

ABBOTT AND COSTELLO

A TWOSOME AND THEN SOME!

By Clair Schulz

For math teachers who are fond of creating theoretical situations that occur when two geometric forms intersect here's one that won't be found in any textbook: In 1936 straight line A met rotund curve C. This union produced hundreds of laughs for twenty years. By what names do we know these two figures?

None of us would have to look in the back of any book to find the answer. Abbott and Costello are one of the most famous duos in history, even more well-known in America than Romeo and Juliet. During the 1940s they were as ubiquitous as Kilroy. Nearly a half century after they reached zenith the dapper dude and the bumbling Rumpelstiltskin are still delighting new generations on the small screen. Even youngsters born in the days of disco fever who love to recite "Who's on first?" know who put those words in their mouths. The story of this unique team is one of gags to riches to gags.

William Abbott wasn't actually born in a trunk in 1895, but he easily could have been for his parents were members of the circus family. It was most propitious for Bud that his father later switched to a part of show business that was just taking off: burlesque. Bud served for a time as a treasurer of a theater in Brooklyn and as a producer of one in Detroit, but these jobs were really an apprenticeship for his days as an entertainer because he observed the performers closely and memorized the standard routines. After he learned the trade out front and in the wings, he moved onstage and became what he still is today: the best straight man in the business.

Lou (born Louis Cristillo) did not have any show business in his blood when he was born in 1906, but he quickly

developed a love for the movies, particularly those featuring Charlie Chaplin. In his youth Lou was quite athletic, excelling at basketball and boxing. His agility proved useful when he was called upon to act as a stuntman during his first stay in Hollywood in 1927, but he gave it up when he began to acquire more injuries than dollars. On the way back to his native New Jersey he heard of a theater in St. Joseph, Missouri that needed a Dutch comedian. At this point Lou wasn't very funny and he certainly wasn't Dutch, but he applied anyway and was hired. He learned on the job and quickly moved up the burlesque ladder to the Orpheum and other top-of-the-line houses in New York. While performing at the Eltinge Theatre Lou saw Bud and Bud studied Lou and before long they realized that their styles complemented each other well.

Once they formed a team the dominoes began falling. Success in burlesque was followed by a ten-week run at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City which resulted in nightclub bookings and an engagement at Loew's State Theatre which led to *The Kate Smith Show* on radio and an appearance on Broadway in *The Streets of Paris* which were their tickets into the movies.

Although their first film, *One Night in the Tropics*, is the only one in which they are not the main players, it is significant because it demonstrates a basic tenet of their motion pictures: don't ever let the plot get so involved that it cannot be interrupted by a burlesque routine. It is quite apparent that the only purpose in having the pair in *Tropics* is so they can deliver a handful of their best bits between musical numbers and love spats.



BUD ABBOTT AND LOU COSTELLO

Cinema scholars are fond of claiming that the first feature in which Abbott and Costello got top billing, *Buck Privates*, is one of their best movies. It is certainly one of their better offerings, but it is not *their* movie. They had to share screen time with the Andrews Sisters, a sub-plot involving a love triangle, and military maneuvers. But the episodic nature of the film was just right for the team's writer, John Grant, to slip in old standbys like the dice game, the drill bit, "Go ahead and sing," and "Lend me fifty bucks."

The success of *Buck Privates* indicated that Americans in 1941 were in the mood for service comedies so before the year was over the team served up *In the Navy* and *Keep 'Em Flying*. But their most significant film that year was *Hold That*

Ghost because this was the first of their "giggle and gasp" films and it was here that the team excelled.

Lou Costello could do more with practically nothing than any entertainer except perhaps Chaplin and W.C. Fields. There were not many easy laughs in their films of the forties; Abbott and Costello earned the audience response through expert timing and precise execution.

They were also earning top dollar at the top of the popularity charts in 1942 as *Ride 'Em Cowboy*, *Rio Rita*, *Who Done It?*, and *Pardon My Sarong* kept them rolling merrily along. In the seven films that followed during the war years the team continued to please audiences with a mixture of fast-moving stories, surefire routines, and frantic chases. In 1946 they

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tried a change of pace with a straight, lackluster story, *Little Giant*, and a delightful fantasy, *The Time of Their Lives*. With the lukewarm reception to these two films their popularity declined and it wasn't until 1948 that they made a comeback with what very well might be their best film.

Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein has an advantage over *Young Frankenstein*, *Transylvania 6-5000*, and other parodies of horror films: it had the original cast. Bela Lugosi was Dracula and Lon Chaney Jr. was the wolf man; anybody else playing those roles is wearing borrowed robes. Karloff had long since stopped being Frankenstein's creation, but Glenn Strange had played the part in two films and was sufficiently terrifying in the Universal-copyrighted monster make-up. The frightening presence of the Big Three juxtaposed with Lou's antics created a unique blend of laughs and chills that even Abbott and Costello themselves could not duplicate when they met Boris Karloff, the invisible man, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and the mummy. The scene with Lou and the wolf man in an apartment and the one in which Costello unwittingly sits on the monster's lap in an underground chamber are two gems that outshine anything yet produced by battalions of ghostbusters.

