

You don't have to be a crazy to work, but it helps: Work in comedies of the 1930s

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Having recently published an overview of film, television and radio comedy (Mundy and White 2012) I am curious how relatively seldom work appears in the foreground of comedy texts. Comedy is drawn to controversial areas and ideological fractures in the social structure with issues of taste, class, gender, race and sexuality consistently appropriating the focus. Work is the background, the normal and quotidian against which the comic can emerge. Certainly there is humour to be found in work activities and environments, but work itself is so monolithic in our lives that our fondest wish is often to escape it and its domination of our time. Comedy reflects this by preferring to associate itself with either the opposite of work (the holiday, the circus or carnival, the seaside) or time out from the busy working day (home, relationships, the things we do to distract ourselves from the fact that our lives are governed by work).

The ways in which the genre of comedy treats work will be examined through mainly American films from across the 1930s, in which an economic situation not unlike that of 2013 applied. The post-war economic boom of the 1920s had led to the Wall Street Crash of 1929 when paper stock fortunes were lost overnight and the ensuing slump – the Depression – required the Roosevelt government's New Deal to put the country back on track. Hollywood history during the period treads a slightly different path. The change over to sound production and the new audience demand it generated allowed the industry to go through a costly refit in its production and exhibition facilities and still make profits despite the downturn. It was only by 1931 that the studios began to feel economically vulnerable and though two majors became bankrupt in 1933 (Paramount and RKO) they were allowed to survive.

Both middle class and proletarian film audiences were able to recognise that the WASP elite who had led the country into the Depression through incompetence or corruption had lost a considerable amount of moral authority. The economic conditions of the thirties demanded some thought was given to the organisation of society and particularly issues relating to employment. If we are to understand how much comedy texts agree or disagree with societal attitudes towards work we must consider the mythology of work.

The capitalist hegemony of western society has established work as an accepted, necessary obligation. Work is an activity that the individual undertakes for the benefit of themselves and society. As such it is rewarding (the satisfaction of a job well done), responsible and mature to work. Work

allows individuals to provide for themselves, their family and their future. It offers workers the chance to 'make good' and advance themselves. This mythology is so embedded in society that not working has negative connotations, whether it is the 'idle rich' living on inherited or speculatively gained wealth or the 'idle poor' living on government benefits and often depicted as a direct burden on those working. However much we might want to debate the nuances of such mythology, it is at least understood that working for remuneration is the norm and that this is a prevailing view in our culture. If it was not recognised, comedy at its expense would not be possible.

Differing attitudes to work can be attributed to the two strands of film comedy highlighted by Henry Jenkins: the anarchistic and the affirmative. The anarchistic comedy is about rejecting (albeit temporarily in carnivalesque manner) the constrictions of society, offering glimpses of more progressive visions of the future within a mainstream medium. The affirmative comedy, often but never entirely synonymous with the romantic comedy, presents plots in which the individual learns to negotiate with the requirements of society, whether to fit into a work environment or to live a fuller life outside it.

Working requires the individual to be serious and responsible. In anarchistic comedy it is unlikely that the leading characters are either of these things and therefore it is equally unlikely that they will be good at whatever it is they do. If we really believed the mythology of work the comic characters incapable of doing a good job ought to be despised and the schemers and rules benders among them ought to be disliked, but this is not generally what happens. It is the characters who buy the mythology of work that are the objects of ridicule and hostility. Anarchistic comedy is pleased to point out that in accepting work we make ourselves dupes of the societal mythology surrounding it. Committing to work is a refusal of one's individuality, a surrender of time and freedom. Work is a gyp, a con, an imposition. The carnivalesque aspect of comedy is at play here: ridicule of work is a holiday from it. We nevertheless are compelled to return to work and, in the absence of some untried alternative, this adaptation to the prevailing conditions is what is recognised and validated by the affirmative comedies. The texts studied in this chapter run the gamut from anarchistic to affirmative and back again, but there is another axis against which they can be read.

Comedian Comedy, as originally defined by Steven Seidman (1981), focuses on comedians who usually demonstrate their initial unfitness for society by their inability to successfully hold down a job no matter how hard they try. The best fitting examples would be films from the 1950s starring Jerry Lewis, or in Britain those of Norman Wisdom. Their rewards for achieving a measure of conformity during the films usually include romantic fulfilment. It is also a possible consolation for failure.

Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) is an excellent example of a comedian comedy from the 1930s, though its lack of dialogue is exceptional and out of step. *Modern Times* emphasises the alien and inhuman nature of mechanised work and engages with the specific connection between food and work directly. Gerald Mast's in-depth analysis (1979: 110-14) suggests that this film shows 'The compromises that humans must make to live together are simply not human.' (110) One such compromise is the need to work and inability to comply with it means the Tramp and his female companion take to the road at the end. At least they have each other. The examples discussed in depth in this essay conspicuously don't provide similar rewards for their protagonists since I have focused on films that don't offer romantic motivations for their negotiations with work.

Affirmative comedian comedies are not the only comedy protagonists. There are other comedians who do not succeed in fitting in to society. Henry Jenkins makes a useful distinction between comedian comedy and clown comedy that identifies this division: 'The comedian's comedy stems from mistakes and mishaps arising from efforts to conform to social norms, the clown's comedy from disruptions and transgressions arising from a desire or compulsion to break free from constraint.' (Jenkins 1992: 236) The impetus to conform and the impetus to resist are implicit in the affirmative and anarchistic modes of comedy, in comedian comedy and clown comedy, but neat categorisation is hard to achieve when the comedies themselves are often such heterogeneous vehicles caught between telling a story and making audiences laugh. The line between clown and comedian comedy blurs ultimately because making comedy is the performers' *work*.

'Help Wanted'

We begin with perhaps the most antagonistic mainstream film text we can find relating to work. *Duck Soup* (1933), the Marx Brothers' most anarchistic comedy indeed 'the most anarchistic of all screen comedies' (Jenkins, 1992: 241), might seem an unlikely text through which to examine work but the film actually focuses on the fitness for purpose of individuals in work roles. The spectre of unemployment haunts the film with gags hanging on 'help wanted' signs and recruitment advertising on sandwich boards. In a situation of near economic collapse, where 'beggars can't be choosers', taking jobs for which one is ill-suited is a clear possibility.

From the outset the plot, such as it is, hangs on an unusual appointment as super-rich widow Mrs Teasdale (Margaret Dumont) is able to use her financial dominance over the bankrupt republic of Freedonia to impose Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx) as president over the corrupt and inept frock-coated elite who have previously ruled. What qualifies him for this post is never entirely clear since his

chief activity seems to be in tormenting the cabinet by making a mockery of their standard practices. In a clear critique of conventional thinking, these dupes can never seem to get past the deference due to job titles no matter how much the Marxes refuse to obey the logic of their posts. They remain dupes and Firefly remains head of state, despite plunging the country into war with neighbouring Sylvania.

The Sylvaniaian ambassador, Trentino (Louis Calhern), proves his own unfitness for his job by hiring Chicolini and Pinky (Chico and Harpo Marx) as his spies to seek incriminating information about the new Freedomian president. They are the worst spies imaginable, failing to gain any (let alone incriminating) information. Chicolini's best plan is to set up stall as a peanut vendor beneath the president's balcony while waiting for Pinky, who can't or won't talk, to do his job for him. When Pinky doesn't, their tussle trespasses the territory of burly but slow-fused lemonade vendor (Edgar Kennedy). He separates them and demands that Chicolini shut up, Chico responds rapidly in his heavy Italian accent as follows:

'But mister you no understand. Look, he's a spy and I'm a spy and he's a-working for me. I wanna him to find out something but he no find out what I wanna find out. Now, how am I gonna find out what I wanna find out if he no find out what I gotta find out?'

While this is clearly another ridiculous indiscretion it is also a statement of the difficulty of working in a hierarchy that involves delegation of work. Our roles as workers depend on the work of others. Chico's tirade asks 'How can this be right?' when we could do it ourselves, better. But then we would be the subordinate. No, as with the placeholder political dupes in charge, the hierarchy must be maintained whether the work gets done or not. Identified as a proletarian schemer by Durgnat (1969: 153-4), Chico is always looking to do a deal to get ahead as for example the iceman in *Horse Feathers* (1932), or as racing tout in *A Day at the Races* (1937). When he takes on a role that requires him to be Harpo's spokesman it must count for something, even if this is ultimately him taking the blame and facing the consequences.

