

The New Criterion

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Marxism on the New York stage!

by Paul du Quenoy



Matt Walters, Seth Shelden, Matt Roper, and Noah Diamond as the Marx Brothers in I'll Say She Is/Photo: Mark X Hopkins

"*Je suis Marxiste, tendance Groucho*," the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard supposedly quipped in response to France's pseudo-revolutionary unrest of 1968. Nearly half a century on, the professed American "Groucho Marxist" Noah Diamond has indulged his adoration of the fraternal comic ensemble to find what Marx Brothers fans have long regarded as their Holy Grail: the Brothers' "lost" first Broadway revue, *I'll Say She Is*. A fully staged off-Broadway production opened in previews at the Connelly Theater on May 28 followed by the official opening night on June 2.

A hit at its premiere in 1924, *I'll Say She Is* occasioned the end of nearly two difficult decades on the vaudeville circuit and vaulted the quartet to stardom (a fifth Marx Brother, Gummo, left the stage to enlist in the army during World War I, purportedly announcing that anything was better than acting). Plaudits poured in from *le tout* New York, including the Algonquin critics Robert Benchley and Alexander Woollcott, who championed the Brothers' madcap insolence in their staid world of "legitimate" theater and welcomed Harpo Marx to their witty lunchtime romps. Charlie Chaplin called *I'll Say She Is* the funniest revue he had ever seen. Groucho recalled that it made him and his brothers "the toast of the town," which was, he announced in character, "a lot better than being in a breadline." The Marx Brothers' next two Broadway revues, *The Cocoanuts* (1925) and *Animal Crackers* (1928), not only enjoyed riotous stage success but—arriving just in time for the talkie era—quickly became their first feature films.

For all its hilarity and critical acclaim, the Marx Brothers' *ur*-musical never made it onto the silver screen and was never revived on stage—until now. Beginning with Will B. Johnstone's thirty-page rehearsal typescript, Diamond spent seven years painstakingly tracking down every reference to the show he could find, gleaning information from reviews, press accounts, memoirs, Groucho's ad-libs, and other material. In 2014—ninety years after *I'll Say She Is* vanished—his ensemble performed readings and semi-staged performances at New York's International Fringe Festival and he campaigned for a fully staged revival. Part of the expense was shouldered by crowd funding, our era's improvised recourse for causes lacking ready institutional support.

As a lifelong student of the Marx Brothers—he has been performing as Groucho since age fourteen—Diamond relied on his encyclopedic knowledge not only of their *oeuvre* but also of Johnstone's other writings to intuit his way through the gaps in the available record. In the program's "historical note" (titled "hysterical note" in a worthy Marxian malapropism), Diamond admits that about half the lyrics and a third of the book are his original contributions. Audiences familiar with the films will recognize lines, scenes, and gags repurposed to fill out the revival. The sharpest adaptation was the card game scene. When the game goes awry, the Brothers destroy a perfectly innocent card table to the tune of the "Anvil Chorus" from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (spoofed in *A Night at the Opera*). Harpo's apprehension as the household silver thief (utensils fall out of his sleeve in batches while an unnoticing cop fulsomely congratulates him on his virtues as a law abiding citizen) will be familiar from the end of *Animal Crackers*. The musical numbers also mix solos made famous by the films with the original show's signature pieces. These include the ensemble tune that gives the work its title and the female ingénue's brassily alluring "Gimme a Thrill," which sets up the revue's thin but serviceable plot.

More than anything else, weak plotting accounted for the disappearance of *I'll Say She Is*. Self-conscious about their vaudevillian roots, *les frères Marx* feared that Broadway's sophisticated audiences would balk at their stock idiom. They were not wrong. As Harpo recalled in his memoir *Harpo Speaks!*, Woollcott only reluctantly attended, fearing that he would waste an evening covering "some damned acrobats." To the critic's surprise and delight, he busted a gut and the very next morning struck up a lifelong friendship with Harpo. Nevertheless, the revue did not cross the blurry line separating vaudeville from coherent musical theater.



