the last one left in the camera shot. Berle's upstaging trickery included dropping his hat and staring at what everyone looked at just a few seconds longer. Uncle Miltie's subterfuge did not go unnoticed. In one sequence, his obnoxious mother-in-law, played by Ethel Merman, belted him several times with her purse. Afterward, Berle angrily complained to director Kramer that Merman really hurt him. The famous singer of show tunes opened her handbag and pulled out some heavy costumed jewelry. "Oh, I must have forgotten these were in here," she remarked, without any apparent remorse.

Extra: Ethel Merman (1908-1984) and Milton Berle (1908-2004) spent so much time together on the *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* that the two show-business legends reminded their co-stars of a bickering married couple. After Berle found out the name of Merman's new dentist, he hinted that the same hygienist recently made a painful mess of his teeth. Merman was apprehensive for a week before discovering that she'd been tricked and plotted revenge. Ethel casually let it slip to Berle that she was getting higher billing than her *Mad World* co-stars. Not realizing he'd been lied to, the angry ex-television clown immediately called his agent and demanded equal treatment.

Extra: Uncle Miltie, one of TV's earliest stars, used to drive his fellow comedians crazy with his joke stealing. Famed gossip columnist Walter Winchell (1897-1972) once dubbed Berle "The Thief of Bad Gags." Milton once bragged to Groucho Marx, "Groucho I took some of my best material from your act."

"Then you weren't listening!" Marx angrily snapped back.

Extra: Milton Berle once testified in a courtroom trial after being instructed by his lawyer only to answer yes or no. While in the dock, the old vaudevillian stated that he was the greatest comedian in the world. Later, the legal expert admonished him for not following instructions. Milton shrugged, “Hey, I was under oath.”

Chico’s Sure Thing

Chico Marx’s lifelong gambling addiction kept getting him in and out of trouble. After the Marx Brother’s 1933 comedy *Duck Soup* crashed and burned at the box office, Chico, along with younger brothers Harpo and Groucho, were fired by Paramount Studios and spent two years lost in the Hollywood wilderness. Chico scored a bridge game with MGM bigwig Irving Thalberg and charmed the producer into giving the famous comedy team a new contract. The savvy Thalberg cast the Marxes in the 1935 classic *A Night at the Opera*; it became the biggest hit of their careers. Two years later, the piano-playing comic once again got into financial hot water on the set of the newest Marx offering, *A Day at the Races*. Right before shooting the movie’s climactic steeplechase scene, Chico made a large bet on a horse that lost in the script. When asked for an explanation, the once-again broke fifty-year-old shrugged, “The crew gave me twenty-to-one odds.”

Extra: Leonard Chico Marx (1887-1961) was a compulsive gambler from the age of nine. His father, who was a tailor, learned never to trust his son with a delivery. Leo hocked the clothes and blew the money in pool halls. No amount of beatings or admonishments from his old man could deter the boy from his risky hobbies. As he reached adulthood, Chico became a skilled card player but often took needless chances, which caused him to lose. Friends recalled him giving them expensive presents, then asking for them back within hours to use as bets. As his fellow movie-star brothers became rich, the old piano man performed in seedy dives to get by. Even after his frustrated siblings put him on an allowance, Chico continued to blow his meager funds till the end of his life. But once, the skirt-chasing comic scored big on an unlikely life-and-death long shot. After losing to mobster Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel (1901-1947) in a high-stakes poker game, Chico paid him off with a bad check. The hot-tempered thug was gunned down in a probable gangland hit before he tried to cash it.

Extra: In 1929, Paramount Studios head Adolph Zukor (1873-1976) reneged on a deal one of his underlings made to pay the Marx Brothers seventy-five thousand dollars. Sure, the comedy team’s play *The Cocoanuts* was a hit on

Broadway, but they were unproven in pictures. The mogul scheduled a meeting with Chico Marx, and ordered his wayward executive to attend so he could learn how a talent negotiation should be done. The oldest Marx Brother praised Zukor to high heaven. It was such an honor for Chico to meet the man who practically invented the motion-picture industry. It would be the thrill of a lifetime for the brothers to make a film at Paramount for a mere one hundred thousand dollars. Smiling, the totally charmed Zukor turned to his assistant and said, "Well, that sounds reasonable."

Extra: In 1934, the Marx Brothers felt insulted by MGM bigwig Irving Thalberg (1899-1936). How dare he say that their movies needed less laughs and more romance? And why did this young man keep them waiting when they scheduled meetings? The Marxes were from vaudeville where promptness was demanded. The comics plotted their revenge. One day they barricaded Irving's office door with filing cabinets, and then escaped through the window. Another time, the once again tardy producer entered his workplace to find the comics completely naked and roasting potatoes in his fireplace. The good-humored Thalberg told the brothers to wait; he then called the MGM commissary and asked them to send up some butter.

