

Gimme a **THRILL**

★
THE STORY OF
I'LL SAY SHE IS
THE LOST
MARX BROTHERS
MUSICAL
AND HOW IT WAS FOUND
★

NOAH DIAMOND



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GIMME A THRILL :
THE STORY OF *I'LL SAY SHE IS*,
THE LOST MARX BROTHERS MUSICAL,
AND HOW IT WAS FOUND

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Published in the United States of America by:
BearManor Media
P.O. Box 1129
Duncan, OK 73534-1129
BearManorMedia.com

ISBN: 1-59393-933-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-59393-933-5

Printed in the United States.

Cover:

Photo of the Marx Brothers in *I'll Say She Is*, 1924, author's collection.
Photo of Noah Diamond as Groucho as Napoleon by Don Spiro.

Design and layout by the author.

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GIMME A THRILL



OVERTURE

THIS IS A BOOK about a musical called *I'll Say She Is*.

The first half of the book is a history of the original production, which opened in New York at the Casino Theatre in 1924. Its stars were the Four Marx Brothers, Julius, Arthur, Leonard, and Herbert, making their Broadway debut after a twenty-year vaudevillian odyssey. *I'll Say She Is* was a phenomenal smash (“A masterpiece of knock ‘em down and drag ‘em out humor”—George Jean Nathan, *American Mercury*). The Marx Brothers drew raves from Algonquin Round Table tastemakers like Alexander Woollcott and Robert Benchley, and became the preeminent jesters of the Jazz Age and the darlings of the New York smart set.

I'll Say She Is was their first great work, the long-delayed bloom of the rose they'd been tending all those years in vaudeville. Joe Adamson, in his immortal book about them, calls *I'll Say She Is* “the beginning of the Marx Brothers Proper.” It influenced all of the Marx Brothers comedies which followed, especially their next two Broadway musicals, *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers*. Those became the first two Marx Brothers movies, and are now beloved classics, often revived on stage. But *I'll Say She Is* slipped through history's fingers. For most of a century it was a legend, known only by anecdote, and only by the world's most passionate Marx Brothers fans.

The second half of this book is about one of those fans, touched by the Marxes in childhood, and never quite the same thereafter. You know the kind—in high school, he told you that your eyes shined like the pants of a blue serge suit. My fascination with the Marx Brothers (especially their Broadway period, and especially *I'll Say She Is*) eventually led me to spend years researching, reconstructing, and adapting the lost Marx Brothers musical. In the summer of 2014, it had its world re-premiere in the New

York International Fringe Festival, ninety years after its original Broadway opening.

So the first half of this book is about the first production of *I'll Say She Is*, and the second half of this book is about the second production of *I'll Say She Is*, and I figure now is a good time to tell the story, quickly, before there's another production of *I'll Say She Is*.



Act One

I. BROTHERS



*The Marx family, circa 1914:
Harpo, Chico, Frenchie, Zeppo, Minnie, Gummo, and Groucho*

ONCE UPON A TIME, a hundred years ago, there were five brothers named Leonard, Arthur, Julius, Milton, and Herbert. They grew up in New York City, the sons of Jewish immigrants. Their father was Sam Marx, a dapper Alsatian, known to all who loved him as Frenchie. Their mother was Minnie Schoenberg, from the German village of Dornum. Minnie's parents, Lafe and Fanny Schoenberg, had been itinerant performers in the old country. Lafe lived long enough to become a towering figure in the boys' childhoods, but Fanny had left behind only a token of her existence. Her harp, played in German music halls in another age, sat in a state of unplayable disrepair in Lafe's bedroom. Although none of the Marx children ever played it, it was a powerful symbol.

