A program devoted to the work of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (and our dates 1923-1935, printed at left, refer to the boundaries of our program, not of their career) can be tackled in several ways. From a purely chronological point of view, one could take regularly spaced examples of their work as individual comedians, as a team in silents, and as a team in sound films. One could separate their films into categories, and select the best examples of each. One could arbitrarily select their best films. Or finally, one could concentrate exclusively on their fine work in lesser known films. Our task is complicated by the fact that we have frequently shown Laurel and Hardy films (often as "bonus" items, not listed on our notes) and hate to devote sparse playing time to films already shown. So, taking the bull by the horns, we have tried in some measure to combine ALL of these approaches. And since Laurel & Hardy devotees never mind (in fact, welcome) repeat viewings of their comedy, which never seems to grow stale, we think you'll like the outcome. You'll find some old favorites here -- plus one or two lesser-known comedies that you probably haven't seen -- and some really rare silent footage that you almost certainly haven't seen, at least since the time of its initial release back in the twenties.

We've made no attempt to cover any of the features of Laurel and Hardy, on the theory that even the best of these (and there were some excellent ones) could be improved on by their shorts. For the record, the best of Laurel & Hardy's features were made for Hal Roach, as were their shorts. Despite some definitely weak ones (most notably "Bonnie Scotland", "Pardon Us" and "Pack Up Your Troubles") the features for the most part were of a very high standard -- "Way Out West" being perhaps the very best, with "Blockheads", parts of "Swiss Miss", and "Fra Diavolo" not too far behind. Once Laurel & Hardy left Roach (and presumably had less control over their own material) their features suffered badly. "The Flying Deuces", for RKO, was very disappointing. Back with Roach temporarily (but now for UA rather than MGM) they made the enjoyable "A Chump at Oxford", and the abysmal "Saps at Sea". Then came an uttererly poor series for Fox, with the first, "Great Guns", being probably their all-time weakest. Of this series, only "Jitterbugs" and Hal St. Clair's "The Big Noise" had genuine comedy content. Two at MGM, "Nothing But Trouble" and "Air Raid Wardens" showed an encouraging return to the old style, but the series was not continued. Their last film,
the curious "Atoll K", had but limited distribution in this country. Although a misfire, and with only occasionally typical Laurel and Hardy sequences, it was nevertheless far more enjoyable than "Great Guns", "Saps at Sea", "The Dancing Masters" and some of their other films of the 40's.

Oliver Hardy died in mid-1957; Stan Laurel is currently very ill, and it is unlikely that he will ever work in films again.

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**Program in order of screening**

LAUREL AND HARDY - A SURVEY (27 minutes)

This print of a recent television program provides a useful introduction to our entire program in that it highlights recurring trends which you'll see throughout the rest of our films. An off-the-cuff discussion of their work does of course leave important things unsaid, as do most off-the-cuff discussions -- especially on television, where there always seems to be an endless race against time. However, the things left unsaid vocally are more than taken care of by the carefully selected film sequences, which include silent extracts from "Crazy Like a Fox" and "Kill or Cure", and longer sound sequences from "Pack Up Your Troubles", "Come Clean", "Tit For Tat", "Their First Mistake" and "Hog Wild".

SILENT

"PLAYWATES" (King-Bee, 1917) Starring Billy West, with Oliver (Babe) Hardy, Leo White, Charlie Chase.

Before his teaming with Laurel, Hardy was used primarily as a burlesque heavy (most notably in Larry Semon comedies) and as a minor comedy foil - as in Mack Sennett's "Madcap Ambrose". Yet this film makes it strikingly apparent that already, by 1917, he was a unique comedy performer. The infant routine between Hardy and Billy West, the Chaplin imitator, is an astonishing foreshadowing of the similar "Erats" done much later by Laurel and Hardy. This print by the way consists of the first reel of a two-reeler. When a 35mm print was discovered recently, reel two had already decomposed beyond all saving; reel one was already badly eaten away by hypo, and by now has also dissolved into dust and goo. However, this one reel, despite much flickering, was saved, and while it's frustrating not to have the rest of it, there's some grand stuff here. Not the least of its charms is Charlie Chase's uninhibited portrayal of a hopeless dope fiend!

