

“I Want Music Everywhere”

Music, Operetta, and Cultural Hierarchy at the Hal Roach Studios

In their 1928 stockholders' report, the Hal Roach Studios' board of directors anticipated the company's conversion to sound with calm assuredness:

The last few months has [*sic*] witnessed the advent of another element in the production field; that is, the talking or sound pictures. It is, of course, difficult to foretell what the eventual outcome of talking pictures will be or the eventual form they will assume. One thing is certain, however, that is that they are at the present time an element in the amusement field apparently having a definite appeal to the public, and properly handled, it promises to be a great addition to the entertainment value of pictures and a great aid to the producer in building up the interest in the picture intended. The company has placed itself in a position to gain by any and all new methods and devices introduced in the field.¹

Confidence is to be expected in a stockholders' statement, but for the Roach Studios such an attitude likely came easy, at least in comparison with the competition. Unlike the independent producer-distributor Educational—which had initially flubbed its transition by backing the Vocaflm technology—the Roach Studios enjoyed the luxury of a financing and distribution deal with industry powerhouse Loew's-MGM and opted to follow the parent company's lead in entering the uncertain waters ahead. The Roach organization was, for example, included in Loew's-MGM's initial contract with Electrical Research Products, Inc. (ERPI), for installation of sound technology, signed May 11, 1928; and, like Loew's-MGM, Roach contracted with the Victor Talking Machine Company, a phonograph manufacturer and ERPI licensee, for recording equipment supply and the manufacture of soundtrack discs.² The arrangement with Victor brought not

only equipment and technology but also new personnel. Victor employee Elmer Raguse arrived in late 1928 to prepare the soundproofing of the studio's existing stages, then signed on to serve as Roach's permanent sound engineer once the installation was complete. The following year, Leroy Shield, Victor's A&R man for the Western United States, was sent to the Roach lot in Culver City, where he remained to write musical cues and themes for the studio's comedies.³ Roach's firm quickly availed itself of these new corporate and personnel resources to experiment with new forms for sound comedy that included music as a principle of comic form.

One of the distinctive aspects of the Roach Studios' passage through the conversion era, this chapter argues, was the role that music came to play in negotiating that transition. If sound's first and most direct contribution had been to open new possibilities for comic sophistication through *speech* (discussed in chapter 2), and if this in turn had been answered by knockabout's resurgence under the aegis of *noise* (chapter 3), then the use of *music* supplied Roach's organization with a third path that promised to salvage its product from the cultural and industrial marginalization against which all short-comedy companies struggled during this period. In focusing on these musical endeavors, moreover, the chapter aligns itself with emergent scholarly trends focused on the consolidation of film and music industries wrought by the transition to sound. Rather than approach that transition from a perspective focused narrowly on the *film* industry, the recent scholarly tendency has been to examine larger issues of sound technology *across media* during the 1920s and 1930s. Hollywood's conversion thus emerges not as an isolated technological shift but as the catalyst for a developing pattern of media industry convergence that saw the integration of radio, music publishing, and film businesses during these years.⁴ As media historian Ross Melnick explains,

In the span of five hectic years [from 1926 to 1930], family-owned film companies morphed into global entertainment giants that were both horizontally and vertically integrated with numerous media distribution channels and profit centers. By 1930, RCA, Paramount, Warner Bros., Fox, and Loew's were all convergent media conglomerates, with many owning motion picture production, distribution, and exhibition, music publishing and recording divisions, and broadcast networks, stations, and/or radio programs. There no longer was a walled-off "film industry" but rather an "entertainment industry" that produced motion pictures among a host of other products and media.⁵

The conversion to sound brought film and music-related industries together, creating fresh opportunities for studios to establish multiple media connections for incorporating and promoting musical content across several platforms. Warner Bros., for instance, acquired several large music-publishing companies (M. Witmark and Son, Harms Music Publishing, and others) and even developed

a short-lived chain of music stores. Paramount began radio broadcasts from its Hollywood studio in 1928, and in 1929 temporarily acquired half interest in the CBS radio network. In the process, the “music sector” of the economy was profoundly transformed: music-related industries came to be concentrated in media centers like New York and Los Angeles, spurring a significant migration of musical talent, including people like Raguse and Shield. For example, between 1921 and 1929, the Los Angeles Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians saw its numbers quadruple to about four thousand, as each of the major studios developed permanent music departments with contracted composers, arrangers, orchestrators, librarians, and resident orchestras, all working under in-house music directors.⁶

Given the marginalization of short subjects in most film historical research, one is not surprised to find that short-subject producers have been ignored in these developments, too. Yet a miniaturized version of these same convergent processes can be observed at the Hal Roach Studios, where they inspired an evolving range of approaches that incorporated music as an element of slapstick form. The company entered the talkie era in early 1929 with four short-film series—Laurel and Hardy, Charley Chase, Our Gang, and the Roach All-Stars—into which filmmakers soon began including Tin Pan Alley-style ditties as a potential basis for cross-media tie-ins (phonograph and sheet-music sales). The following year the studio institutionalized “wall-to-wall” (that is, continuous) background music across all its series—over a year before similar scoring practices gained traction in features—with scores composed by Leroy Shield and arranged for small jazz orchestra. In these ways, Roach’s filmmakers translated an inherited culture of commercial popular music into innovative practices of background musical accompaniment. Yet that inheritance was in turn abruptly transformed when, beginning in the early 1930s, Roach decided to move into feature film production, abandoning the Tin Pan Alley idiom of the studio’s earlier shorts to launch Laurel and Hardy in a series of feature-length Viennese-style operettas (e.g., *The Devil’s Brother*, 1933; *Babes in Toyland*, 1934; and *The Bohemian Girl*, 1936).

This chapter explores the factors that gave rise to these different idioms of what can be called “slapstick musicality.” Rather than simply catalog them, however, my intent is to indicate how changes in these idioms partook in slapstick’s devaluation during this period. In exploiting a Tin Pan Alley idiom, Roach’s filmmakers were working with the framework of a “distinctly modern art,” in Ann Douglas’s terms, whose commercial appropriation of vernacular traditions (African American ragtime, Irish ballads, Stephen Foster melodies) resonated with the broader landscape of metropolitan culture and Jazz Age nightlife.⁷ In subsequently embracing European operetta as a format for the Laurel and Hardy features, Roach’s filmmakers were opting for the safety of middlebrow strategies of appeal to offset the

greater financial risks of feature filmmaking. The result, however, was to drastically resignify Roach's most popular slapstick team, which was now excised from the contemporaneity of vernacular idioms—both comedic and musical—and instead consigned to a mythic past: nostalgic tales of dashing brigands, gypsy revenge, and the restoration of aristocratic order placed Laurel and Hardy within what Susan Stewart theorizes as the “infinite time” of fairy tale.⁸ What emerges from musical processes at Roach is, in this sense, a further mode of the “aging” of slapstick, one linked not only to changes in the form's audiences and the temporality of their tastes (as in banalization) but also to the defensiveness of production practices seeking the cachet of cultural forms that were already consecrated, already—like operetta—“classic.”

“WHERE THEY THOUGHT THE MUSIC OUGHT TO BE”:
SONGS AND UNDERSCORING IN THE HAL ROACH
STUDIOS' EARLY SOUND OUTPUT

Needless to say, none of these musical approaches emerged immediately; rather, they were arrived at only after a “feeling out” phase that encountered occasional dead ends. The initial approach to sound considered at Roach sought simply to maintain the status quo of the studio's established mode of production. At the end of November 1928—simultaneous with Elmer Raguse's arrival to prepare the sound installation—studio manager Warren Doane recommended that the studio's sound productions reserve dialogue only for later dubbing or close-up inserts. A testimony to the confusion and uncertainties provoked by sound, Doane's memo deserves quoting at length:

It would be my idea that we should continue the making of silent pictures exactly as we have in the past up to the time when the picture has been previewed and finally accepted as ready for shipment. At that time I believe it will be possible in a very short space of time—not more than an hour or two—to photograph synchronized dialogue action, which then cut into one of the negatives will give us a dialogued motion picture

The installation necessary to do this, in my opinion, would consist of a sound-proofed room in the stage, a sound-proofed projecting room also in the stage, and an appropriate movable monitory room, a sound track recording camera, together with the necessary microphone and mixing panel equipment, and a means of sound-proofing cameras.