Immediately after Chicolini and Pinky's first conflict with the Lemonade Vendor, the object of their spying, Firefly, reveals his own incompetence by hiring Chicolini as his Secretary of War. Chicolini doesn't report this to his Sylvaniaian master, however, seeming to want to keep his employment options open and perhaps sensing, in the obvious clash of interest, the opportunity for profit. He is the one caught and put on trial for spying, but the final declaration of war halts the trial. By the end all three brothers and Mrs Teasdale are besieged in a bombed mansion and only their chance capture of Trentino apparently saves the day. War is shown as the product of financial chaos in a way

that, with hindsight, looks like a prediction of the development of the 1930s (Polyani 1991, Harvey 2006).

The anarchistic comedy of the Marxes at top speed ridicules the mythology of work, and each brother refuses to recognise himself in the requirements made by their assigned job and programmatically rejects executive power (Groucho), middle management (Chico) and proletarian (Harpo) roles. Their treatment of the Lemonade Vendor might further indicate their hostility to private enterprise, too. The logical outcome of these rejections is that the capitalist social structure is anathema to them and that we are seeing the anarchistic comedic impulse manifested. But is a logical outcome really what the chaos of *Duck Soup* generates?

The Marxes are always playing con-men, always masquerading as competent, as something that they're not in a world that is alien to them: high society in *Animal Crackers* (1930), crime in *Monkey Business* (1931), the opera in *A Night at The Opera* (1935), business in *The Cocoanuts* (1929), academia in *Horse Feathers* (1932). Marc Winokur properly notes the significance of their assumed immigrant status but the humour is more accessible than that; work itself is like a new country, and we must make our way in it however unnatural its strictures seem. Jenkins sensibly counsels that: 'We must be cautious ... about attributing a progressive force to anarchistic narrative apart from its use of historically specific imagery and its function within a particular cultural context' (Winokur 1996: 243). However, the Marx Brothers are still with us in the era of DVD because their comedy is still sufficiently funny to us (though not necessarily in the same way, of course). Gerald Weales (1985: 79-80) identifies their appeal as lying beneath their specific social comments but in their 'malevolent energy' only fully released in *Duck Soup*. In a somewhat Manichean interpretation of 'the darkest elements in the admirable energy of the Marxes' he notes that 'By identifying with them, we accept that part of ourselves which insists that there are no boundaries, no limitations, no restrictions. Liberation. Exultation.' The implication of Weales' statement takes the rejection of boundaries far beyond the issues of work in the context of the 1930s, but does not remove it from those origins. The Marxes had lost heavily on investments made with the proceeds of their Broadway headlining shows in the crash. In the final image of *Duck Soup* Mrs Teasdale sings 'Hail, Hail Freedonia' (a parody of the United States National anthem) she is pelted with fruit by the brothers. As representation of wealth and opportunity, even nation, she suffers for getting them in to this mess. In its lashing out *Duck Soup* is an exemplary text of anarchistic clown comedy.

Gerald Mast makes a point of emphasising the contributions of the Marx Brothers' writers in plotting, dialogue and in selecting targets (1979: 284-5) therefore avoiding the impulse to impute

authorship of their films to them (see Mundy and White 2012: 49-51). Nevertheless, we may consider why *Duck Soup* was the Marx Brothers' last film for Paramount. Reports of *Duck Soup*'s lack of box-office success are greatly exaggerated (see Louvish 1999: 278). Jenkins (1992: 184) notes Hollywood's recognition of general audiences having difficulty with some aspects of the urban and ethnic aspects of the Vaudeville aesthetic, the Marx's relationship with Paramount had almost broken down after *Horse Feathers* (1932) and the increasing emphasis of the Production Code on Hollywood's social responsibilities may have made it seem like their comedy had run its course. Yet the relative success of *Duck Soup* is not the fulcrum of our argument about the appeal of anarchistic attitudes to employment. It does not require as frenzied and excessive a comedy as *Duck Soup* to express contemporary dissatisfaction with the world of work.