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Minnie's brother, Al Shean, had the showbiz bug, and he became a famous vaudeville comedian in America. Uncle Al's success was an inspiration in a way that Frenchie's humble career, as "the most incompetent tailor Yorkville ever produced," was not. One by one, in their teens, Minnie's boys entered vaudeville. Julius was the first to set foot on stage, after answering an ad in the *Morning World* seeking boy singers. In 1905 and 1906, he appeared in an assortment of trios, doubles, ensembles, and touring theatrical productions, which are remembered only through his own later reminiscences. In 1907, brother Milton joined Julius and a girl singer in an act known as Wayburn's Nightingales, managed by vaudeville teacher and impresario Ned Wayburn. That lasted about six months, until Minnie herself assumed control of the act. Initially billed as the Three Nightingales, they became Four when young Arthur (born Adolph) joined the act, at Minnie's insistence. For years they trudged through the trials and indignities of small-time vaudeville, getting tougher and tighter, and gradually evolving from a musical act with comedy to a comedy act with music. In 1912, Leonard joined them, and they became the Four Marx Brothers. Two years later, at a backstage poker game in Galesburg, Illinois, a comedian named Art Fisher gave them funny nicknames. These nicknames caught on instantly in private, but did not go fully public for another ten years. They were inspired by the comic strip characters of Gus Mager—a family of monkeys with names like Knocko, Yanko, Rhymo, and Groucho.

Leonard was the oldest surviving Marx brother. (Sam and Minnie's first child, Manfred, had died before his first birthday—of old age, Julius said later.) Leo was fast and fearless, Minnie's favorite, a joyously irresponsible gambler and reckless optimist. He entered showbiz by way of the piano keys, taking advantage of the lessons Minnie had dotingly purchased for him, and of his own prodigious mind for numbers and timing. Leonard joined the family act in a typically brash and impulsive manner. Arthur, Julius, and Milton were playing Waukegan. Leonard ambled into town, went to the theatre, and arranged to sit in for the piano player. In the middle of the

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act, he jumped up on stage, and he stayed there with his brothers for half a century. He had previously worked with their cousin, Lou Shean, doing a stock Italian dialect character. This was another choice he made and stuck to for half a century, along with voracious womanizing, which is why Art Fisher called him *Chicko*.¹

Arthur idolized his big brother. He had Leo's cockeyed charm, but not his drive and sense of purpose. Leo had a sense of purpose even when he had no sense and no purpose. Arthur was up in the clouds. He was forced onto the stage by Minnie, and encouraged to sing as quietly as possible. His initial comedy role was another ethnic caricature, the Irish bumpkin—thus the red wig. By approximately 1914, he had abandoned onstage speech altogether. But the silent Marx Brother was never really silent; he was just non-speaking. He was perhaps the *noisiest* member of the team, his repertoire of sounds including whistles, stomps, honks, clangs, and the ethereal soundscapes woven at his harp. The harp was a gift from Minnie, no doubt thinking of her mother's instrument and of Arthur's fascination with it. He painstakingly taught himself to play, in his own idiosyncratic style, which earned him the nickname Harpo.

The third brother was often mistakenly thought to be the oldest, because he was the most serious, and the most articulate. Unlike his older brothers, he wasn't looking for a good time. Or his idea of a good time was a quiet room and a dense book, or civilized conversation with carefully-selected friends, rather than parties and games. He was sober and introverted, yet he was the first of the boys to enter show business, and in the early days, the one most determined to find success as a performer. Al Shean was his inspiration, and his first comedic specialty was a Dutch character in blatant imitation of Uncle Al. Julius was dour and cynical enough to be called Groucho.

Milton, nicknamed Gummo for the softness of his shoes, was in the act until 1918, when he joined the army. He survived the Great War, serving

¹ Although the *k* was later dropped, it's still pronounced *Chicko*.

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Vaudevillians of 1916: Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and Gummo

bravely in Illinois, and when it was over he had no interest in returning to the stage. His role was filled by the baby of the family, Herbert, who had a burgeoning career as a juvenile delinquent until Minnie drafted him. Herbert was nicknamed Zeppo for several reasons, none of them true.

The early Nightingales act was mostly singing, with comedy provided mainly by Julius, playing a German butcher boy character named Hans Pumpernickel. By 1911, they had a full-fledged comedy act, *Fun in Hi Skule*. It was a school act, with Julius as the elderly Dutch teacher, and Arthur and Milton as unruly students. School acts were in vogue, due to the success of Gus Edwards' *School Boys and Girls*. The Edwards school act had premiered in 1908 and taken the country by storm, as had its hit song ("School days, school days / Dear old golden rule days"). The Marx Brothers' *Fun in Hi Skule* was liberally borrowed from the Edwards turn, and refreshingly advertised

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as “The Somewhat Original School Act.” After Leonard joined the act, it evolved into *Mr. Green’s Reception*, a more elaborate production built around the same schoolroom characters. This, in turn, was replaced by *Home Again*.

