

# Mad Marxists revel in film anarchy

by Harvey Elliott  
Feature Writer

"I am a Marxist, of the Groucho sort,"—Anonymous revolutionary in Paris, 1968.

There are certain rules in filmmaking which can't be broken. Plot must be logical. Character must be consistent and believable. Audiences need to relate.

Except, that is, when the Marx Brothers are involved.

Three lunatics nicknamed Chico, Harpo and Groucho came to the movies in 1929 and proceeded, for the next two decades, to be illogical, inconsistent, unbelievable and totally unrelated to the audience—or the world, for that matter.

A new style of film comedy, based on irrelevance and non sequitur, began to eclipse the sentimentality of Chaplin and the bumbling good naturedness of Laurel and Hardy.

The Depression was being fought by Absurdity.

When the Marx Brothers arrived in

Hollywood in the early 30's, with at least four or five writers already at work on scripts which would be thrown away and revisions which would be revised time and again, the film colony stood properly in awe.

Their special brand of anarchy was not to be snuffed out, and Groucho immediately began to sign autographs "Mary Pickford."

Once, after the brothers had moved to MGM, Groucho discovered himself in an elevator with Greta Garbo. The quiet and aloof actress was quite hidden beneath a large hat, and Groucho forthrightly lifted the brim of the hat to catch a glimpse of the famed face. One glance from Garbo insisted on an apology for this intrusion, whereupon Groucho said, "Excuse me, I just thought you were a fellow I once knew in Pittsburgh."

Their irreverent, helter-skelter *modus operandi* extended to the actual filmmaking, too. Directors were afraid to work with them, because no schedule was ever firm. And no one knew what to expect.

Like the time when Groucho, Harpo and Chico were discussing preparation for *A Night at the Opera* with producer Irving

Thalberg. Thalberg always had several projects going at the same time, and, often, at the consternation of the brothers, he would leave their conferences to pop in momentarily on others.

They made their dissatisfaction felt, as usual. Thalberg excused himself one afternoon to check on a story conference on *The Good Earth*, underway in the same building. When he returned, he found Groucho, Harpo and Chico sitting stark naked before his fireplace, roasting potatoes.

And their special brand of insanity even spread to their writers. Another story concerns Al Boasberg, one of the best comedy writers of the period and the uncontested King of the One-Liners.

The film was, again, *A Night at the Opera*, and the problem was, again, Irving Thalberg, who demanded that Boasberg finish a certain scene by the following evening. Boasberg, obviously irritated, told Thalberg he could pick up the script from his office that night.

When Groucho and Thalberg arrived, Boasberg was nowhere to be found, and neither was the script. They were about to

leave when Groucho noticed something unusual on the ceiling.

Boasberg had written the scene for Thalberg all right, but he had also snipped the script into hundreds of tiny one-line pieces and tacked them all over the ceiling for the producer to discover and assemble.

Luckily Thalberg took the trouble to do just that. Had he not, *A Night at the Opera* might not contain its famed stateroom sequence.

Three Marx Brothers films will be playing in Chapel Hill this week.

*A Night at the Opera* (1935) is Thursday night's Free Flick at the Great Hall of the Carolina Union.

And starting Friday at the Varsity Theatre are two of their best films from the earlier Paramount period. *Monkey Business* (1931) and *Duck Soup* (1933) are less structured, less lavish and less polished than the 1935 MGM classic, but that very primitivity allows the comics a slightly freer rein, with very little plot and excess baggage.

The Marx Brothers didn't need baggage, or plot. They were their own inspiration and haven't been equalled since.



UNC Art Professor John Allcott with sketchbook at Ocracoke

## Richie delivers overwhelming impact

by Kathy Rea  
Feature Writer

Richie by Thomas Thompson.  
Saturday Review Press (309 pp., \$7.95)

The newspapers of the '60s were filled with accounts concerning drug abuse by adolescents, college students and blue collar workers. But, Thomas Thompson has written the story *Richie* about a teenager so polluted with pills that he finally provoked his father into killing him.

George Diener was a man who lived life the American way. His rules assimilated his ambitions: a healthy family, recognition for hard work, a piece of property with trees and a modest home. He and his wife raised Richie in East Meadow, a moderately-sized city on Long Island. They helped him through the periods of isolation, resulting from ostracism by peers in school; they nurtured his intense interest in animals and nature. But they began to ignore his adolescent infatuation with loud music, unreliable friends and drugs.

As loving parents always do, the Dieners gave Richie and his brother adequate material attention. Each child had his own bedroom and had it decorated to suit his respective interests.

Richie lined the walls of his room with posters of rock groups, while their music poured out of his stereo set at a constant full explosion. Ostensibly, this was his psychedelic scene. Yet, Richie and his friends

took the culture one step further, into an area his father found difficult to handle.

The high school in East Meadow was attended by many students dealing in drugs. At age 14, challenges made by Richie's friends initiated his drug sequence. First, the traditional few joints a week behind the school gymnasium. Then, it came to barbiturates and amphetamines. By the time Richie was a senior, he was smoking in his bedroom and swallowing pills in the bathroom. His behavior at home was offensive to his parents, yet they never knew how to correct the situation.

Richie's mother was lenient. She consoled Richie for being expelled from school and helped him in finding a job. Father to son talks were never accomplished.

Richie's late hours, his walking out on dinner and his deviant remarks around the house finally prompted George to tap his own phone. In this way, he found out the answers to all his questions concerning Richie's involvement with drugs. The boy's life was centered around selling drugs to twelve year olds, setting up pot parties, ripping off drug dealers and even stealing money from his mother's purse. The tapes made George aware, in a painful way, of Richie's consumption, but even these revelations weren't sufficient evidence to warrant the arrest of his son. He finally equated helping Richie with police intervention.

The sickening situation culminated in

## CURRENT FILMS

*Jeremiah Johnson*—With Robert Redford. (Through Thursday at the Carolina).

*What's Up Tiger Lily?*—Woody Allen dubs an awful Japanese secret-agent flick with a succession of one-liners. (Ends today). Wednesday and Thursday—*The Paper Chase*, at the Varsity.

*The Spikes Gang*—With Lee Marvin and Ron Howard (Opie). (Through Thursday at Plaza I).

*Blazing Saddles*—Written by Mel Brooks and starring Cleavon Little, Madeleine Kahn and Harvey Korman. (Continuing at the Plaza II).

unexpected homicide. This was the ultimate tragedy between father and son. Richie descended the basement steps and approached his parents with butcher knife in hand. An OD for Richie, and a conviction of murder for George Diener.

Even though stories have been published about youths losing out with drugs many times before, Richie's story delivers an overwhelming impact. Reading about the family history and the many parental

*The Super Cops*—Ron Liebman and David Selby as Batman and Robin of the N.Y.P.D. (Through Thursday at the Plaza III).


*M\*A\*S\*H*—With Elliott Gould, Donald Sutherland and Sally Kellerman. (Tuesday, 8:30 p.m., Union free flick).

*Duck Soup*—The Marx Brothers. "I could dance with you till the cows come home. On second thought I'd rather dance with the cows till you come home." (Wednesday, 8 p.m., Gross Chemistry Building on Duke Campus.)

*A Night at the Opera*—The Marx Brothers. Again! (Thursday, 8:30 p.m., Union free flick.)

attempts to understand their son make appeals to the reader's emotions and to a sense of empathy. Richie's death is not just an addition to the obituary section. Thompson's reenactment shook me with such sympathy that I closed the book and cried.

The author, Thompson, an editor and staff writer for *Life* magazine, has written an emotional and coherent account, not always an easy combination to handle.



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