The dialogue which will accompany closeup [*sic*] action, in my opinion, should be made in the sound-proof room. The dialogue which will accompany the long-shot action should be made in the sound-proof projecting room and be recorded on film by the Movietone camera. In the case of closeup [*sic*] the characters being re-photographed at the same time recording is made; and in the case of longshots the sound recording added to the film already made.⁹

Doane's motivation was frankly economic (he wanted to keep the "cost of the studio installation . . . at a minimum" and to avoid "loading the picture costs unnecessarily"), but his minimalist approach to the spoken word harmonized well with the comic philosophies of the slapstick filmmakers discussed in the previous chapter: dialogue was to be avoided as far as possible.¹⁰ A year later, in fact, Roach himself advocated a similar position, touting the benefits of pantomime and sound effects over dialogue in the pages of *Motion Picture News*: "The art of pantomime is as old as amusement itself and there isn't the slightest chance that dialogue ever will entirely displace pantomime on the screen. Dialogue can't possibly take the place of pantomime in causing laughs . . . [By contrast,] sound effects in pictures are going to find a definite niche in the market. There is no doubt about that."¹¹ Interestingly, something close to this was codified at the *Our Gang* unit, headed by director Robert F. McGowan, where the child actors' stilted delivery of lines in their first sound production, *Small Talk* (May 1929), led to drastic dialogue pruning for their second, *Railroadin'* (June 1929). As Robert Lynch, manager of Loew's-MGM's Philadelphia exchange, commented in a memo to Roach on this issue: "I think if the Gang comedies were just about 25% dialogue and 75% silent they would be a whole lot better, for it was the fast action that these kids could put over in a silent comedy that got the laughs. As matters now stand, it takes these kids too long to get their dialogue over to make the thing rapid fire enough, so why not try to make the next one along these lines?"¹²

There was little here to differentiate Roach's filmmakers from others wrestling with the challenge of sound, but more distinctive options were also being explored. One of these, touched on earlier, was to include songs as a basis for synergistic tie-ins—the idea being that Victor would release the performances as commercial records. Songs were, in fact, a feature of Roach's sound shorts from the outset: the very first sound release in the *All-Star* series, *Hurdy Gurdy* (May 1929), included scenes of Thelma Todd and Eddie Dunn harmonizing on "She Lives Down in Our Alley" and "My Gal Sal." The success of that pairing convinced Victor and Roach of commercial possibilities, setting in motion plans for a phonograph of a second Todd-Dunn duet, "Honey," for tie-in with *Dad's Day* (July 1929), and even a series of all-musical films, although both proved nonstarters.¹³ Slightly more successful in synergistic terms were the early sound releases in the Charley Chase series, which commonly featured jazzy comic ditties, some penned by Chase himself. Early in 1930, one of these tunes—Alice Keating Howlett and Will Livernash's "Smile When the Raindrops Fall" from the comedy *Whispering Whoopee* (March 1930)—was released in sheet music form, seemingly prompting encouragement for further such endeavors from Loew's-MGM offices (fig. 22). Responding to a preview screening of the Charley Chase musical three-reeler, *High C's* (December 1930), exchange manager Lynch again took it upon himself to give feedback, writing to Roach that "the way that music worked in there is the last word. It was the

THEME SONG FROM "WHISPERING WHOOPEE", A HAL ROACH M-G-M COMEDY SUCCESS

SMILE

25

WHEN THE RAINDROPS FALL

WITH UKULELE ARRANGEMENT

FOX TROT BALLAD

Words & Music by ALICE KEATING HOWLETT and WILL LIVERNASH

CHARLEY CHASE

BABE HARDY

THELMA TODD

STAN LAUREL

HARRY LANGDON

Sung by CHARLEY CHASE and played by THE HAL ROACH "HAPPY-GO-LUCKY TRIO" IN THE COMEDY SUCCESS "WHISPERING WHOOPEE" STARRING CHARLEY CHASE

~A HAL ROACH-METRO-GOLDWYN MAYER COMEDY~

OUR GANG

PETE CHUB MARY ANN WHEEZER JACKIE EARINA

D.A. Quinke & Co. Music Publishers Los Angeles, Calif.

FIGURE 22. Sheet music for "Smile When the Raindrops Fall," featured in the Charley Chase comedy *Whispering Whoopee* (March 1930). Courtesy Vince Giordano.

opinion of about twenty others who saw this comedy that two or three more like that would be just what the public wants (I mean that music worked into it)."¹⁴ After Roach replied by agreeing "to mix one of these musical type of pictures into the Chase Series every once in a while," Lynch subsequently reiterated his point in connection with the debut entry of the Thelma Todd-Zasu Pitt series, *Let's Do Things* (June 1931): "You boys overlooked, in my opinion, a wonderful bet in not having those singing voices in at least three times as much of that comedy as you did . . . I think the movie fans would be glad to listen to a whole half a reel of such voices . . . particularly with good songs."¹⁵

Such an emphasis on song was broadly characteristic of the early sound period, when the possibilities for music cross-promotion encouraged the Hollywood studios to include songs in an unexpected variety of genres, including even

westerns and melodramas (as Donald Crafton has noted, “Around 1929–1930, it was the rare movie that was *not* a musical in some sense of the term”).¹⁶ But it was far more distinctive for producers of short-subject slapstick who, with the exception of major-affiliated companies like Roach, generally lacked the necessary musical talent and corporate ties to sustain such tie-in marketing.¹⁷ Where Roach’s early sound shorts most decisively innovated, however, was in their swift adoption of musical scores and themes. Here, acknowledgment must be given to two individuals who had arrived at the Hal Roach Studios by following the intersecting pathways linking the era’s film, radio, and recorded sound industries: Marvin Hatley and Leroy Shield.¹⁸ An Oklahoma-born substitute pianist at Warner Bros.’ radio station, KFWB, which had begun broadcasting in March 1925, Hatley had been hired to a new radio job for the Roach Studios’ in-house station, KFVD, shortly before the studio’s conversion to sound. Appointed musical director for the studio’s sound releases, Hatley made an early mark by introducing one of the first examples of a musical signature in sound films, the famous “Dance of the Cuckoos” motif—also known as “Ku-Ku”—that played over the opening titles of Laurel and Hardy releases. As Stan Laurel later recalled, the tune had begun life as Hatley’s hourly time signal for the Roach Studios’ *Cuckoo Hour* radio show. “That originally was taken from a little radio station at the Roach studio We did it [first in *Brats* (March 1930)] for a laugh because it sounded cute. They liked it at a preview and we decided to leave it in.”¹⁹

Soon, the studio’s shorts were regularly incorporating full background music contributed by Minnesota-born pianist and composer Leroy Shield, who had first come to Roach as part of the deal with Victor. Shield was not himself responsible for the earliest background compositions in Roach’s sound shorts: some of the studio’s very first all-talking releases—including Charley Chase’s sound debut, *The Big Squawk* (May 1929), and the second *All-Star* talkie, *Madame “Q”* (June 1929)—had incorporated wall-to-wall background compositions contributed and recorded by Gus Arnheim’s legendary Cocomanut Grove band.²⁰ Studio management soon switched to an in-house model, however, and, by the late summer of 1930, Shield was supplying original tunes for use in Roach’s shorts over their entire running time. The first film to feature Shield’s compositions in this way was a Laurel and Hardy comedy, *Another Fine Mess* (November 1930), the extant continuity script for which stipulates that, for each of the three reels, “instrumental music is played offscene through[out].”²¹ Nothing in extant production files, however, indicates the style of these melodies, which were scored not symphonically—as would eventually become the Hollywood norm—but rather after the fashion of orchestral jazz, consisting of around a dozen players: three strings (violins/cellos), three brass (trumpets/trombones), three winds (clarinets/saxophones), and a rhythm section (commonly comprising piano, banjo, drums, and double bass). (In a 1935 letter to Roach studio manager Henry Ginsberg, Shield requested orchestration consisting of violins, saxes, trumpets, a trombone, piano, guitar, bass, and percussion, includ-

ing xylophone.)²² Nor do the files indicate the range of Shield's jazzy compositions during his brief stint at Roach, which saw him compose some sixty-eight tunes—foxtrots, ballads, hurries, waltzes, the gamut—along with numerous brief cues during a burst of extraordinary creativity from late 1929 to his departure in 1931. As Shield scholar Piet Schreuders has noted,

Shield probably set out to score specific scenes for specific purposes—for example, his beautiful love ballad “You Are the One I Love” was usually played behind love scenes, and something called “It Is To Laugh” behind comic scenes—but [sound editor Elmer Raguse] soon began to stuff each film sound-track with Shield's music, with little or no regard to its original purpose. Roach paid the composer a flat fee of about \$200 per tune, and was able to use them as he pleased, whether Shield liked it or not.²³

Raguse could do this, moreover, because, while at Roach, Shield never approached his compositions in a way that directly timed the progression of individual tunes to the unfolding of an action.²⁴ Rather, Shield's compositions were discrete melodies, each conceived and recorded individually, which were then arranged by Raguse in sequences over each two-reeler's duration, either using the entire tune or (in most instances) just segments. Effects cues would be used, but the music was generally linked to action primarily at a level of overall tone. The approach is evident from the cue sheet for Charley Chase's *Looser than Loose* (November 1930), the first reel of which includes a scene in which Charley endeavors to present an engagement ring to Thelma Todd in the face of a series of frustrations (fig. 23). What Raguse does for the sequence (comprising cues 10–13) is to take two of Shield's preexisting compositions and alternate between them: on the one hand, Shield's standard love theme “You Are the One I Love,” a waltz consisting of a sixteen-measure introduction and a sixteen-measure melody that basically can be repeated as long as necessary; on the other, “Your Piktur” (referred to on the cue sheet as “Picktur”), which is a brief laugh cue, first introduced for the *Our Gang* short *Teacher's Pet* (October 1930) and introduced here whenever Charley's romantic entreaties are comically interrupted (figs. 24 and 25, auds. 1 and 2). In other words, “You Are the One I Love” establishes the base romantic mood, from which “Your Piktur” punctuates comic deviations. The first such occurs after Thelma, in close-up, opens the ring box to look inside: a point-of-view shot shows a frugal ring with tiny stone, while the soundtrack shifts to the braying two-bar laugh effect that begins “Your Piktur” (figs. 26 and 27). The same musical articulation recurs when Charley is interrupted by the phone: angrily, he picks up the receiver and yells “HELL-O!” only for a cut to reveal his boss on the other end of the line, again punctuated on the soundtrack by a shift to “Your Piktur,” this time for four bars (figs. 28 and 29). Although neither of Shield's compositions was specifically written for this film, Raguse arranges them segmentally in a way that precisely articulates the momentum of the film's action (vid. 4). This approach can be linked to the silent era, when there existed a number of handbooks like Erno Rapée's 1924 *Motion Picture Moods*, consisting of melodies indexed under headings of mood or subject mat-

HAL ROACH STUDIOS, INC.
Culver City, California

Date:
Prod. No. C-34

MUSICAL COMPOSITIONS RECORDED IN

A Production entitled: "LOOSER THAN LOOSE"