Home Again was their biggest hit in vaudeville, serving them for nearly a decade. It was written and staged by Al Shean, cementing his role as a primary shaper of early Marx Brothers comedy. Uncle Al didn’t create the Marx Brothers, but they created themselves in his image, and without his example it’s unlikely they would have happened as they did. However impressive Al had seemed to the boys in childhood, his greatest fame was still ahead of him, even when he worked on *Home Again* in 1914. At this point, he had worked with Ed Gallagher once, but it would be six years before their paths crossed again, with dazzling success, as Gallagher and Shean.

The Four Marx Brothers who gradually conquered vaudeville were not a simple comedy act “in one” (in front of the curtain). They were not embryonic standup comedians, like Fred Allen, Will Rogers, or Jack Benny. What the Marxes did was theatre. Their act was a production, a self-contained mini-musical known in vaudeville as a *tabloid* or tab. A typical tab was about forty minutes long, and encompassed comedy scenes, singing and dancing turns, and musical specialties, strung together by a thin storyline, with a carload of scenery and a cast of fifteen or twenty. Tabloids were the perfect format for the Brothers, comedians who did a little bit of everything: singing, instrumental solos, impressions, a little dancing. But they always had a context, a scene to play, and they got laughs by playing it in surprising ways, and eventually violating its whole intention.

By 1918, they were among the biggest comedy stars in vaudeville, and the act entered a period of restless introspection. The boys were now grown men, mostly on the road since childhood, and even Harpo was beginning to find it “grueling and tiresome.” Everybody was exhausted and impatient with showbiz. The dream was Broadway, where if you were a hit, you could get rich without leaving New York. Chico, the ever-hopeful gambler, was sure that the Marx Brothers could be a hit on the Big Street, the Main Stem, the

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hardened artery. Groucho was sure they couldn't. Harpo agreed with both of them, and nobody asked Zeppo.

While the Brothers were trying to get out of one line and into another, the public and the press were having an increasingly hard time telling the difference. *Variety* concluded that “the ‘revue’ in vaudeville now amounts to what vaudeville does in musical comedy. If Broadway can sell vaudeville under the guise of musical comedy up to \$3.50, there is no reason why vaudeville cannot sell musical comedy at one dollar, more or less.” The Marx Brothers couldn't manage to cross the blurry line.

Theoretically, their tabloid style would transfer easily to the legitimate stage. As early as 1916, the *New York Clipper* was reporting that “an effort is being made to induce the Four Marx Brothers to desert vaudeville in favor of musical comedy. The idea is to build up their present act, which runs forty minutes, into a full time show.” *Billboard* noted, three years later, that “in their frantic search for new material for musical comedy the producers seem to be overlooking the Four Marx Brothers...The comedy ideas and versatility of these boys could be well used in a revue.” Yet whenever they tried to graduate from vaudeville, they flopped. In 1918, they attempted to “begin a career” and “forsake the varieties for a venture in musical comedy.” The result, *The Street Cinderella* (sometimes called *The Cinderella Girl*), was significant for being the official stage debut of Zeppo Marx as part of the team. But they opened in Grand Rapids, Michigan in the midst of an influenza epidemic, and patrons were only permitted to occupy every other seat in every other row. The show limped onward to another booking or two, but to little effect, and the Brothers' hopes for legitimate theatrical success died of the flu.

At the end of 1919, they actually signed a contract with an esteemed New York producer, Charles Dillingham. He announced his intention to star them on the Main Stem in the 1920-1921 season, but nothing came of that. He made noises about getting Aaron Hoffman, an old Weber and Fields scribe, to write for them, but nothing came of that either. Dillingham finally offered the Marxes the third road company of an old Montgomery

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and Stone vehicle, which they turned down.

