

The American Century Theater
Presents

The Screamlined Revue!

Hellzapoppin

AUDIENCE GUIDE

**Book and Concept by
Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson**

**Produced by Eleanor Gomberg
Directed by Jack Marshall
Musical Direction by Thomas D. Fuller**

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**Guide Articles by Jack Marshall, Doug Krentzlin, and Thomas
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Edited by Jack Marshall

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American plays of the Twentieth Century... what Henry Luce called "the American Century."

The company's mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to lose our mooring to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all citizens, of all ages and all points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These study guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.



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The Hellzapoppin's Forgotten Stars: Olsen and Johnson

By Jack Marshall, Director

In Mel Brooks' groundbreaking western comedy "Blazing Saddles," we are introduced to the beleaguered town of "Rock Ridge" during a town meeting that parodies the parallel scene in "High Noon." Everyone in the town appears to be named Johnson...the incomprehensible old man, "Gabby" Johnson (a spoof on immortal western sidekick Gabby Hayes); the ice cream store owner, Howard Johnson; the erudite Dr. Samuel Johnson. But the most outspoken (and the funniest) of the town leaders is identified as "Olsen Johnson." Brooks, who probably knew that his politically incorrect, fart joke-laden spoof would make him the new champion of the "anything for a laugh" school of film comedy, was paying his I.O.U.'s. He, like Woody Allen, the writers of "Airplane!" and "The Naked Gun," and scores of other comics, comedians and clowns both before "Blazing Saddles" and after, had been inspired by the life's work of a vaudeville team that had long been forgotten even if its influence was more powerful than ever. Olsen and Johnson deserved a salute in Brooks' outrageously silly movies, because they helped shaped the brand of American humor that made silly movies possible to this day.

John Sigvard Olsen was born in Peru, Indiana on November 6, 1892, and soon acquired the nickname that was often affixed to Swedes in that era, "Ole." Harold Ogden Johnson, also of Swedish descent, entered this world in Chicago a year and a half earlier, on March 15, 1891. He preferred to be called "Chic." Both attended Northwestern (only Olsen graduated), but met when they were hired to play in the same band, Ole on the violin, Chic on the piano. The band broke up, but they stayed together as a comedy team though they had no experience and little material. Their early routines consisted of Ole singing silly lyrics to songs he played on the fiddle while the he traded insults with Johnson at the piano.

They were instantly popular, and the considerable visual record on film does not fully explain why. As the team evolved and they dropped their instruments for gag props and break-away pants, Olsen was less of a straight man than a master of ceremonies, surprisingly underplayed for a vaudeville comic. Johnson was a cuddly, giggling man-child, who loved naughty jokes but seemed neither especially bizarre (like any of the Marx Brothers) or emotionally volatile (like Lou Costello). They were, in short, likable as opposed to edgy (one of their handbills referred to them as “Two Likable Lads”). Their genius was in appearing completely natural on stage, as if they had just wandered in off the street.

Initially, Olsen and Johnson’s material was also unremarkable. Mostly they recycled old skits and gags that were already classics by the time they got them, but some trademark bits emerged as the team made the journey from obscure nightclubs to the major vaudeville circuits. The pair always carried starter’s pistols, and were likely to start shooting blanks at anything that irritated them in a sketch. They typically fired guns up into the rafters, and in response got a shower of dead ducks ...and occasionally dead “cows” and other unlikely game. Olsen and Johnson began throwing food...bread, bananas, even eggs...at the audience, a Burlesque practice that had died out during the Depression that continues today in the hands of such practitioners as Gallagher and Rip Taylor. Olsen and Johnson were also what were called “prop comics.” Their reliance on visual puns was adapted and popularized by younger comics like Ed Wynn, and survives in the 21st Century in the clowning of Carrot Top and his ilk. A typical Olsen and Johnson prop bit is in the (almost unwatchable) movie version of *Hellzapoppin*, where the two are doing an inventory of their most prized possessions. Olsen pulls out what he says is “Napoleon’s skull.” (Olsen and Johnson had a thing about Napoleon.) In response, Johnson produces a tiny skull, and when Olsen inquires what it is, replies, “This is the skull of Napoleon when he was a child.”

While on the West Coast making their largely unsuccessful films in the early Thirties, Olsen and Johnson headlined a comedy revue called *Monkey Business*. There they began assembling a more elaborate act in which they tended to be the victims or observers of genuine lunacy taking place all around them. Their sight gags still tended to be “borrowed” from other comedians, but they put their own stamp on them, mostly through their inspired improvisation in performance. Olsen and Johnson were fearless: no joke was too absurd or topic too sensitive if it could get a laugh. And if other teams had gotten big laughs with a sketch, character, routine or bit, well, Olsen and Johnson would consider it common property and figure out a way to make it wilder and funnier than ever. Thus was born the Olsen and Johnson “kitchen sink” formula for comedy. Its motto: “Anything goes.”