Recorded by HAL ROACH STUDIOS INC. at Culver City, California

CODE FOR USAGE:

BACKGROUND INSTRUMENTAL	- BV	PARTIAL USAGE	- P
VISUAL INSTRUMENTAL	- VI	ENTIRE USAGE	- E
BACKGROUND VOCAL	- BV		
VISUAL VOCAL	- VV		

TITLE OF COMPOSITION	COMPOSER	PUBLISHER	HOW USED
<u>Reel 1</u>			
1. GANGWAY CHARLEY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
2. GANGWAY CHARLEY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
3. GANGWAY CHARLEY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
4. BEAUTIFUL LADY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
5. PICKTUR	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
6. BEAUTIFUL LADY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
7. PICKTUR	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
8. GANGWAY CHARLEY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
9. PICKTUR	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
10. YOU'RE THE ONE I LOVE	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
11. PICKTUR	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
12. YOU'RE THE ONE I LOVE	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
13. PICKTUR	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
14. RIDING ALONG	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
15. THE ONE I LOVE BEST	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
16. YOU ARE THE ONE I LOVE	Le Roy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
17. CONFUSION	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
18. THE ONE I LOVE BEST	Le Roy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
19. CONFUSION	Le Roy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
20. TUNE	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
21. DANCING GIRL	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - E
22. TUNE	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
<u>Reel 2</u>			
23. TUNE	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
24. TUNE	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
25. GANGWAY CHARLEY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
26. GANGWAY CHARLEY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
27. IT IS TO LAUGH	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - E
28. ANTICIPATION	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - E
29. ANTICIPATION	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
30. ANTICIPATION	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - E
31. ANTICIPATION	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
32. LITTLE DANCING GIRL	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
33. YOU'RE THE ONE I LOVE	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
34. LET'S GO	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
35. ANTICIPATION	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P
36. CONFUSION	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - E
37. GANGWAY CHARLEY	LeRoy Shield	Unpublished	BI - P

(Note: World Picture rights on all music used in scoring this picture is owned by Hal Roach Studios)

FIGURE 23. Cue sheet for the Charley Chase comedy *Looser than Loose* (November 1930). Courtesy Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California.

ter: accompanists would simply draw upon these to present an appropriate musical analogue for the developing action on screen. In effect, what Raguse does here is to sequence Shield's compositions in a fashion akin to how a silent film accompanist would have used Rapée's *Motion Picture Moods*, treating Shield's melodies as an ever-growing library of prerecorded cues that could be selected from and "plugged in" to appropriate scenes.

AUDIO 1. Melody from “You’re the One I Love.”

To listen to this audio, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.28.1>



Moderato (♩ = c. 105)

You Are the One I Love. LeRoy Shield

The transcription shows the melody for 'You Are the One I Love.' in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The tempo is Moderato with a quarter note equal to approximately 105 beats per minute. The melody is written on a single staff with a treble clef. Chords are indicated above the notes: C dim, Bb, B dim, D/F#, F m, F m, Bb, Eb. The piece is credited to LeRoy Shield.

Moderato (♩ = c. 78)

Your Piktur LeRoy Shield

The transcription shows the melody for 'Your Piktur.' in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major. The tempo is Moderato with a quarter note equal to approximately 78 beats per minute. The melody is written on a single staff with a treble clef. Chords are indicated above the notes: D, C#dim, F m, Bb, Eb/Bb, Eb, A dim, C, G. The piece is credited to LeRoy Shield. There are also markings for 'Clarinet' and 'Piano'.

FIGURES 24–25. Transcriptions for “You’re the One I Love” and “Your Piktur.” Courtesy Mauri Sumén.

AUDIO 2. Melody from “Your Piktur.”

To listen to this audio, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.28.2>



This treatment of his music disgruntled Shield, who around this time began complaining to his publisher that Roach’s filmmakers were reusing his compositions in films for which they were not originally written and not paying him for the additional use. “I do not know just how to get around this,” he wrote. “I cannot very well insist that music for each picture must be new, or that I must do the score, but I am wondering if in some way there might be a means of restricting their using any of the music without your permission as publisher, or mine as composer. In other words I do not like to lose this income.”²⁵ By June 1931, Shield quit Roach to once again follow emerging corporate pathways, this time taking a job as musical director at the Chicago studios of NBC (also owned by Victor after merging with RCA). In Shield’s absence, Roach’s filmmakers continued to rely upon his preexisting compositions in new shorts, even using them for reissues of early comedies that



FIGURES 26–29. Musical sequencing in *Looser than Loose* punctuates the visual punchlines (cues #10–13). Thelma’s engagement ring disappoints (26, 27) and Charley inadvertently yells at his boss (28, 29). The second shot in each pair is accompanied by Leroy Shield’s laugh effect, “Your Piktur.”

VIDEO 4. Clip from *Looser than Loose*.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.28.6>



had originally been released without underscoring (which is why the brief Shield tune “Bells,” for instance, ended up being featured twenty-four times in Laurel and Hardy shorts alone). There was an attempt to bring Shield back to Roach in 1932 to contribute fresh cues (Henry Ginsberg wrote Shield in February to request “about twelve numbers consisting of six good Fox Trots, a couple of Hurrys, two Ballads, a Waltz and a Heavy Number”), although nothing came of it.²⁶ Shield did return briefly to help adapt Daniel Auber’s score for the feature-length operetta *The Devil’s Brother* in 1933, and was subsequently invited back by Ginsberg to head a new musical department at the studio in 1935.²⁷ Existing correspondence shows that Shield leapt at this new offer, but it appears that Ginsberg had overstepped his authority. Shield’s replies to Ginsberg went strangely unanswered, and he instead received a terse and disingenuous rebuttal from Roach himself: “Our program for next year will be composed of feature length comedies,” began the two-sentence letter Roach wrote to Shield early in 1936, “and as we have no musicals in this, will have no need for a Musical Director. However, if our policy ever changes, will

be glad to have you with us.”²⁸ Roach was not exactly unknown for such shabby treatment of his talent—he had summarily shown the door to comedian Snub Pollard in 1924 and would do the same to Charley Chase in 1936—and he likely realized that Shield was by this point somewhat superfluous to the studio’s needs. Marvin Hatley had stepped into Shield’s shoes to supply new cues as early as the 1933–1934 season, and at considerably less pay—two hundred dollars a week—than Shield would have required. Roach did soften to the point of signing Shield for a two-week period in mid-1936 to compose tunes for the Laurel and Hardy feature *Our Relations* (1936) at a salary of five hundred dollars per week.²⁹ But this was the last employment Shield ever saw at the Roach lot. Shield himself had become disposable even as his compositional model remained indispensable.

*

To see the stakes in Shield’s musical practice more clearly, it is worth locating the Roach Studio’s introduction of background music against broader scoring trends in Hollywood during the early sound period. In her book *Saying It with Songs*, Katherine Spring examines the classical Hollywood background score as something that began to take shape, through the early 1930s, out of the tail end of the theme-song craze of sound’s earliest years.³⁰ By encouraging the use of songs willy-nilly in a wide variety of genres, Spring contends, the theme song trend had generated unmanageable problems for classical norms of narration and, by around 1930, theme songs rapidly began to fall from favor. This shift in musical practice was then accompanied by a change in the staffing of music departments as the studios bought off the contracts of the Tin Pan Alley songsmiths they had hired, instead retaining composers who brought a more European/classical style of orchestration to their scoring.³¹ What’s distinctive about Roach here is really three-fold. First, the institutionalization of underscoring occurred at Roach prior to *any* other producer of live-action fiction films. This is not to suggest that the Roach shorts were the first live-action all-talking films to include underscoring on this scale—Warner Bros.’s 1929 feature *The Squall*, released two weeks before Charley Chase’s *The Big Squawk*, provides an earlier known case—but they were the first films for which the practice was standardized across a studio’s entire product line.³² Second, the approach to underscoring at Roach was conceived *within* a Tin Pan Alley mode, in contrast with the late Romantic idioms practiced and popularized by subsequent composers like Max Steiner, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and Alfred Newman, with whose names the development of the classical Hollywood score is more typically discussed.³³ As such, the Roach films show how Hollywood underscoring practice initially accommodated a popular musical paradigm that bore scant resemblance to the symphonic—indeed, Wagnerian—model more commonly prioritized in scholarly studies of early sound-era compositional practice.³⁴ Third and finally, the need to maintain classical norms of narration can’t actually

explain the introduction of underscoring at Roach because slapstick, historically, has been a site of deviance vis-à-vis those norms.

The key factor behind the sustained adoption of underscoring at the Hal Roach Studios instead emerges from the specific difficulties that film comedians had faced following sound's advent, particularly as these concerned the issue of pace. As discussed in the previous chapter, the coming of sound had significantly impacted the pacing of slapstick action by making filmic time commensurate with profilmic reality: the standardization of motorized cameras and projectors ensured that films were now projected at the rate at which they had been shot.³⁵ The result, however, was to produce what one exhibitor deemed a “stultifying effect” on comedy by eliminating the undercranking effects on which the buoyancy of silent-era slapstick action had depended.³⁶ Comedy producers had, from the beginning, struggled to find ways around this difficulty: one technique— heavily employed, in fact, at Roach for the 1932–1933 *Taxi Boys* series—was to step-print sequences of comic action to create a “sped-up” feel. The chief avenue pursued at Roach, however, was to explore the possibilities of music as a means of *temporalizing* the image (the term is sound theorist Michel Chion's)—that is, to use underscoring as a means of dynamizing the visual action through musical qualities of rhythm and melody.³⁷ And here one finds that the studio's *comedians* took the lead in advocating this function for background music, as clearly indicated by the recollections of Marvin Hatley. “Every time Stan [Laurel] worked on a picture, he'd say, ‘I want music everywhere.’ He said, ‘I do lots of pantomime, and I've got to have something going back there. A good, fast-paced music makes my stuff go better; if you take the music away, I don't move so fast.’”³⁸ Hatley also recalled that it was performer-directors like Laurel and Charley Chase who would give “the general idea of . . . where they thought the music ought to be,” noting “Laurel usually wanted 100% music.”³⁹ Unlike the initial use of songs at Roach, then, it was not the economics of convergence that motivated the dissemination of underscoring at Roach; rather, the direction of innovation was shaped by comedic norms of pacing and tempo inherited from silent-era filmmaking—as well as from the stage, where musical accompaniment for pantomime performances was standard—and that continued to govern the creative labor of performers like Laurel through the conversion period.