Bob Couldn't Always Trust Bing

Bing Crosby would stick up for his friend and sometimes-rival Bob Hope, but loved playing jokes on him in private. One time during a morning round of golf, the screen partners discussed a hurtful magazine article that called the very rich Hope a cheapskate. Bing promptly went home to write an angry letter to the editor. People didn't realize that when Bob did free benefits for the US armed forces, he also gave up tons of money he could earn in other venues. After Hope thanked him, the crooner wanted a favor. There were a group of sailors on leave in New York who could use entertaining. Bing's schedule was full; could Bob do it? The patriotic comedian agreed and quickly left Hollywood for the East Coast. Bob was stunned when the military audience sat stone-faced, not laughing at any of his jokes. Crosby hadn't mentioned to Hope that the servicemen were members of the Royal Dutch Navy, who didn't speak a word of English.

Extra: Crooner Bing Crosby (1903-1977) and comedian Bob Hope (1903-2003) met while they were each performing at New York's Capitol Theater in 1932. They became drinking buddies and planned out a routine to enhance each other's act. Bob would come out on stage and say he had to do the show alone

tonight. His partner had unfortunately locked himself in his dressing room. Bing then appeared in the wings, holding a plank of wood with an attached doorknob. "I'll be going solo tonight," Crosby told the crowd. "My partner has a stomach ache."

"But I don't have one," Hope protested.

"You will after I make you swallow this!"

Audiences were delighted and Hollywood studio executives took notice.

Extra: Crosby and Hope sometimes had a tense relationship and did not always appreciate being the butt of each other's jokes. A particular sore spot for Crosby was when Hope made fun of his toupee. During a scene in *Road to Singapore* (1940), the two men were about to settle down and get some shuteye when the director noticed something wrong. "Bing, why don't you take your hat off?"

"What are you talking about?" the singer replied. "This is how I sleep."

No amount of arguing or front office pressure could change the leading man's mind; Crosby's head and hairpiece stayed covered throughout the shot.

Extra: Bob Hope was one of the Masters of Ceremonies when Bing Crosby won the Oscar for playing a priest in the sentimental comedy *Going My Way* (1944). The comedian later said that smiling as Crosby received his statue was the greatest acting job of his life.

A Christmas Story

William Claude Dukenfield, better known as W. C. Fields, who once claimed he would only play the role of Ebenezer Scrooge if he didn't have to repent at the end, one time displayed a sentimental side during Christmas. In the winter of 1895, the fifteen-year-old vaudevillian was robbed by his manager, and found himself stranded and broke at the Kent, Ohio, train station. The man behind the counter noticed him sitting quietly. "Are you an actor?"

W. C. nodded. "People don't trust your kind," the worker noted.

The young Fields, who had committed acts of larceny since he had run away from his father back in Philadelphia, said nothing. The clerk pulled a bill out of his wallet. "Listen, son, here's ten dollars. Pay me back when things are better for you."

Shocked by such kindness in a cruel world, William burst into tears. Two years later on Christmas Day, the ticket seller received a note thanking him for his gesture with the original loan, plus another ten dollars in interest. It was all the money Fields had, so he spent the holiday in a soup kitchen.

Extra: Movie star W. C. Fields (1880-1946) often performed great acts of kindness and charity, but kept that side of his personality to himself. One December in the 1930s, the rich curmudgeon was shooting the breeze in the halls of Paramount Studios with Bob Hope, when two charity workers approached them. “Gentlemen, there are so many who suffer during the holiday season. Could you see your way to help them out?”

The normally tight-fisted Hope reached into his pocket and pulled out some cash. But Fields said, “I’m sorry, Madam. I gave all my money to the SEBF.”

After the disappointed Samaritans left, Hope asked, “Hey, Bill, what’s the SEBF?”

“Screw Everybody But Fields!”

Extra: Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) was a British economist who publicly stated that impoverished people should be taken off government relief for their own sake. He felt it morally wrong for a family to reproduce before they could financially sustain themselves. His political enemies said that Malthus didn’t care if the poor got smallpox, was an advocate of child murder and simply wanted to take the fun out of life. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) reviled him and Malthus may have been the inspiration for the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge in the writer’s short novel, *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

Many free marketers questioned *A Christmas Carol’s* philosophy. Why should Scrooge volunteer to give up more of his hard-earned wealth if he was already being taxed to support inadequate institutions? Was it an employer’s fault if one of his workers had five children that he could not afford? When Ebenezer lent money, didn’t it help his fellow citizens improve their lives and property? If the debtors agreed to Scrooge’s terms and then couldn’t, or wouldn’t, pay him back, was that the businessman’s fault? W.C. Fields, who lacked a formal education but loved the works of Charles Dickens, may have felt that the Scrooge at the beginning of the story was a well-meaning entrepreneur and a contributor to society.