The chance to quit

If I Had a Million (1932) is a portmanteau film with nine sections by various writers and directors made under the production control of Ernst Lubitsch for Paramount. An opening montage indicates the capitalist industrial might responsible for the fortune of John Glidden (Richard Bennett) who is old and sick, mostly at the prospect of delivering his money to gathering vulturine relatives who have done nothing to earn it. He hits on a scheme to give his money away, a million at a time, to persons picked at random from the telephone book. In the most telling sequence bespectacled, mole-like book keeper Phineas Lambert (Charles Laughton) receives his certified cheque in the post at work, puts it in his pocket and leaves his place among the rows of other book keepers in a vast General Office. He ascends stairs to the Administration Office, then there is a sequence of other doors (Secretary to the President, Private Secretary to the President) until one is marked Mr Brown, President. Lambert adjusts his tie in the mirror outside before going in. Verbally checking that he has indeed reached Mr Brown (the only speech in the sequence), he blows a raspberry at the silver haired patrician behind the desk before turning to leave. The sequence is comic because we all understand it. The wish to do something similar if we had no further need of our employment is fairly general. Various national and international lotteries are funded by the purchases of millions of individuals living on the faint hope of removing all financial obligations from their lives. Protests about 'undeserving' winners of such lotteries implicitly reserve the right of winning to those who have done their time as wage slaves deferent to employer power. Where comedy engages with work, it recognises our frustrations not exactly in terms of alienation from the means of production and its process, but in terms of work not being *our* work at all. It is (usually) not what we would choose for ourselves but what economic conditions require us to do.

Two other comic sequences in the film provide variations on this attitude. The second recipient of Glidden's largesse is, cutting through the film's circumspection, a prostitute called Violet Smith (Wynne Gibson). Finally convinced that the offer is real and without strings attached she checks in to a fancy hotel, alone, and goes to bed alone (making a point of disposing of the second pillow). Though the film is voyeuristic in its attention to her undressing and removing her stockings (pre-enforcement of the Production code) the message is that she'll never work again. The implication that work is a wearying type of prostitution may perhaps be attributed to Lubitsch's sophisticated wit, Marxist analysis or a combination of both.

The first recipient of Glidden's money is Mr Peabody (Charlie Ruggles) a hen-pecked former clerk now promoted to a sales position in a china shop and caught between paying for breakages and placating his nagging wife who immediately takes charge of his wages. Peabody is bad at his job. Trapped in an unfulfilling working nightmare, the million dollar cheque frees him to indulge his love of rabbits, dress in fine clothes and go on a cathartic smashing spree in the store. These three comedic examples from the film illustrate that, whether good (Smith), bad (Peabody) or undistinguished (Lambert) at their employment, the worker's dearest wish is to have done with work. The economic conditions of the 1930s sharpened the awareness of filmmakers and audiences of the nature of the capitalist bargain and they appear to share a delight in those situations where its necessity is escaped.

'It's great to have a good job to go to'

Not all comedies of the period present work so negatively. Never as anarchistic as the Marx brothers, the comedies of Laurel and Hardy alternately present the pair as petit bourgeoisie, destitute or working class. *Busy Bodies* (1933) shows them prosperously employed as carpenters, looking especially dapper in their bowler hats, high collars, ties and jackets over their workmen's dungarees and gloves. 'It's great to have a good job to go to,' Ollie states, 'It just makes the whole world bright.' They can afford a car with a built-in radio that makes their journey to work along palmy Californian avenues a pleasure. The fact that the radio is actually a wind-up gramophone under the hood, however, indicates that the pair are satisfied by the semblance of the thing rather than the thing itself. Work at the sawmill, however, is introduced by a montage of loud industrial saws in action which, in addition to the repeated buzz saw screen wipe, makes us aware that their workplace is dangerous (insanely so to eyes conditioned by twenty-first century health and safety legislation).

