



Sunday, 14 July 2019

Reviewing the Revue

A cast of 75! A budget of \$250,000! Singing! Dancing! Talking!

That's the hype that accompanied MGM's "The Hollywood Revue of 1929."

And among the "more stars than there are in heaven" caught in this was Jack Benny.

It was 1928 and sound was beginning its eventual strangling of silent films. Sound meant studios were looking for stars who could talk (and sing and dance). Where else to find them but the vaudeville stage?

That's where Jack Benny could be found. He was signed to a deal by Warners and made a short called "Bright Moments." Then came 1929 and Metro wanted a huge blockbuster where it could toss in all its big players. Thus Jack Benny was hired in April and acted as co-master of ceremonies in a filmed musical extravaganza called "Hollywood Revue of 1929."

It opened at Grauman's Chinese on June 20, 1929. Civic groups in Hollywood were so confident "the fame of the film capital will be broadcast to the four corners of the earth" because of the movie, store owners along Hollywood Boulevard were asked by the local business group to decorate their buildings and the city was asked to allow them to put up lit stars on lamp posts along the street (*Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1929).

Women's Wear Daily (yes, it had an entertainment section) of July 29, 1929 proclaimed: "The Hollywood Revue" is the most spectacular sound picture that has yet been produced. In Los Angeles, where it is now being shown at Grauman's, it has been running for many weeks to packed houses and is accounted the biggest success of any of the 'talkies' yet presented."

The New York *Times* of August 11, 1929 bleated information from Metro's press releases: "more than 1,500 persons took part in the designing, recording and photographing ... more than 3,000,000 feet of film were used to secure the final eleven reels ... More than ninety songs were written by the twenty-three song writers at the studio, of which the twenty best were selected ... chorus of 125 girls ... 1,500 applicants ... ten microphones frequently were at use at the same time ... Laurel and Hardy blew out a number of light valves in the sound apparatus ... Buster Keaton introduces a new dance he calls a Sausage Dance." When the movie opened on August 14th in New York, *Exhibitors Herald World* screeched: "Beautiful show girls in costume sing and dance atop the worlds greatest theatre electric sign at the Astor, N. Y. Broadway has never seen so amazing a spectacle. Police hold back thousands along the Great White Way as crowds watch Hollywood Revue promotion stunt."

Anyway, that gives you enough of a sense of hype.

But what of Jack Benny?

Benny was a co-emcee in the movie with Conrad Nagel (who sang). Nagel represented the Hollywood film community, Benny the Broadway show folk. Jack talked about his first major experience in the movies with the *Los Angeles Times* in an interview published on July 7, 1929. His quotes come across as a lot stiffer than



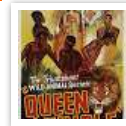
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Movies with Michael



Cowboy Church #19 - Hello my friends and welcome to another addition of Cowboy Church. We start

anything I've read elsewhere; one wonders if they are actually the writer's paraphrases. It's interesting that despite being featured in one of the biggest talkies to that time, movies were not where Jack made his fame.

The last quote is very revealing and turned out to be quite true. Jack never abandoned live appearances, whether in vaudeville, his radio audience, his television show (filmed in front of a live audience off-and-on) and his concert stage appearances, not to mention benefits and roasts. He continued to work in front of living, breathing people until cancer stopped him.

LAUGH BUSINESS SERIOUS

Jack Benny, Gentleman of Comics, Explains How Brands of Merriment Differ

BY PHILIP K. SCHEUER

Nice Nellie would refer to him as John Benjamin, but he is and always will be Jack Benny to most of us. He is in, as those who know their vaudeville win testify, the business of laughs—and a mighty serious one it is. A gentleman to his fingertips, Jack Benny must remain ever a stranger to the bawdy, the vulgar, the slapstick; he and a custard pie must never meet.

But what, interrupts the dissenter fresh from an evening at "The Hollywood Revue" in Grauman's Chinese Theater, where Jack Benny officiates as a shadow master of ceremonies—what about the so-delectable birthday cake which descends with such unerring aim on the impeccable brow of this same Mr. Benny? A custard pie by any other name is still as squidgy!

The answer is significant. Pie or cake, the basis of the situation, or "gag," lies not in the generous and indiscriminate spread of dough and icing over the dignified features of Mr. Benny, but in the fact that the gentleman rises superior to the calamity and, with no loss of aplomb or change of expression, proceeds to announce the next act on the program! In the industry, they would call it "topping a gag," the discerning person will recognize it as the mark of the true comic artist.



"The moviegoer," Mr. Benny comments, "is still an unguessable quantity. We who have learned to gauge our abilities to amuse by the known quantity of response in an audience are finding it difficult to a standard for laughter in the talkies. I have noted the reactions a professional gathering, at the premiere of 'The Hollywood Revue,' and of the typical crowd of merry-makers that attends a midnight show. They are not alike, but still they bear more resemblance to one another than they do to what is known as an 'average audience.'"

