

LAUREL ^{and} HARDY

THE CHICAGO STOP

BY BILL OATES

At the State Lake theatre Ramon Novarro and J. Carrol Naish were on stage to accompany the motion picture *The Lady in Question*; Duke Ellington and his band were at the Oriental; and with *Knute Rockne All American*, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy appeared on stage in Chicago at the theater of the same name.

These shows were typical of the offerings that blew into the Windy City in 1940, a time period that gave the movie goers an incredible entertainment treat. The time was ripe: the Great Depression had recently faded, prosperity had arrived, and the new decade revived the momentum of an expanding country.

For Oliver Norvell Hardy and Arthur Stanley Jefferson it represented the much desired chance to come face to face with their adoring audiences. Just as surely as a world calamity (World War II) would break the new-found national tranquility, this pinnacle in Laurel and Hardy's careers represented the calm before their creative storm.

Stan and Ollie (Babe to those who used his childhood name) spent three decades as a premier comedy team and continue to be loved by millions around the world.

The glory years of "two minds without

a single thought" were spent at the Hal Roach Studios, beginning in 1926. At this Culver City fun factory the team made over 100 silent and sound shorts and feature films. While many then-popular comedians of that era are only infrequently seen today, the films of Laurel and Hardy continue to be shown on television and at film revivals. They are also the stars of "new" video releases, both in glorious black and white, as well as in titles that have been colorized.

Sadly, the triumphal tour that brought Laurel and Hardy to Chicago for their only visit, starting on October 18, 1940, came at the artistic peak of their career. The gravy years at Roach quickly gave way to slick looking, but increasingly less funny films at 20th Century Fox and MGM, which was no fault of the comedy team.

The boys came into this world over 100 year ago. Stan, the slender genius fool, was born in Ulverston, England in 1890, and found his way in front of audiences as his curiosity peaked about the theater that his father managed. Not always the perfect student in school, young Stan's occupational learning came as a member of the Fred Karno comedy troupe in pre-World War I England. When they toured America

DOWNTOWN.

DOWNTOWN.

DOWNTOWN.

USE 2¢ or 10¢ for 50¢ or 6¢
Chicago
 LOOK WHO'RE HERE!



TODAY—LAUREL & HARDY lead the stage parade... while "KNUTE ROCKNE" again leads the thrill parade!

First time in Chicago!
IN PERSON!

STAN LAUREL & OLIVER HARDY

with their own company of 30 in their own merry **HUGE STAGE REVELS!**

LAFF, TOWN, LAFF!

**LEW PARKER
 SYD GOLD
 PAUL REMOS
 DARLENE GARNER
 MAXINE CONRAD
 CARLTON KELSEY
 JAMES MORTON
 GONZALO & CRISTINA
 LAUREL & HARDY BEAUTIES**

Autographed photos of
LAUREL & HARDY
 to the first 1000 patrons TODAY!

Women, **THIS IS YOUR PICTURE!**

For above the cheers... the pounding thrills... last week's wet-eyed throngs felt the touch of a woman's love... her faith and courage... stealing "Rock" in despair... lifting him to triumph and immortal fame!

**KNUTE ROCKNE
 ALL AMERICAN**

PAT O'BRIEN as Rockne
GALE PAGE as Mrs. Rockne
 RONALD REAGAN · DONALD CRISP



**2nd
 BIG WEEK!**

Paramount World News

DECIL B. DEMILLE'S "NORTHWEST MOUNTED POLICE" are on the way!

with a group that included Charlie Chaplin, Laurel through that his calling was on the west side of the Atlantic and eventually stayed for good.

Oliver Norvell Hardy, a full moniker often delivered in the films by the larger member of the team, was born in Harlem, Georgia in 1892. Like Stan, Ollie's formative years led way to family activities in and around the theater, and especially in early movie houses. In 1913 he followed his dream to be in motion pictures when he journeyed to Jacksonville, Florida and to Lubin Pictures.

Both Stan and Babe learned their craft in struggling, small companies and even ran into each other nearly a decade before they were teamed. Stan's first starring film "Lucky Dog" (1919) included the part for a hold-up man, aptly played by a sometimes villain Hardy. Until their joint venture at Roach in 1926, their careers found paths through numerous studios. Stan even left acting for the director's chair for awhile. Ollie played both comic and villainous parts, and even starred as the Tinman in the first feature film version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1925).

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Hal Roach, the 100-year-old producer who still appears in behalf of his productions, began making comedy films in 1913. Mack Sennett had laid down the early ground rules for this cinema genre, but Roach redefined it for the next two and a half decades. His comedy All-Stars were the principal players in his films which included Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chase, Our Gang, and eventually Laurel and Hardy and the team's talented supporting players.

The derby hats were not part of Laurel and Hardy's earliest trademarks, nor were their distinctive habits such as Ollie's tie twiddling and Stan's crying, but after a few silent films the characters evolved into their memorable personae.

The first Laurel and Hardy "starring" film was titled "Putting Pants on Phillip" (1928), a short subject built on an hilarious single gag wherein American Ollie had to

convert visiting Scottish nephew Stan's wardrobe from kilts to pants. Calling one film the official first Laurel and Hardy style production creates controversy, but it is accurate to say that during the 1926 and 1927 seasons at Hal Roach Studios two characters with derby hats and distinctive mannerisms began to evolve into Laurel and Hardy.