Once Laurel and Hardy arrive they seem ill-prepared for the pace of work at the sawmill. Hardy manages to walk into planks being carried between two men three times before he even gets his jacket

off. Their employment appears to involve making window frames and they certainly destroy one after Ollie has gotten stuck in it. Stan and Ollie's work doesn't progress because they spend their time at odds with each other in a tit for tat feud. Having stuck a full set of paintbrush bristles to Ollie's chin Stan tries to make amends by shaving them off with a plane. After repeated soakings with the hose used to wet his beard Ollie has had enough and he yanks the hose in a rage pulling the whole sink unit off the wall. It hits him in the head but, instead of being fatal, the blow precipitates him, via unguarded belt drives and crashing through a floor, into the factory's sawdust extraction system through which he is sped, subjected to further life threatening bumps and humiliations, until becoming stuck in the outlet. Stan puts a ladder up to the outlet, whether to rescue Ollie or simply to return his hat ('You dropped this') isn't clear, but they are both dislodged by a barrel of shellac and topple onto the foreman's office, levelling it. Attempting to flee the chaos they have caused, not knowing the foreman (Tiny Sandford) has been taken out by the flying barrel, they end up driving their car through a vertical saw that cuts it in half. While Stan looks on the bright side – the gramophone still works – Ollie realises they are ruined and pursues him.

In this short film, work is a place of petty rivalries, intimidating overseers, downright dangerous machinery and full of difficult not to say baffling tasks. Stan and Ollie's enthusiasm for the rewards of employment is not matched by their aptitude for its challenges. Likewise in *The Finishing Touch* (1928) and *The Music Box* (1932) their enterprise and effort comes to nothing (or worse). Unlike the Marx Brothers, their mishaps are disasters with consequences. While the Marxes are largely impervious, invulnerable clowns, Laurel and Hardy's engagement with work involves physical punishment and the loss of what they have gained or accumulated previously (for both see *Towed in a Hole* (1932)). In a world that is ultimately beyond our control the future is not necessarily bright and there is clearly some pessimism about the economics of the period in these shorts. Yet to focus on the end of a Laurel and Hardy comedy would be an error since, as Durgnat observes 'the general audience doesn't remember only endings' (Durgnat 1969: 169). What we remember from *Busy Bodies* is the sawmill setting, the slapstick spiralling out of control and the inappropriate use of tools. In short, work rendered ridiculous. This is a comedian comedy that is affirmative in intent but by focusing on trying and failing asks just as many questions of social requirements as the outright rejection of clown comedy.

As professional comedians first teamed in the silent period, Laurel and Hardy flourished in the relative freedom of the Hal Roach Studios where they could follow their comic instincts (Louvish 2001: 324) but found it harder to stay in control of their later longer vehicles. From their early 1930s

peak they continued to show willing into the 1940s, but their best work consistently shows them failing to achieve what they set out to achieve. Laurel and Hardy do not reject work or seek escape from it, they embrace it, yet they are still utterly incapable of meeting its demands.

‘All in a day’s work’

Pleasure in the idea rather than the actuality of work can also be seen in British comedy in the 1930s. The effects of the Crash were widely felt in Britain with unemployment reaching well over the three million mark and only a very slow recovery beginning in 1933. The Jarrow march of 1936 was an attempt to highlight the fact that what recovery there was, was somewhat local to the south and to puncture the complacency of the pre-war government. The teaming of Will Hay, Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt, first occurring in *Windbag the Sailor* (1936), was responsible for three striking films focusing on particular work roles. *Ask a Policeman* (1939) and *Where’s that Fire* (1940) deal with the public safety institutions of the police and fire services. Though the trio undermine their roles, with their idle policemen dishonest in most things and their firemen capable of literally pumping petrol onto a fire, it is in *Oh, Mr Porter!* (1937), set in a pre-nationalisation train service, that best reveals the underlying attitudes to work their films capitalise on.

As might be expected from a British film, social status is subtly nuanced in *Oh, Mr Porter!*. William Porter (Hay) is the brother-in-law of the Managing Director of the Railway, a ne’er-do-well with a string of failures behind him. Appearing as a wheeltapper during the christening of the new Silver Link locomotive he halts work to listen to the Minister of Public Communications and inspires the top-hatted politician to attempt a joke about a wheeltapper who, after forty years in his job didn’t know why he tapped wheels. It’s easy to see that Porter is equally alienated from his work but, asked by the minister’s wife why wheels are tapped, he bluffs his way through before his attempt to leave and avoid further questions drenches the officials’ podium with the contents of the water tower.