"Yet it is this average audience which we must play. My best lines, I am frank to admit, are lost in the revue. This is not our fault the audience's; it is just a lesson by which we must profit. The first-nighters caught more of the wisecracks because they were trained experience to listen quickly for them—and not, as you may suppose, because they were necessarily more critical

or harder to please. "Let us go into it further: The average spectator, I am told, breaks into hearty laughter when William Haines expresses his delight at meeting me by ripping off my collar. Instead of diminishing, the laughter increases as Haines tears the buttons from my coat one by one. This is a reaction natural in the man educated to the pantomime the films; but by giving way to he completely misses the accompanying dialogue, which is the basis the humor we intend to convey. To wit:

"Haines, as he attacks each button, prefaces the act with the remark, 'I saw you in Detroit,' 'I saw you in Chicago,' and so on—with button for each city. He leaves me, you will remember, one button; and this, after a suitable pause, I jerk loose myself, with the dry comment, 'You forgot Minneapolis.'"

"Timing, it is probable, would have extracted the full humor from the situation so that everyone could appreciate it: and still it might not have. That is something that only experience will teach; the movie goer may be as unwilling to accept the formula of the theater a year from now as he is today. Who knows?"

HOUSEWIVES MISSED

The greatest loss to a "personality comedian" of Mr. Benny's calibre, on the screen, is the power to improvise speeches, or "ad lib." He relates, for example, that a matinee audience at the varieties always includes enough of that large class known as housewives to make comment like, "I'll bet there are plenty of sinks filled with unwashed dishes this afternoon" surefire, in the parlance. In the same manner, comical reference to a preceding act on the bill, particularly one which has "gone over big," never fails to elicit laughter.

"A reference of this kind, or the mention of any current news topic," Mr. Benny explains, "establishes an intangible bond with an audience, which senses or believes it senses that, the reference being impromptu, one's entire monologue must be!

"Still, in a talking film, one has the satisfaction of knowing that one's performance will be as fresh and amusing the five-thousandth time as the first. Provided," he added, with a twinkle, "that it is any good the first time.

"So both mediums have their advantages."



Mr. Benny speaks of the differing methods employed by other comedians. Al Jolson, he says, possesses the gift

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of making his auditor believe in him utterly. Ken Murray has a glib tongue and this failing can resort to slapstick for a laugh. Olsen and Johnson, though unfunny themselves, use the elements of surprise and incongruity in staccato order successfully. The extremely garrulous Joe Cook and Julius Tannen pour forth unconnected nonsense in perfect seriousness. And Robert Benchley and Donald Ogden Stewart represent the average fellow in what is usually called a tough spot.

"For myself," Mr. Benny confesses, "I am definitely committed to the sort of thing I am doing now. I have been in vaudeville and revues for seven years; it was not until I first tried acting as a master of ceremonies three years ago, that I varied my monologue at all. I didn't dare; I was too frightened!

"Curious, isn't it, that my chief stock in trade is my nonchalance, when really I am so timorous? I have never been able to overcome it; I bemoan the inadequacy of my powers of speech, and the microphones certainly do not encourage it. I shall be glad to get back on the stage again, if only for a while. I feel the need of that human response—and badly."

As a post-script, Benny appeared on local radio to, no doubt, promote the movie. This is from the *Santa Ana Register*, August 8, 1929.

Jack Benny Will Preside Tonight on KHJ Program

Jack Benny, one of the two masters of ceremonies of the "Hollywood Revue of 1929," and famous Keith-Orpheum headliner, will be master of ceremonies at the weekly Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer program to be presented over KHJ between 8 and 9 o'clock tonight. Jack Benny will introduce on this program Kay Johnson, noted stage star, now appearing in "Dynamite," Johnny Mack Brown, Julian Lay Faye, baritone under contract with M-G-M and the Campus Trio, three girls with pleasing voices, under contract with M-G-M for a series of short subjects. Also featured on this program will be the "Richfield Roamers," well known to listeners over KHJ.


Posted by Yowp at 07:07

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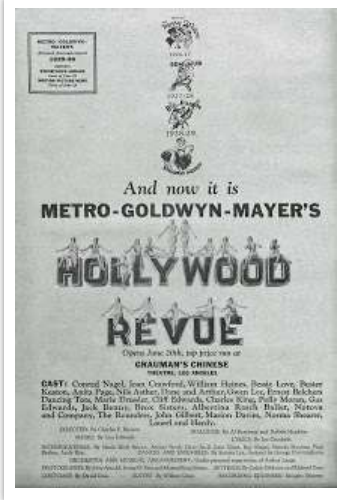
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