

Eden Court Cinema  
Monday, 18 May 2015  
at 8.15pm

Comedy, USA, B&W,  
68 mins.

Director:  
Leo McCarey  
Screenplay:  
Burt Kalmar, Harry  
Ruby, Arthur  
Sheekman, Nat Perrin

Cast:  
Groucho Marx, Chico  
Marx, Harpo Marx,  
Zeppo Marx,  
Margaret Dumont,  
Raquel Torres, Louis  
Calhern, Edmund  
Breese, Leonid  
Kinskey, Charles B  
Middleton [Charles  
Middleton]



## Duck Soup

Notes assembled by Georgina Coburn

The Marx Brothers' greatest and funniest masterpiece - the classic comedy *Duck Soup* (1933) is a short, but brilliant satire and lampooning of blundering dictatorial leaders, Fascism and authoritarian government. The film, produced by Herman Mankiewicz, was prepared during the crisis period of the Depression. Some of its clever gags and routines were taken from Groucho's and Chico's early 1930s radio show *Flywheel, Shyster & Flywheel*. Working titles for the film included *Oo La La*, *Firecrackers*, *Grasshoppers*, and *Cracked Ice*.

It was the Marx Brothers' fifth film in a five-picture contract with Paramount Studios, before they went on to MGM. It was their last and best film with the studio. The film was directed by first-class veteran director Leo McCarey (who would go on to direct *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Love Affair* (1939), *Going My Way* (1944), and *An Affair to Remember* (1957) - a remake of his 1939 film), and its screenplay was written by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby



Plus...  
*We Give Pink Stamps*

(with additional dialogue by Arthur Sheekman and Nat Perrin). Originally, it was to have been directed by Ernst Lubitsch...

The outrageous film was both a critical and commercial failure at the time of its release - audiences were taken aback by such preposterous political disrespect, buffoonery and cynicism at a time of political and economic crisis, with Roosevelt's struggle against Depression in the US amidst the rising power of Hitler in Germany. (This film quote, spoken by Groucho, was especially detested: "And remember while you're out there risking life and limb through shot and shell, we'll be in here thinking what a sucker you are.") Insulted by the film, fascist Italian dictator Mussolini banned the film in his country. Fortunately, the film was rediscovered by a generation of 1960s college students, and by revival film festivals and museum showings. As a result, the film has attained immortal status. This was the last of the Marx Brothers films to feature all four of the brothers. Their next film (without Zeppo), for MGM and its producer Irving Thalberg, Hollywood's most prestigious studio, was their landmark film *A Night at the Opera* (1935) with a more developed and polished plot-line.

The irrepressible comedians in this quintessential anarchic, satirical film simply but irreverently attack the pomposity of small-time governmental leaders (Firefly as President), the absurdity of government itself (the Cabinet meeting scene), governmental diplomacy (the Trentino-Firefly scenes), an arbitrary legal system (Chicolini's trial), and war fought over petty matters (the mobilization and war scenes). The non-stop,

frenetic film is filled with a number of delightfully hilarious moments, gags, fast-moving acts, double entendres, comedy routines, puns, pure silliness, zany improvisations, quips and insult-spewed lines of dialogue - much of the comedy makes the obvious statement that war is indeed nonsensical and meaninglessly destructive, especially since the word 'upstart' was the insult word (Ambassador Trentino called Firefly an 'upstart') that led to war between the two countries. It also contains a few of their most famous sequences: the lemonade seller confrontation and the mirror pantomime sequence.

The mirror routine, contributed by McCarey, had been used by Charlie Chaplin in *The Floorwalker* (1916) and by Max Linder in *Seven Year's Bad Luck* (1921). It was later replicated in a Bugs Bunny cartoon, re-enacted by Harpo with Lucille Ball on a 1950's "I Love Lucy" show episode, and also appeared as part of the opening credits for the 60s TV series "The Patty Duke Show". Actor/director Woody Allen paid homage to the film in his *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) - with an excerpt from the musical number "The Country's Going to War."... Unlike many of their other features, there are no romantic subplots (with Zeppo) and no musical interludes that stop the film's momentum - no harp solos for Harpo and no piano solos for Chico. There are, however, a couple of musical numbers that are perfectly integrated into the plot.