The point emerges clearly from a brief comparison of slapstick routines from the Laurel and Hardy shorts before and after the implementation of Shield's compositions. A good example of the former is the five-minute sequence from the team's second sound short, *Berth Marks* (June 1929), in which the boys undress and prepare for bed while crammed into an upper berth. Punctuated only by minimal (and apparently improvised) dialogue and accompanied by the sound of rail tracks, the routine provoked disappointment on the part of the *Motion Picture News* critic who described it as “monotonous”: “The comedy

consists for the most part of medium and closeup shots of the pair in the agonies of undressing. There's nary a variation."⁴⁰ It is thus significant that a parallel sequence from the Shield-scored *Be Big* (February 1931) did not receive such critique, since this suggests the difference that scoring could make. *Be Big*'s centerpiece is an even lengthier routine—a thirteen-minute set piece in which Babe, aided by Stanley, tries to remove a pair of boots in his hotel room—only this time with a Shield-composed score comprising fragments from the following melodies: “Ah! ’Tis Love,” from the *Boy Friends*’ two-reeler *Doctor’s Orders* (September 1930); “Excitement” and “Hunting Song,” both originally composed for *Pardon Us* (1931); “Rockin’ Chair,” whose appearance in *Be Big* marks its first; and “Slouching,” one of the most widely used of Shield themes. Within this musical constellation, the plodding 3/4 tempos of “Rockin’ Chair” and “Slouching” serve equivalent expressive functions, both used more or less interchangeably to churn up the tension of slow-burn physical routines (for instance, when Stan and Babe each get a foot caught in the other’s sweater and are unable to extricate themselves); the lurching, triplet-based syncopations of “Excitement” are reserved for outbursts of frenetic energy (e.g., when Babe tears a curtain pole off the wall in frustration); and the upbeat, xylophone-driven “Ah! ’Tis Love” punctuates the two moments of respite when Babe thinks he’s figured the boots out. (Based loosely on “A-Hunting We Will Go,” Shield’s “Hunting Song” seems primarily to have been chosen because of the film’s plot: the boys are trying to trick their wives so they can attend a party at a hunting lodge.) “Temporalization” in this sequence is in fact less a mere matter of “fast-paced” music—as Laurel’s own words would seem to imply—than, more ambitiously, of the use of unequally rhythmic melodies to structure the ebb and flow on which this chamber slapstick (two men, one pair of boots) depends.

Here, then, is a conception of scoring as a fragmented assemblage, not a Romantic unity, whose system is governed less by narrative values (only “Hunting Song” resonates narratively) than by the phenomenology of slapstick, by the rhythm and tempo of its physical action. As such, Shield’s work at Roach confirms the suspicions of those cinema scholars and musicologists who have disputed the salience of Romanticism to the initial development of studio-era Hollywood scoring. As Jennifer Fleegeer has argued, the conversion-era score was “disparate . . . rather than unified”; it was an “amalgamation of melodic fragments” whose conceptual basis was not in the unities of classical music, as most scholarship has assumed, but in the compressed, hook-heavy style of Tin Pan Alley.⁴¹ What is perhaps even more of an affront to conventional histories is the fact that underscoring first became institutionalized in Hollywood not in dramatic filmmaking but in the specific field of *slapstick* cinema, for it was not in the name of classical narrative values that underscoring was first normalized but rather as a kind of affective “gel” that lent its qualities to the sensory registers of comedic pacing.⁴²

"STRAINING THE RISIBILITIES": THE HAL ROACH
STUDIOS' TRANSITION TO FEATURES

We will approach subsequent developments in this paradigm of slapstick musicality by first turning to the economic and industrial factors that prompted the Roach Studios' transition to features. From any standpoint, the Roach lot was uniquely positioned to weather the storms within the short-subject market of the 1930s. Coddled by his distribution deal with Loew's-MGM, Roach had guaranteed access to a major-studio-owned theater chain that protected his product from the front lines of the battle against double features. Roach himself considered that deal "the smartest business move I ever made," and for good reason: he was the only independent producer of short comedies whose company survived the decade.⁴³ Still, the Roach lot could hardly stand entirely outside the fray. MGM may have been—famously—the most "Depression-proof" of the Hollywood majors; even so, the economic turbulence of the short-subject market ensured that Roach's profits occasionally transformed into losses. The Roach Studios had posted profits of \$87,085 for its first full season following the Depression—July 27, 1930 to August 29, 1931—but then registered losses of \$41,875 for the following six months.⁴⁴ The seesawing continued throughout the early 1930s: profits of \$218,155 for the 1933–1934 season were answered by losses of almost the same amount, \$221,919, the subsequent year, with more red ink coloring the ledgers for the 1935–1936 season.⁴⁵ Roach's first response to these market uncertainties had been to experiment with a three-reel format in a number of his series in the 1930–1931 and 1931–1932 seasons. The plan seems to have been to seize a "prestige" identity for the studio's releases that would differentiate the Roach brand from competitors in the short-subject field.⁴⁶ But the experiments failed to satisfy exhibitors—who complained that the films seemed "padded"—prompting a further change in strategy on Roach's part: seeing no future in shorts, he opted to transition gradually out of the short-subject market altogether to produce features. It was within those features that a new role for music was assayed.

Not that the Roach Studios' earliest dalliances with the feature format reflected any grand plan. The studio's first feature effort, *Pardon Us*, seems to have begun life as a regular Laurel and Hardy two-reeler that Roach's filmmakers, perhaps emboldened by their concurrent three-reel experiments, opportunistically extended to feature length. "As far as I can remember," Roach later recalled, "*Pardon Us* was supposed to be a two-reeler."⁴⁷ The idea for the short had been to use the massive sets recently built for MGM's *The Big House* (1930) as the basis for a prison-themed comedy. When the set-use arrangement fell through, however, Roach was forced to create new prison sets on his own lot (reportedly based on actual photographs of Sing Sing and San Quentin).⁴⁸ To offset the expense, Roach and his writers simply extended the film to six reels for release as a feature, rightly trusting that they would be able to convince MGM

to release it. On May 25, 1931, MGM bucked its long-standing policy of only distributing in-house features and drew up a one-time deal to cover the release of *Pardon Us*.⁴⁹ The resulting feature did terrific business, grossing more than a half million dollars in the United States and Canada alone—a figure that Laurel and Hardy’s subsequent features never managed to top.⁵⁰ Roach was now in a position to negotiate with MGM in advance for future features, although MGM permitted these arrangements only on a picture-by-picture basis and initially limited these deals to Laurel and Hardy vehicles; moreover, the comedy team was to continue their work in short subjects at the rate of around a half dozen per year. A deal for a second feature, *Pack Up Your Troubles* (1932), was signed on January 5, 1932, and for a third, *The Devil’s Brother*, at the end of the year—at which point MGM doubled down on its commitment by contracting for two Laurel and Hardy features for each of the 1933–1934 and 1934–1935 seasons.⁵¹ By mid-decade, the ongoing success of these films empowered Roach to begin to phase out his short-subject lines and place studio operations on a more consistently feature-length footing. Laurel and Hardy made their last short together in 1935, *Thicker than Water* (March), and then appeared exclusively in features for Hal Roach for the remainder of the decade, two per season; the Thelma Todd and Patsy Kelly shorts were abruptly terminated by Todd’s death, also in 1935, at which point Roach leveraged Kelly into feature-length roles in *Kelly the Second* (1936) and *Pick A Star* (1937); Charley Chase was unceremoniously shown the door after his first solo starring feature, *Movie Night* (1936), misfired and had to be cut down for release as a two-reeler, retitled *Neighborhood House* (May 1936); finally, the *Our Gang* releases were phased down to single reels, “too successful to stop,” in historian Richard Roberts’s words, until Roach sold the whole franchise to MGM in 1938.⁵²

To have convinced MGM to accept a regular supply of independently produced features was no small feat; as Richard Lewis Ward notes, an examination of MGM’s release schedule in the 1930s shows that the studio accepted only three other third-party features during the entire decade, one of which was David O. Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind* (1939).⁵³ But securing distribution was only part of the difficulty. The studio’s filmmakers also had to negotiate the pitfalls of adapting the Roach brand of slapstick to the longer format.⁵⁴ It is moreover clear from contemporary reviews that Laurel and Hardy’s initial features struggled precisely on this issue. *Pardon Us*, as noted, began life as a two-reeler that Roach’s filmmakers then stretched out for six reels for release as a feature. Yet such an approach all but guaranteed a heavily episodic structure that diverged from classical norms of plot construction: as in many of their shorts, Laurel and Hardy are simply characters to whom things “happen”—here, imprisoned, caught up in an escape, recaptured, caught up in another escape—rather than goal-driven protagonists capable of sustaining an unfolding narrative.