Beverly Hills Ad Libber

Twenty-three-year-old Eddie Murphy had to fill in some big creative holes when he replaced Sylvester Stallone in the 1984 comedy *Beverly Hills Cop*. The thirty-eight-year-old Stallone walked off the film when the producers balked at paying for expensive action scenes. The hasty recasting led to huge chunks of dialogue and dark moments being excised from the script. Before shooting certain sequences, the director gave Eddie the merest outline of what was supposed to happen and relied on the innovative young stand-up comic to

make it play. In take after take, Murphy came up with spontaneous monologues to con his way into a filled-up exclusive hotel, a posh country club and a heavily secured customs warehouse. The leading man's ad-libbed rifts forced his co-stars to cover their faces or pinch themselves hard; whatever it took for them not to laugh and ruin takes. Critics' complaints about a flimsy murder revenge plot with a typical shoot-'em-up ending could not stop Eddie becoming the biggest star in America, while the sparse *Beverly Hills Cop* screenplay was nominated for an Oscar.

Extra: In 1980, nineteen-year-old Eddie Murphy of Roosevelt, Long Island, bombarded the Midtown Manhattan offices of TV's *Saturday Night Live* with three phone calls a day, insisting he'd make a great addition to the cast. After six auditions, Murphy was hired, and then it took several frustrating months before Eddie convinced *SNL*'s producers that he was ready to carry a sketch. No matter that he'd been working the comedy clubs around New York for four years. "You're too young," they told him. "Learn from us, we have more experience."

Finally his persistence paid off; Eddie debuted on national television as a bitter high school basketball player who'd been a junior for seven years, and was now upset that his team was about to be racially integrated. The studio audience loved him and went into hysterics. Eddie became an instant celebrity, and some of the same people who had been condescending took credit for his discovery.

Extra: After Eddie Murphy became a major movie star, he surrounded himself with a huge paid entourage and worried that he'd lost his creative edge. Unlike other comics, Eddie was not "on" all the time but rather an astute observer of human behavior. When his new employees laughed at whatever he said, the multi-millionaire Murphy intimated that they wanted to keep their jobs. People that expected to meet an aggressive cut-up were sometimes surprised when Murphy displayed a shy demeanor in public. When Eddie played an overweight scientist in the 1996 comedy *The Nutty Professor*, some of his co-workers felt the actor only relaxed when he slipped into his fat suit costume. During breaks in filming, the still disguised Murphy went off on his own to Los Angeles city parks and played with children.

Charlie Chaplin's Advice

Charlie Chaplin always wished to move away from the comedy that made him famous. His serious turns disappointed many of his followers. When future film funny men like Lou Costello or Jim Carrey would get too poignant, they

were accused of having “Chaplinitis”. Even as the “Little Tramp’s” movies got heavier, his comic advice was highly sought after. One time in the 1930s, famed writer Charles MacArthur questioned Chaplin on staging the most basic of scenes, a fat lady slipping on a banana peel. How do you present it on the screen without slipping into cliché? Would it be better to let the audience see the fat lady first and bring in the banana peel at the end of the sequence? With no hesitation, Chaplin said, “No. First you show the banana peel. Then you show the fat lady eyeing it, walking towards it and carefully stepping over it. Then the last thing you see is her falling down the open manhole she didn’t notice.”

Extra: Charlie Chaplin’s screen rival Buster Keaton (1895-1966) once pointed out that audiences didn’t like it when comedians were smarter than they were. One time Keaton walked over a banana peel and waved at the camera; the gag got absolutely no laughs at the preview. The scene was redone with Buster slipping on a second banana peel that the comedian didn’t notice; he was still gloating over avoiding the first one. The newly edited sequence went over well.

Extra: One morning in the 1970s, comedian Jackie Vernon (1924-1987) was having breakfast in a London restaurant when he spotted his boyhood idol, Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977). Back when he was a kid, Jackie had sent the “Little Tramp” admiring fan letters every week for ten years. The silent film legend never replied so finally Jackie gave up. But now his hero was here in the flesh and Jackie could fulfill his lifelong dream of meeting him. Vernon approached the now wheelchair-bound Chaplin’s table. “Mr. Chaplin, I have always admired and wanted to meet you. My name is Jackie Vernon.”

The old man repeated the name thoughtfully, “Vernon...Vernon...So why did you stop writing?”