Why the title *Duck Soup*? [Earlier in 1927, director Leo McCarey had made a two-reel Laurel and Hardy film with the same title - and he borrowed the title from there.] The film's title uses a familiar American

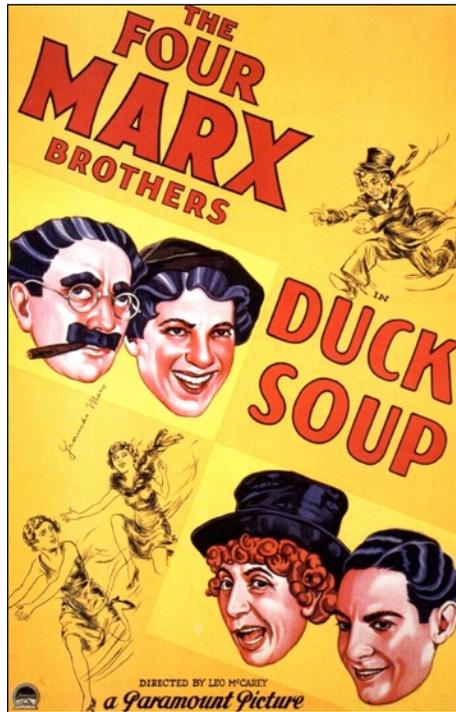
phrase that means anything simple or easy, or alternately, a gullible sucker or pushover. Under the opening credits, four quacking ducks (the four Marx Brothers) are seen swimming and cooking in a kettle over a fire. Groucho reportedly provided the following recipe to explain the title: "Take two turkeys, one goose, four cabbages, but no duck, and mix them together. After one taste, you'll duck soup for the rest of your life."

By Tim Dirks <http://www.filmsite.org/duck.html>

## The Marx Brothers an overview

The mother of the Marx Brothers came from Germany. Miene Schönberg was born in Dornum on Nov 9, 1864 and in 1880 the family came to the United States. Grandfather Levy, an umbrella maker who had worked as a ventriloquist and Grandmother Fanny played the harp - so the brothers were not the first family members on a stage...

The family lived in New York. When Minnie (Miene) was 18 she met Simon "Sam" Marx in a dance hall. He came from Alsace, France. He had changed his family name from Marris to Marx to make it sound more German because he hoped it would be easier to find a job. In 1884 when Sam was 23 and Minnie was 20 they got married and moved into 354 E 82nd Street together with Minnie's parents and other members of the Schönberg family. Simon worked as a tailor, but since he refused to use a measuring tape, his



customers were seldom satisfied. His real talents were in cooking, and the family used this when they had to 'bribe' somebody.

Simon's and Minnie's first child Manfred was born in 1885 and died in infancy. The other children were born in 1887, Chico, 1888, Harpo, 1890, Groucho, 1892, Gummo and 1901, Zeppo. Minnie helped her brother Al Sheen getting into show business and decided early that her children should follow him. Chico played the piano in pubs, Groucho sang as a boy soprano and the brothers appeared as The Four Nightingales and The Six Mascots.

The first performance in the Marx Brothers style as we know it was *Fun in Hi Skule* in 1912. Other shows were *Mr Green's Reception*, *Home Again*, *On the Mezzanine Floor* and *I'll Say She Is* which became



their first big success in 1924. After *Home Again* Gummo left show business and became an agent. He was replaced by Zeppo. *The Coconuts* a Broadway show followed, which became their first film. This show as well as *Animal Crackers* was originally written for the stage and what we see today are more or less filmed versions of the stage productions. These stage performances gave them the possibilities to test the script before an audience to perfect the puns and timing. They went back on stage for

test performances when filming *A Night at the Opera*.

From 1929 on they were mainly active in filming. In their first films they appeared as The Four Marx Brothers (Chico, Harpo, Groucho, Zeppo), but Zeppo left the movie business after *Duck Soup*. From 1929 to 1949 they made 13 films. After that Chico and Harpo more or less retired, but Groucho started a second career as a show master in the quiz show *You Bet Your Life*.

[www.marx-brothers.org](http://www.marx-brothers.org)



Eden Court Cinema  
Tuesday 2 June 2015  
at 7.15pm

Our next screening...  
Victor Heerman's

## Animal Crackers

Continuing our  
Marx Brothers season

Inverness Film Fans (Infifa) meet fortnightly at Eden Court Cinema for screenings and post-film discussions.

For more information and to join us, free, go to:

[www.invernessfilmfans.org](http://www.invernessfilmfans.org)



[www.facebook.com/infifa](http://www.facebook.com/infifa) [twitter.com/infifa](http://twitter.com/infifa)

Famed African explorer and big game hunter Captain Spalding (Groucho Marx) goes hunting for a valuable missing painting in the home of society matron Mrs Rittenhouse (Margaret Dumont) in this madcap Marx Brothers comedy. Based on their Broadway show and a box office hit on release *Animal Crackers* is full of classic one liners, physical comedy and marvellous music.