

# 'Where's Poppa?' may be hazardous to sense of humor

Carl Reiner is a funny man. With Sid Caesar, Dick Van Dyke, and his own ("Enter Laughing"), he's given us his particular brand of solid, journeyman's humor. Nothing deep; surely nothing memorable: except, was it ever funny. It was the kind of humor your mind could relax to. Mr. Reiner! May he live and prosper forever!

This by way of a half-apologetic preface to my remarks on "Where's Poppa?" which Reiner directs, and which is neither funny nor intelligent.

"Where's Poppa?" is Reiner's first attempt at directing someone else's screenplay, and I can almost understand how so flimsy a property attracted him. "Where's Poppa?" is a melange of styles and comic targets—perhaps it would be more accurate to say a comic stew cooked up only of spices: but spices that were the sole possession of avant-garde theater eight or nine years ago. Specifically, Reiner tries to make black humor, momism, and absurdist comedy palatable to domestic audiences, and does

so—as Robert Klane's brainless script implicitly suggests he do—by treating them like a typically "wacky" episode of the Dick Van Dyke Show. Only, "Where's Poppa?" is meant to be wackiness with an exponent on it.

What held the Dick Van Dyke Show together was the consistent assumption of normality underlying the comic situations. Absurdist humor, on the other hand, requires, if not an artistic coherence of its own, then at least an intelligible relationship to the external world—satirical, psychological, or whatever. To combine these modes randomly is to create a world of irrelevance. To construct a novel or film which is sometimes recognizably "normal," and sometimes wildly a-rational, depending on the artist's whim or the ebb and flow of his comic inspiration, is finally to approach total opacity. This is the case with "Where's Poppa?" which is an artistic chaos: it becomes incapable of making any statement about either itself or the

world—in capable even of asserting that the world is absurd.

The maintenance of this kind of perspective, it seems to me, should be the first concern of a comic artist. Without it, an audience can literally not know when to laugh.

In "Where's Poppa?" there's a courtroom scene in which George Segal represents a Memphis football coach who's accusing his team of breach of contract in firing him. Segal hasn't slept the night before, and he stumbles and mumbles through the scene, shuffling and dropping his—thousands, it seems, of papers, forgetting who his client is and what questions he wanted to ask him. The coach, we learn, has been in the rather dubious habit of kidnapping the biggest and fastest nine and ten year-old boys he can find, so that he can teach them football the right way, from basics. Their parents make some ruckus, but quiet down when they get the bonus money. There's the situation. The entire scene, it should be added, is merely a digression which might have been lifted bodily from the film, with no loss.

What we have here is humor that works at contradictory levels. On the first, we're apparently supposed to chuckle at Segal's ineptitude, as the coach grumbles and the judge demands that he get on with his questions. This is "normal" comedy, and our laughter arises from our recognition of the difference between doing something right and doing it extravagantly wrong. But on the second level, there are the coach's plans for building a football dynasty. This is the humor of absurdity, no sequitur joking, and its effect in the scene is to make Segal's mugging and the various reactions to it look pedestrian and out of place. Conversely, however, the particularly unimaginative comedy of errors deprives this second level of humor of the air it needs to breathe, and leaves us with the impression, as the scene closes, that the coach is out of step with the rest of his world, rather than that the world itself is insane.

A more serious instance of "Poppa's" failure to assert a point of view, occurs toward the end of the film, when the audience apparently is supposed to

delight in a representation of an old peoples' home, and its inmates. Here, the humor doesn't merely fail; it turns putrid in your mouth.

I don't mean to imply that "Where's Poppa?" is utterly without laughs. It has its moments, but they get farther and farther apart as the film proceeds. And they are always easy laughs, as when a Colonel attempts to dispel our civilian misconception that soldiers like to kill Vietnamese. Not at all, he says, and then explains with obvious relish how he deals (always fatally) with the "little bastards" and "gooks." Funny? Yes... but.