Comics and Monsters

Director Charles Barton put up with many ridiculous antics on the set of the 1948 comic horror film *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Lou Costello, who thought the film’s script could have been written by a five-year-old, insisted that the cast participate in a wild pie fight, much to the chagrin of the well-dressed Bela Lugosi who played Dracula. Costello also put a leash around the neck of Lon Chaney Jr. in his wolf man costume, and then took his hairy co-star for walks around the studio. When Lou was being chased by Glenn Strange, as Frankenstein’s Monster, the pudgy comic pelted ad-libs that caused the creature to laugh and ruin takes. A bigger concern to the filmmakers was Bud

Abbott, who would get so sloshed by two p.m. that he was incapable of shooting for the rest of the day. Abbott explained that when he was young, a doctor stated that if Bud didn't stop drinking he'd be dead by the age of thirty. The straight man was so worried by the diagnosis, he stayed drunk for the next forty years.

Extra: In 2006, forty-three-year-old director Quentin Tarantino stated that *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* was his all-time favorite movie. In Quentin's opinion, the epic meeting between the monsters, who were allowed to be scary, and the silly comics provided the perfect blend of horror and humor.

Laurel and Hardy's Hard Times

Like many Americans, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy endured tough times in 1932. The British-born Laurel had tragically lost his son, born two months prematurely, just nine days old. His marriage to his wife Lois was falling apart, and for the rest of his life Stan would deny accusations that he cheated on her. Meanwhile, Oliver Hardy's alcoholic spouse Myrtle was constantly being placed in and escaping from sanitariums. The heavysset, but very graceful actor from Georgia sought escape on golf courses and in the arms of another woman. With all their personal traumas, that year Laurel and Hardy still turned out their only Oscar-winning film, *The Music Box*. The antics of the helpless pair, trying to push a piano up a flight of 131 stairs, proved to be a great tonic for economically struggling audiences during the Great Depression. *The Music Box* continued to make people laugh hysterically for generations to come.

Extra: One time in the 1930s, Laurel and Hardy filmed a scene that required them to run down a narrow alleyway with their wives in hot pursuit. The women would shoot at them, causing two-timing men to come out of the nearby apartment buildings in their undergarments and run away, with Stan and Ollie doing double takes. Before the action commenced, Laurel gathered the extras around. "Listen, fellas, it's costing us a fortune to rent out these apartments so I want to get it right the first time. Now when you hear the shots and run out into the alley, don't linger. We only want you in the scene for about ten seconds."

After the director shouted, "ACTION!" the boys ran down the alley, their wives fired their guns and the men in their undergarments ran out and disappeared quickly, following Stan's instructions to the letter. All except one guy who was about thirty seconds late, ran the wrong way, and bumped into

Laurel, which messed up his close-up. “You bloody fool. You ruined the shot!” shouted Stan.

“I’m not in the movie,” replied the man.

I’m a Bad Boy

As his popularity rose in the 1940s, Lou Costello found an interesting way to furnish his ranch home in the San Fernando Valley. During the making of one of the Abbott and Costello comedies at Universal Studios, some furniture kept mysteriously disappearing from the set. Following a hunch, the producer called Costello and told him that they needed the chairs and tables to complete the movie. The pudgy star, who was known for his generosity to co-workers, was indignant. What did it have to do with him? Universal was a bunch of cheats! How would Costello and his partner, Bud Abbott, be treated when their career took a downturn? But the props reappeared at the studio the next day and stayed on hand till the picture was done. Then they immediately vanished in a pattern that continued throughout Lou Costello’s employment at Universal.

Blue Buddy Standards

Adults, who took their children to see Buddy Hackett in family movies, were sometimes shocked by his lewd stand-up act. The raunchy comedian, who wrote all his own material, kept a strict moral code when it came to choosing films. In 1952, the little-known twenty-eight-year-old Buddy turned down a chance to replace the late Curly Howard as a member of The Three Stooges because he felt they were too violent on screen. Thirty-eight years later, Buddy threw Martin Scorsese out of his home after the director offered him a role in the R-rated bloody gangster drama *Good Fellas*. Hackett was proud to work in Disney classics like *The Love Bug* and *The Little Mermaid*, but he didn’t always behave. In the 1961 comedy *Everything’s Ducky*, the funny man worked with a fowl that in one scene was supposed to wobble and fall over like a drunk. After several failed takes, the frustrated director chewed out the duck’s trainer; neither noticed Buddy attending to his little white co-star with a whisky bottle and an eyedropper.

The Hard-to-Please Sergeant

Many years after he starred in the 1950s hit TV comedy *Sgt. Bilko*, Phil Silvers was a very difficult guy to buy gifts for. To his pals, the Brooklyn-born comic seemed to have everything; in reality, material goods meant very little to

him. Growing up poor, Silvers hated shopping because his sister always haggled to bring prices down — it was so humiliating. The well-off actor often agreed to buy whatever salespeople showed to him, just to get out of stores. One time Phil visited a rich buddy for the weekend in a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud. The friend saw a golden opportunity to pull off a really great surprise. He asked to borrow the car under the pretext of giving it a tune-up; he then installed a built-in bar, a state-of-the-art hi-fi stereo system, a deluxe color TV and a videocassette recorder. It was all ready by Monday and with great anticipation, he returned the automobile. It turned out to be a rented car.

