The Cocoanuts
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Tasso Feldman (above) as Harpo (Silent Red), Jim Poulos as Chico (Willie Wony Diddydony), and John Plumpis as Mr. Hammer (Groucho) in The Cocoanuts, 2016.
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About the Playwright: The Cocoanuts
By Rachelle Hughes

Almost a century ago Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright George S. Kauffman joined his creative genius with Songwriter's Hall of Fame composer and lyricist Irving Berlin to write the Marx Brothers’ first movie and second Broadway play, The Cocoanuts. In the grand scheme of theatre history as theatre buffs look back on the combination of these entertainment powerhouses all working on one production, it is hard to believe it took so long for someone to find a way to bring a contemporary version to the stage.

Mark Bedard
In 2014 Berlin and Kaufman gained another collaborator posthumously when actor and adapter Mark Bedard seized the opportunity to revive the magic of the Marx Brothers with his adaptation of The Cocoanuts at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. His adaption combined the wit of Kaufman, the musical talents of Berlin, and the improv of the Marx Brothers into a musical that appeals to the contemporary musical theatre’s desire for a storybook musical as opposed to a vaudeville musical.

Mark Bedard first became interested in the Marx Brothers when he was performing in Animal Crackers at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He fell in love with them and their backstory. So, he began researching their work and he ordered a script of the play. “I saw all this material including scenes and songs that were not in the movie and I became really excited about ‘Oh we can bring this material back to an audience,’” Bedard said in a YouTube video on his inspiration for his adaptation (Mark Bedard, Snapshot: On your Marx! Get Set! Show! June 9, 2014[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F733CIC6uCs]).

As he studied the full body of works performed by the Marx Brothers, he says he was able to see what worked and didn’t work. When he saw that their most successful work centered around a love story he decided to build on the love story already in the original The Cocoanuts script. When The Cocoanuts was first performed on Broadway in 1925 it was a vaudeville style musical. As Bedard said “Musicals have come a long way since then,” (YouTube). Bedard restructured The Cocoanuts to make it a more cohesive storyline in the more contemporary style of a storybook musical. However, he built on the legendary wit of playwright Kaufman and the magic of adlibbing that was such a successful part of the Marx Brothers on stage synergy. His version is a blend of past meets present. When he played the role of Groucho in his adaptation of The Cocoanuts he stayed true to the Marx Brothers tradition of never having a play be the same on any night by adding new jokes each night. Bedard’s version is musical theatre meets stand-up comedy.

Bedard found his love of theatre during his senior year of high school. Although he was drawn to the arts he shied away from performing and instead joined the football team. When he tried out and was cast in the play his senior year he found his true passion.

“Unlike football where I had struggled with every fiber of my short frame against guys typically much bigger to hold my own, I took to theater like a fish to water,” he said (“Oregon Shakespeare Festival 2014: Mark Bedard plays with danger as Groucho” [http://www.oregonlive.com/performance/index.ssf/2014/07/oregon_shakespeare_festival_20_12.html]).

Bedard attended University of California–Irvine and immersed himself in theatre. His professors saw depth and passion in his time as a student. Before he took on his role as Mr. Hammer (Groucho) in The Cocoanuts, Bard played a variety of roles at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Mint Theatre Company, Seattle Rep, and Shakespeare & Company.
His roles have varied from Robert in Boeing Boeing to Oberon in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

George S. Kaufman

The Cocoanuts book author, George S. Kaufman was at the center of the drama scene during the 1920s. He nearly always wrote in collaboration with another writer and so it is easy to imagine he would have welcomed the collaborative efforts of Bedard.

Kaufman was born on November 16, 1889 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania into a Jewish family. He started out his drama career as a newspaper reporter and drama critic and eventually became the drama editor at the New York Times. Kaufman stretched his theatrical muscles, and in 1918 he made his Broadway debut with Some One in the House, written in collaboration with Larry Evans and W.C. Percival. During what would become known as the Golden Age of Broadway, Kaufman became known for his satire and quick wit. Playwright Garson Kanin said, “George S. Kaufman ranks without peer as the wit of the American twentieth century. George’s comment, George’s cool-off, George’s swiftness to pick up the answer was breath-taking. . . . He was taciturn. He didn’t say much, but what he did say was stringent, always to the point, cutting, acid, true or true enough. Which was his great trick. His trick of wit and his trick of criticism wasn’t that he found what was true, but he would find what was true enough” (John Hopwood, “Biography George S. Kauman” [The Internet Movie Database, www.IMDb.com, 1990–2016]).