In 1919 and 1920, the Brothers worked a new tabloid entitled *N'Everything*, but it was really *Home Again* again. Still, their performances kept getting better, and their improvisations more daring. *N'Everything* was hailed as “a thousand per cent beyond what they ever did before” in a June 1920 Chicago item, which also noted that the team “panicked the house not once but forty times, and stole a clean, bombarding hit, and got very near and dear to the customers.” In August, “more people were talking about Marx Brothers than about any other act on the bill...It is an entertainment that has pretty nearly everything, yet everything is worthwhile and some things are streaked with genius.” In Newark on October 2, *Billboard* reported that the Marxes “were forced to respond to so many encores at last night’s performance that the act, which ordinarily runs about forty-five minutes, ran over an hour.”

Yet their consistent ability to score with audiences, and the resultant fawning of much of the vaudeville press, inevitably stirred the resentment of those few who *didn't* like the Marx Brothers. As would ever be the case, there were always some who looked down their noses at these brash boys and their unrefined “roughhouse” antics, and considered the whole enterprise tasteless and juvenile. The *New York Clipper's* vaudeville pages were especially harsh during the second half of 1920:

The Four Marx Brothers, with an act that lacks class and has a lot of rough business such as slapping a girl in the back, washing the face and hands in a bowl of punch and tickling a girl under her arm-pit, dragged along without exciting any great amount of interest. (August 18)

The harp is well played by one of the boys, but the act is just as sloppy and suggestive in places as it was when last reviewed at the Palace and makes one

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wonder how they get away with it. (September 29)

The Four Marx Brothers slopped up the stage with water and wine and still have several pieces of business that are very coarse and vulgar. (October 20)

[The Marx Brothers] were a noisy stampede from the word “go.” (November 3)

There is little class to the entire offering, practically everything being sacrificed for the sake of getting laughs, many of which could, with good taste, be eliminated. (December 8)

By most accounts, this was a frustrating period for the Marxes personally. The endless vaudeville grind would have been especially onerous for two of the Brothers, who were trying, in their ways, to be family men. Chico had married Betty Karp, a chorus girl from the act, in 1917, and quickly produced a daughter, Maxine. Meanwhile, Zeppo, the handsome teenager, fell for Ruth Johnson, another handsome teenager, who was his dance partner in the act. Then older brother Groucho swooped in, swept her off his feet, and married her. Their son, Arthur, was born in July of 1921. These joyous developments meant that the act *had* to keep going, and the team had to work harder than ever, because they had more mouths to feed.

THE MARX BROTHERS began the 1920s with a crucial creative transformation. Up to this point, Uncle Al Shean had been their major influence, but his effect was waning. German dialect humor had lost its appeal during the war, causing Groucho to drop his Dutch affect in favor of an elderly Yiddish persona. Regardless, the character had become confining. Mr. Green, or Schneider, had served Julius Henry Marx nobly, but his day had passed, and from his ashes an immortal spirit would rise—a more brash and modern figure, for the more brash and modern world around him.

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Harpo and Chico, meanwhile, had the fundamentals of their characters in place, but they'd been playing boys too long. It was time to grow up and play men who *behaved* like boys. It was a time of expansion and experimentation. To shepherd this process, the Marxes found an important new collaborator, whose contributions have largely been ignored.

Herman Timberg was a librettist, songwriter, producer, director, and star, prominent in vaudeville and on Broadway for decades. Today he would be remembered as one of the great old masters if only we had more of him on film. Born in New York in 1892, he was slightly younger than the three major Marx Brothers, but in the early days he always seemed to be one step ahead of them. While still a teenager, Timberg achieved celebrity as the star of Gus Edwards' *School Boys and Girls*. It was Timberg who introduced the song "School Days," in 1908. This was the act the Marxes shamelessly plundered in 1911, when they conceived *Fun in Hi Skule*. One review of the Marxes' version declared it "the best 'school act' seen since the Edwards turn had Herman Timberg in it."²

Timberg was successful enough to support his family before he was eighteen. His father, an immigrant violinist who'd been paying the rent as a barber, retired his shears and tended house, while Herman provided academic and musical education for two younger siblings, Sammy and Hattie. The Timbergs would work together, like the Marxes. Herman and Hattie had an act in which they played violins while dancing, and both Sammy and Hattie would appear in Herman Timberg tabs. Sammy began to contribute music to the act, and eventually wrote now-classic themes for Fleischer cartoons, including *Popeye*, *Betty Boop*, and *Superman*. Herman Timberg interrupted his career as a vaudevillian *auteur* to appear on Broadway in Shubert revues like *The Passing Show of 1916*, and eventually created his own revues. He was famous for "the Timberg crawl-off," in which he exited the stage on all fours.