Few reviewers harbored any illusions that the film was anything but a drawn-out short, and many reiterated the accusations of padding that had accompanied the studio's three-reel releases. “The material does not provide the consistent riotous fun that their short films do,” observed one reviewer; “[The] full-length film is something of a strain on the partnership,” commented another.⁵⁵ Similar complaints attended Laurel and Hardy's second feature-length effort, *Pack Up Your Troubles*, released the following year. Even though Roach's writers this time sought a stronger basis in story—the plot apes Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) by casting Stan and Ollie as surrogate fathers to the orphaned daughter of their deceased war buddy—critics remained dubious about the duo's suitability for six-reelers. “This kind of entertainment, rough and comic, needs to be short, pungent and, above all, speedy to be really effective,” Marguerite Tazelaar commented at the *New York Herald-Tribune*. “Two reels packed with it make for the kind of side-bursting hilarity Chaplin and Mack Sennett have been able to achieve. Six reels tend to strain the risibilities.”⁵⁶ More striking than this, however, was the degree of hostility leveled against the film's slapstick sequences, which, some felt, were jarringly mismatched with the otherwise sentimental storyline. “They have allowed their low comedy to become entwined with the wrong kind of pathos,” commented a reviewer for the London *Times*, criticizing in particular the slapstick depiction of trench warfare early in the film, when the young girl's father loses his life. “The soldier whose last hours are made miserable by a genuine concern for his motherless child ought never to have been enlisted in an army that already had Laurel and Hardy in its ranks.”⁵⁷ Also jarring was an elaborate pie fight sequence—eventually cut from the finished film—which ensues when the boys, back from the front, disrupt a wedding. As scripted, the sequence seems to have been intended as an homage of sorts to one of the most celebrated sequences of the pair's silent shorts, the hugely elaborate pie fight from *Battle of the Century* (December 1927), which had involved the entire day's output of the Los Angeles Pie Company. (The screenplay for *Pack Up Your Troubles* makes the link to the earlier film explicit: “This develops into a ‘Battle of the Century,’ ending with the bride crowning the groom with the big cake.”)⁵⁸ But lightning failed to strike twice, and a poor preview screening for *Pack Up Your Troubles* resulted in the sequence being pulled. As Felix Feist of MGM wired Roach executive Henry Ginsberg following the August 1932 preview, “Practically every preview card expressed repulsion at pie throwing episode which Hal agreed should come out.”⁵⁹ The critical double bind was thus apparent: where *Pardon Us* received complaints for its lack of an integrative narrative, *Pack Up Your Troubles* provoked “repulsion” for slapstick sequences that *mismatched* its narrative frame.

Curiously enough, Laurel and Hardy had by this time already cameoed in another, quite different type of feature that may have suggested to Roach a more

promising path for multiple-reel success. The film in question was the 1930 MGM operetta *The Rogue Song*, a high-profile, two-color Technicolor showcase for Metropolitan Opera star Lawrence Tibbett, directed by Lionel Barrymore, for which Laurel and Hardy had been loaned from Roach to appear briefly as “burlesque desperadoes.”⁶⁰ Loosely adapted from Franz Lehár’s 1912 operetta *Gypsy Love*, *The Rogue Song* had been a flagship for sound cinema’s promise as a medium of musical uplift. Tibbett thus spoke of the film as an attempt to disseminate high culture for the American public: “Just as the radio educated the public in the matter of good music,” he noted, “so the talking picture will show the beauties of music combined with dramatic action.”⁶¹ The movie was received in kind by a number of critics who considered it an “epoch-maker” that promised to fundamentally transform sound cinema’s position within the field of cultural production: *The Rogue Song* “will surely start a concerted raid on the grandest opera houses in the world to get singers from the screen,” one critic wrote; “the picture should open the door to great voices and really great composers,” commented another.⁶² But what were Laurel and Hardy doing here? Although their inclusion in the film may seem incongruous, most stage operettas did in fact contain comic foils to the romantic couple. As Donald Crafton has suggested, moreover, Laurel and Hardy’s presence in *The Rogue Song* seems to have been calculated to ensure a broad, mass public for a feature that was otherwise marketed in distinctly highbrow terms.⁶³ Within the trajectory of Hal Roach’s developing production strategies, then, it is possible that *The Rogue Song* offered an intriguing object lesson in how to negotiate the terrain of feature-length filmmaking. Casting Laurel and Hardy as comic relief in operetta-style plots would not only bring the pair’s features in line with the prestige brand identity of Roach’s distributor, Loew’s-MGM; it also suggested a strategy for resolving the double bind that the team had encountered in their first two starring features. Such an approach would relieve the comedians of the burden of carrying a feature-length narrative—since they could now appear as auxiliary comic characters within otherwise serious romantic plots—and it would also provide a genteel framework for couching the duo’s “low” slapstick. At a time of slapstick’s waning mass appeal, the operetta model would enable Roach to identify the Laurel and Hardy features with a *diversity* of attractions: not just slapstick but romance and period settings, not just “lowbrow” comedy but “highbrow” opera. Accordingly, for their third feature, Roach aped the *Rogue Song* template by casting the duo in *The Devil’s Brother*, based on Daniel Auber’s 1830 opéra comique *Fra Diavolo*, and would do so again in two of their subsequent features: *Babes in Toyland* (based on Victor Herbert’s 1903 operetta) and *The Bohemian Girl* (based on Michael Balfe’s 1843 opera). In the process, Roach’s filmmakers would not only completely invert the Tin Pan Alley paradigm of slapstick musicality first developed in shorts; they would also consign the studio’s leading clowns to a realm of fairy-tale nostalgia.

"A CHILD'S CONCEPTION OF FAIRY LAND": SOCIAL
ORDER AND FAIRY-TALE UTOPIA IN THE LAUREL
AND HARDY OPERETTAS

To understand this process it is useful to attend first to what philosopher Jacques Attali has termed the "political economy" of music. Such an economy, Attali argues, revolves in the first instance around distinctions between what is considered *music* and what is *noise* in any given period; that is, how and where those distinctions are located and negotiated within social experience and cultural expression. Those distinctions, moreover, pertain to questions of social and political ordering. Noise is the very "image of subversion," Attali argues, to which music responds as a force of order, both a symbol and a tool of social cohesion.⁶⁴ "All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality *Every code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the same time produces them.*"⁶⁵ What Attali proposes, in short, is nothing less than a historical hermeneutic that comprehends music—traditionally, for aesthetic theory, the most ineffable and immaterial of cultural forms—as in fact in reciprocal interaction with material social formations. Musical forms thus not only correspond to or "reflect" concrete social forms, Attali suggests, but also play a productive role *within* the social process, whether as a means of actively reinforcing social or cultural order or as a provocation toward material social changes to come. (Tonal music, for instance, grounded as it is in a scientific ideology of harmony, thus becomes for Attali a bourgeois substitute for religion in imaginatively convincing people of the ideal of a harmonious and rationalized social order from which dissonance will be removed; free jazz, meanwhile, is viewed as the "refuge of a [revolutionary] violence" that as yet lacked a "political outlet.")⁶⁶

This sense of music's role in reproducing social forms is important to us in this analysis, since it suggests a way of framing the Roach Studio's toggling between musical styles (Shield-style pop jazz, European operetta) in terms of the different social imaginaries they sustained. In accommodating popular musical paradigms as a basis for underscoring practice, Roach's output was initially configured in relation to musical idioms that corresponded, within the era's cultural imaginary, to a heteroglot conception of society. To take jazz as an example: a common image for the form was given in Paul Whiteman's musical film for Universal, *King of Jazz* (1930), which posited the music's origins in the combined influences of all manner of immigrant communities (albeit notoriously, in this film, with the omission of African Americans). What jazz meant in this context was notoriously slippery (music historian Krin Gabbard notes that "jazz" in the 1920s meant basically any fast-paced popular tune); still, the sense that it amounted to a kind of "industrialized folk-music," as the *Nation* dubbed it, was commonplace.⁶⁷ The same held for a range of cognate musical idioms, from ragtime to Tin Pan Alley commercial pop, which exhibited a "multicolored musical and linguistic palette"

that appropriated the syncopated complexities of African musical tradition to Euro- and Anglo-American song structures like marches and ballads.⁶⁸ “Most of the star Tin Pan Alley composers and lyricists were Jewish and of recent immigrant stock,” Ann Douglas writes, “and they found their finest interpreters in Negro as well as Jewish musicians and performers—Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Al Jolson, Louis Armstrong, and Ethel Waters.”⁶⁹ In the opinion of a host of commentators, the vernacular mixing that produced these various musical forms thus gave the nation its only fully developed “folk” art. (Or, as George and Ira Gershwin put it in the title of one of their early tunes, “The Real American Folk Song (Is a Rag).”) It is thus notable how this hybridized musical imaginary seems to have informed the social content of the Roach Studios’ early sound output: the popular tunes and jazzy ditties that commonly appear in the narratives of these early shorts often become fulcrums around which the studio’s clowns forge communal connections across distinctions of ethnicity, region, and even nation in a kind of comically enacted utopianism. A remarkable instance is provided by the very first sound release in Roach’s *All-Star* series, *Hurdy Gurdy*, in which sound is exploited both for ethnic dialect humor and for singing. Directed by Roach himself, the film is less narrative than slice-of-life, cutting between various scenes on the fire escapes of a New York City tenement as the residents sweat out a heat wave. Dialogue here works to establish a comedic tapestry of interethnic miscommunication and frustration: Edgar Kennedy, performing his familiar policeman role in a thick Irish brogue, vainly tries to get some sleep while harassed by his Italian neighbors’ pet monkey; two German-Jewish neighbors, played by Max Davidson and Oscar Apfel, vainly try to discuss politics in broken English; all, moreover, become suspicious of their beautiful neighbor (Thelma Todd), who continually calls on the ice man (Eddie Dunn) to deliver blocks of ice. Popular song, by contrast, expresses a more integrative ideal; in counterpoint to the vignettes of squabbling neighbors is a series of scenes between Todd and Dunn, whose developing romance is conveyed through duets of “She Lives Down in Our Alley” and “My Gal Sal.” Their performance of the latter provides resolution and the film’s conclusion: Todd allays her neighbors’ suspicions by explaining that she is a vaudeville animal trainer who needs the ice for the seal she has hidden in her bathroom; Kennedy apologizes “on behalf of mesself and all those furrners out there in the alley”; and Todd and Dunn harmonize one final time on the fire escape.