What's In a Name?

Groucho Marx was incensed when Warner Bros. threatened to sue The Marx Brothers over the title of the 1946 film *A Night in Casablanca*. The wisecracking comedian pooh-poohed the notion that people would mistake the new comedy for Warners classic *Casablanca*, made four years earlier. He wrote the potential plaintiffs a letter stating that the Marxes used the word Brothers professionally long before the Warners; maybe they should countersue. Furthermore, Groucho was certain that moviegoers could tell there was a physical difference between his brother Harpo and *Casablanca's* beautiful leading lady Ingrid Bergman. Also, did Jack Warner own the rights to the name Jack? After all, he was preceded by Jack the Ripper and Jack and the Bean Stalk. After receiving the funny missive, the Warners dropped the issue. Later it was discovered they never objected at all; Groucho Marx made up the whole feud as a publicity stunt.

Moe Watched Out For Larry

In 1958, after twenty-five years of making *Three Stooges* shorts, Moe Howard was a real estate millionaire while his screen partner, Larry Fine, was totally broke. The uptight leader of the famous comedy team often got angry with Larry for being late, not knowing his lines and entering sets at the wrong time, which ruined scenes. Moe, who was five years older than his co-star, had constantly warned the knucklehead not to blow his money by living in hotels and gambling. Now Columbia Pictures had fired them; the fifty-six-year-old Larry was planning to eke out a living managing apartments. It served him right. But Moe remembered when his late younger brother Curly had been sick; the kind-hearted Larry had given him part of his salary. Through hard work and hustle, the rich Stooge kept their movie career alive, remained a worrywart and helped the middle Stooge to continue on with his happy, carefree lifestyle.

Extra: When The Three Stooges were hired at Columbia Pictures in 1934, they made sixty thousand dollars a year divided by three and never got a raise. Head honcho Harry Cohn loved their act and promised Moe Howard that they'd always have a place at the studio while he was boss. By the 1950s, the Stooges were the only comedy team in Hollywood still making twenty-minute, "two reelers"; Moe decided not to rock the boat by asking for more money. Right after Cohn died in 1958, the Stooges were immediately fired. When Moe came back to Columbia to say goodbye to his old pals, he was not admitted on the lot.

Extra: Larry Fine constantly gave money to friends who never paid him back. He made up for it by continuously borrowing from Moe and then forgetting all about it.

Extra: When Larry became a Stooge in 1926, the former violinist was told he'd have to forget about playing his music. Larry happily replied that for one hundred dollars, he'd forget everything.

The Distinct Dummy

To many people, ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his wooden partner Charlie McCarthy were two distinct individual beings. The self-taught voice thrower based Charlie on a rascally newspaper boy that he had known in his youth. Wearing his cape, monocle and top hat, the dummy got away with sexual innuendos that most adults in the 1930s never dared utter in public. Critics, who charged that Bergen did his best work on radio where people couldn't see his lips moving, were disarmed when Charlie made fun of Edgar for the same thing. For over forty years, Bergen entertained audiences in all different media, and received an honorary Oscar for his wisecracking creation in 1938. One time when the famous pair appeared on television, the soundman was so absorbed by Edgar and Charlie's banter that he kept moving the microphone back and forth above the head of the one that was currently speaking.

Hope and Roosevelt

Democrat Franklin Roosevelt was the first of eleven presidents Republican Bob Hope entertained. The commander-in-chief loved the comedian on the big screen and appreciated Hope's efforts entertaining the troops during World War II. Their paths crossed when Bob emceed a dinner in the president's honor, a

few months before Roosevelt won an unprecedented fourth term in 1944. In front of a crowd of luminaries, Hope told a story about a Marine in the South Pacific who was disappointed that he had not encountered an enemy combatant. At the edge of a jungle, with his gun at the ready, he shouted out, "To hell with Hirohito!"

A Japanese soldier emerged from behind the trees. "To hell with Roosevelt!"

But the Marine lowered his weapon. "Darn it, I can't shoot a fellow Republican."

The president threw back his head and laughed so hard Bob later said he almost considered voting for him.

Extra: In late 1941, Bob Hope started broadcasting his radio shows live from army bases as ploy to bring up ratings. The comedian endeared himself to enlisted men by making fun of their officers. Then in December, when America entered World War II, Hope and a number of other stars went on a victory caravan tour and sold war bonds. Unlike his fellow pampered celebrities, who complained about the cramped quarters on their shared train, the ex-vaudevillian Hope felt exhilarated by both the travel and crowds. It was no problem for the energetic Bob, who lived to be a hundred, to go overseas and entertain the troops.