As a regular participant in the famed Algonquin Round Table, Kaufman was valued for his wit and his quick tongue. The Algonquin Round Table was a group of New York literati who met daily at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. Its members included the drama critic and radio personality Alexander Woollcott. Joining him were writers Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley, playwright Robert E. Sherwood, critic Heywould Hale Broun, comedian Harpo Marx, composer Irving Berlin, and many others. Many of these round table members would collaborate with Kaufman at some point.

Of Kaufman’s full-length plays, only The Butter and Egg Man (1925) and the musical Hollywood Pinafore (1945) were written by him without a collaborator. The first solo effort, The Butter and Egg Man was a hit, running for 245 performances. However, Hollywood Pinafore was a flop. His collaborations throughout his career continued to pair him with some of Hollywood and Broadway’s biggest stars including the wildly popular comic performers The Marx Brothers. Although Kaufman was said to hate Hollywood, he traveled there in 1935 at the request of the Marx Brothers. They asked him to pen the book for the stage revue The Cocoanuts which featured lyrics by fellow Algonquin Round Table member Irving Berlin. He followed up that request by writing the play Animal Crackers (1928) for the Marx Brothers, which he wrote in collaboration with Morrie Ryskind.

Kaufman earned the drama world’s most prestigious awards when he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, along with Morrie Ryskind and Ira Gershwin for Of Thee I Sing (1931). He won a second Pulitzer for You Can’t Take It with You (1936), co-written with Moss Hart. Kaufman was also a theatrical director, directing many successful plays, including The Front Page (1928), Of Mice and Men (1939), My Sister Eileen (1940), and Guys and Dolls (1950). He won the 1951 Tony Award for the Best Director for Guys and Dolls.

Kaufman was married twice. His first marriage to Beatrice Bakrow ended in her death in 1945. His second marriage to Leueen MacGrath ended in divorce following a torrid affair with actress Mary Astor. George S. Kaufman died on June 2, 1961.

Jerome Kern said of The Cocoanuts song composer and lyricist, “Irving Berlin has no

Today, Berlin’s influence on American music is hard to fathom. After all, he wrote over 1,500 songs during his century-long life.

**Irving Berlin**

Irving Berlin was born Israel Beilin on May 11, 1888, one of eight children. As a young boy his family immigrated to New York from Tolochin, Bel. At just thirteen years old, Berlin took his burgeoning musical talents to the streets after his father died. He earned money doing work as a busker singing for pennies, then as a singing waiter in a Chinatown cafe. His hard work paid off, and in 1907 he published his first song, “Marie from Sunny Italy,” and by 1911 he had his first major international hit—“Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”

Berlin’s music career took off, and over the next five decades his ballads, dance numbers, novelty tunes, and love songs became a part of American music history. His works include well-known songs like “How Deep Is the Ocean,” “Blue Skies,” “White Christmas,” “Always,” “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better,” “There’s No Business Like Show Business,” “Cheek to Cheek,” “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody,” “Heat Wave,” “Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning,” “Easter Parade,” “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” and the iconic “God Bless America.” It is no mystery that Berlin was inducted into the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame in 1970.

Berlin’s talent was sought out as a composer and lyricist for both Broadway and Hollywood productions. As a member of the celebrated Algonquin Round Table he had access to some of the most forward thinking drama minds of the 1920s, and they had access to his talent. His Broadway scores can be heard in *The Cocoanuts, Annie Get Your Gun,* and *Mr. President.* Among his many awards were a special Tony Award (1963) and the Academy Award for Best Song of the Year for “White Christmas” in 1942.

As an active member in the music community throughout his life he was the co-founder of ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), the founder of his own music publishing company, and, with producer Sam Harris, builder of his own Broadway theatre, the Music Box. Over the years he donated millions of dollars in royalties to Army Emergency Relief, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and other organizations. Irving Berlin turned 100 in 1988 with a worldwide birthday celebration including an all-star tribute at Carnegie Hall benefitting the Hall and ASCAP (www.songwritershalloffame.org).

On September 22, 1989, at the age of 101, Irving Berlin died in his sleep in his townhouse in New York City. His wife of sixty-two years, heiress Ellin Mackay, had died the previous year at the age of 85.
**The Cocoanuts: Characters**

THE COCOANUT TRIO (NATE, TRIXIE, COCO): Members of the hotel staff who are essentially the back-up singers of the story.

ROBERT JAMISON (ZEPPO): The last remaining clerk and bellhop at the Cocoanuts Hotel. He is overworked, high-strung, unconfident, and bottled-up. He is an aspiring architect and is in love with Polly Potter.

POLLY POTTER: Headstrong girl who is torn between her upper class upbringing and following her heart. She loves Robert Jamison.

