

Food, Love, Laughter... and One Hard-Boiled Egg

By Jim Meskimen

Last weekend my mother threw a birthday party for my step father, actor Paul Michael. As with any party at Marion's, it was a unique creation, and a wonderful time.

My step dad celebrated his 83rd birthday, and there was much to celebrate. He and my mom have been together for more than twenty years now, and each has enhanced the other's life beyond measure. Finding each other later in life has worked out to be a complete blessing to the both of them, and for the whole family.

Marion met Paul onstage while working on the play, "The Whole Half" in Los Angeles. They've collaborated on stage many times and are scheduled to do so again in 2010 down at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, reprising roles they originated in Joe Dipietro's "The Last Romance".

They have also done many movie and television appearances together. The chemistry is infectious.

Paul does the cooking for family gatherings, and is a marvelous cook, specializing in dishes from his Lebanese family heritage. For his 83rd, Paul prepared a huge spread of homemade spanikopita, babaganoush, tabouli salad, stuffed olive leaves, a lentil and onion dish called Mujadarra, hummus and lamb kibbeh. There were no survivors amongst the side dishes; everything was eaten to the last lentil.

When the sun started to go down, we all walked over to the lot next door that my mother owns and has dubbed, "Sophie Park" after her award-winning character on the Gary David Goldberg created TV series Brooklyn Bridge, and had dessert and coffee by the bocce court under a canopy of Mulberry trees and decorative lights.

Then, as the special treat of the evening, we went into the little park area where a projector and screen had been set up, and we all watched the Marx Brothers in "A Night at The Opera", seated in our chairs on the lawn. There was even an old fashioned popcorn machine on hand, and boxes of movie candy.

What a hit!

Watching the film outdoors on the lawn, there was one brief moment of drama—I could swear I heard the sound of the sprinklers beginning to go off. But thankfully, it was a false alarm.

"A Night at The Opera", if like me you haven't seen it in a decade or two, is still breathtakingly funny and brilliant; a perfect capper to a lovely evening. I can still hear Paul roaring with laughter at the hilarious scene where Groucho's stateroom rapidly fills up with people as they sail to New York.

The thing that most struck me this time, now that I am a bona fide grown up, is the amazing range of entertainment in that film; it's not all just a ridiculous romp— there are moments of high, high aesthetics. When Harpo eventually stops tearing things to pieces and plays the harp, it is so timeless and elegant, it made me weep a little bit, out of sheer appreciation. I wept too, I think, to recall a time when

moviemakers had the sensitivity to recognize the beauty of a classical music interlude, and the fine, fine wavelength of virtuosic expression. In amongst the pratfalls, the ketchup on the pancakes, and Harpo tearing the skirts off the showgirls in the opera finale.

Also what struck me was the genuine and “uncomedic” acting demonstrated by Groucho and Chico in their now famous routines... I knew them by heart when I was a teenager, and so I was now just observing how they played them, rather than what was being said. It is interesting to me that they were completely unself-conscious throughout their long routines, such as where they go over the contract for the opera singer (“...the party of the first part shall be known hereafter as the party of the first part...”) It is just as neutral as can be. Astonishing!

What is interesting to me is the lack of display of comedic awareness. They are just “being themselves” (characters honed from a decade in vaudeville, as unlike their real selves as a porcupine) and not reaching in the slightest way for a laugh or for approval from anybody. That sort of performance then, is completely timeless, since it isn’t serving anything as disposable as the current fashionable way of being funny— a fleeting language that changes with the headlines.

Not that some of the jokes weren’t a bit shopworn, but very few. Very few. And the physical comedy was still 100% riotous.

The laughs rolled over the lawn all night and over the hillside in Woodland Hills where Marion and Paul make their home. May it echo for many, many years to come.

(Have you seen “A Night at the Opera” lately? I can’t recommend it enough. Taken as directed, it can bring you into states of robust hilarity. If prolonged laughter persists longer than four hours, consult your doctor.)

The End