Like everyone else, Olsen and Johnson were on the radio, but the medium didn’t play to their strengths, which were visual, not aural. Johnson’s persistent laugh was not enough to make the team distinctive in the absence of sight gags. The studio audience was in stitches, but the radio audience couldn’t see why. Theirs was, first and foremost, a live act meant to be seen and often,

felt. In subsequent revues like *Take a Chance, Tell Me More, and Tip Toes*, Olsen and Johnson got more and more involved with the patrons, forcing them to deal in close quarters with gorillas, costumed midgets, madman and other assorted whackos, and often showering them with simulated creatures or unpleasant substances. Loud noises occurred without warning; skits ended without reason. You never knew what might happen next. Audiences loved it, and Olsen and Johnson were unusually good at managing chaos.

All the elements came together in *Hellzapoppin*, the 1938 Broadway musical revue that gave Olsen and Johnson the budget they needed to be really ridiculous on a grand scale. Vaudeville was in its death throes, though it would linger for more than a decade; the type of comedy being showcased in *Hellzapoppin* was not something legitimate theater-lovers either respected or saw very often. Olsen and Johnson didn't care: they threw bananas at them anyway. To everybody's surprise, especially the critics, *Hellzapoppin* ran 1,404 performances, then the Broadway record.

The Olsen and Johnson style was now thoroughly established, and the duo spent the rest of their career both capitalizing on *Hellzapoppin* and trying to repeat its success. They had a series of Broadway revues, including a new version of *Hellzapoppin*, *Sons O'Fun*, *Laffing Room Only* and finally the desperate *Funzapoppin* in 1949. Though the earlier revues had some notable accomplishments (the first *Hellzapoppin* sequel introduced Carmen Miranda to American audiences, for example, and *Laffing Room Only* marked the Broadway debut of Betty Garrett), Olsen and Johnson had clearly reached their peak and were on the way down.

Television provided one last opportunity for Chic and Ole. After a few guest appearances on the various variety shows attempting to figure out the new medium, Olsen and Johnson got a summer replacement show of their own when Milton Berle went on vacation. "Fireball Fun-for-All" premiered on June 28, 1949, and it was *Hellzapoppin* all over again, but with more stooges in the audience. Most of the gags were recycled from the various reviews; by this point, Olsen and Johnson weren't innovating or even adapting very much. They found, as many other stage comics found, that television devoured material in months that may have taken years to develop. The hilarity exhibited by the studio audiences (if indeed there were any people in the seats who weren't part of the show) did not translate into popularity among home viewers. By October, the TV experiment was over.

"Uncle Miltie," who had a genuine affection for Olsen and Johnson, gave them another shot a few years later, essentially turning his show into a *Hellzapoppin* retrospective. Seeing the kinescope now, one is struck by how easy-going the old vaudevillians appear in comparison to the over-bearing and obnoxious Berle, then the biggest star on television. The old pros acquitted themselves well, but the show had the feel of a retirement party. Fittingly, they ended the Berle show as they ended all their shows, with Olsen saying, "May you live as long as you like," and Johnson following up with, "And may you laugh as long as you live."

They continued doing the act in Vegas, nightclubs and anyplace else they were welcome until their health broke down. Both died of kidney disease, Johnson on 1962, Olsen a year later. Unlike virtually every long-running comedy team in show business history, they never had a serious falling out, and remained close friends throughout their three decades of performing together. They may not have lived as long as they liked, but Olsen and Johnson seem to have laughed almost as long as they lived. And they defined a comedy tradition that has kept much of America laughing ever since.

The Secrets of *Hellzapoppin*, or How to Recreate a Broadway Legend Without A Usable Script, or What Jerry Lewis Wishes He Knew

By Jack Marshall

Hellzapoppin ended its Broadway run in 1941 as the longest-running musical in Broadway history, a distinction that it held for just a few years. *Oklahoma* soon shattered its record by more than 50%, but that doesn't take away from Olsen and Johnson's achievement. After all, *Hellzapoppin* wasn't a book musical or even a conventional revue. It was a mess, a rule-breaking exercise in hysteria that the press quickly dubbed a "circus musical" because it seemed that multiple acts were always occurring at the same time. Olsen and Johnson may have been flops on the silver screen, and they may not have been gifted writers, but they knew how to make complicated stunts and routines appear spontaneous without letting a show tumble out of control.

The script for *Hellzapoppin* was merely their starting point, and even it was just a cut-and-paste job from old routines and classic material from other comics. Only one complete script exists, though many scraps and sections are well-buried in Ole Olsen's personal papers in Indiana. The surviving script is the first one, from 1938, and checking out the programs from the show it is clear that it underwent many alterations. In fact, Olsen and Johnson boasted that you could keep coming to *Hellzapoppin* indefinitely and never see the same show twice.

This was undoubtedly true. Ole and Chic didn't even stick to the script they were officially using at any given time, which was a good thing. The 1938 script, as typed, is fairly bland, with more detail in the stage directions than in the dialogue. As they had throughout their career, Olsen and Johnson punched up their lines considerably once they got in front of an audience.

It is this unique aspect of *Hellzapoppin* that accounts for the fact that it is by far the least produced of the 100 longest-running Broadway musicals. *Hellzapoppin* was Olsen and Johnson, and vice versa, and without them, the show couldn't exist – or so the conventional wisdom went.