"MAN ABOUT TOWN" (Roach-Pathe, 1923) One reel. With Stan Laurel, James Finlayson, Betty Compson.

We had planned to run only an excerpt from this, but since if we don't run it now we probably never will, we decided to exhibit the whole thing. It's a routine enough comedy, but with occasional good gags, and pleasant exteriors of streets, automobiles etc. It has one gloriously sadistic gag involving a hunchback which would never get past past today's censors! Incidentally, this (and two other items on tonight's bill) have only flash-titles (for a full explanation of this, see our notes on "Movie Night" last month; it's one of the penalties one has to pay for seeing some of the rarer items!) None of the titles (which we studied carefully) mean much to the plot, except the opening ones which establish Laurel as a stranger in town. He wants to change to another street-car, and the conductor tells him "Follow that girl -- she's taking the car you want". Bearing that premise in mind, you'll have no trouble.
"ORANGES AND LEAONS" (Roach-Pathe, 1923) Director: George Jeske; with Stan Laurel and Katherine Grant. One reel.

The first flash-title on this one tells us that Stan is "A Sunkist sap with a sunny smile and a foggy mind". For the rest, it's straight violent slapstick in an orange-boxing factory. Although Laurel rated higher than Hardy as a solo comedian prior to their teaming, he didn't appear on his own after they got together. Hardy on the other hand, made several solo appearances, starting with "Zenobia" for Roach. Laurel's only other film activities consisted of producing a series of Fred Scott musical westerns for Spectrum in the mid-20's.

"CALL OF THE CUCKOO" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1927) Directed by Clyde Bruckman. With Max Davidson, Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chase, James Finlayson. 2 reels

Laurel and Hardy came together almost accidentally in a number of Roach comedies made at Pathe in the late 20's. Some of these, in which they performed together, but not as a team ("Slipping Wives", "Sailors Beware") have already been shown by this society. But by the time Roach left Pathe, they were established as a team, and when he went to work for MGM in 1927, they were not only stars, but creators of their own material. Just how creative was shown quite graphically a few shows back when we contrasted one of their silent films with the remake which they had re-shaped to suit themselves. All this preamble is by way of explaining that their "supporting player" category in this film is really more in the nature of "guest" appearances. Again, this is a flash-title print, but all that you need to know is that Max Davidson is slowly going crazy because his neighbors (Laurel and Hardy et al) live in an insane asylum. He is tricked into trading his house for a brand new one which was, however, erected in three days -- and which proceeds to fall apart on him as soon as he moves in. The payoff of course is that the asylum moves too, so that in the fadeout Laurel and Hardy are again his neighbors. Although the Laurel and Hardy footage doesn't get too much prominence, they're on really top form nonetheless.

"DOUBLE WOOPEE" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1929) Director: Lewis Foster. With Jean Harlow

It is exactly three years since we ran this two-reeler, which includes a wonderful Erich von Stroheim lampoon. It was a big hit then, and we assume it will be again. A little jerky in its continuity, it nevertheless has some wonderful bits of savagery, including one of Laurel's supreme moments of sadism -- attaching a sheet of fly-paper to a man's bare chest, pressing it really tight -- and then ripping it off!