PENELlope MARTIN: A cunning conwoman of the upper class.

HARVEy YATES: A member of the privileged class but secretly broke. Wants to marry Polly Potter for her money.

MRS. POTTER: Polly’s proper, privileged, and wealthy mother.


CHICO (WILLIE WONY DIDDYDONY): A petty thief with an Italian accent.

HARPO (SILENT RED): A mute, petty thief.

DETECTIVE HENNESSey: A very serious, large, intimidating gentlemen trying to get to the bottom of the scheming and theft.

**The Cocoanuts: Synopsis**

This Marx Brothers romp with music by Irving Berlin takes place in Florida during the 1920s land boom, which was, of course, followed by a bust. Mr. Hammer (Groucho) owns the all-but-bankrupt Cocoanut Hotel, as well the dubious real estate development Cocoanut Manor that he tries to sell off to gullible buyers.

His only clerk and bellhop, Robert Jamison (Zeppo), runs rampant trying to hold the hotel together, all the while planning how to break free and make it big as an architect in order to marry his sweetheart, Polly Potter. They have been hiding their relationship from Polly’s mother, a wealthy member of the upper class who wants nothing less than an eligible match for her daughter.

Harvey Yates, of the “Boston Yates,” sees his opportunity to regain his wealth and pay off his debts by going after Polly. Mrs. Potter readily agrees to match him up with her daughter.

Enter the other Marx Brothers (Chico and Harpo) as thieving, nutty hotel guests. Harvey’s cunning accomplice, Penelope, has a plan to make them both wealthy: steal Mrs. Potter’s very expensive diamond necklace and frame it on someone there at the hotel. With the scheme in place, all chaos and zaniness breaks loose. Meanwhile, Robert and Polly dream of their “little bungalow” together. How will all the plotting and planning turn out? Will the crooks make off with the valuables? Who will get blamed? Will the lovers find happiness? Hold onto your hats for a zany ride!
The Marx Brothers on Broadway
By Lawrence Henley

The Cocoanuts is, essentially, a rollicking farce set amid the Florida sun and a bevvy of palm trees. Constructed around a young romance, a wonky hotel, and a trio of concurrent swindles, to some this show might simply seem an exercise in frivolity. Well, folks, “not so fast!” In actuality, this romp in the tropics is the collaborative work of some of the most significant theatrical talent of the early twentieth century. And, for good measure, the zany plot actually bears significance to modern times.

The Cocoanuts is set during the hysteria of the infamous Florida real-estate boom of the 1920s, prior to the bottom falling out. When the land bubble burst, it was a contributing factor in the stock market crash that triggered the Great Depression of the 1930s. As the rest of the nation’s economy collapsed, so did the economic fortunes of the Sunshine State. Florida wouldn’t fully recover from the bust until after World War II. Not surprisingly, the lessons of this seismic real-property disaster went unheard in the late 1990s and early 2000s, resulting in a similar real estate and housing crisis (the effects of which the American Southwest is still recovering from). Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it, c’est correct?

In the Roaring Twenties, musical theatre in America bore little resemblance to the phenomenon it would become in the late 1930s and 1940s. Immediately prior to that time, Broadway began to morph out of Vaudeville, the touring variety entertainment format that had dominated the theatre business since the late nineteenth century. Hardcore fans of vintage Broadway and classic films will be familiar with the legacy artists largely responsible for that transformation: Irving Berlin, George S. Kaufman, George M. Cohan, and the Gershwin Brothers. Broadway icons in their heyday, the Marx Brothers are often overlooked (doubtless owing to their later career success in Hollywood). Truthfully, their three Broadway hits (I’ll Say She is, The Cocoanuts, and Animal Crackers) were an innovative comedy-musical trifecta that still speaks volumes as to their significance.

The five Marx Brothers were all part of the act at one time or another. In order of age they were Chico (Leo Marx, born 1887); Harpo (Adolph, later changed to Arthur Marx, born 1888); Groucho (Julius Marx, born 1890); Gummo (Milton Marx, born 1893); and Zeppo (Herbert Marx, born 1901). A sixth Marx brother died in infancy (Manfred, or Mannie). All were blood brothers, born into an emigrant family with a performing background dating back to nineteenth-century Europe.

Family was extremely important to the creation of the Marx Brothers. Their parents, Frenchie (Samuel) Marx (a tailor) and Minnie (Meine) Schoenberg, were first generation Americans from Western European Jewish families. The grandparents of the Marx Brothers fled untenable conditions in the Old World, sailing to a new life on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Meine, was the Marx Brothers’ first manager (working under the name “Minnie Palmer”), and the boys’ act was greatly influenced by their uncle, famed vaudevillian Al Schoenberg (stage name, Al Shean). The Marx Brothers evolved from a series of strictly musical acts. Groucho Marx’s habit of injecting his razor sharp humor into their performances would eventually change the family’s dominant milieu from music to comedy.