² Some accounts of the Marx Brothers' early career have connected the wrong dots and assumed that Groucho appeared in the Gus Edwards school act. Not quite; in the spring of 1906, he appeared as one of Gus Edwards' Postal Telegraph Boys, a different act entirely. Sounds adorable, though.

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Among his signature hits were a “big-little musical comedy...described as a Chinese-American fantasy” called *Chicken Chow Mein* (in mockery of the popular *Chu Chin Chow*), and a 1920 Broadway revue known as *Tick-Tack-Toe*. *Theatre Magazine* suggested that a more apt title would be *Herman Timberg in Three Acts*.

Despite this, Timberg was known for his generosity to other performers. Even when he was the centerpiece of the act, he made sure his fellow troupers had interesting and rewarding material to play. Over the years, he increasingly worked as a writer, producer, and director for other comedians, including Fanny Brice, George Jessel, Clark and McCullough, Benny Rubin, the *Our Gang* kids, and the Three Stooges. The Stooges’ Larry Fine, according to his brother Morris Feinberg, “idolized Herman Timberg,” and later hoped in vain that a Timberg-penned feature film would establish the Stooges as “successors to the Marx Brothers.”

In 1921, Herman accepted the challenge of writing and producing a new act for Julius, Arthur, Leonard, and Herbert. The act he created was initially titled *On the Mezzanine Floor*, later shortened to *On the Mezzanine*, and eventually renamed *On the Balcony*. (Its elaborate second scene featured a mezzanine—or, if you prefer, balcony—built into the scenery.) Like many Timberg creations, it was a story about show business. He loved to write about managers, critics, actors, and showgirls. The first scene took place in a theatrical manager’s office, and featured Zeppo as a playwright pitching a new play. The second scene was that play. This novel structure allowed for standalone revue material, including long-established specialties like Harpo’s harp solo, Chico’s piano solo, and Groucho’s comic vocals. But all of this would take place in Timberg’s Broadway milieu, and the Marx Brothers would “do away with their former characters,” as *Variety* put it.

Most significantly, *On the Mezzanine* brought an important revision to Groucho’s stage presence. For the first time, Julius would not be playing an immigrant; he would be what he was, a first-generation American Jewish New Yorker with a big mouth. The jokes Timberg wrote for him replaced

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Uncle Al's singsong Dutch, or its variant, with modern New York jazz patter that fit Julius's distinctive speaking voice like a tailored velvet suit. This new character was called Mr. Hammer. (The name that had already been in use by Groucho in *N'Everything*, the hastily-conceived update of *Home Again* which the Brothers performed in 1919 and 1920.) We would recognize this Mr. Hammer as an old friend, if we saw him, and not only because the name would surface again in the film version of *The Cocoanuts*. The Mr. Hammer of *On the Mezzanine* is the first in a long series of illustrious aliases for the same character, a list which would grow over the years to include Captain Jeffrey T. Spalding, Rufus T. Firefly, and Dr. Hugo Z. Hackenbush.

This new character had a new look. Timberg wrote a line in *On the Mezzanine* in which Mr. Hammer says, when asked to describe himself: "Did you ever see Lincoln without a beard? Well, I look like Washington with a moustache." This is the dawn of the Groucho moustache! And the matching eyebrows, mentioned less often but no less vital to the impact of that face. Adam Gopnik observed that Groucho's makeup "allowed him to communicate ironically with a big theatre audience." The earliest known photographs of a mustachioed Groucho were taken late in 1921, in connection with *On the Mezzanine*; it appears as a smear of greasepaint not unlike the one that would become his signature for thirty years.³ These photographs—two posed publicity shots taken on December 16, and one candid backstage photo from a couple of months earlier—show that Groucho retained the old schoolteacher's wire-rim glasses and frock coat, but abandoned the bald cap in favor of his own dark, frizzy hair. In one photo, he's wearing a bowler hat, also a Timberg trademark. In another, he's sprawled on the floor in a mock-provocative pose, eyeballs rolling, while his brothers cavort above him. In these pictures, Harpo's coat and hat look a little too crisp, and Chico doesn't

³ Groucho often explained that he had begun with a stage moustache made of crepe or fur, but was late for an entrance one night—in some versions of the tale, due to the birth of his son, Arthur—and smeared on the greasepaint in haste. This seems entirely plausible, especially for a Groucho anecdote, but I've never seen a photograph to support the existence of the pre-greasepaint moustache.