Legendary Broadway producer Alexander Cohen set out to disprove the conventional wisdom in 1975. Reasoning that *Hellzapoppin* was still famous even if nobody under the age of 40 (then . . . 70 now) could have seen it, he lined up comedian Jerry Lewis to be his star. Lewis was then about the same age (and about as washed-up in movies) as Olsen and Johnson were in 1938, but he was certainly at home with outrageous material, physical comedy, and ad-libs. British actress Lynn Redgrave joined Lewis as co-star. Cohen, every bit David Merrick's equal as a hit-maker, spared no expense: he hired the biggest names in the business to write new material and songs, and took the show on the road to Broadway in 1977. Pulitzer Prize winner Abe Burroughs was originally the director. After he was fired, Broadway veteran Jerry Adler took over

The show wasn't just a flop. It was a catastrophe of historic proportions. Lewis, who insisted on directing all his own sequences, feuded with Redgrave over comic styles and stage time. Though Adler always claimed that Lewis behaved like a consummate professional, Producer Cohen and Lewis also fought – in fact, there was a point at which they reportedly exchanged death threats. Tommy Tune, among others, tried to re-work the show, but nothing could save it. The project exploded in Boston a welter of accusations and rumors and red ink; the entire \$1.3 million investment was lost. To this day, mentioning *Hellzapoppin* is a sure way for any interviewer to get thrown out of Jerry Lewis' home. *Hellzapoppin* without Olsen and Johnson had only been Hell.

But, of course, it was *Hellzapoppin* in name only. The original had been hosted by two gentle comics who let the supporting cast get most of the laughs, a formula wisely followed by TV's *Hellzapoppin* clone, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*. (Producer George Schlatter originally was going to call the show *Hellzapoppin*.) Lewis, a famous egomaniac even by Hollywood standards, saw the show as his showcase and was loath to surrender center stage to anyone. A few years later, Mickey Rooney and Ann Miller essentially made a Broadway hit out of the same show concept that Lewis was rehearsing. Their show was called *Sugar Babies*. And it wasn't *Hellzapoppin* either.

In preparation for the project of mounting an authentic-feeling version of *Hellzapoppin*, the American Century Theater interviewed many people who had seen the original show and recalled details about it. Few mentioned the stars. Everyone mentioned *Hellzapoppin*'s signature gag, the tree that grew throughout the second act, the "Oscar Lady," Olsen and Johnson's raffle, and the fact that an audience member "won" a lap full of ice. Many recalled the various assaults on the audience with practical jokes involving fake insects, rubber snakes, and weasels. The chaos in the lobby stuck in people's minds, as did the intrusions of various audience "plants." A few mentioned

a man “thrown from the balcony”; he was, of course, a dummy, but this was a memorable gag in the show. Universally, the interviewees said that show was extraordinarily loud.

They also opined that it couldn’t be done. One expert who thought it could was frequent TACT costume designer Rip Claussen, whose grandfather worked on the original production. Rip provided invaluable background, and agreed to both design costumes and serve as Assistant Director.

All right: any *Hellzapoppin* had to have the tree (indeed, even Jerry Lewis’ version included the tree), the “Oscar Lady,” spiders, weasels, and a raffle with a grand prize consisting of ice. What else? Here a script sent to us by a wounded veteran of the 1977 *Hellzapoppin* proved invaluable. Also invaluable were various accounts of the show, which mentioned routines that somehow had slipped the minds of our interviewees after only six decades.

The Opening

Among the most audacious *Hellzapoppin* bits was the “**Yiddish Hitler**,” which appeared shortly after the show opened. It was right at the top of the show, taking the place of the newsreels mentioned in the script: the curtain opened to reveal the Nazi dictator making a speech in Yiddish with gestures typical of the Jewish comics of the period. Olsen and Johnson were not generally interested in political commentary, but Hitler was a terrific comic prop, and, as Mel Brooks has proved more than once, he still is. Thus, we knew what the first “number” would be. Another irresistible *Hellzapoppin* gag involved an audience member eagerly buying a ticket to a more “respectable” show (in the original run, Rodgers and Hart’s musical *I Married an Angel*) from a scalper.

Constructing the rest of the show’s opening involved adapting the original script to the confines of a black box theater. *Hellzapoppin* began with confusion among supposed audience members arguing over seats, followed by a vast scene called “Bedlam” that involved over 40 bizarre characters wandering around the theater. The new version of *Hellzapoppin* had to have a different kind of Bedlam to evoke the same effect, and makes use of two standard Olsen and Johnson devices that they included both in the show and their films: gorillas, and disgruntled chorus members. Traditionally Olsen and Johnson made their entrance well after the show had gotten under way. Sometimes they came in driving an old jalopy, sometimes they were carried in by Harem girls, sometimes they just stumbled into the proceedings as if by accident. We opted for the latter, and, of course, Olsen and Johnson had to begin by throwing various kinds of food at the audience.

The Sketches

The “**Hotel Sketch**” in Act I was an Olsen and Johnson staple that is presented here essentially as it was in the original *Hellzapoppin*. The sketch certainly didn’t originate with them. It is one of many standard Vaudeville routines that allowed comics to customize a generic situation with their choice among dozens of tried-and-true sight gags and one-liners. The Olsen and Johnson version included several gags that, if not original with them, certainly became identified with them through repeated use: the spoon exchange, “sorting strawberries,” and the discussion of Johnson’s driving skills. The one feature that seems 100% Olsen and Johnson is the stampede; when they weren’t stealing from other comics, Ole and Chic’s humor tended to the surreal. The original sketch’s ending involved a joke that doesn’t “play” now (after the lights go out, Johnson has a dream and awakes to find himself in a romantic embrace with Ole). The revised ending involves typical Olsen and Johnson devices, and if they didn’t use it, they certainly wouldn’t have objected to it.