At the end of this period, a part-talkie *The Jazz Singer* premiered in 1927 sending the film industry scrambling for sound equipment. Hal Roach jumped on the bandwagon making his first Laurel and Hardy sound film, "Unaccustomed As We Are," in 1929 and in doing so assured that these comedians would easily adapt to the new talkies.

Their comic genius emanated from the fertile mind of Stan and the perfect execution of the gags by Ollie. They were good friends off camera, but Stan often stayed back at the studio creating while Ollie took to the golf links. It was the



"I'm Mr. Hardy . . ."



". . . and this is my very good friend, Mr. Laurel."



STAN AND OLLIE at the Hal Roach Studios' radio station KFVD in 1928.

“dumb one” who was the creative brains behind Laurel and Hardy. The ultimate film by the team was the feature *Way Out West* (1937), produced by Stan for Hal Roach and containing numerous routines by the frequently underacknowledged Laurel.

After *Saps at Sea* was released in 1940, Laurel and Hardy sought greener pastures. At his peak, Stan Laurel made \$3,500 per week, good wages for the time, but substandard for a major Hollywood star. What he didn't realize was the artistic freedom he enjoyed at Roach Studios. One such valuable comedy machination was the luxury to shoot scenes in sequence, normally a rarity in motion pictures.

Instead of returning to Roach, the boys made a disastrous trek to 20th Century Fox and MGM for more money. Later Stan lamented the difficulty in exercising continuity in humor if the filming was so disjointed. At Roach, when one exited a

kitchen door into a living room, the camera moved into a new set to complete the sequence, as opposed to the usual studio method of shooting all kitchen scenes, then all living rooms scenes, and so on.

Hal Roach had cunningly kept Stan Laurel's contract expiring in one year and Oliver Hardy's in the following year, thus assuring that the team would not move elsewhere together. Stan simply waited until Babe's contract expired, hoping Roach would sweeten the pot. In the meantime, the Boys left for their stage tour of the United States.

Laurel and Hardy crossed the United States in 1940 playing in numerous major cities. After the team was given the key to Omaha, Nebraska, a scene which could have been out of a Laurel and Hardy film occurred. The mayor quickly asked for the key back because Republican presidential nominee Wendell Wilkie was due on the next train into town and there was only one

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key to the city. Wilkie followed them to other locations as well. The comedy team was a big hit in Indianapolis, but when the Hoosier hopeful arrived for a political rally, the celebration shifted toward the hometown boy.

A lucky Chicago audience saw "some 30 performers" (according to the *Tribune* review of October 20, 1940), including Lew Parker, Syd Gold, Darlene Garner, Paul Remos, Gonzalo and Cristina, and, straight from the Cocoanut Grove, Danny Dare's dancing chorus of beauties. Autographed photos were available to the first 1,000 in line, who paid 35 cents admission from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 50 cents until 6:30.

Laurel and Hardy often performed sketches written by Stan and the Chicago audience was treated to 30 minutes of laughter, including the famous "Drivers License Sketch" (originally written by Stan in 1939 for a Red Cross benefit and revised for later tours). After a week in the Windy City (visits often included stops at orphanages and radio stations) the revue moved on and C.B. De Mille with the cast of *Northwest Mounted Police* (Gary Cooper, Madeleine Carroll, Paulette Goddard, Robert Preston) replaced them in the next parade of stars at the theatre.

During the 1940's Laurel and Hardy did their part for the war effort, going on two tours, making the public service film "Tree in a Test Tube," and appearing on radio broadcasts such as the 1943 stint on Armed Forces Radio Service's "Mail Call" with another sketch written by Stan.

The boys thought that even greater cinema opportunities lay ahead after the tour; Stan was preparing final plans for a version of Victor Herbert's *The Red Mill* (they starred in the same composer's *Babes in Toyland* in 1935 and this new venture would have been another natural for them.) Instead, a downhill slide of five years started at the Fox studios.

Discouraged with Hollywood, The boys

sought security in two stage tours of Europe in 1947 and 1952. Ill health, first for Stan and later, more devastating for Babe, squashed the last plan for the team, a television series of English style pantomimes done on the Roach television lot which was home to shows such as *My Little Margie* and *Amos 'n' Andy*.

First beloved by millions in the roaring twenties and by depression-weary audiences, the films of Laurel and Hardy continue to give laughs through the audience's feeling of superiority over the way things just shouldn't be done.

Comedy seldom receives critical acclaim, and the followers of great comedy help keep the samplings alive. One major award came when the team won the best short subject Oscar of 1931-2 for perhaps their most famous film "The Music Box." This film still remains as a monument to futile action and hilarious reaction: it all seems to be a simple chore, delivering a piano, but even the viewer must admit to similar circumstances of misfired energies. Stan received an honorary Oscar in 1961 for his comedy contributions four years before his death and four years after Ollie died.

Every other year, hundreds of Sons of the Desert, the Laurel and Hardy appreciation society endorsed by Stan in his last year and named for the film that had the boys sneaking off to a convention in Chicago, celebrate Laurel and Hardy at an international gathering (the first of which was in Chicago in 1978) by screening as many of the films of the team as possible.

When Sons from around the world met this year in Las Vegas, they competed for one prize: the chance to enjoy Laurel and Hardy films, stories, memorabilia, activities, and fellow admirers of "the two minds without a single thought" as much as they could in the few days of the convention.

As has been the case for sixty-five plus years, there will be no losers, just another fine mess for all. ■