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have exactly the familiar clothes yet, but it's unmistakable: posterity's first glimpse of the Marx Brothers as we know them.



Icons emerging, December 1921: Zeppo, Groucho, Harpo, and Chico

There have been debates about who “created” the Groucho Marx character, most of which have rightfully concluded that Groucho Marx deserves most of the credit. *Groucho*, as he appears in the films of the Marx Brothers and in our wildest imaginations, is probably best explained as the personification of Julius Henry Marx’s sense of humor. But there were important secondary father figures, starting with Al Shean, and later, Will B. Johnstone and George S. Kaufman. Herman Timberg belongs on this list, right after Uncle Al. He didn’t wholly invent the modern Groucho character, and it’s possible that the first-generation speech as well as the moustache originated during *N’Everything* or even *Home Again*, as part of a more gradual evolution. But what evidence we have suggests otherwise. Timberg probably found it easy to write for Groucho, because it was the kind of fast-talking wiseguy role

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he often wrote for himself. Surviving recordings of Timberg's voice reveal a throaty, velvety sound not unlike Groucho's (and even less unlike Eddie Cantor's), while surviving caricatures and publicity portraits of Timberg show him with glasses, leering eyebrows, cigar, tailcoat, and bent posture.

The best-known material Timberg wrote for the Marx Brothers was the opening scene of *On the Mezzanine*, generally known as "the Theatrical Agency sketch." It outlived *Mezzanine*, remaining a fixture of the Brothers' later vaudeville repertoire, then finding its way into *I'll Say She Is* in 1923, and even onto film in 1931. Marx fans know it well, and it must be considered canonical; it is classic Marx Brothers, but it is also *very* Herman Timberg.⁴ A gruff theatrical manager presides over a Times Square booking office, into which the Marx Brothers barge, one at a time, each offering an imitation of the same popular star. The sketch is full of recognizable Marx Brothers comedy, but most of the dialogue is written in rhymed verse. The following review, which appeared in the *New York Clipper* in March of 1921, reveals a lot about Timberg's writing, as well as the Marxes' improvisational approach:

Al Shean was supposed to have written the old vehicle of the Four Marx Brothers. Before they had used it one season, outside of the setting, and about three lines, the act was purely and simply the Four Marx Brothers, and their own ad lib material placed permanently into the act.

Herman Timberg evidently wrote the new one, *On the Mezzanine Floor*. The program states "Herman Timberg Presents." However, there seems to be one infallible method of discovering a Timberg written act. That's by syncopated talk. Timberg had jazz patter in his own act some years ago. Then he wrote *Chicken Chow Mein*, and jazzed the talk. He did it in his production. He did it with

⁴ A later Timberg extravaganza, *Laugh Factory*, played the Keith-Albee circuit in 1927. It included not only a "scene in a New York theatrical manager's office," but "Herman Timberg in a comedy skit entitled 'Monkey Business!'"

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George Mayo's act. And he's done it with the Four Marx Brothers.

But what we're driving at is this. At present, *On the Mezzanine Floor* is mainly the act written by Timberg. What it'll be a few months from now is difficult to say. For even on the third day of this act's first appearance in the city, only a few weeks old, when the writer reviewed it, he recognized lines that never could be written by Timberg and must come from the Marx clan . . .

Most of the bits formerly done by the Marx Brothers are retained for the new act. The piano "Silver Threads" bit, done by "Wop" Marx for the past ten years, is still in, and seems to be as good for laughs as it was years ago. "Red" Arthur sprang a big surprise when reviewed, by actually playing his harp with hardly any clowning. Incidentally these two are now also playing the clarinet and harmonica. "Pop" Marx announces that he will imitate George M. Cohan and then sings "Roly Boly Eyes" with the "wha wha" business as done last season.