This model of a mixed musical community would return throughout the early period, notably in some of the Charley Chase musical shorts—for example, in the wartime comedy *High C’s*, in which Chase fakes an armistice so that he can reach across enemy lines and enlist a talented German tenor into his close harmony quartet, or in one of his rural slapsticks, *The Real McCoy* (February 1930), in which Chase’s city slicker proves his worth to distrustful hillbillies by leading them in an up-tempo rendition of the traditional song “Naomi Wise.” It would also underpin the short-lived series of “comedies with music” launched in the 1933–1934 season,

featuring Billy Gilbert and Billy Bletcher as the German “Schmaltz brothers.” In this series, popular music greases the wheels of business success and assimilation for the ethnic clown. The first in the series, *Rhapsody in Brew* (September 1933), has the brothers tricked into buying a failing beer garden that they nonetheless turn into a hit nightclub destination by hiring an all-female jazz orchestra. In the third, *Music in Your Hair* (June 1934), the comedians play not brothers but German neighbors who put their battles aside when their Americanized children—the Bletcher character’s daughter and Gilbert’s son—fall in love and form a nightclub musical duo. Making visible the historical role of popular music as a vehicle for ethnic participation in America’s mass culture, these comedies translate that process into utopian depictions of bottom-up communal formation and kinship.⁷⁰

But this polyglot utopianism vanished with the Roach Studios’ transition to operetta, which replaced the vernacular ideal of a mixed community with the depiction of a top-down political order. In his book *The American Film Musical*, Rick Altman discusses the operetta (which he dubs the “fairy-tale” musical) as an allegory of governance. Characteristic of the operetta—particularly in the Viennese tradition pioneered in the 1870s and 1880s by Johan Strauss II and continued into the new century by Franz Lehár—is the “equation of an aristocratic or even royal love affair with the affairs of government.” “Courting relations,” Altman writes, “are tied to government concerns.”⁷¹ At the center of the operetta’s imaginary universe is thus typically the motif of the small kingdom or Old World principality, dominated by a castle or estate as the organizing center of narrative action: a place for the convening of lords, ladies, and their retainers, the castle-space provides the trappings for romantic and familial complications whose resolutions also serve to reinstate political order.⁷² The film operetta immediately adopts this syntax, beginning with Warner Bros.’ *The Desert Song* and Paramount’s Ernst Lubitsch-directed *The Love Parade* in 1929. The former, based on Sigmund Romberg’s 1926 operetta, situates its *Sheik*-like romance against the backdrop of a rebel uprising against a French outpost in Morocco; the latter, Lubitsch’s first sound film, ties the romance between the unmarried queen of Sylvania (Jeanette MacDonald) and a capricious count (Maurice Chevalier) to the restoration of the country’s financial security. Yet the extent to which the operetta thus concentrates on adult themes of governance brought dilemmas for the Roach Studios’ engagement with that tradition. True, the presence of clown or fool figures was a standardized trope of the operetta form, extending back to the style of opéra bouffe pioneered by Jacques Offenbach in the 1850s. But operetta’s thematic organization also displaced those clowns from the kind of narrative pertinence that feature-length starring vehicles would seem to require.⁷³ The formal problem of the Laurel and Hardy operettas thus lay in a social and narrative conception that paradoxically both enabled and limited the duo’s presence all at once.

These dilemmas were clear from the Roach Studios’ very first operetta, *The Devil’s Brother*, in which Laurel and Hardy appear as the comic henchmen from

Auber's original text, Giacomo and Beppo—here renamed Stanlio and Ollio. Although greatly expanded from the source, the henchmen's roles are nonetheless caught between three nullifications that work to insulate their comedy from the social logic of the film's narrative. First, and most basically, Stanlio and Ollio are almost entirely excluded from meaningful plot agency. Predating the tradition of the operetta proper—as associated with Strauss, Lehár, and others—Auber's text belongs properly to the earlier lineage of the *opéra comique* and, accordingly, stakes its narrative on a somewhat different vision of social order, not the fantasy of a fairy-tale kingdom but rather the economic security of an emergent bourgeoisie (the same social vision, that is, as contemporaneous French stage melodrama, albeit here reworked as comedy); yet the narrative exclusion of the clown remains the same, for what is at stake is a social order that simply permits no space for clowning in its constitution.⁷⁴ The plot is thus configured around complications concerning property and real estate, of which Stanlio and Ollio have none. On the one hand, there is the romance plot: an innkeeper's daughter, Zerlina, loves a young soldier, Lorenzo, yet her father plans for her to marry into wealth so he will have enough money to keep his inn. On the other, there is the kind of risqué courtly intrigue characteristic of the filmed operettas of Lubitsch: a dashing bandit, Fra Diavolo, steals money and jewels from the young wife of a witless aristocrat, Lord Rocburg (the aristocratic couple played by Roach stalwarts Thelma Todd and Jimmy Finlayson). The two lines converge to resolve the innkeeper's economic situation when Diavolo, unmasked as the thief, secretly gives some of the stolen loot to Lorenzo, who in turn uses it to save the innkeeper from having to sell his inn, so that it is not the riches of aristocracy that the narrative works to restore but the consolidation of bourgeois economic security at the expense of bumbling aristocrats.

Where, then, are Laurel and Hardy in this story? Wandering peasants, they are tricked in their first scene into joining Fra Diavolo's team of bandits, but over the course of the film make only one meaningful contribution to the story's development—when a “spiffed” (drunk) Stanlio unwittingly reveals Diavolo's identity to Lorenzo. Instead, theirs is a life lived in the *entr'acte*, in the interstices of comic relief: in the time spent in bungling efforts to carry a sedan chair, or in repeat run-ins with an enraged bull, or in soporific drunkenness. “Interlude” was in fact a key term in the film's critical reception, where Laurel and Hardy's scenes were repeatedly described as “funny interludes,” “pantomimic interludes,” and the like.⁷⁵ What Stanlio and Ollio are subject to, in other words, is simply the other side of the same comic depreciation that renders aristocracy, in the form of Lord Rocburg, a figure of fun: laughter, in this narrative, radiates outward from the bourgeois middle to render all its outsiders fools, peasants and nobility alike.

It is in this sense that the duo's narrative marginalization is further crisscrossed by a second form of nullification, the motif of play, which defines the duo's comicality in terms of an infantilism entirely separated from adult concerns of marriage and property ownership. *The Devil's Brother* introduces this motif by having



FIGURE 30. “Stanlio” and “Ollio” in *The Devil’s Brother* (1933). The caption on the back of this production still reads, “Stan Laurel does the ‘finger-wiggle’ for Oliver Hardy’s benefit.” Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Stanlio repeatedly befuddle Ollio through the games of “Finger Wiggle”—which involves interlocking both hands by pivoting them around the middle fingers—and “Kneesy, Earsie, Nosey”—a challenge of coordination involving grabbing one’s ears, knees, and nose with alternating right and left hands (fig. 30). (The reviewer for the *Herald-Tribune* described the latter game, which briefly became a children’s fad, as “an exhibition of sheer idiocy . . . [that] convulses the audience.”)⁷⁶ Subsequent operettas stuck to the formula: *The Bohemian Girl* featured Stan perplexing Ollie with a number of children’s tricks, including the age-old “severed thumb” illusion, while *Babes in Toyland* launched another kiddie craze with its revival of “pee-wee,” a game with a wooden stick and puck. (This time, the Roach Studios saw the merchandising opportunity and licensed the manufacture of a Laurel and Hardy pee-wee set.)⁷⁷

Third, and most tellingly, Laurel and Hardy are also excluded from the world of song, which, typically of operatic forms, serves to galvanize the narrative’s social universe, punctuating and defining its various political orderings. As philosopher Catherine Clément has observed, “In any opera there is what might be called a vocal backdrop . . . a *society of voices*. . . . The community is represented

by crowds singing with a huge, vague voice.”⁷⁸ From the outset of the film, song plays an essential part in introducing the narrative’s various social groups—first the world of the bandits, next the world of nobility, third the world of the inn—before the clowns make their appearance as an eccentric fourth term, excluded from the film’s musical organization. For the opening scene, we are introduced to Fra Diavolo singing his signature tune “On Yonder Rock Reclining” as he descends into the bandits’ camp, greeted by a chorus of men and women with the refrain, “Diavolo, Diavolo, Diavolo!” The next scene is a flashback, as Diavolo regales his cohort with the story of his encounter with Lady Rocburg. The aristocratic world of courtly affairs and intrigue is here associated with the wistful barcarole with which Diavolo, disguised as a marquis, seduces Lady Rocburg into betraying the location of her jewels. Next, we are brought to the inn, where another choral refrain coalesces a third social world: a soldiers’ drinking song (“Wine’s the soldier’s shield/ In the tented field,” etc.) introduces the community around the inn, where Lorenzo and Zerlina declare their love for one another.

