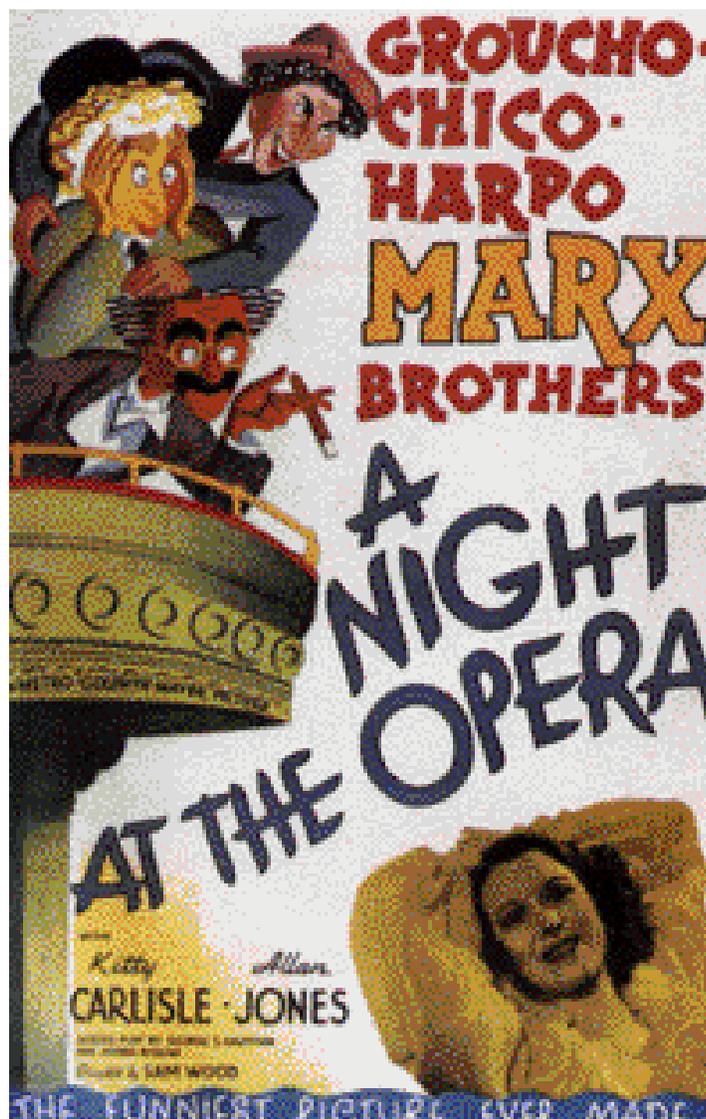


A Night at the Opera



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Sam Wood. Produced by Irving Thalberg. Final screenplay by George S. Kaufman & Morrie Ryskind and others. Story by James Kevin McGuiness. Cinematography by Merritt B. Gerstad. Art Direction by Cedric Gibbons. Original Music by Herbert Stothart. Edited by William Le Vanway. Dances by Chester Hale. Cinematic length: 93 minutes. Distributed by M.G.M.. Cinematic release November 1935. DVD release 2004. Check for ratings. Rating 80%. All images are taken from the public domain and wiki derivatives with permission.

Cast

Groucho Marx as Otis B. Driftwood

Harpo Marx as Tomasso

Chico Marx as Fiorello

Kitty Carlisle as Rosa Castaldi

Allan Jones as Ricardo Baroni

Margaret Dumont as Mrs. Claypool

Sig Ruman as Herman Gottlieb

Walter Woolf King as Rodolfo Lassparri

Robert Emmett O'Connor as Sergeant Henderson

Edward Keane as The Captain

Purnell Pratt as The Mayor

Review

A Night at the Opera has all the usual motifs, attitudes and ideas that usually go into a Marx Brothers movie: a young couple being thwarted in their love overcoming the problems with the help of the brothers, a soothing interlude on the harp by Harpo, some songs, a triumphant mockery of pompous officials, witty, rapid fire repartee from Groucho, amusingly wry cynicism from Chico, silence and practical jokes from Harpo and permeating everything, anarchic mayhem directed against the pretence of order that dominates society.

All this adds up to great fun. The plot, such as it is, can go into a line or four. Mrs. Claypool (Margaret Dumont) a wealthy widow holidaying in Italy, wants to be accepted in New York's high society and she has employed Otis

B. Driftwood to do this. He encourages her to finance an opera when they return to America. However Rodolfo Lassparri (Walter Woolf King) becomes employed as the lead male because he is supposedly the world's best tenor. He is also the world's most obnoxious male. He beats his dresser (Harpo Marx), lecherously pursues the opera's female lead Rosa Castaldi (Kitty Carlisle) against her clearly stated wishes and tries to get his romantic and professional rival Ricardo Baroni (Allan Jones) and the Marx brothers arrested.



From the top: Chico, Harpo, Groucho and Zeppo, who is not in this film.

Almost everyone tries to get some money and /or a position out of Mrs. Claypool. Lassparri wants a thousand dollars a night to sing. Baroni wants much less, the opportunity to sing professionally. Fiorello (Chico Marx) wants to be Baroni's manager for 10% of his earnings. Herman Gottlieb (Sig Ruman) a smarmy European who always wears a tuxedo, wants and gets Groucho's job. Groucho wants that job back. All these competing desires add up to merry mayhem as Harpo, Chico and Baroni become stowaways in Groucho's cabin on the voyage to New York.



The crowded cabin scene

The voyage provides some of the best moments. As well as contributions to the screenplay Buster Keaton created the crowded cabin scene as Groucho, his trunks and the three stowaways already crowding out the cabin, are joined by cleaners, mechanics, waiters and inspectors. Everyone piles in, following rules about doing their job and oblivious to the chaotic reality, until nobody can move and Groucho asks, it his imagination or are they crowded?

The top deck night scene on the voyage, where the large numbers of Italian migrants sing, dance and then listen to Harpo play a harp, have a zest and are delightful. They are also a calming, needed break and a contrast from the frenetic energy and endless madcap situations that soon emerges in the world of New York opera. When Mrs. Claypool puts on Verdi's *La Traviata* everything that can possibly go wrong becomes an opportunity for the Marx Brothers. Chico appears in drag on stage and Harpo plays havoc with the sets, then they are chased by the police and also by the loudly furious Gottlieb, trampling backstage through the wrecked performance.



Groucho, Gottlieb and Mrs Dumont at the start of History's most chaotic opera performance.

Throughout the film Harpo's visual gags work as a perfect foil twice over, once for society's official order, which is personified in authority figures and again for Groucho's verbal gags. These quips are smart, clever and witty observations on motivations and foibles, delightfully they include his own. Social structures also cop it and Chico self-deprecatingly attacks the same by his way of going for an angle to get a personal advantage.

Some of the gags would have been better if they were shorter, but they do provide a contrast for the moments of maniac pacing. By going for these characteristics and downplaying what was topical and typical in the 1930s *A Night at the Opera* make for timeless comedy.



Sam Wood 1884-1949