"BIG BUSINESS" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1929) Dir: James Horne 2 reels

It's a toss-up whether this, or "Two Tars", can be considered the Laurel and Hardy comedy. We chose to show this partly because "Two Tars" has been shown more frequently, but mainly because "Big Business" seems to be the very apotheosis of Laurel and Hardy's work. Everything is here -- Hardy's polite chit-chat, his florid gestures, his fantastic ego, his mute, pitiful appeals to the audience -- and above all, the savage exchanges of mutual sadism between the boys and their arch-enemy James Finlayson, with each waiting, like a good sport, to take his medicine, before reciprocating in kind. Never has the passive acceptance of disaster -- and the element of curiosity combined with dread -- been better exploited by Laurel and Hardy than in this masterpiece of at first childist, and finally uncontrollable, savagery. It's two reels of brilliantly constructed, steadily mounting frenzy and insanity.

Bruckman of course was a master comedy craftsman who directed some of the best Keaton, Lloyd and Fields comedies. He died tragically a year or two ago by shooting himself.
SOUND

"THEY THAR HILLS" (Roach-MGM, 1934) With Mae Busch. Dir: Charles Rogers. One of the gentler Laurel and Hardy comedies (at first) this little item has the boys going off to the hills to relax, on the orders of Billy Gilbert. Despite minor accidents, all is serene. Laurel learns to live with Hardy's pomposity, and both are determined to extend charity to each other. As if to make up for lost time, the sadism is really poured on with a vengeance for the climactic episode -- which includes Hardy being smothered with gasoline and set afire. (Laurel helpfully supplies the match to the inquisitor!)

"MICKEY'S GALA PREMIERE" (Walt Disney-UA-1933) (also titled "Movie Star Mickey") merely to provide a momentary change of pace, and on the flimsiest of excuses (Laurel and Hardy are featured in it) we decided to include this really fine little early Disney. The musical background is bouncy and delightful in the old Disney style, and there are wicked caricatures of Karloff, Lugosi, Barrymore, Langdon, Fairbanks and others.

"THE MUSIC BOX" (Roach-MGM-1932) Dir: James Parrott. 2-reels This Academy Award winner of '32 surely needs no introduction; a classic essay in frustration, it features only occasional (but meticulously constructed) slapstick, and winds up in a lovely sequence wherein Laurel and Hardy break into a spontaneous dance. Incidentally, our print includes the famous nurse's line - "He kicked me, right in the middle of my daily duty" - so often cut by television's curiously sour censors.

"HELPMATES" (Roach-MGM-1931) Dir: James Parrott) 2 reels

To wind up, we've selected one of the pair's lesser-known films -- and easily one of their best. It's a magnificent essay in frustration and violent slapstick, with more pokes in the eye, bellows of pain, and off-screen uproars, than any other comedy we can think of. Hardy has staged a wild party, and has to clean up before his wife returns. Unwisely, he invites his friend Mr. Laurel to help him. It's a pity that the messenger boy and the wife have to intrude briefly; they're not needed at all, and otherwise it is strictly a two-man show.

Program Notes & Enquiries: Wm. K. Everson, Manhattan Towers Hotel, 2166 Broadway, Committee: Edward Gorey, Dorothy Lovell (art work), Chas. Shibuk. NYC.

Our next show, of course, is "NAPOLEON", "CHRONICLES OF THE GRENADIER" and "MENDING THE TRAIL", one week from tonight. Our first show in March will be devoted to the years 1929-1933, and the changeover from silents to talkies, with stress not so much on the great films that were made, but rather on the stars themselves -- those who made it, and those who didn't. BETTY BRONSON's "THE MILLICENT MAN" (with Jack Benny and Eva Novak) will be the feature, while there will be lengthy extracts from early talkies starring LILLIAN GISH, GLORIA SWANSON, HENRY V. WALTHALL, LAURA LA PLANTE, RICARDO CORTEZ, JOHN JACK BROWN, JOHN BARRYMORE, WILLIAM FARNUM, DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, EVE SOUTHERN, PRISCILLA DEAN, MOLL MURRAY, BETTY COMPSON, ESTHER RALSTON, NOAH BEERY and others -- plus WILLIAM S. HART's superb 5-minute speech used to introduce the reissue of "TUMBLEWEEDS". An especially large set of program notes will be issued with this show.