It is worth mentioning that heterosexual men frequently shared bed in hotels during the Depression and long before. Such scenes, especially when the comics involved were obviously fully dressed or were wearing hats and shoes, carried no homosexual implications whatsoever. Crosby and Hope, Martin and Lewis, the Marx Brothers, Abbott and Costello, Wheeler and Woolsey, and The Three Stooges all can be seen sharing beds in their films. But in the 90’s, *Sesame Street*’s Muppets, which borrowed heavily from *Hellzapoppin* in both that program and *The Muppet Show*, learned to their sorrow that even two male *puppets* (“Bert and Ernie”) couldn’t share a bed without sparking questions about their sexual orientation. Ridiculous.

Other sketches in the original script had dated beyond fixing. One was the “**Vegetable Sketch**,” in which Olsen and Johnson (the former in drag) play a supposedly “racy” romantic scene and then are forced by a censor to perform it again with vegetable names substituted for the objectionable words. This was a satire on the infamous Hays Code then being followed in Hollywood, and most of the humor involved Johnson’s cracking up at the silliness of the sketch, *à la* Harvey Korman in “The Carol Burnett Show.” But today the sketch seems tame and tedious rather than naughty and silly.

To replace this and an even more dated sketch involving World War I, we added two genuine Vaudeville classics that Olson and Johnson definitely performed and probably included in *Hellzapoppin* during its run. One of them is the most enduring and famous of all Vaudeville routines, variously called “**Niagara Falls**,” “**Poko-Moko**,” and “**Slowly I Turned**.” The other, less well known but also a comic staple, is the “**Straight Man Sketch**,” in which a volunteer from the audience repeatedly foils the comic’s attempt to tell a joke. We added a technological element, but the sketch is otherwise just as Ole and Chic performed it.

Other sketches that are adapted from the *Hellzapoppin* originals include “**Lonely Heart**,” to which we appended a final punch line most famously used by Spike Jones, and “**The Maternity**

Ward,” which in 1938 ended with a gag that would be regarded as racist today. Courtroom and doctor “blackout sketches” (so named because the lights would go off immediately after the punch line) were standard equipment in Burlesque and Vaudeville; they were essentially dramatized jokes. All of such sketches presented here were in Olsen and Johnson’s repertoire, and surely some, if not all, of them appeared in *Hellzapoppin* at one time or another.

The Audience Bits

In addition to the “**Hellzapoppin Raffle,**” (which in the 1938 script included five prizes; it must have taken twenty minutes!), most of the audience bits in TACT’s recreation are from the original, with some adaptations. For example, the multiple incarnations of “**Spartacus**” who invade the show were originally “**Napoleons.**” The crying baby was actually “shot” (!); as violent as this *Hellzapoppin* is, the first was more violent still. The lottery winner, the knight, the balloon seller, the various odd scenes discovered in the dark, the multiple idiots and madmen – these were all features of the original.

Hellzapoppin was famous for its practical jokes on the audience. Olsen and Johnson required patrons to enter through the stage, where they would be the object of various gags and tricks; for example, the women would have their dresses and skirts blown up by blasts of air (a joke that originated in Coney Island Fun Houses). The “**Spiders in the Ceiling**” and the “**Escaped Weasel**” routines, with their respective assaults on random audience members, were among the features that made *Hellzapoppin* what it was. At the risk of lawsuits by phobics, both are faithfully recreated here.

Olsen and Johnson were famous for their use of **audience stooges** for everything from heckling from the audience to taking a 50 pound block of ice on the lap. Yes, some of the interjections and wisecracks you hear from the audience are scripted. (But maybe not all of them!)

The real Olsen and Johnson didn’t have the opportunity to devise any cell phone gags, obviously, but a 2007 O & J certainly would have. The cell phone routine, complete with archer, was adapted from a bit in the West End *Hellzapoppin*-like British comedy revue, *The Show What I Wrote*.

Acts and Routines

The “**Magic Door**” running gag was a standard device in Vaudeville and Burlesque; on television it was used most prominently by comic Soupy Sales and on the Dean Martin Show. The bit was also the inspiration for *Laugh-In*’s “Joke Wall” that always closed the show. Olsen and Johnson used the gag occasionally on their *Fireball Fun-For-All* TV show, and it is thoroughly in the spirit of *Hellzapoppin*. One of the door routines was taken more or less directly from the Olsen and Johnson film *Crazy House*: the Saleslady, who in the original was a salesman played by Shemp

Howard.

The “**Escape Artist**” routine and the “**World’s Greatest Second Tenor**” (he was a *first* tenor originally, and Chinese rather than a Pacific Islander) stand out in the original script (and in some newspaper reviews) as among the very best *Hellzapoppin* comic elements, and apparently were included in the show throughout its run. “**Eleanor Rigby**” is a variation of the mangled lyrics routines pioneered by the great Winstead “Doodles” Weaver (Sigourney’s uncle), who appears briefly in the *Hellzapoppin* movie but who was best known for his work with Spike Jones’ comedy band. The rest of the truncated or botched songs as well as the parodies were adapted from older bits and various sources. Similar routines constantly cycled though Olsen and Johnson’s original.