Seth Shelden, Matt Walters, Noah Diamond, and Matt Roper as the Marx Brothers in I'll Say She Is/Photo: Mark X Hopkins

One of Diamond's wiser instincts was to correct this weakness by adding and rearranging material in order to deepen what plot *I'll Say She Is* does have. We meet the four Marx Brothers in a talent agent's office hungrily seeking representation with successive impressions of Al Jolson—a scene they later filmed as a standalone skit and which prefigured their Maurice Chevalier impressions in *Monkey Business*. They get a break when the agent reads out an ad from a wealthy heiress named Beauty ("I'll say she is" was the clichéd response to the 1920s slang question, "Isn't she a beauty?"), the niece of Mrs. Ruby Mintworth, who offers "her hand, her heart, and her fortune" to anyone who will "show her a thrill."

The challenge of getting bored rich people out of a funk is a classic comic trope. Johnstone scavenged the revue's premise from his two previous Broadway shows, both of which failed. Accordingly, the players glide through a pastiche of hilarious scenes in which the Brothers, with Zeppo getting closest to the girl, introduce Beauty to the glories of New York: Wall Street, Central Park, Broadway itself, Napoleon's debauched "court at Versailles" (reached via hypnosis), and finally a Chinatown opium den. After a mobster massacres the opium denizens and frames Beauty by throwing his Tommy gun into her hands, she is put on trial for murder with Groucho as prosecutor, Chico as defense lawyer, and Harpo as (silent) judge. Miraculously sprung by the mobster's offstage confession, her melancholy dissolves in a heart melting admission that love is the ultimate thrill. She ends up with Zeppo as Groucho marries Mrs. Mintworth, who warmly welcomes the other brothers into her household despite their ceaseless mockery of her and everything she stands for.

Diamond has judiciously incorporated clever improvisation. Like Groucho, he periodically breaks the fourth wall to deliver commentary on the action or engage with the audience. Telling Beauty that she is charged with murder and that if convicted she will be “charged with electricity,” he spins around to announce to the groaning audience, “this is current news” and that they should “watch how they conduct themselves.” There are even bows to contemporary relevance, perhaps a legacy of Diamond’s earlier work as a political satirist. When Beauty seems downcast, Groucho asks whether it is from loneliness or the presidential election. Since the latter option in the original text is the speeches of Warren G. Harding, who died in office after the revue was written but before it premiered, the election could just as easily be the current one as the one that confirmed Calvin Coolidge in the presidency. Sometimes, though, there is a reference that seems dated. When a policeman asks Chico if Harpo is his brother, he delivers the deadpanned non sequitur, “I don’t remember, it was during the epidemic.” The line was timely for the pre-penicillin premiere audience, but today it really only works if you learned about the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 in history class or, given the geriatric age of New York theater audiences, if you are old enough to remember surviving it.

The overall effort rings a loud bell for authenticity. *I’ll Say She Is* harmonizes deliciously with the look, sound, and feel of the films we all know and love. The original material resounds with the Marx Brothers at their very best. This is especially true of the colorful Napoleon scene, whose ostentatious mockery looks forward to the declaration of war tableau in *Duck Soup*. Groucho claimed that the Versailles tomfoolery, in which his Napoleon is cuckolded by the other three brothers clustered around Beauty’s Josephine, endured as the ensemble’s own all-time favorite scene.

No amount of praise is too great for the ensemble. Led by Diamond’s spot-on Groucho, the Brothers easily made one forget that the actors playing them are in character and not the real thing. Seth Shelden’s Harpo mastered the character’s subtly studied mime, gesture, facial expressions, and physicality. He even studied harp for the musical solo. Chico’s one-liners zing with loving precision from the well practiced English comic actor Matt Roper. As Beauty, the New York performance artist and burlesque star Melody Jane captured the upbeat spirit that Kitty Carlisle brought to *A Night at the Opera* and Maureen O’Sullivan to *A Day at the Races*. Kathy Biehl’s Mrs. Mintworth did great homage to the character of Margaret Dumont’s film roles—the straight (wo)man foil to the Brothers’ antics. She did not, however, quite attain the witless ingenuousness of Dumont, whose success is often chalked up to the widely held belief that she did not get the jokes. Missing that element of the character might be unavoidable in a recreation such as this, but the audience certainly understood enough of the humor to launch what will assuredly be a successful run (through July 2). With periodic revivals of *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers* already popping up in theatrical venues around the country, we can only hope that Noah Diamond and his ensemble’s work will not end here.

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