It is only after these three scenes, paralleled in their use of song to define distinct social groupings, that Stanlio and Ollio are introduced, in what is, not coincidentally, the first of the film’s scenes to lack song. Laurel and Hardy’s exterior position vis-à-vis the narrative’s broad social divisions—the world of the bandits versus that of nobility versus the bourgeois world of the inn—is thus defined as a specifically *musical* separation. There is no singing in Laurel and Hardy’s introductory scene, in which they comically attempt to rob a woodcutter; instead, the script simply specifies “incidental noises to end of reel.”⁷⁹ Indeed, there is no real singing for the pair at all in this film: clowning’s close relation to musicality in the Roach shorts is, in this sense, inverted into a nonrelation to song in *The Devil’s Brother*. Only at a much later point does Stanlio even attempt to sing, instructed by Fra Diavolo to use a snatch of melody as a secret signal in the plot to steal Rocburg’s fortune. But Stanlio sings the wrong tune and is told to shut up: “If I hear a single note of that song again,” Fra Diavolo yells, “I’ll—I’ll cut out your tongue!”

This use of song as a device for encoding a social structure from which the clowns are excluded carries over into *The Bohemian Girl*, which adapts Balfe’s opera about a gypsy band and their kidnapping of an aristocrat’s daughter. Once again, as with *The Devil’s Brother*, the opening sequences use the “society of voices” device to organize and divide the different groups within the film’s narrative: first, an extended sequence of gypsies singing and dancing (“Gypsy vagabonds are we/ As free as anyone can be,” etc.); next, a brief marching song as soldiers arrive at Count Arnheim’s estate. Yet Stan and Ollie’s place within this divided social world, and thus their relation to song, is again an ambivalent one, in which they serve primarily as intermediaries between the social poles of the narrative, fully belonging to neither. Nominally gypsies, they receive neither respect nor inclusion within their own community, which consigns to them the unwanted task of raising the kidnapped girl; nominally her deliverers, Stan and Ollie eventually restore the count’s daughter to her rightful

estate, only to be tortured, not rewarded. Nor, then, do they really belong to song, as again becomes comically evident in the one instance when Stanley *does* attempt a tune. Ollie hears a beautiful soprano voice singing outside his caravan, only for Stan to enter and reveal the voice as his (a woman’s voice comically dubbed over). “Do you know you have a nice voice?” asks a surprised Ollie. “Oh, I had a much nicer voice until I ran a nail through it,” is Stan’s nonsensical reply. Later in the scene, Stan starts singing again—only this time he emits a deep bass for one verse, then a squeaky falsetto in the next (again overtly dubbed).⁸⁰

Despite differences, then, in the political orders that *The Devil’s Brother* and *The Bohemian Girl* enjoin—in the former, the economic security of a nascent bourgeoisie, in the latter, the familial lineage of aristocracy—neither is ultimately able to tolerate what literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin described as the clown’s “right to be ‘other’” within their social worlds.⁸¹ Neither permits the duo meaningful agency in the establishment of their respective orders, nor are they allowed a place once restoration is achieved: *The Devil’s Brother* ends with Stan and Ollie being chased off by the bull one last time, *The Bohemian Girl* with them rescued from Count Arnheim’s torture chamber. For the latter film’s closing “gag,” in fact, the duo appear as physical symbols of their own lack of fit, tortured into grossly misshapen form, Stanley squeezed short, Ollie stretched tall. (The *Variety* critic, with a view to the child audience, deemed this ending “downright unwholesome.”)⁸² In the meantime, the clown’s power of play, as the right to refuse categories and expose masks, has been immunized as childish gaming, a kind of inconsequential fun to be enjoyed in the interstices of the adult world.

(An extended parenthesis is warranted here to touch briefly on a film that, while not one of Laurel and Hardy’s feature-length operettas, nevertheless provides the most startling instance of these representational conundrums: *Bonnie Scotland* [1935]. Although lacking song, the film shares the operetta formula of linking romance to governmental concerns within an exotic “fairy-tale” space—here, the outpost of a Scottish regiment in the far reaches of imperial India. Borrowing liberally from the basic template of Sig Romberg’s *The Desert Song*, the plot of *Bonnie Scotland* braids its romance around the regiment’s efforts to quell an uprising of native forces, led by the evil Khan Mir Jutra. But the efforts of writers Frank Butler and Jeff Moffitt to find a place for Laurel and Hardy within that narrative broke down completely. In the preview cut, so much screen time was given over to the love story as to puzzle audiences and critics expecting a Laurel and Hardy feature. The “romance between a young soldier and the girl is developed almost entirely without the aid of the comedians,” noted a *Variety* reviewer, while the critic for *Liberty* magazine similarly expressed disappointment at “prolonged scenes of a conventional and dully treated love story.”⁸³ In response to the film’s poor preview, Laurel elected to cut out much of the romance plot, reducing the original running time by some twenty minutes. In the process, however, he rendered the film’s narrative incoherent. As the romantic lead William Janney remembered, “Stan cut out

so much of it that when you'd see one scene, the scene before it was missing, so you'd wonder, "What in the hell are they doing *that* for?"⁸⁴)

It is thus telling that the one Laurel and Hardy musical feature to redress these dilemmas did so by bracketing off the concerns of the adult world altogether to situate its narrative fully within the realm of childhood fantasy. A free adaptation of Mother Goose nursery rhymes, Victor Herbert's 1903 operetta *Babes in Toyland* had already been eyed as a potential sound feature by RKO as early as 1930, when the company arranged to have Walt Disney produce the film as a two- or three-strip Technicolor animated feature for distribution through RKO exchanges; but when the expense of the project gave RKO cold feet, Hal Roach—who had fond memories of seeing the play as a young boy—stepped in to acquire the rights in November 1933.⁸⁵ *Babes in Toyland* became the most ambitious and expensive picture that his studio had ever attempted, its negative cost of \$421,810 more than doubling the average of the firm's previous features (and requiring an exceptional \$250,000 advance from Loew's-MGM).⁸⁶ Above all, though, *Babes in Toyland* represented a determined attempt to secure Roach's transition to features by targeting children as a pathway to the profitable family audience. The film was aggressively marketed in sentimental terms as a family picture for Christmas release. Promotional material explained how *Babes in Toyland's* lavish budget had been spent to create "the average child's conception of fairy land," and the film was received in kind, with many critics commenting on its seasonal appeal.⁸⁷ "In England the 'Christmas Pantomime' for the kiddies is an ancient and honorable institution," the *New York American* reviewer observed. "[*Babes in Toyland*] provides something of the same sort for the youngsters here—the quiet little ones who sit up for Santa Claus."⁸⁸ "If Hal Roach aimed at the production of a purely juvenile picture to which children might conceivably drag their elders, he has succeeded in a measure beyond others who have sought to enter this realm," another critic noted, praising the film's "glamour of mysticism which marks juvenile literature."⁸⁹ (Far less maudlin, the reviewer for *Time* noted that "minors, for whom . . . [it] was presumably intended, are almost sure to like it," usefully adding, "A more important recommendation is the strong possibility that it will not bore, disgust or irritate their elders.")⁹⁰

Cementing this sense of the film as a "special event" for children, *Babes in Toyland* was even given a well-publicized advance screening, on December 18, to an audience of some 175 disabled children at New York's Bellevue Hospital, where it was attended by two of the film's stars (Jean Darling and Johnny Downs, who appear in the film as Curly Locks and Little Boy Blue, respectively) and current Our Gang members Spanky McFarland and Scotty Beckett (fig. 31). The sentimental imperative that governed the film's marketing here crested in a staged event centered on the pathos of childhood dependency. As the *New York Times* reported, "There were tiny boys with arms in slings and casts or bandaged heads. There were children lying on stretchers, others seated in chairs, against which crutches were



FIGURE 31. Special screening of *Babes in Toyland* (1934) to an audience of disabled children at New York's Bellevue Hospital. Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

propped. . . . As the children left the 'theatre' one little girl heaved a tremendous sigh. 'It's the best movie I ever saw,' she said."⁹¹

That *Babes in Toyland* was so explicitly marketed as a movie for children is the first clue here. In operettas like *The Devil's Brother* and *The Bohemian Girl*, we have seen, the clown's role was demoted to an interstitial space of childhood play, marginalized within plots revolving around adult concerns of marriage and political rule; in *Babes in Toyland*, however, the narrative world *is* that of childhood, insofar as it marks the exact adequation between narrative and nursery rhyme. To be childlike is thus not to be marginalized but to *belong*, for this is a world populated entirely by nursery rhyme characters. Little Bo-Beep, Tom, Tom the Piper's Son, the Three Little Pigs, the Cat and the Fiddle, the Little Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, and "Stannie Dum" and "Ollie Dee"—in the opening sequence, a pocket-sized Mother Goose introduces these dramatis personae one by one, turning the pages of a nursery book (a studio prop twice her size), each page bearing a matte live-action image of the character. Within this world, moreover, the themes of class power or political governance simply do not appear. Rather, to the extent to which this world is a contested space, it is so by forces whose possible social or political content is entirely absorbed into the received codes of childhood

fable. As literary scholar Susan Stewart has argued, the fairy tale is typically a tale of miniature forces—a fable of fairies or dolls pitted against ugly dwarves, for instance—whose very reduction in scale creates an “other” time and space that displaces the world of lived, social reality. “The miniature,” Stewart writes, “does not attach itself to lived historical time. . . . [It] skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its ‘use value’ transformed into the infinite time of reverie.”⁹² Miniaturization is, indeed, the salient principle of Toyland’s representation as a terrain for actualizing children’s fantasy: to quote studio publicity, the set comprised “attractive little houses with candy canes forming a picket fence; the tiny homes of the Three Little Pigs built of bricks, straw and sticks; miniature wagons drawn by goats,” and at its center, the boot-shaped home of the Little Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, here literalized.⁹³ The fantastic and diminutive scale of things is further established by a set of correspondences with familiar objects: the outsized book prop from the credit sequence, toy soldiers taller than the “human” protagonists, as well as “a number of giant trees . . . supplied by outside nurseries”—all coalesce in the impression of a toy-chest world whose precisely arranged detail rests on the exclusion of the grotesque, as embodied in the misshapen, imperfect form of the bogeymen, consigned to a nether realm.⁹⁴ Mediating the two spheres in *Babes in Toyland* is Silas Barnaby, the “meanest man in town,” whose frustrated designs on Little Bo-Peep lead him to unleash the forces of Bogeyland against the Toyland residents. Only here that mediation is not between two halves of a social totality that must be arranged into a class order (as in the relation between bourgeoisie and aristocracy in *The Devil’s Brother*) but rather of the illicit opening between two separate scales of fairy-tale reality—the miniaturized ideal, the monstrously grotesque—that must be hermetically sealed against one another.