The Running Gags

Hellzapoppin accumulated multiple running gags as the show progressed. Among the authentic running gags from the original that are faithfully reproduced in the current production: **the growing tree, the “Oscar Lady,” the balloon seller, the drunk who is searching for a bathroom, the hapless escape artist, and the off-stage suicide.** And, yes, we couldn’t resist adding one or two of our own.

One famous *Hellzapoppin* running gag that has attained pop culture immortality is the **joke public address announcement.** We have many of them, most based on Olsen and Johnson equivalents; the original had even more, and they were constantly being changed. Robert Altman used the device prominently in his film *M*A*S*H*; *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-in* made gag announcements one of the show’s trademarks, both with text crawls across the screen and using Gary Owen’s radio announcer character to intone absurdities and *non sequiturs* .

So the question remains: how authentic is this *Hellzapoppin*? It doesn’t have the real Olsen and Johnson, obviously, nor are the songs the same – though many of them date from the same period or before. There is no elaborate Lindy Hop production number as in the original, because that was an act meant to capitalize on a new dance craze, and the Lindy Hop is no longer new or even popular. The specialty acts – the jugglers, acrobats, ventriloquists, and unicyclists – are missing, but they were fungible, generic circus and variety show acts that could have been in any show of the period, and were. Today you can see such performers live at the D.C. Fringe Festival or on TV in such shows as “America’s Got Talent.” In *Hellzapoppin*, they were filler. The cast is less than half the size of the original, and there is no orchestra and very little dancing.

But this *Hellzapoppin*, our research tells us, is an accurate evocation of the pace, spirit, and style of the original Olsen and Johnson creation, and it contains much of the material that made the show memorable and influenced so many writers and comics to come. If 2007’s *Hellzapoppin* evokes laughter, it is laughter that comes to us through the decades from Olsen and Johnson and

their contemporaries. And if it evokes enough laughter, issues of authenticity fade into irrelevance. All Olsen and Johnson cared about was that their audiences, beset by the long Depression and dreading a war that was already visible on the horizon, left the theater happier and sillier than when they entered it. If this updated packaging of their show's jokes, routines, and sketches accomplishes this for today's audiences, we're confident that Chic and Ole would be satisfied.

The Songs and People of *Hellzapoppin*

by Thomas D. Fuller, Musical Director

The antics of Olsen and Johnson were the principal draw of the original *Hellzapoppin*. No one could have taken 2½ hours of that, though (as evidenced by the offstage “suicides”), so they were helped out by songs, other performers, and other routines.

Songs

The songs changed nightly, but there were a set of “core” songs that survived more or less intact throughout the long run. Many of these were written by the composer-lyricist team of Sammy Fain (1902-1989) and Charles Tobias (1898-1970). Both men had a rich background in vaudeville music, as well as in other music for the stage. Fain composed the music for many hits, including “Let a Smile Be Your Umbrella”, “Secret Love”, “That Old Feeling”, and “Love is a Many-Splendored Thing”, and contributed to the scores of several Disney animated films, including *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Rescuers*. Tobias, who billed himself as “the boy who writes the songs you sing”, was the lyricist for songs like “Lazy, Hazy, Crazy Days of Summer” and “Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree”.

The Fain- Tobias songs in the *Hellzapoppin* core group included the nonsense song “Fuddle Dee Duddle”, “When McGregor Sings Off-Key”, and “It's Time To Say Aloha”, which was usually the closing number. Other standard songs were “Booms-a-Daisy”, a comic dance in which Olsen and Johnson repeatedly bumped their behinds (music & lyrics by Annette Mills), “G'Bye Now” (by Olsen & Johnson with others, an alternate closer used late in the run), “When You Look In Your Looking Glass” (lyrics by Sam M. Lewis, music by Paul Mann and Stephen Weiss), and “Abe Lincoln” (music & lyrics by Earl Robinson and Alfred Hayes).

We kept Honest Abe in the cast, but after evaluating the original songs for appeal to modern audiences, we couldn't find any that we felt justified inclusion. The humor of *Hellzapoppin* is old but still entertaining. The music of *Hellzapoppin*, sadly, is just old.

Even “The Laughing Song” (technically, “The Whole World's Laughing at Me”), Olsen & Johnson's signature song that long predated *Hellzapoppin* and was seldom, if ever, used in the

show, proved unsuitable. We searched extensively for the music and lyrics of this song, and eventually found them in a reference library in Australia. It's the sort of number that probably amused people in the 1920's but has little chance of doing so now, despite a rather pleasant melody.

The musical director for the original production was Harold Stern (dates unknown), who had earlier overseen (and in some cases composed) the music for revues like *Pleasure Bound* (1929) and *Artists and Models* (1930). Stern started his career as a vaudeville and dance band singer (under the monstrously boring pseudonym "Bill Smith", possibly adopted to avoid Jewish connotations), and later had his own band with a similarly unoriginal title: Harold Stern and His Orchestra. The high point of his stage career was a stint as the musical director for the Shubert Theatres.