Reiner's direction, as I've already implied, is extremely uninspired. His metier seems to be realistic comedy. Here, in a film which might have been brought some measure of organization by a director with an imaginative visual conception of what he wanted to say, Reiner can add nothing. Hence, "Where's Poppa?" is almost entirely lacking in the kind of visual humor it needs so desperately to achieve any unified effect. Reiner's cinematic vocabulary is limited to a close-up, a slow zoom, and a distance shot which invariably leaves you with a sense of being just slightly too far away

from things. This kind of clumsiness can be cured, as I hope it will be, by experience. But beyond that, the direction of the entire film is a solecism, and I hope Reiner's next film will be a return to the kind of thing he does best.

George Segal, who starred in one of the most beautiful films in many years, "Bye-Bye Braverman," is wasted here.

Ruth Gordon, who plays his senile Mother, is effective—and yet, "Where's Poppa?" is the kind of film which makes even a good performance seem unsatisfactory. Ron Lieberman, as Segal's brother, is also good.

## Film Society features classics

The UNC Film Society has scheduled a series of cinematic classics to be shown on Thursdays during the semester.

The series begins tomorrow at eight o'clock with the Marx Brothers' first film, "Cocanuts," which was made in 1929, the year the Depression began. It was based on a Marx Brothers' Broadway offering that enjoyed enormous success. On February 18, "The Big Sleep" will be screened. William Faulkner wrote the screenplay and Howard Hawks directed the Humphrey Bogart film. "The Big Sleep" is a murder mystery in which the outcome is always suspensefully and artfully in doubt.

Equally artful is Erich von Stroheim's direction of "Greed," adapted from Frank Norris' novel, "McTeague." French filmmaker Jean Renoir hailed it as "The masterpiece of the cinema." Erich von Stroheim was a pioneer in cinematic techniques. "Greed" will be shown on March 4.

"The Shop Around the Corner" is slated for March 11. Directed by Ernst

Lubitsch, the movie features James Stewart. The movie was adapted from a Ferenc Molnar play. The senior clerk and a female clerk in a Budapest store discover their love through a "lonely hearts" correspondence club.

On March 18, two all-time film heavies, Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre, appear in "The Mask of Dimitrios." The action in this one is virtually nonstop. The film is based on Eric Ambler's novel of the same name.

Next in the film fare is "Two or Three Things I Know About Her," a movie from Godard's bourgeois period. Pauline Kael has called Godard "the most dazzlingly inventive and audacious artist in movies today." The movie is scheduled for March 25.

On April 8, Gene Kelly will once again dance his way into America's hearts in "Singing in the Rain." Many critics consider it the best musical of all time. Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen direct the film, based on an Adolf Green-Betty Comden play. Two weeks later, the first

French sound film, "Under the Roofs of Paris," will be shown. Rene Clair wrote and directed it.

On April 29, "The End of St. Petersburg," a silent study of the Russian Revolution directed by V.I. Pudovkin, will be presented. Pudovkin, along with notable Russian film makers, helped to revolutionize motion pictures.

The series concludes May 6 with another Ernst Lubitsch film, "Desire." Marlene Dietrich made her comedic debut in this 1936 movie.

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There will be a meeting of the Campus CPG Wed. night at 8:00 at our UNC Office to discuss leadership difficulties. It will be a joint meeting with the Duke branch CPG.

Women's Liberation—new discussion groups beginning—Thursday, Feb. 11, 8 p.m. in room 205 in the Student Union. All women welcome.

The library at Hill House, 210 W. Cameron, has a large collection dealing with Judaism and Jewish history. The

library is open to all UNC students and faculty.

Travel information on Israel is available at Hill House, 210 W. Cameron Avenue.

Modern Hebrew Classes will be held this, and each, Thursday at the Hill House, 210 W. Cameron Ave., at 7:30 p.m. for beginners, and at 8:30 p.m. for intermediates. All interested students are invited.