Despite the reviewer's certainty that Timberg's script would be abandoned—and despite the certainty that the Marxes *did* ad lib and rewrite—they were still performing the agency scene as a recognizable Herman Timberg creation in Hollywood in 1931. It was partly through Timberg's style, his milieu, and his "syncopated jazz talk" that the Marx Brothers assumed the breathtaking modernity that would make them the Broadway rage of the 1920s. (And perhaps it was through Art Fisher's nicknames, still yet to go fully public, that the boys avoided being permanently identified as Pop, Wop, and Red.) Chico would still be playing "Silver Threads Among the Gold" in the film version of *Animal Crackers* in 1930, and the earnestness of Harpo's solos would prove an even more lasting development.

On the Mezzanine was financed in part by prizefighter Benny Leonard, who joined the cast for a while, performing a comedy boxing scene with the Marxes and romancing the show's ingénue. The ingénue was Timberg's sister, now billed as Hattie Darling. She drew positive notices, singing, dancing,

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and performing the kind of violin specialty she'd been doing with her brother for years. She also served the act in a managerial capacity, as she would recall in conversation with Charlotte Chandler in the 1970s:

Benny Leonard was in love with me, and he wanted me to marry him. My brother, Herman Timberg, was a great writer, and he wrote *On the Mezzanine*, and Benny Leonard put up the money for the show. I managed the act and collected the salary at the box office, which Chico couldn't stand. The four Marx Brothers were only getting a thousand dollars a week, and Chico was quite a gambler. He loved to gamble and was always losing, so he had to come to me for advances, and this would irk him so much. Groucho loved it because he didn't want Chico to gamble.

The act was a success. "It is the effrontery of these gifted boys that makes them so funny," said the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, "especially when they try their awkward manners on the society dames of the play." *Billboard's* Chicago critic described the team as "an entire musical comedy show by themselves," and the *San Francisco Chronicle* found it "rough stuff, but hilariously funny," adding, "It's like a nightmare, so full of changes and surprises." There were still huffy objectors, now led by *Billboard's* New York office, which had something snide and degrading to say almost every time the Brothers returned to the Palace. "Such stuff is hardly worthy of mention" was all *Billboard* could muster in March of 1921, saving the real knife-twisting for a return booking in the summer:

The Four Marx Brothers top the bill at the Palace this week, which in itself is quite a compliment to the Marx Brothers, when one takes into consideration the quality of their entertainment. To find the Marx Quartet headlining leads one to believe that there must indeed be a tremendous shortage of really good acts. On the other hand, however, the showering of such honors upon the

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four Marx Brothers may also be taken as evidence of a noteworthy inability on the part of the Palace management to judge an act of headline caliber.

Variety, in a kinder, more thoughtful, but similarly disapproving review of the same Palace engagement, detected the boys' restlessness:

Since last seen here the act appears to have been roughened up considerably by the introduction of low comedy business, not in the original script as written by Herman Timberg. One bit had "Harpo" manipulating a rubber glove after the fashion of a person milking a cow. Pretty crude for any place. In another part Julius had a bit of dialog about something creeping over him—addressing his conversation to one of the women in the act—and following it up with another remark about "scratching it out." The Marx Brothers are an exceptional quartet, all talented, Harpo and Julius particularly, but they seem to need direction.

But on balance, the critical response suggests that Timberg had helped the Brothers get closer to their goal. The *New York Sun* noticed that *Mezzanine* was "more pretentiously in the nature of a revue than anything they have done heretofore." An earlier *Variety* account perceived "an outstanding smack of smartness...which, coupled with the Marx Brothers' low comedy clowning, constitutes a combination that's infallible." The notice closed with the promising observation that "the turn also has real values in a production way" and "it should lift the Marx family right onto Broadway."

But it didn't, and vaudeville felt like business as usual, with the Marxes still cranky and hungry for new vistas. They made a silent movie, the legendary, lost *Humor Risk*. It was shown once, never released, and apparently destroyed. (And yes, we sure would like to see it.) If film was not the answer, perhaps they could become International Artistes, like others who had conquered American vaudeville. They bought *On the Mezzanine* from Timberg and Leonard, for a price of \$10,000, and headed across the pond to make their

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European debut. The Four Marx Brothers, their two wives and two children, the cast of *On the Mezzanine*, and Minnie sailed from New York on the *Mauretania* on June 6, 1922. On June 10, they appeared on a special shipboard vaudeville bill, “in aid of seamen’s charities,” along with George Arliss, Clark and McCullough, Groucho’s wife Ruth, and any other show people who happened to be aboard. This did not, however, include Hatty Darling. The ingénue role was filled by Helen Schroeder, soon to become famous as Helen Kane, one of the primary inspirations for Betty Boop.