Porter’s reassignment rather than sacking is the Managing Director’s way of avoiding Porter coming to live with him. Realising he has an opportunity for an easier life, Porter angles for a Station Master job and is initially thwarted (‘The one job I know I can do, they won’t let me’) but his sister insists and they find a station in Buggleskelly, Northern Ireland, that is looking for its sixth station master in as many months. The rural station Porter discovers, after a wet walk of two miles from the nearest bus stop, is unwelcoming. His inquiry is greeted by the baffling ‘Next train’s gone’ from aged Deputy Station Master Harbottle (Marriott) while his plump subordinate Albert (Moffatt) affects to ignore the new arrival. Porter’s attempts to impose himself rub them up the wrong way (‘Bit officious,

ain't you,' comments Harbottle) and he loses patience, shouting: 'You show a little more respect for your superiors ... and take your caps off.' He is then momentarily distracted by the jar Albert has brought Harbottle and asks what it is: 'My supper beer. Have some?' In response Porter immediately asserts his job status once again: 'Certainly not. This place is far too free and easy altogether. I don't hold with a man in my position hobnobbing with his staff. You keep your place and I'll keep mine. What is it? Bitter?' Maintaining the hierarchy of work is difficult when his pleasures are identical with those of his subordinates. As in the Marx Brothers films, entry into the work hierarchy produces spurious advantages and false positions. The chief difference between Porter and his subordinates, the very thing that makes them inhabit these roles, is that where Harbottle and Albert are happy to keep their heads down, Porter is belligerently insistent on his significance when it comes to interpreting his status in the hierarchy with other railway employees. Told by Albert that the morning express 'only stops at important stations' he immediately sets about bringing it to a halt at Buggleskelly with: 'I'm station master here and if I want a train to stop it stops.' The guard on the express is less than impressed: 'Do you think I want my train stopped every time some dirty little halt changes its staff?' A childish argument ensues over which is more important, train or platform, and over who actually has the authority to set the train moving again. The conductor scoffs that Porter doesn't 'even know where the train is going to' to which he responds: 'Why should I? When it leaves here I wash my hands of it.' Territorial conflict clearly goes against the smooth running of the trains but it is also familiar in any type of work where there is the least ambiguity over responsibility.

Porter is fired in less than a week, having lost an excursion train and antagonised both the main signalbox and head office during simultaneous phonecalls. His comeback to his dismissal is 'I've been thrown out of better stations than this.' Yet from this point he is inspired to find the missing train, taking his unwilling subordinates and the old engine, Gladstone, investigating ('It's not my job to poke my nose into other people's tunnels' grumbles Albert) and managing to defeat the gun-runners who are using the old legends of 'One-eyed Joe the phantom miller' to disguise their activities. Among the trackside compliments thrown his way when the gang has been captured are 'Good bit of work' and 'I'll see that you get recognition in the proper quarters' replied to with Porter's airy 'all in a day's work'.

The protagonists have come good here, through his leadership. This is despite the fact that their regular work activities include 'living off the land' by pilfering goods in transit, from Albert stealing two ducks from the stopped express ('they got off at the wrong station') to Harbottle extracting chocolate from the platform vending machine with a kick rather than a coin, and their errors have

destroyed trucks, carriages and, finally, Gladstone the engine. Porter recognises that ‘Everything on this station is either too old or it won’t work and you’re both’ but is of exactly the same stripe as his confederates. There is a moment when Albert knocks the gun out of Grogan’s hand and Porter kicks him out the door and locks it that they do seem capable, but before long they are stuck at the top of a windmill, claiming ‘we’ve got it under perfect control’. Not a bit of it. In a tradition of ‘zany fidelity to grass roots reality’ (Durgnat 1969: 142) what the film celebrates is British bumbling through where only the final outcome counts and doing things properly is only to be scoffed at. Being true to ourselves is more important than following regulations or abstract knowledge about how we are supposed to do things. It is an appealing fantasy that craftily manages to have its cake and eat it. *Oh, Mr. Porter!* is also an ambivalent comedian/clown comedy hybrid, with protagonists who ultimately succeed in their work roles despite the fact that they can’t or won’t conform to society’s requirements.

In their teamings with Hay, Marriott and Moffatt get many of the best lines and Hay, the star, wary of comedy’s carnivalesque inversion of hierarchy, became keen to ditch them (see Rinaldi 2009: 265-66) and escape the production treadmill at Gainsborough Pictures where he had made nine films in three years.

