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The Stage Mom Behind the Marx Brothers

In *Four of the Three Musketeers* Robert S. Bader shows that Groucho, Chico, Harpo and Zeppo had nothing on Minnie Marx—the booster, nag and agent who set them on their way to fame.



By Ethan Mordden

Having a relative in the business should give you a good head start. But Uncle Al Shean wasn't all that prominent, and he did little to help his nephews find a place in show business while he himself was struggling. In the end, he became half of a duo-act that introduced one of the best-known catch phrases in the culture—"Positively, Mister Gallagher? Absolutely, Mister Shean!" Yet he was all the same completely overshadowed by his wild and crazy nephews: Leonard, Adolph, Julius, Milton and Herbert.

Known as the Four Marx Brothers—Milton hated performing and dropped out early on—they hit the big time in the 1920s and, famous as Chico, Harpo, Groucho and Zeppo, made some of the funniest movies in Hollywood's history, most notably everyone's favorite, *A Night at the Opera* (1935), and the Central European military spoof *Duck Soup* (1933).

How the quartet started, persevered and finally broke through to success on the highest level is the subject of Robert S. Bader's fascinating book on their life and work before the movies. But there's another Marx in it, and she's the heroine of the saga, for the boys had not just an uncle but a mother in the business: Minnie Marx, Al Shean's sister, who served as booster, nag and agent.

Mr. Bader clearly adores her; he even seems to think that the brothers' career would have died a thousand deaths but for her resurrections. Yet it was a hard life that she pushed them into, for until they got to Broadway—their springboard to the Hollywood that made them truly national figures—they were in

vaudeville, at first at its very bottom. And there was nothing lower in all show business than the bottom of vaudeville.

As a theatrical genre, vaudeville ranged in grandeur from all-star evenings at New York's Palace Theatre to continuous performances in a small-town grind house where the audience was mostly retirees reading newspapers. Except for the top headliners, touring in their private railroad cars, it was all trains, fleabags, meals on the road, scorn from everyone you met. The only hope for a vaudevillian was a booking in one of the theater capitals, such as New York or Chicago, where Florenz Ziegfeld might catch your act and put you into the *Follies*.

Yet one takeaway from Mr. Bader's vast recounting of this at times discouraging tale is that the show business of the Marxes' early days, starting in 1908, was replete with opportunity. It was as if anyone, of whatever age, looks or talent, could fit in somewhere. Song and dance? Jokes? A dramatic playlet in which, through lightning-fast costume changes and endless exits and entrances, you took all the parts? Magic, trained animals, playing ditties on glasses of water?

The Marxes began with song and dance and expanded over the years into comic sketches and even little musicals. Mr. Bader includes an appendix of all their bookings, and it's amusing to see the permutations: "Fun in Hi Skool," "Home Again" (billed as a "Pretentious Musical Comedy Skit"), "On the Mezzanine Floor" (with "Fifteen Gorgeous Winter Garden Girls in Entrancing Raiment"). At one point, mother Minnie and her sister Hannah joined the show—"We'll pretend we're schoolgirls," Minnie explained—because with two more "stars" they could raise their salary.

Of course, the brothers are the stars of Mr. Bader's show. Groucho, who usually leads the brothers' endeavors on stage and screen, is the shyster and the singer of demented patter numbers. Harpo is the randy mime, always ready to tear off after one of the chorus girls or sabotage a crucial scheme. In the film *Monkey Business* (1931), the brothers try to get off an ocean liner using Maurice Chevalier's passport. To persuade skeptical customs men, each tries out a Chevalier impression, but only Harpo actually sounds like Chevalier . . . till the windup record player strapped to his back runs down. Chico is the hustler, with a silly Italian accent; his favorite stunt is conning Groucho. Zeppo does what's left, such as playing straight man to Groucho while never reacting to his jokes, occasionally singing and then vanishing till the finale. Backstage, however, in Mr. Bader's telling, these caricatures emerge as all too human. Harpo is a sweetheart, yes, but Groucho is abrasive, Chico selfish and reckless, a mad gambler, and Zeppo creative but restless.

The movies, starting in 1929, were the Marxes' second act. Mr. Bader is almost exclusively concerned with their early years, and it's a smashing first act, a steady rise despite vaudeville's minefield of monopolistic theater chains and vindictive chieftains. Naturally, calamities ensue. For instance, Harpo played not only his namesake instrument but the piano too (though that was really Chico's specialty). His keyboard debut, apparently somewhere in the South in 1909-10, gives Mr. Bader a chance to describe the family act, temporarily known as the Six Mascots: Groucho does "his German dialect numbers"; Harpo has a bit "stealing the prop frankfurters"; and Groucho and Gummo (Milton), who was still in the business, "strummed mandolins during some of [the family's] old quartet standards." But Harpo's piano solo did not go over well. "I had to compete," he would later recall, "with a lynching on the other side of town." And for all his fondness for Minnie Marx, Mr. Bader is honest about her shortcomings. Her sons "may have done more for her than she did for them," he writes. "They survived on her enthusiasm and their own abilities," not on her acumen as an agent.

Still, the Four Marx Brothers finally lucked into a show that seemed good enough to dare Broadway and put vaudeville behind them. This was *I'll Say She Is* (1923), a madcap combination of plot and revue. The plot involved a contest among eight men to "thrill" a lovely heiress and win her hand. The revue, says Mr. Bader, threw in "story lines, scenery, and costumes from four different shows." Thus, for no particular

reason, the heroine asks her fairy godmother (Groucho in a tutu) to show her what poverty is like. Well, OK—but, as Mr. Bader dryly reports, “instead, she is transported to a Hawaiian dance number.” It’s shows like this that give the average theatergoer the (wrong) impression that every musical before “Oklahoma!” lived in delirious chaos.

The Cocoanuts (1925) and *Animal Crackers* (1928) concluded the Marxes’ series of Broadway shows. Both were later filmed, in a manner stagy enough (and including enough of the Broadway principals) to suggest what they were like in the playhouse. Mr. Bader’s comprehensive knowledge of the vaudeville and theater scene of the era gives this saga its historical context. The author also troubles to correct the often-misleading Marx mythology, much of it romanticized by the Marxes themselves.

Above all, Mr. Bader presents the tale of a penniless family using the theater to find its place in the world. It was a rough ascent, and the brothers didn’t really get along all that well, but mother Minnie insisted that they follow her instructions on how to make something of oneself in America’s rich culture. And, indeed, the brothers’ act, with its zany non sequiturs and high-strung fantasy, was niche art that somehow or other ended up captivating the nation. And, as Mr. Bader tells us, Minnie always knew it would.