Other Performers

Over its 1404-performance run, *Hellzapoppin* saw many performers come and go, but several stayed with the show long enough to become identified with it.

Dewey Barto (born Dewey Smoyer; dates unknown) and George Mann (1905-1977) were the vaudeville comedy team **Barto & Mann**, a "Mutt and Jeff" pairing of widely disparate physical types – Mann was over seven feet tall, and Barto less than five. They did a maternity ward sketch in the original show, echoed by our "Feet Up, Pat Him on the Po-Po" sequence. Barto was the father of MGM musical and TV star Nancy Walker, whose show-stopping song ("First Girl") from a flop Broadway revue will occasionally be included in our production. Mann's last film appearance was in the Disney film *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971), uncredited in the role of the Old Home Guardsman.

The Olsen and Johnson Families, true to Vaudeville tradition, found themselves represented in *Hellzapoppin* as well. Most prominent was Chic Johnson's wife **June Johnson**, who created the character of the annoying woman shouting for "Oscar" throughout the show. Also playing annoying characters was Ole Olsen's son, **Ole Jr.**, who was the disruptive balloon seller as well as many other interlopers during performances.

Ray Kinney (1900-1972) was a native of Hawaii (born to Irish-American parents) who was discovered in Honolulu by the legendary impresario Samuel Lionel "Roxy" Rothafel (1882-1936) and brought to New York City to open the Roxy Theatre in the 1920's. He was central to the Hawaiian sequences in the original show. Kinney came to the mainland accompanied by **the**

Aloha Maids, a group of three hula dancers who were also swimming champions. They joined Kinney in the show's Hawaiian interludes, which were included to appeal to the Hawaiian craze in music, fashion and drinks (courtesy of "Trader Vic") that was then sweeping the country.

The Starlings were the world's only coloratura soprano duo. Cyrel Roodney (dates unknown) and June Winters (1920-?) could both sing up to a high F sharp, and met while enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music. They were regulars on the vaudeville and radio circuits.

Happy **Moore** and Stormy **Berg** (born Bergh; he dropped the "h" in his stage name) were a vaudeville team formed by accident. Moore had been performing for years with a partner who then died. Berg was a newspaperman who also happened to be Ole Olsen's neighbor. Olsen saw potential and hooked him up with Moore, and the two worked together for many years.

Other Acts

Dippy Diers (dates unknown) was a second-rate pantomimist and clown whose greatest success was his development of the straitjacket routine in *Hellzapoppin*. He went into the jacket halfway through the first act and stayed there for the rest of the show.

Theo Hardeen (1876-1945) began his career as a magician with his famous brother, Harry Houdini. They broke up when Houdini married, and Theo continued as a solo act under the name Hardeen. When Houdini died in 1926, Theo inherited all of his magic tricks, and used many of them in *Hellzapoppin*. Houdini's will specified that all of his equipment and secrets should be destroyed on Hardeen's death, but Hardeen saw differently and sold most of them off before his death.

Walter Nilsson (dates unknown), billed as "a loose nut on wheels", kept audiences howling with his performances on various permutations of the bicycle. He was the only person in the world who could mount an 8-foot unicycle (known as a "giraffe") without using a ladder. In 1934 he rode such a unicycle across the country, a distance of 3,386 miles, in 117 days; the feat was recorded in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. Sadly, we could find neither an 8-foot unicycle nor anybody who could ride one.

Lastly, and most famously, were **Whitey's Steppers**, popularly known as "Whitey's Lindy Hoppers." Almost all of the major songs in the original show were accompanied by dance routines, but the Lindy Hop routine (performed to the song "Jumping at the Woodside") was by far the most famous. Astounding in its accuracy and athleticism, it took the audience's breath away every night. Fortunately, a version of the routine (to different music) is preserved in the otherwise forgettable 1941 film version of *Hellzapoppin*. (The main section of this astonishing sequence can

be viewed on YouTube.) Because such routines must be re-created superbly or not at all, the limits on the American Century Theater's performing space and the scarcity of modern day Lindy-Hoppers compelled us to adopt (reluctantly) the latter choice for this production.

Olsen and Johnson in Hollywood

by Doug Krentzlin

Doug Krentzlin plays Chic Johnson in this production. A long-time student of film and comedy, he is a professional writer, actor and theatre critic. For the Washington Examiner. This essay is used with his permission.

In the 1930s and 40s, Hollywood had an embarrassment of riches in terms of great comedians thriving there. The most popular comics of the period included Stan Laurel & Oliver Hardy, Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Will Rogers, Joe E. Brown, Bert Wheeler & Robert Woolsey,* Eddie Cantor, the Three Stooges, Bob Hope, Red Skelton, Bud Abbott & Lou Costello, and Danny Kaye. (Also, in 1948, Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis made their screen debut.) The main reason for this comedic wealth was the birth of the talkies in the late 1920s. When the movies found their voice, just about every Vaudeville comedian worth their salt turned up in front of the cameras. Some, such as Fanny Brice, Tom Howard and George Jessel, despite their stage popularity, failed to make the cut. Others, like the comedians mentioned above, became world-famous celebrities.