It wasn't all downhill after 1948, but the quality of their films which, up until this time had been remarkably consistent, began to be erratic. The pair would put together a couple decent films, then do a turkey like *Comin' Round the Mountain*, follow that with a vehicle clearly geared toward the juvenile market (*Jack and the Beanstalk*), take a step forward by meeting Captain Kidd, and then slide back again with a brace of sorry efforts, *Lost in Alaska* and *Abbott and Costello Go to Mars*. Their last film together, *Dance With Me, Henry* (1956), is painful to watch, not because the movie is so bad, but because the chemistry between the two men, the animation that

marked their most spirited performances, the special magic that they had which no other duo had before or since, all of them were gone. By the summer of 1957 so was their partnership.

Lou did one film without Bud, *The Thirty Foot Bride of Candy Rock*, and some solo television work on *The Steve Allen Show*, *General Electric Theatre*, and *Wagon Train*, but a 1943 bout with rheumatic fever had taken its toll on Costello's heart and he was not a well man when he returned to the world of burlesque for an engagement at the Dunes in Las Vegas in 1958. He suffered a heart attack on February 26, 1959 and he died on March 3.

Bud's problems after the breakup were both financial and physical. The IRS disallowed many deductions he had claimed and repaying the taxes plus penalties cost him his home in Encino and his ranch in Ojai. He found some work doing the old bits in nightclubs with Candy Candido in 1961 and by providing the voice for his character in the Hanna-Barbera series of Abbott and Costello cartoons in 1967, but that did little to keep the wolf from the door. An epileptic who had leaned on the bottle for solace for years, Bud soon was confronted with a succession of maladies: strokes, prostate operation, broken hip and leg, and, finally, cancer. He spent his last two years in a wheelchair and died at his small house in Woodland Hills, California on April 24, 1974.

When people look at the careers of the two men, they tend to think of Abbott and Costello the movie stars and overlook the fact that they were very much at home on radio. In fact, most Americans heard them before they saw them. After their stint with Kate Smith, they made regular appearances with Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen on the *Chase and Sanborn Hour* before acting as a summer replacement for Fred Allen in 1940. Two years later they had their own show.

Their radio programs do not wear as



well as their motion pictures. Bud was basically the same fast-talking, take-charge slicker he was in the movies, but Lou was not the well-meaning "little fellow" we had seen on the screen. Instead, he was a loud-mouthed wiseguy hurling insults at everyone from the wife of the announcer to Mrs. Abbott. On radio the team served up their classic routines like "Mustard" and "Down is up" with the usual relish, but the exchanges that usually opened the program were helpings of corn of the purest sort which are not easy to digest today. However, audiences then ate it up and the show lasted until 1951 when the team moved to television.

The fifty-two episodes of *The Abbott and Costello Show* started on December 5, 1952 and are still running in syndication. If some of the TV shows look familiar, it is because they are condensed versions of their feature films. The people who like the lemon bit from *In the Navy* can see it again in a segment of "Charity Bazaar." Never seen "Slowly I turned" in *Lost in a Harem*? Tune in the "Jail" episode and follow the moves step by step, inch by inch. The quality of these episodes is rather uneven, but at least Lou was playing the sympathetic klutz we recognized and Bud was in his familiar position as glib prime mover. The program does not contain their best work, but it was good entertainment

and good Abbott and Costello is not at all bad.

Just how good they were is a question that is still being debated. Many critics and film historians place Abbott and Costello in the middle of the totem pole of comedy teams: below the Marx Brothers and Laurel and Hardy and above Martin and Lewis and Wheeler and Woolsey. It probably would be useless to remind them that Abbott and Costello were the leading players in thirty-four feature films released over seventeen years by major studios like Universal, MGM, and Warner Brothers, that no other team came close to that total, and that only the Three Stooges (basically a two-reel team who had several changes in personnel) produced a continuous stream of movies for a longer period of time. They might even concede another point: Abbott and Costello were an unqualified success in the movies, on television and radio, and also on the stage; no other team was anywhere near that versatile. Having admitted that, the learned ones will sigh and say, "Yes, yes, but they were so lowbrow, so plebeian."

True, but at times so was the humor of Chaucer and Shakespeare. No matter how far they roamed from their early haunts Bud and Lou always had their feet firmly planted in the earthy roots of burlesque and burlesque will never be mistaken for drawing-room comedy. Slapstick, pratfalls, double takes, snappy patter, and those venerable routines were what they offered whether they were at the Steel Pier in 1937 or in Hollywood in 1955. Their armor was creaking near the end and it might have been all they had to wear, but it sure was a perfect fit.

Frank Capra was proud of having his name above the title. In the eight decades of motion pictures only two stars have had such drawing power that their names appeared in the titles of ten films. It is comforting to know that as long as film and videotape exist what will always be playing is Abbott and Costello Meet the Fans Who Love Them.