Faculty, students and town fold are invited to come to the Buffet at the Battle House at Battle Lane and Boundary every Wednesday from 12 noon to 2 p.m. Within easy walking distance from the campus, the buffet features lunch and conversation in a relaxed atmosphere. The meal is one dollar (\$1) and reservations are not required.

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#### ACROSS

- 1 Crony (colloq.)
- 4 Make amends
- 9 Greek letter
- 12 Anglo-Saxon money
- 13 Seagoing vessel
- 14 Base
- 15 Stage performer
- 17 Angry outburst
- 19 Chopped finely
- 21 Transgress
- 22 Food program
- 24 Obscure
- 26 Chisel
- 29 Finished
- 31 Girl's nickname
- 33 Golf mound
- 34 Near
- 35 Title of respect
- 37 Fruit seed
- 39 A state (abbr.)
- 40 Conducted
- 42 Stroke
- 44 Part of jacket
- 46 Allowance for waste
- 48 Cut of meat
- 50 Prohibits
- 51 Scottish cap
- 53 Tail
- 55 Declares
- 58 Baggage carrier
- 61 Greek letter
- 62 Vapid
- 64 Before
- 65 Desire intensely (slang)
- 66 Sword
- 67 Parent (colloq.)

#### DOWN

- 1 Seed container
- 2 Moscow

Answer to Yesterday's Puzzle

PEA TOWER COP  
ARC ENATE ORA  
SAC DAINS NEW  
OPS MATES  
ARMS YES ITEM  
TIP PER GREAT  
FLEET REELS  
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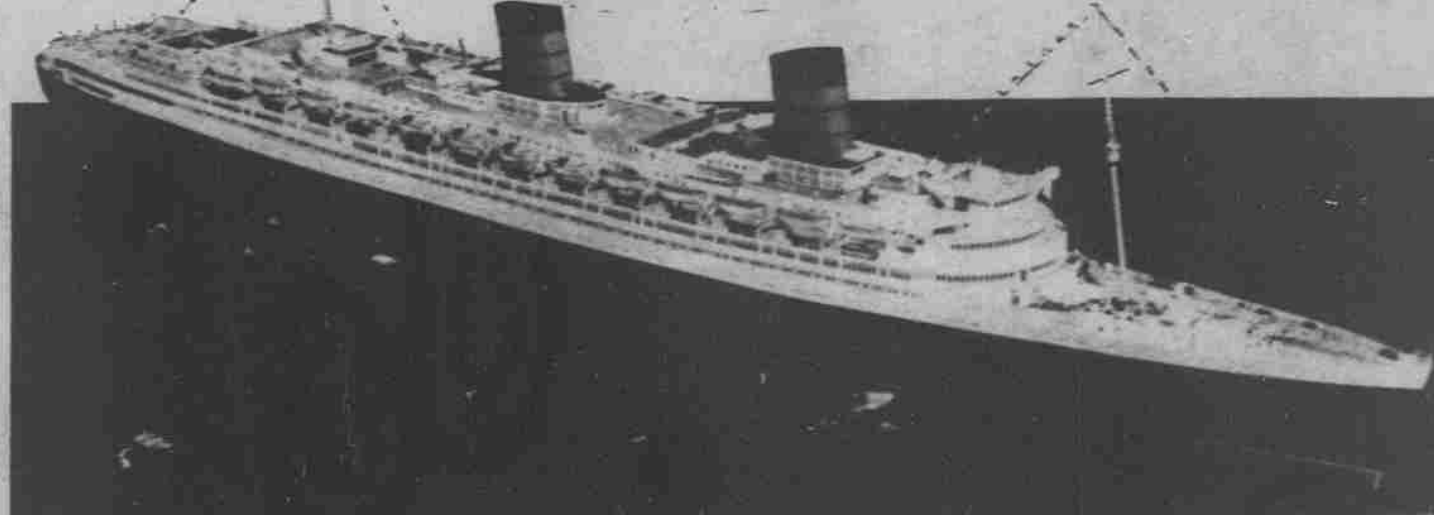
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