At first, Hope found America's young fighting men to be the easiest audience he ever faced. Jokes that died in the States got uproarious laughter from the homesick G.I.s. In the beginning, Hope stayed out of combat areas, but then he reasoned that those in actual battles needed him the most. Bob flew in planes that could have been shot down and performed in places that had been recently attacked. He was greatly moved by the injuries he saw in hospital wards, and quietly used his vast wealth to help set up several wounded veterans in their own businesses after the war ended. Later, in the 1960s, Hope could not understand the Vietnam conflict, getting in trouble when he repeatedly suggested we should bomb the enemy into submission. Bob continued to perform for United States' troops even after some of the soldiers, who disagreed with his political stances, booed him.

George Burns on Tours

While giving tours of Hollywood in the 1990s, it was a pleasure for me and my customers to see ninety-something George Burns being driven around in a black Cadillac. The comedian always rode shotgun and smoked his trademark cigar. He would roll down the window, say hello and smile for the cameras. The women on the bus frequently commented on his cuteness. Usually Burns rode

to Forest Lawn Cemetery to talk with his late wife Gracie or went to have lunch at the Hillcrest Country Club. Since the 1940s, George had sat at Hillcrest's famed "Comedian's Round Table" with legends such as Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, Al Jolson, The Marx Brothers and George Jessel. When we encountered Burns, he was the last survivor of the group. The Hillcrest Board of Directors was always very strict about the club members following their rules. But they amended one policy so that anyone ninety-five and over could smoke.

Extra: Founded in 1897, the Los Angeles Country Club was composed of the city's old money oil people; Jewish show-business types and actors were not allowed. The new monied movie folk started the Hillcrest Country Club in 1920, just a few miles away. Ironically, Hillcrest's primarily Jewish membership discovered oil on their property.

Extra: One time George Burns (1896-1996) and Harpo Marx (1888-1964) were playing golf at the Hillcrest. It was a hot day and the two men took off their shirts. A staff member raced over to tell them that their action was against club protocol. They shrugged and complied. Then a grinning George asked if there were any rules against taking off your pants. The employee admitted that there weren't. For the next few hours, the sight of the two half-dressed comics startled several other players.

Extra: Always optimistic, when George Burns turned ninety-nine, he signed a new contract with the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas. He promised to renegotiate in five years if the hotel was still around.

The Unusual Speaking Engagement

One day in the 1950s, George Jessel was having lunch with some fellow comedians when he was approached by a stranger who asked him to speak at his dog's funeral. The famous toastmaster, who often got into trouble professionally because of his outspoken conservative politics and his fierce support of Israel, was insulted. Jessel's speechmaking was reserved for political and entertainment gatherings. This fellow was humiliating him; George's friends would probably rib him about pet eulogies for the next five years. The cash-starved womanizer began to reconsider when the man quietly promised to pay him a great deal of money. Still, George hesitated. Could he really agree to this indignity in front of his pals? His would-be benefactor then stated that he would also donate heavily to George's pet cause, the Jewish Relief Fund. Slowly, Jessel broke into a smile and then said, "Why didn't you tell me your dog was Jewish?"

The Reluctant Stereotype

Marilyn Monroe was disgusted when she read the script for the comedy *Some Like It Hot* in 1959. The thirty-three-year-old Connecticut resident had left Hollywood partly because she had grown tired of stereotypical dumb blonde roles. Now they wanted her to appear as someone too dense to realize that Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis were disguised as women. Even she had never pretended to be that stupid. Still, Marilyn needed the money. Her acting coach, Lee Strasberg, reminded Monroe that she usually hadn't been close with other ladies. Marilyn should play her character as someone who yearned for female companionship so much that she did not notice her new friends' more masculine attributes. Armed with her teacher's advice, the bombshell unhappily returned to Los Angeles. Though she was resented by her co-workers for constantly being late and blowing her lines, movie audiences totally fell for Marilyn's sweet and sincere comic performance.

Extra: Thirty-four-year-old actors Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon (1925-2001) sometimes suffered in silent agony on the set of *Some Like It Hot*. Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) often took multiple takes to get her lines right, while her dressed-in-drag male co-stars were forced to stand for hours in their uncomfortable high-heeled shoes.

Extra: In one *Some Like It Hot* sequence, Marilyn's only line was, "It's me, Sugar." It took her sixty-five takes. In between camera setups, the frustrated director, Billy Wilder (1906-2002), tried to calm his leading lady down. "Don't worry, Marilyn."

"Worry about what?" she replied.

Later, the blonde, who was very shrewd about her comic abilities, told friends that she functioned as her own director. Once Monroe thought all the elements in a scene were correct, she delivered her dialogue perfectly.