The stage success of Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson made it a forgone conclusion that they would be summoned to Tinsel Town. Indeed, they were given three bites of the apple, as it were, but they never achieved the adoration that the comics listed in the first paragraph did. The chief problem with Olsen & Johnson's movie career was that their unique form of comedy did not translate well to the film medium, which is the most literal of the performing arts. Not only were Ole and Chic prevented from interacting with the audience (a major part of their shtick), but they had to carry actual stories complete with supporting characters and plot twists, a far cry from their free-wheeling, anything-for-a-laugh Vaudeville revues.

The first and most prestigious of these movie gigs was a three-film contract with Warner Brothers, starting in 1930. Before dealing with these films, however, a little context is needed to explain why this was such a plum assignment. In the early days of the Depression, comedies were particularly popular with movie audiences, so just about every studio in Hollywood had a star comedian or comedy team on their payrolls. In 1930, Paramount had the Marx Brothers, later replaced, in succession, by Fields, Hope, Martin & Lewis, and finally, Lewis, solo. MGM had distribution rights to Laurel & Hardy's films for Hal Roach, and also had Keaton, who was followed, in succession, by the Marxes and Skelton. Goldwyn had Cantor, later replaced by Kaye, who, Kaye claimed, always called him "Eddie"; RKO had Wheeler & Woolsey; and Fox had Will Rogers. In 1934, Columbia signed the Three Stooges. The only major studio that didn't have any comedians under contract at this time was Universal Pictures.

Thus, Olsen & Johnson had the honor of being Warner Brothers' first house comics. (Warners' publicity department heralded them as "America's Funniest Clowns.") Of their three movies for Warners, *Oh, Sailor Behave* (released in August, 1930) is no longer available for viewing, but the surviving films that Olsen & Johnson did for the studio are such lame, unfunny turkeys that this can hardly be considered a loss.

Their second Warner Brothers movie, *50 Million Frenchmen* (released in February, 1931), had considerable potential, based as it was on a hit Cole Porter musical and filmed in early two-strip Technicolor. Unfortunately, the finished film was an abject failure. (It didn't help that, despite the fact that the score included the Porter classic, "You Do Something to Me," Warners decided, with typical Hollywood logic, to eliminate all of the songs and just retain the basic story.) Although they were given top billing, Ole and Chic were forced to play second fiddle to Broadway legend William Gaxton repeating his stage role in one of his rare film appearances.

Olsen and Johnson's third and last Warners film, *Gold Dust Gertie*, (released in June, 1931) turned out to be the worst movie Ole and Chic ever made, a pathetically feeble farce with nary a laugh in it. Once again, despite top billing, Ole and Chic were forced to take a back seat to another performer, in this case overrated comedienne Winnie Lightner, another Broadway headliner who failed to cut it in movies, playing the title role. Ole and Chic were two ex-husbands of Gertie, a notorious gold-digger who re-enters their lives for purposes of blackmail. Laurel & Hardy's three-reeler *Chickens Come Home*, released that same year, had an almost identical premise and was infinitely funnier.

Understandably, none of the three movies Ole and Chic made for Warners were box office smashes, so when their contract expired, their option was not renewed. This was to be the pattern for the remainder of their film career. They were promptly replaced as Warner Brothers' top comics by Joe E. Brown, whose movies were much more successful. The fact that Warners, one of the savviest studios regarding comedy, were unable to figure out how to package Olsen and

Johnson is compelling evidence of how difficult it was to translate their unique appeal to the screen.

Ole and Chic's next crack at movie stardom came courtesy of newly formed Republic Pictures in 1936. Founded the year before by Herbert J. Yates, Republic devoted itself mainly to low-budget westerns and serials. Even at this early stage, Yates aspired to respectability on a par with the big studios. His first step in that direction was to sign-up some comedy stars for Republic. And so, for the second time in a row, Ole and Chic became a studio's first house comedians. Alas, the results were pretty much the same in terms of audience popularity. On the plus side, the two movies Olsen & Johnson made for Republic are now the most accessible of their films, due to being in public domain; both are available on DVD from Alpha Video.

Their first Republic film, *Country Gentlemen*, was released in November, 1936. Ole and Chic were cast as a couple of con artists on the run from the cops who set up a phony oil well scam in a small rural town. Blandly directed by Ralph Staub, *Country Gentlemen* had a few amusing moments. Though no comic masterpiece by any standard, it seems like one compared to Ole and Chic's Warner Brothers movies.

Happily, their second and last Republic film, *All Over Town*, released in September, 1937, was not only a major improvement, but turned out to be Olsen & Johnson's best movie ever. For once, Ole and Chic were allowed to take center stage from beginning to end, instead of being forced to the side by plot lines, production numbers or romantic interludes. Operating on the principle that, if you're going to steal, steal from the best, Republic placed the directing chores in the hands of James W. Horne, Laurel and Hardy's most talented director; Horne had just completed Stan and Ollie's finest feature-length film, *Way Out West*. Also, for the first time, Ole and Chic were given top-drawer support by some of Hollywood's best second bananas, including Franklin Pangborn, Stanley Fields, Lew Kelly, Fred Kelsey, and, another Laurel & Hardy regular, James Finlayson. *All Over Town* may have had a legitimate story (Ole and Chic try to solve a murder committed in the "haunted" Broadway theater where they're staging their new show), but here it was just a structure on which to hang a series of self-contained comedy routines. (At one point, Ole and Chic become convinced that their pet seal, Sally, is the culprit and, in the movie's funniest -- and most bizarre -- sight gag, envision her going to the electric chair, *film noir* style.)