The Anglicized tab, now called *On the Balcony*, opened on June 19 at the London Coliseum and scored at the matinee. The London *Daily Telegraph* celebrated “the maddest thing the variety stage has seen for a long time, conspicuous for its splendid inconsequence and clever back chat,” while *The Stage* found the Brothers “immensely funny.” On the strength of the audience’s response, the act was moved from fifth on the bill to the star closing position, formerly occupied by a Russian dance troupe (“Lydia Lopokova, Leonide Massine, Lydia Sokolova, and Leon Wojcikowski in a ‘Divertissement’”). But the evening show did not go well. Much of the audience was rude or indifferent to the Brothers’ efforts, provoking Groucho’s hostility and an unscripted aside: “They know *some* language, but what the hell is it?” Was his New York accent indecipherable to these British ears? He tried over-enunciating, in what might have sounded like mockery of the British, and this brought an aggressive hail of heavy British pennies upon the stage. Groucho marched to the footlights and pleaded, “Friends, it’s been an expensive trip over. Would you mind throwing a little silver?” This earned the one genuine laugh of the evening, and was quoted everywhere the next day. “Following the conclusion,” reported *Variety*’s British correspondent, “Julius Marx appeared before the curtain and apologized for what he termed ‘the poor performance,’ blaming it on ‘the rowdiness of the gallery.’ The apology was received with silence. Hearty applause greeted a frequently repeated line in the script by one of the characters: ‘This is getting on my nerves.’”

The manager of the Coliseum later confronted the Marxes and was all

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apologies, explaining that the Russian dance troupe was furious at being asked to switch spots on the bill, and had arranged for a large contingent of angry fans to sit in the balcony and give the Marx Brothers a hard time. Groucho dispatched a terse letter to *Variety*, explaining that “ardent admirers of the Russian dancers, sometimes known as a claque, took exception to the switching of their favorites, and were responsible for the pennies that were thrown...Why your correspondent here gave such prominence to the penny throwing incident and none to the reasons thereof, I do not understand... The statements he sent in were injurious to our professional reputation.”

But the tale of the vengeful Russian dancers, even if we assume it to be true, was likely a convenient cover for the fact that the Marx Brothers did not quite catch on with British audiences during this visit. The *London Times* approved only grudgingly, allowing that the boys seemed to enjoy their own performances so much that eventually the audience had to give in. On the fourth day of the booking, they abandoned *On the Balcony* and reverted to the old crowd pleaser, *Home Again*. Surely they would not have done this if they were really going over well. They moved to the London Alhambra, then Bristol, then Manchester. Although they completed their British experiment without further embarrassment, it didn't feel like much of a success. Perhaps they weren't International Artistes after all. Even when they did well, it was with their dusty old act from 1914. Every time they tried to do something new, they wound up having to do something old.

An even bigger disappointment awaited them upon their return to the States. E.F. Albee, president of the Keith circuit and fearsome kingpin of big-time vaudeville, was furious with the Marxes for accepting a foreign engagement without his permission. Apparently there was something written on a piece of paper somewhere. Albee was a seething, tyrannical authority figure who was just *born* to run afoul of the Marx Brothers; he was known for his iron grip on the major vaudeville circuits, and for his puritanical decrees. He banned Prohibition jokes, mother-in-law jokes, “jocular references to the picture players of Hollywood and Hollywood itself,” and “all racial funny

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talk, grotesque make-up and offensive references.” The Marxes’ intention to tour Britain had been reported by the trades well in advance, and Albee surely could have warned them not to embark upon it, or risk their future in American vaudeville. But he waited for them to return, and then slapped them with his favorite punishment. And so, having resigned themselves to big-time vaudeville, the Brothers now suddenly found themselves blacklisted from big-time vaudeville.