"FRA DIAVOLÒ" ("The Devil's Brother") (CFC-Hal Roach, 1933) Directed by Hal Roach and Charles Rogers; Script by Jeanne MacPherson from the operetta by Aubert; Camera, Art Lloyd, Hap DePew; 90 minutes. With Laurel and Hardy, Dennis King, Thelma Todd, Lucille Browne, James Finlayson, Henry Armetta, Lane Chandler, Wilfrid Lucas, James C. Morton, Arthur Pierson, Nina Quartero, Matt McHugh.

Unseen theatrically for a great many years (its last New York exposure was at the old Laffmovie in 42nd Street in 1952), "FRA DIAVOLÒ" holds the distinction of being, commercially speaking at least, the most successful of all the Laurel and Hardy films. Indeed, together with the silent Harold Lloyd feature "Grandma's Boy", it was the most profitable of all the Hal Roach films from any period. Its production was almost an accident, inspired by the much earlier German operetta "Quack Songs" into which Laurel & Hardy had been injected, after the film was finished, to add slapstick as a kind of salvage operation. It had worked, though the comedy interpolations were necessarily clumsy, and Roach thereafter had wanted to fashion for them a full-fledged and literally "comic" opera. "FRA DIAVOLÒ" was so successful that it was followed by "Babes in Toyland" (in some ways even better in that more of the music was retained, and Laurel and Hardy comfortably absorbed into it instead of being grafted on to it) and then "The Bohemian Girl", a decidedly weak entry and the last foray of its kind. Critics (too many of them unaware of the quality of Laurel & Hardy's shorts, and judging them solely by their few and undistinguished features up to that time) literally raved about their work in "FRA DIAVOLÒ", and began to take them seriously for the first time. Now that we can review the totality of their work, it certainly cannot be placed in the very top echelon, but some of its individual sequences are certainly among the best things they ever did. The "Bamse-kneesle-nosele routine is still a delight of comic frustration. It is something of a status symbol (although they didn't call it that in 1933) to be able to co-ordinate the movements successfully, and the game caught on like wildfire on park benches and in school playgrounds. The "laughing gag too - a routine that they have used in several silent and sound films - is seen at its best here in a sequence that builds from chuckles to belly-laughs, growing and feeding on itself, relying not on incident but on the infectious quality of laughter itself. One might add too that there is at least reasonable respect for the original work and that Dennis King is allowed to cut a handsome if appropriately stagey figure as the bandit-hero, and to sing the Auber songs without interruption or intrusive comedy.

--- 10 minute intermission ---


Because of legal problems surrounding the original story-rights, this remake of one of Fields' better silent vehicles, "So's Your Old Man" has, until now, been withheld from theatrical, television and not-theatrical showings like this one. Its absence has been particularly unfortunate in view of the general availability of the other Fields films inasmuch as it was really the first all-silent briefing vehicle for Fields in talkies, following a period in which Paramount, uncertain of his appeal, starred him in shorts but were careful to place him only in features where by virtue of plot or all-star casts ("If I Had a Million", "Six of a Kind", "International House", "Million Dollar Legs") he had relatively limited footage. " Tillie and Gus" was an uncertain trial balloon in which he and Allison Skipworth did a kind of Beery-Dressler routine. Here, finally, in "You're Telling Me", he was allowed his own vehicle and the results, finally available for reappraisal, are quite surprising. For one thing, it is a very measured and gentle film, and a disciplined one to boot. Erle C. Kenton, a Lubitsch-patterned director in the silent period, gives the film a good deal more charm than would normally be expected of Fields in this period. The opening is a delightful slice of meticulous pantomime; thereafter Fields' bits of business are brought into play regularly, and his familiar but always-funny golf-game routine makes for a grand set-piece finale. But the film lacks the rough edges and moments of insanity that Fields fanatics love, though it may be a better film because of it. In any event, it's a worthy and promising start to Fields' best and most prolific period, with "The Old Fashioned Way" and his masterpiece, "It's a Gift", due to follow that same year. Critics at the time were particularly impressed by the Dickensian quality that Fields brought to his performance in "You're Telling Me".

--- WM. K. Everson ---