The Great One Could Move

Even though his weight sometimes topped 280 pounds, the heavy-boozing Jackie Gleason moved with great speed and grace when he had to. Christened "The Great One" by his fellow drinking buddy Orson Welles, the forty-six-year-old comic actor embarked on a cross-country train trip to promote Gleason's return to television in 1962. For ten days he'd be surrounded by beautiful dames and the alcohol would be flowing. The publicity tour was a huge success; the often hung-over Gleason managed to keep smiling when he was loudly greeted

by fans in each new town. At Union Station in Los Angeles, one of Jackie's entourage, named Billy the Midget, started selling helium balloons on the platform. At one point, the little man was carrying so many products he actually started to float away, when Jackie raced to his rescue and pulled him back to safety. "Nobody gets to San Bernardino before I do, pal!"

Bill Murray Made it in the Shower

When he joined the cast of TV's *Saturday Night Live* in 1977, Bill Murray was getting hate mail till an idea struck him in the shower. The twenty-seven-year-old comic, who replaced the very popular Chevy Chase, had struggled to be funny in his initial weeks on *SNL*. Sometimes the volatile Murray angered the show's writers by blowing his lines; the best material went to Bill's more established castmates. But now, holding onto a gag gift, a microphone-shaped bar of soap, the former medical student Murray had an inspiration. In the season finale, Bill shone as a pretend tacky morning disc jockey that showered with his wife, played by co-star Gilda Radner, while he talked to an imaginary audience. The laughs were enhanced when Murray introduced his spouse's supposedly secret lover, Buck Henry, as a surprise guest who joined the married couple under the running water. The "Shower Mike" sketch was a huge hit with viewers; from then on Bill's fan letters reflected a 180-degree change of heart.

Detective Burns

George Burns and Gracie Allen worried that their careers interfered with their parenting. One night the married comics arrived home late and were distressed to find that all the pictures had been cut out of their dictionary. Burns insisted that he handle it; he asked his boy Ronnie where his daughter Sandy had put the scissors; the kid didn't know. When George asked Sandy the same question, she revealed her brother hid them in a drawer. Even Gracie was impressed by George's detective work, and the kind-hearted straight man was so pleased that he doled out only a minor punishment to his son. For many years afterward, George proudly related the tale about his clever sleuthing to dinner guests until one night the now grown-up Sandy couldn't take it anymore. "Please don't tell the scissors story tonight, Dad."

"Why not, sweetheart?"

"Well, the reason I knew where they were is that I was the one who cut out the pictures."

Extra: The ninth of twelve children, George Burns of New York City (he was born Nathan Birnbaum and renamed himself after a successful baseball player) contributed greatly to the legend and lore of Hollywood. When author Max Wilk did research for his great 1973 book *The Wit and Wisdom of Hollywood*, George related an anecdote to him about a man named Osterman who came from the East Coast to run Paramount Studios in the early 1930s. Actress Claudette Colbert was upset that her stand-in had been fired as a cost-cutting move and threatened to quit her latest picture. Osterman was incredulous. “Miss Colbert, do you mean to tell me you will give up \$125,000 unless this girl gets her thirty-five-dollar a week job back?”

The star was adamant, so the executive gave in. Hearing about the incident, George Burns, who along with his wife Gracie Allen (1895-1964) was new to pictures, decided to make his own demand. Their blue dressing room was giving Gracie a headache and it had to be repainted immediately if the comedy team was going to continue working there. “Mr. Burns, do you mean to say you would give up sixty thousand dollars unless your dressing room is made to look a different color?”

“That’s right!”

“Mr. Burns, have you ever run a studio?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re running one now!”

And with that, so said George Burns, Osterman left Hollywood and returned to New York, never to come back. Max Wilk was all set to use the story for publication; the only problem was, according to his information, the Paramount head honcho at that time was named Otterson, not Osterman. George explained to Max that he’d used the name Osterman because he didn’t want Wilk to be sued since the whole tale was a complete fabrication.

Jack Benny Lived Down to his Reputation

From 1932 to 1965, Jack Benny excelled at playing a beloved miser on radio and television. In real life both a generous man and a worrywart, Jack fretted that people would think he was like his small-screen character. Benny insisted on giving huge tips in restaurants, which caused waiters to give him sad looks, as if they were disappointed that he was not really stingy. Each year Benny gave lots of money to charity, but there were times that the former vaudevillian lived down to his reputation. Once, Jack was about to leave a posh hotel in a cab when he realized he had left his wallet in the restroom. He raced back to where he’d been, crouched down to look in the stall, and sure enough, he saw his little pocketbook on the floor. Not wanting to repay the ten-cent fee, Jack tried to

crawl underneath the door and was straining to reach his money, when he was startled by laughter. Another man had come in to use the facilities. “Mr. Benny, I’m so glad everything I heard about you is true!”