‘He’s the most trying man ever put on this earth’

Finally we take in a comedian comedy with an affirmative attitude towards work. Our example is the W.C. Fields vehicle *The Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935) in which he plays Ambrose Wolfinger, an eccentric files clerk employed by the ‘Malloy MFG. Company (Woolen Goods)’, who hasn’t taken a day off in twenty-five years. Wolfinger’s enslavement to his job is partly the product of his home life in which for the last eight years he has been hemmed in by his wife Leona (Kathleen Howard), his mother-in-law Mrs Neselrode (Vera Lewis) and his brother-in-law Claude (Grady Sutton). His only ally is his daughter from his previous marriage, Hope (Mary Brian). Wolfinger is the epitome of the unassertive middle-aged employee and demonstrates this when he quietly submits to a sequence of undeserved driving penalties from police officers. Wolfinger has two non-work enthusiasms; making applejack and wrestling. Both get him into trouble within 24 hours. When incompetent burglars get tipsy and nostalgic on the applejack in his cellar he is required to make a show of masculinity and confront them. Not realising that due to his extensive delays the police already have them in custody he tumbles down the stairs, crashes through the cellar door and accidentally fires off a couple of rounds from his revolver. Yet when he and the policeman appear before the judge with the crooks it is Wolfinger who is fined for manufacturing alcohol without a licence and arrested when he can’t pay

(being in his pyjamas) while the burglars go free. His wrestling interest gets him in trouble at work because, instead of admitting his true reason for taking the afternoon off, he invents the demise of his mother-in-law to excuse his absence. The Malloy firm's attempts to exploit their concern as a publicity exercise lead to Wolfinger's ruse being discovered by his wife and in-laws. Meanwhile, after his brother-in-law has stolen his ticket and his various misadventures, he is last in the ticket office queue at the wrestling and is knocked down at the turnstile when one of the contestants in the final heavyweight bout is thrown from the ring. This is reinterpreted by Claude to include his being drunk in the gutter outside the wrestling match with his secretary/ mistress (Field's actual mistress Carlotta Monti) in a way that gets him fired by Peabody (Lucien Littlefield). Finally asserting himself when his daughter is threatened during the ensuing family argument Wolfinger clobbers Claude and breaks with his wife. While this might seem like a positive outcome nothing can really be resolved while Wolfinger is unemployed.

Wolfinger's ace in the hole is that he's actually good at his job (which he describes as 'memory expert') knowing the credit and social details of clients in a way that helps the owner, Mr Malloy (Oscar Apfel), gain their business. While the best Wolfinger can think of to regain his position is to offer to work for less, his daughter takes the telephone call from Peabody reversing his sacking because he is needed and renegotiates a much improved contract by inventing a counter offer. Shortly afterwards, after Mrs Wolfinger has realised the financial burden of her in-laws, the new familial situation is neatly figured in the concluding trip in Wolfinger's new car with room for wife and daughter inside and the in-laws in the rumble seat being exposed to the rain.

The outcome of the plot shows only those who work are rewarded and Wolfinger ultimately gets what he's entitled to and fuller recognition for his work. Nevertheless, every indiscretion of the hero is to be punished, too, and a condition of his re-employment is that he forgets about wrestling. Given the 1960s co-option of Fields as an anti-authoritarian figure (Louvish 1997: 480) we might find this film's rather fawning conformity to conventional work mythology surprising. Simon Louvish uses this film's title for his biography of Fields and shows the biographical elements of the text adding various dimensions including that: 'There was nothing in Fields' life that could not be recycled into his raw material.' (1997: 398) It might also be argued that this film is not a genuine 1930s text about work in the sense that Fields was recycling material from his silent film career and indeed regularly used situations and scenes that went back to earlier dramatic models (as in *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (1933) and *The Old-fashioned Way* (1934)). Wolfinger's only subversiveness is in stubbornly filing the materials in a way only he can understand (fitting his own interpretation of the job rather than the

company's) and this is a key element for interpreting the resolution of the work elements of *The Man on the Flying Trapeze*: Wolfinger needs to do things his own way and that he has earned the right to do so.