Despite the fact that *All Over Town* finally proved that Olsen & Johnson's humor could work in the film medium, it fared no better at the box office than their previous movies, so, once again, the team was given its walking papers. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise for them and Broadway, because it left Ole and Chic free to create the most spectacular success of their career, the 1938 stage version of *Hellzapoppin*, which became the longest-running Broadway musical to date. The show's popularity ensured that a film version would follow, which brings us back to the subject of Universal Pictures.

As mentioned before, Universal was the only Hollywood studio that didn't have any comedians working for them during the Depression. This changed in 1939 when, after a close brush with bankruptcy, Universal, as if to make up for lost time, signed up several comics who had been dropped from their previous studios. Among the refugees were W.C. Fields, the Ritz Brothers, and Olsen & Johnson. As it turned out, Universal needn't have bothered. In one of those cosmic ironies that occur so often in show business, the star comedy act that the studio was searching for was already working on the lot. The ex-burlesque team of Bud Abbott & Lou Costello had just made their film debut in *One Night in the Tropics*, a big-budget Jerome Kern musical that tanked at the box office, but their second film, *Buck Privates*, broke attendance records all over the country. When the Universal comedies featuring the Fields and the others failed to duplicate the success of Bud & Lou's movies, their contracts were allowed to run out.*

The film version of *Hellzapoppin* (released in December, 1941), directed by H.C. Potter, may be Ole and Chic's best known movie, but it failed to capture the sheer insanity of the stage original. The suits at Universal insisted on saddling *Hellzapoppin* with the type of story and romantic sub-plot that were so prevalent in Hollywood comedies at the time. Obviously the film's funniest sequence in which Ole and Chic argue with the director (played by Richard Lane) about *Hellzapoppin* not needing a plot, went straight over the heads of these suits. An even worse liability was the movie's relentless determination to be, not just another comedy, but the funniest, wackiest, zaniest farce even seen on film, the same type of overkill that ruined Stanley Kramer's 1963 disaster *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. (Compare this self-consciousness with the laid-back approach Bob Hope and Bing Crosby brought to their *Road* pictures, which captured the anything-can-happen feeling of the stage *Hellzapoppin*' better than any of Ole and Chic's movies.) But at least Universal made the effort to come up with cinematic equivalents for Olsen & Johnson's off-the-wall humor. The best running gag in *Hellzapoppin*' involves Ole and Chic's feud with the movie's projectionist (the irreplaceable Shemp Howard of Three Stooges fame), whose projector keeps eating up the film and throwing it out of sync.

Olsen & Johnson's second Universal film, *Crazy House* (released in October, 1943), was much better. The direction for *Crazy House*, as well as Ole and Chic's next two movies, was in the capable hands of comedy veteran Edward Cline, whose most notable credit was W.C. Fields' best film, *The Bank Dick*. In the movie's prophetic opening scene, Ole and Chic are fired by Universal Pictures and set out to produce their own movie. They get backing from a group of shady executives who plan to steal the movie once it's finished. (Mel Brooks' *Silent Movie* was an uncredited remake of *Crazy House*.) This time, Ole and Chic's crazy humor was better integrated into the film, although there was still the obligatory romantic subplot. However, in the film's most satisfying moment, when the two lovers embrace at the finish, Chic picks up a machine gun and mows them down. Asked why by Ole, Chic says: "This is one picture that isn't going to have a happy ending."

Their next movie, *Ghost Catchers* (released in May, 1944), turned out to be their best

Universal film, as well as their funniest since *All Over Town*. Ole and Chic are working at a New York night club located next door to a haunted townhouse. (Chic: “I don’t believe in ghosts... but, then, I didn’t believe in radio, either.”) When the house’s new owners ask for help, Ole and Chic deduce that, since the ghost was an aficionado of traditional turn-of-the-century music in life, the best way to drive him out is with big band jazz. (The resulting “Exorcism in Swing,” easily the film’s highlight, features a young Mel Torme as one of the vocalists.) As it happens, in addition to being haunted, the house is also the secret headquarters of a gang of crooks (including Andy Devine and Lon Chaney, Jr.), who make several attempts to bump off Ole and Chic.

Their fourth and last Universal film, *See My Lawyer* (released in March, 1945) was their most excruciatingly unfunny bomb since *Gold Dust Gertie*. (The only amusing gag in the entire film involves a talking chimpanzee in a tuxedo.) Based on a popular Broadway show produced by George Abbott, *See My Lawyer* again casts Ole and Chic as night club comics, but in this case, they not only are sidelined by an endless series of specialty acts, but what little screen time they have is marred by lame, shoddy material that was more embarrassing than laugh-provoking. After this gobble, it’s easy to see why Ole and Chic were yet again given the old heave-ho, making them three-time losers as far as the film industry was concerned. No matter. Ole and Chic took it in stride, mainly because they preferred performing for live audiences, anyway. But, at least, a few of their films (*All Over Town*, *Crazy House*, *Ghost Catchers*) preserve Olsen & Johnson’s comic legacy for future generations to enjoy.