Extra: Jack Benny (1894-1974), who made a lucrative career out of pretending to be cheap and eternally thirty-nine years old, once praised the shtick of little-known comedian Jacob Cohen (1921-2004). Born in Babylon, Long Island, Cohen grew up a sad child who claimed his mother woke up each morning at eleven a.m. and never made him breakfast. At the age of twenty-two, he gave up his dream of being a stand-up comic and got a job selling aluminum siding. (“I was the only one who knew I quit,” Jake said.)

Twenty years later, the frustrated tin man returned to the stage, determined to create a distinct image that would separate him from the crowd. Benny caught Jake’s act and thought it was wonderful. “Everyone can identify with what you’re going through, keep it up,” Jack told Cohen.

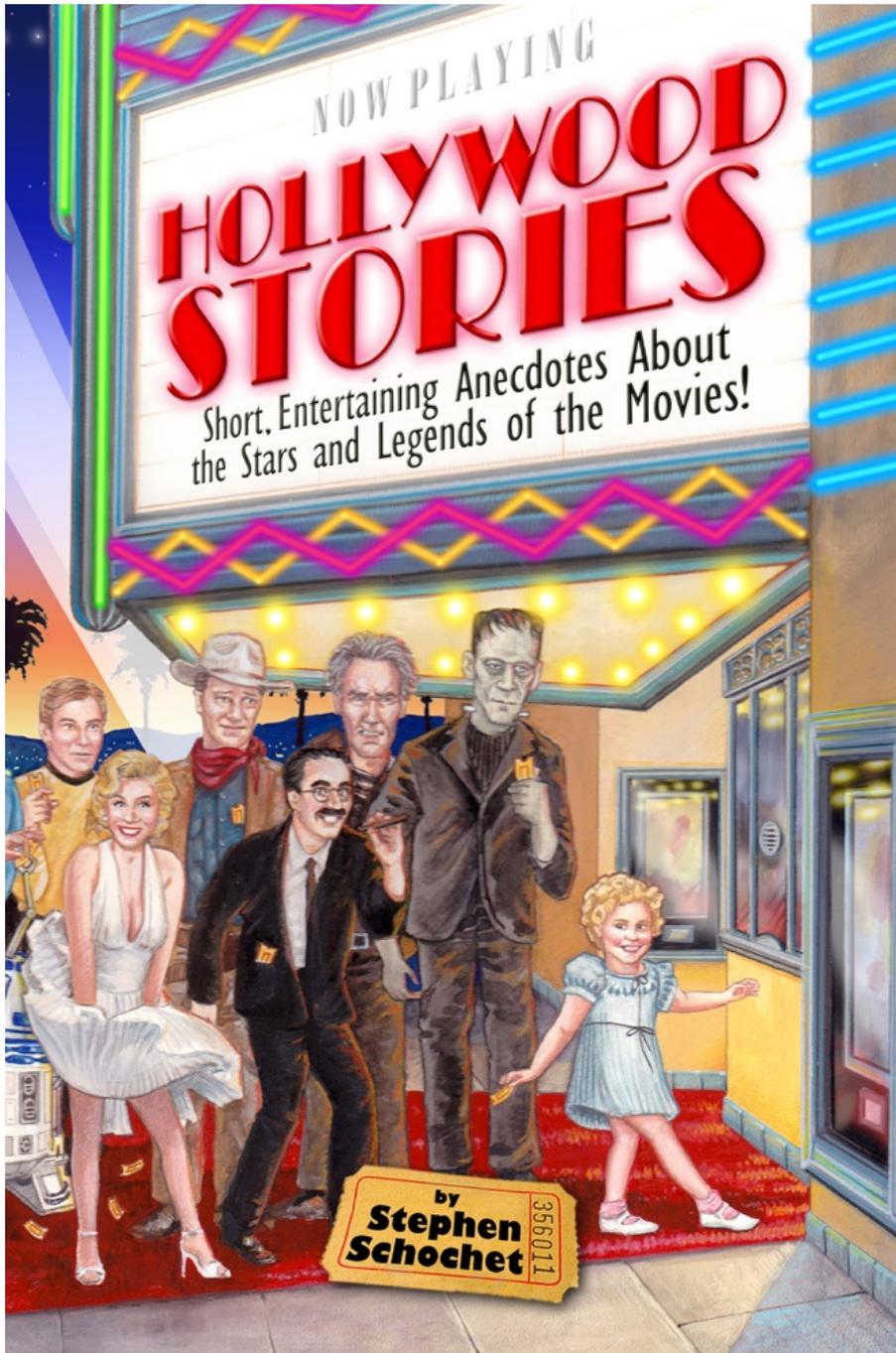
The encouraged younger funny man continued to entertain audiences, delivering rapid-fire one-liners such as, “My wife wanted to make love in the back seat and she wanted me to drive.”

Cohen, who made a great living with his “no respect” routine, borrowed the moniker of a fictional cowboy star mentioned on Jack Benny’s radio show back in 1942, and renamed himself Rodney Dangerfield.

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