Roughly speaking, W.C. Fields' starring vehicles present audiences with two related but separate star personas: the first is the con-man, huckster, performer, often a period figure; the second is the ordinary, contemporary small-town family man. Fields established himself on the stage as the first type in *Poppy* in 1923 and had his first successful film role in D.W. Griffiths' silent adaptation, *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925). Variations on this shady character appear in *Tillie and Gus* (1933), *The Old Fashioned Way*, the sound version of *Poppy* (1936) which was Fields' last film for Paramount, *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man* (1939) his first film for Universal, wherein he is a circus operator whose children's expensive educations have brought to the brink of bankruptcy, and in *My Little Chickadee* (1940) with Mae West. The ordinary man character is the focus of *You're Telling Me* (1934), *It's a Gift* (1934), *The Bank Dick* (1940) and finally in *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941). The message across these films, indicated by the titles, is that the ordinary man is a sucker. But if we follow the examples of the 'ordinary man' line from *The Man on the Flying Trapeze* through Fields last starring roles we see something else emerge.

The picaresque adventures of Egbert Souse (Fields) in *The Bank Dick* show another put-upon small town family man accidentally acquires jobs as a film director and a bank guard. In the latter post he persuades his fellow bank-employee and prospective son-in-law Og Oggilby (Grady Sutton) to invest in a con-man's 'beefsteak mines' and borrow against a forthcoming bonus to do so. The narrative concludes with a car chase motivated by another attempted bank robbery after which Souse receives a series of undeserved financial rewards not unlike the windfall for the characters of *If I Had a Million*. Fields' final star vehicle *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* ends with an even more extravagant chase based on a misunderstanding between Fields and a character not seen earlier in the film. The plot self-reflexively presents Fields as Hollywood performer trying to sell a script with elements of the proposed screenplay shown during a script conference that ultimately rejects it. Fields brings together his two screen personas in a character named W.C. Fields. Like Ambrose Wolfinger, Field's himself needs to be allowed to do things his own way and he has earned the right to do so after more than thirty years in the entertainment business. Fields' last film validates his commitment to his working methods in line with the type of contract Wolfinger gets in *The Man on the Flying Trapeze*. The point to emphasise here is that when he does so *his work* doesn't make sense and, as Louvish (1997: 460-1) suggests, the result drives studios and the censors to the brink of insanity while making

Fields virtually unemployable in Hollywood. Mast concludes that: 'In his contempt for film logic, in the deliberately sloppy non-sequitur construction, Fields ironically synthesized his view of life and his control of cinematic form.' (1979: 292) We might suggest Fields has finally managed to align his view of his working life with his work. In the normal run of things, the employee, the worker, doesn't get to decide what their work should be or how to go about it. Inasmuch as Fields already seems to know by experience what the outcome of his having such control will be, *Never Give a Sucker and Even Break* is a self-portrait of star as sucker (or is it vice versa?).

Conclusion

There seem to be two basic attitudes to work in comedy: the anarchistic raspberry that represents our hostility to it, and the more ambivalent type that accepts work as part of life, or at least as one way of economic survival, but which downplays it against other concerns (such as romance or family). Such contrariness arises because comedy refuses to take seriously those things that we 'ought' to take seriously and which certainly are serious in the proportion of our everyday life that they occupy. To be defined by our jobs is to be limited. We may recognise ourselves in the toilers that comedy presents but we know, at the same time it isn't really us. Comedy's temporary rejection of –or holiday from– the seriousness and normality of work is both its appeal and the reason that it has been held in such relatively low critical esteem as a subject of academic study. Since it has often been critically neglected as trivial, comedy has been able to air to the revolutionary spirit more often than it is given credit for, though it equally often functions as a safety valve so that that in highlighting its challenging aspects we may credit it too much.

One thing that is clear, however, is that the comic performer does not do ordinary work. Like a creative artist, musician, dancer, actor, sportsman or woman their daily occupation is preparation for events in which their performance will be measured and appreciated. To be a comedian is one example of the type of working life we might genuinely aspire to. Successful comedy texts based on those jobs are, however, tellingly few and comedians do not celebrate their successes. They celebrate –albeit comically– their struggles and hardships. The comedies of the 1930s tell us about what it takes to survive, not what it takes to succeed, and work can only ever be part of that larger story. Work is to be rejected, avoided, honestly failed at, muddled through or performed idiosyncratically if not incompetently. If it is to have any value for us it must be ours.

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