"You want ice water in Room 202? I'll send up an onion. That'll make your eyes water."

“You can have any kind of a home you want. You can even get stucco.

Oh, how you can get stuck-o.”
The musical comedy *The Cocoanuts* was written specifically for the Marx Brothers, immediately following their 1924 Broadway hit, *I'll Say She Is*. *The Cocoanuts* opened in Boston’s Tremont Theatre in October 26, 1925, then moved to Philadelphia’s Forrest Theatre on November 23. It premiered on Broadway on December 8, and ran for 276 performances before closing on August 7, 1926. The Marx Brothers then took the musical comedy on a national tour.
The Cocoanuts enjoyed a return engagement on Broadway at the Century Theatre, opening May 16, 1927. On March 20, 1928, it opened on the West End in London, at the Garrick Theatre.¹

The plot, such as it is, revolves around the Florida land boom-and-bust of the 1920s. Mr. Hammer² (Groucho Marx) is the land-speculating/con-man owner of the Cocoanut Hotel in Cocoanut Beach, and his straight man/hotel head clerk/aspiring architect is Robert Jamison (Zeppo Marx). Jamison wants to marry young Miss Polly Potter, but her wealthy mother disapproves, preferring that her daughter marry Harvey Yates. Registered guest Penelope Martin is yet another con artist and colleague-in-crime of Harvey Yates. Meanwhile, Mr. Hammer is attempting to seduce and swindle the only hotel guest with money, Mrs. Potter. Chico Marx and the mute Harpo Marx are petty grifters who check into the hotel with empty luggage, signifying their intention to rob the other guests. Detective Hennessey is trying to catch Chico and Harpo red-handed in their crimes. The plot is basically an excuse for the Marx brothers to display their zaniness, unpredictability, ad-libbing, direct engagement with the audience, and satirical commentary on stage.

However, underneath the Marx brothers’ riotous humor lay some biting critiques of the political and economic context of their time. This included a real estate boom and stock market bubble during the Roaring ’20s, which preceded and helped precipitate the Great Depression, 1929-1939. As observed by Boston Globe critic Robert A. Mclean:


The Marx Brothers ignored the social regulations, which was one reason why they were, perhaps, the most heroic of the Hollywood funnymen.

A rag-tag band of quixotic, comic crusaders, they galloped about a hostile world, jousting with the windmills of hypocrisy and privilege, puncturing and deflating the swollen hot-air balloons of pomposity and affectation, avenging those afflicted by the forces of conformity and cant…

The Marx Brothers were not true clowns, innocent victims whose misfortunes cause the audience to laugh at them while pitying their plight. They were, rather, larger-than-life, madcap champions of the people, with whom the movie-goers could enjoy a laugh on the other guy while Groucho, Harpo, Chico and Zeppo zapped him unmercifully.³

The 1929 film of the same title was adapted for the screen by Morrie Ryskind (1895-1985), who had previously written in an uncredited capacity for the Broadway musical comedy.\textsuperscript{4,5} The 93-minute film was co-directed by Robert Florey and Joseph Santley and released on May 3, 1929. It was shot at Paramount’s studios in Astoria, Queens, during January 1929, with an estimated budget of $500,000.\textsuperscript{6} *The Cocoanuts*, one of the most successful early “talkies” was a huge box office hit, earning a profit of nearly two million dollars. It was well received by contemporary film critics, though the reviewer from the *New York Times* commented negatively about the sound quality, “As the talking pictures are still in their puppyhood, it is justifiable to comment on the registering of the voices and the incidental sounds…. In the course of some of the singing the audible angle is none too good.”\textsuperscript{7}

As a film, *The Cocoanuts* of course starred the Marx brothers: Groucho Marx as Mr. Hammer, Zeppo Marx as Jamison, with Harpo Marx and Chico Marx as themselves. Reprising

\textsuperscript{4} “While studying at Columbia University, Ryskind contributed to several Broadway revues and shows. A major break for Ryskind came in 1925, when George Kaufman hired him to be his assistant. Their collaboration resulted in a number of plays, such as *The Cocoanuts*, Animal Crackers, for which Ryskind also fashioned the screenplay later on, and the musical *Of Thee I Sing*.” Outstanding Broadway Dramas and Comedies: Pulitzer Prize Winning Theater Productions, Pulitzer Prize Panorama (Volume 6) Heinz-Dietrich Fischer. (Portland, OR: International Specialized Book Services, LIT Verlag, 2013), p. 34.

\textsuperscript{5} “His work with Kaufman on the stage play of *The Cocoanuts* came about when they accidentally met on the street in New York. Kaufman decided that he wanted a collaborator, even though he had started writing the book for the show already. On the sidewalk that day, he asked Ryskind to work with him. Ryskind was ecstatic about the idea. They had known each other for some ten years before that…. Although Ryskind worked with Kaufman on the stage production of *The Cocoanuts*, Kaufman took sole credit as the author.” The Marx Brothers as Social Critics: Satire and Comic Nihilism in Their Films, Martin A. Gardener, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2009), p. 30.


her role from the Broadway musical, Margaret Dumont played the dowager Mrs. Potter. The character of her daughter, Polly Potter, was played by Mary Eaton. The hotel desk clerk, would-be architect and love interest of Polly Potter, Bob Adams, was portrayed by Oscar Shaw.

An interesting bit of trivia: each piece of paper in the film had to be soaked in water, because the crackling sound emitted when dry pages were handled was easily picked up by the unsophisticated sound equipment of the time. Twenty-seven takes with dry paper had to be discarded, until the “solution” of wetting the paper was discovered.

8 “Margaret Dumont, whose towering presence provided a perfect foil for the brothers’ antics, was indeed, in the words of one colleague, ‘a real Pasadena lady’ who was not always amused by their particular brand of comedy.”

1929 film adaptation, Paramount Pictures

Marx Brothers’ first feature film

First musical comedy ever filmed
Bedard has taken elements of the 1925 musical and 1929 film and worked them into the musical we are viewing at the 2016 Utah Shakespeare Festival.

Bedard is an actor/singer/writer who graduated from Servite High School in Anaheim, California, and the University of California, Irvine (B.A. Drama, 2006). He is presently based in New York City. Bedard has performed as Mr. Hammer/Groucho in this musical at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland (2014), and The Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis (2015), each directed by David Ivers. Bedard spent seven years as a company member of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.
Mark Bedard

Mark Bedard (left) is Vladimir, and Mark Anderson Phillips is Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Marin Theatre Company, January 2013
Relatively minor differences between the stage musical and the film

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>1925 Musical</strong></th>
<th><strong>1929 Film</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length</strong></td>
<td>Approximately 2-1/2 hours</td>
<td>Cut to 93 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hotel owner</strong></td>
<td>Named Henry W. Schlemmer (Groucho Marx)</td>
<td>Named Mr. Hammer (no first name; played by Groucho Marx)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character Chico Marx</strong></td>
<td>Referred to with insensitive ethnic slurs, such as ‘Signor Pastrami’ and ‘Willie the Wop’</td>
<td>Kept his own first name, Chico – though he maintained his fake Italian accent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character Penelope</strong></td>
<td>More light-hearted and relatively harmless</td>
<td>A shadier interpretation as a real criminal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character Eddie</strong></td>
<td>As bellhop, plays a larger role</td>
<td>Just a few lines in opening scenes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Why a Duck?’</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
<td>Famous ‘viaduct’ shtick added</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further Reading:


“After 60 Years, the Marx Brothers’ Cocoanuts Is Revived on Stage”, Irvin Molotsky, *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 1988 (stage review).