While all of the Marx Brothers were forced to leave school to support the family, Groucho, the most famous, was the lone brother with scholarly interests. Indeed, his world class wit is clearly evidenced by his dexterous use of wordplay in the Marx Brothers hit films. Equally famed as a radio and television personality, Groucho’s show business career spanned seven decades. His signature greasepaint moustache, duck walk, and cigar chomping antics are still imitated.

Chico, the eldest, was Minnie’s favorite. As such, he got away with much juvenile mischief. Street-smart at a young age, he inherited his father’s love of card games, which developed into a lifelong gambling problem, always Chico’s “Achilles heel.” In an attempt to get him off of the streets,
his mother pushed him toward music, and it worked. Chico’s brilliant piano stylings became as much his trademark as the brain-boggling malaprops and faux tough-guy Italian accent. A benevolent con man with a talent for business, Chico Marx sealed the deal that brought the Marx Brothers to Broadway. Their 1923 debut, I’ll Say She Is!, was a smash hit, paving the way for the The Cocoanuts in 1925.

Perhaps the best loved Marx Brother was the purposely mute Harpo, whose nickname alludes to his self-trained mastery of the angelic-sounding stringed instrument. With his curly red fright wig underneath a slouch hat, Harpo Marx was the master of comic pantomime. Without fail, Harpo let his antics, athleticism, and bicycle horns do the talking. Harpo’s funniest bits were usually tag-teammates with Chico.

Zeppo, the youngest Marx, joined the act when Gummo Marx departed to join the military to fight in World War I. Gummo, who shunned the limelight, later took over as the group’s manager. Generally playing “the straight man,” Zeppo’s forte was the young romantic typecast. His job was to advance the action and set up the zingers for Groucho, Chico and Harpo.

Although a significant portion of their act was based on improvisation, the entertainment world owes the Marx Brothers a great debt as the forefathers of popular sketch comedy. With perpetual action and rapid-fire dialogue, their antics could also be thought of as being reminiscent of commedia dell’arte, in that they created and played their own stock characters with their use of signature makeup, wigs, hats, musical instruments, and crazy accents. The Cocoanuts exemplifies this use of caricature. The Groucho character is forever scheming to get-rich-quick through highly suspect business practices, and continually flirting with rich widows. Chico is the fast-talking con artist, and Harpo the loveable, if slightly-crooked clown. Zeppo is the handsome singer and straight man. While they all enjoyed chasing members of the opposite sex, Groucho above all reveled in romancing the wealthy, obstinate society women played by famed character actress Margaret Dumont.

The talents of two other theatrical geniuses elevated both the 1925 Broadway and the 1929 hit film versions of The Cocoanuts. The show’s score was written by the musical phenomenon, Irving Berlin. Frequently called the greatest popular composer of the twentieth century, Berlin was born Israel Beline (born 1888) in Czarist Russia. A brilliant melodist (who could only play piano in a single key), Irving became the “King of Tin Pan Alley,” producing such classic works as “White Christmas” and “Cheek to Cheek” and the musicals Puttin’ On the Ritz, Annie Get Your Gun, Easter Parade, and Alexander’s Rag Time Band. One of Berlin’s greatest tunes, “Always,” was actually cut from the The Cocoanuts score right before it moved to Broadway!

I’ll Say She Is! had been a tremendous success, but the Marx Brothers wanted to add better production values to their next play. Gifted scriptwriter George S. Kaufman was brought on board to add class and sophistication to the writing of both The Cocoanuts and 1928s Animal Crackers. Perhaps the top American theatrical and film auteur of his era, Kaufman’s other greatest hits, such as You Can’t Take It with You, Stage Door and The Man Who Came to Dinner are still produced with regularity in regional and academic theatres. Kaufman (born 1889) also wrote the Marx Brothers’ classic film, A Night at the Opera (1935).

By 1929, the previously silent motion picture business had added sound. Now, the comic escapades of the Marx Brothers could be marketed to a mass audience. Everyone on Broadway knew that the real showbiz gold would now be mined from the movies, and many fled New York for the Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio lots. The lure of Hollywood beckoned for both George S. Kaufman and Irving Berlin. The Cocoanuts, chosen as their first Marx Brothers motion picture, was filmed in New York, but by the early 1930s the Marx Brothers had moved west, on their way to becoming Tinseltown legends.