It is here, in fact, that Laurel and Hardy finally find the narrative agency that in other features eludes them, playing kindly toymakers who become protectors of the Toyland harmony that Barnaby threatens. The boys’ narrative contribution is at first unpropitious: they misunderstand Santa Claus’s order for toy soldiers, building them six times their requested height. Yet the error nonetheless proves to be Toyland’s salvation: in the face of Barnaby’s bogeymen, Stannie and Ollie animate the mechanical soldiers and send them out to successfully ward off the attack (shot in a then-celebrated stop-motion sequence by Roy Seawright). They also turn the game of “pee-wee” into a strategy of offense, as Stan uses his expertise at hitting a puck to launch darts at the invading forces. The very childlike qualities that in other films inscribed Stan and Ollie’s irreconcilable difference have here become the principle of their inclusion, at once the framework for their narrative agency and the means for the restoration of community (fig. 32). In contrast with other Laurel and Hardy features, critical opinion on *Babes in Toyland* thus celebrated the integration of plot and comedy: “Everything done has a direct bearing on the story, and all of the comedy gags are written about this thread of narrative.”⁹⁵



FIGURE 32. Stan and Ollie help Tom-Tom and Bo-Peep escape from Barnaby's lair, an example of the duo's narrative agency in *Babes in Toyland* (1934). Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Importantly, the distinction dividing *Babes in Toyland* from Laurel and Hardy's other operettas also corresponds to a transformation in literary models, a switch from the European *opéra comique*/operetta tradition, premised on themes of social ordering and political governance, to the imprint of the fairy tale in its characteristically Americanized form as a vehicle for utopian imaginings. The "classical" fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson and the brothers Grimm had conceived of narrative as a symbolic form for socializing children into standards of belonging, but later English-language writers like George Macdonald and L. Frank Baum had disrupted this normative function by envisioning fairy-tale utopias informed by more egalitarian and communal ideals.⁹⁶ Baum's legacy is an important one for *Babes in Toyland*. Not only was the success of his original *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1901 the direct inspiration for Herbert's operetta (indeed, the same librettist, Glen MacDonough, was responsible both for Herbert's operetta and for the stage version of Baum's novel, which both opened in 1903 and which contain numerous structural parallels), but it is also likely that it was Baum's 1910 *Emerald City of Oz*, the sixth in his Oz series, that provided the template for Roach's narrative reworking of the Herbert musical.⁹⁷ The most

explicitly utopian of all the Oz tales, *Emerald City* similarly sets the representation of communal harmony against the threat of invasion by grotesque creatures—in Baum’s novel, the Nome king and his rapacious Whimsies, Growleywogs, and Phanfasms. What becomes structurally decisive in the Roach film, accordingly, is thus not the orchestration of a stratified social space, as in *The Devil’s Brother* or *The Bohemian Girl*, but rather, as per Baum, the absolute contrast between fairy-tale utopia and the forces of its negation. There is thus a radical difference in the nature of the political orders that the Laurel and Hardy operettas enjoin; whereas their Viennese-style musicals work to establish a class-based ordering, be it bourgeois (*The Devil’s Brother*) or aristocratic (*The Bohemian Girl*), *Babes in Toyland* envisions the realization of a communal utopia to which the label “political” can hardly be said to apply at all.

But the twist is this: that utopia exists only for childhood. As the lyrics to Herbert’s “Toyland” remind us, first sung by Mother Goose as she introduces the film’s characters:

When you’ve grown up, my dears,
 And are as old as I,
 You’ll often ponder on the years
 That roll so swiftly by, my dears,
 That roll so swiftly by,
 And all the many lands
 You will have journeyed through.
 You’ll often recall,
 The best of all,
 The land your childhood knew,
 Your childhood.

The issue of the clown’s narrative representability in operetta thus encounters both its resolution and, arguably, a dead end in the construction of an unreachable utopia whose forms are projected into an atavistic past. Only within the time-space of childhood fairy tale were Roach’s filmmakers able to find a feature-length operetta format for fitting the clown to the role of narrative agent. But the limit of this solution lies in the fact that this utopic time-space is ultimately *presocial* in its orientation: if, for children, the fairy-tale space of *Toyland* is a realm for play antecedent to the experience of the social world, then for adults it is available only as an occasion for nostalgic retreat subsequent to that experience; for both, lived historical time is excluded.

*

Babes in Toyland was by no means the last attempt of Roach’s filmmakers to find a working formula for Laurel and Hardy’s musical features. The film was followed by two more musical features, the aforementioned *Bohemian Girl* and, in 1938, *Swiss Miss* (an original operetta, with songs composed by Phil Charig), both of which

restore the duo to the interstitial roles of *The Devil's Brother*. (As Roach himself recalled of his original story idea for *Swiss Miss*, in which Laurel and Hardy play mousetrap salesmen who travel to a Swiss hotel, "What I was trying to do is make musicals where a second plot carried on, so that Laurel and Hardy didn't have to be on all the time.")⁹⁸ But if it was not the last word, *Babes in Toyland* did provide the most definitive early example of a template that would become a minor trope of cinematic clowning in sound-era features: namely, the clown's conscription to fairy tale.⁹⁹ Despite some quibbles about the suitability of the bogeymen in a film intended for young children, reviewers were adamant in celebrating Roach's success in adapting slapstick comedy to the forms of children's literature. In the wake of the Payne Fund controversies over movies' influence on child development, *Babes in Toyland* was thus an object lesson in the value of fairy-tale-style family pictures and a model that producers like Disney and others would build upon. In terms of the specific trajectory of Laurel and Hardy's careers, *Babes in Toyland* established the form in which the team would be known and encountered by family audiences for years—indeed, decades—following. The film's substantial budget may ironically have ensured that it was the least profitable of all the early Laurel and Hardy features, with an initial net of only \$13,853.24, but *Toyland* likely made up for this through many subsequent rereleases as a seasonal favorite.¹⁰⁰ Eventually, in 1948, Lippert Pictures acquired the film and reissued it, with a slightly shorter running time, as *March of the Wooden Soldiers*, the form in which it continues to screen to this day as a Thanksgiving and Christmas Day television special.¹⁰¹ In terms of the broader arc of sound-era slapstick, the film helped cement a regular, if modest, trend in features that consigned the slapstick clown to a kind of no-man's land of childhood reverie—eccentric dancer Ray Bolger as the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Abbott and Costello in *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1952), Jerry Lewis in *Cinderfella* (1960), or the Three Stooges in *Snow White and the Three Stooges* (1961).

There was nothing new in the clown's conscription to fairy-tale fantasy, and the earlier-quoted reviewer who linked *Babes in Toyland* to British pantomime was more perspicacious than he knew. The same historical process had occurred a century earlier on the British stage, where, by the 1850s, the harlequinade style of performance, in which clowns were the leading participants, had been marginalized in favor of child-oriented seasonal spectacles and pantomimes based on nursery rhymes and moral fables.¹⁰² The clowns were never excluded from these extravaganzas; rather they brought their clowning into them. The consequence, however, was in all instances a kind of circumscribing of comedy's carnivalesque potential as a site for the festive inversion of the status quo, a restriction of the clown's "right to be 'other'" to the realm of childhood. If the promise of comedy is akin to that of what Michel Foucault once termed "heterotopias"—those spaces within a given culture that function as "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within

the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”—then the heterotopia of fairy tale displaces that promise by twisting away from “real sites” to make itself absolutely anterior to them, the lost possibility of childhood rather than an alternative to the present.¹⁰³

In the case of the Hal Roach Studios, I have been arguing, these processes can at least partly be explained through the studio’s experiments with operetta as a musical and narrative framework for its Laurel and Hardy features; for, in the transition to operetta-style features, music ultimately operated as a principle of ordering that came at the cost of the clown’s relation to lived social time. Whenever the studio operated outside this framework, its features were commonly dismissed by critics as padded-out two-reelers—as had been the case for Laurel and Hardy’s debut six-reeler, *Pardon Us*, and as would also be true of subsequent nonmusical features like *Our Relations* (“Tedious after a few hearty reels,” “They should know when to stop—and that is after the third reel”) and *Block-Heads* (1938; “Should have been one of their usual ‘shorts,’” “A lot of taffy stretched to the breaking point”).¹⁰⁴ While the more prestigious format of operetta went some way to mollifying these complaints, it also tended to subtract from the currency of the team’s comedy, now delegated to the interstices of a mythic political order configured through song (*The Devil’s Brother*, *The Bohemian Girl*) or consigned to a realm of fairy tale accessible only to childhood (*Babes in Toyland*). What begins to emerge, in short, is a second mode of what the previous chapter discussed as slapstick’s “social aging,” only here linked less to a change in slapstick’s audience (as in banalization) and more to textual strategies that served to withhold the clown from any relation with the social world. The next chapter extends this line of analysis by turning to the related issue of nostalgia and the emerging market for “old-time” comedy of the mid- to late 1930s.