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## Hello, He Must Be Going: Frank Ferrante is playing Groucho Marx at the Bucks County Playhouse



Frank Ferrante is playing Groucho Marx at the Bucks County Playhouse through Feb. 25.

By Mike Morsch

The first time Harpo Marx — the silent Marx Brother — ever spoke a word on stage was during a 1941 production of “The Man Who Came to Dinner” at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, Pennsylvania.

Already an established star on Broadway and in films with the Marx Brothers, Harpo played the role of “Banjo” in the production — written by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart — which had just finished a 739-performance run starting in 1939 at the Music Box Theatre in New York City before rolling into the Bucks County Playhouse.

Kaufman himself, who played the lead role in that same New Hope production of “The Man Who Came to Dinner,” was also already well-known to the Marx Brothers as well.

A playwright, director, producer and humorist, Kaufman had collaborated on musical Broadway shows that showcased the talents of the early Marx Brothers like “The Cocoanuts” in 1925 and “Animal Crackers” in 1928. Both of those shows would go on to be hit films for the Marx Brothers, in 1929 and 1930 respectively.

Kaufman and Hart had written “The Man Who Came to Dinner” in 1939, and the fact that it was being performed in New Hope in 1941 with an established star like Harpo Marx, wasn’t unusual at all. The Bucks County Playhouse was quickly becoming one of the most famous regional theaters in the country at that time and would eventually attract a roster of American theater royalty that included Helen Hayes, Kitty Carlisle, Grace Kelly, Robert Redford, Bert Lahr, Walter Matthau, Bernadette Peters, Liza Minnelli and many more.

But it was also convenient because Kaufman owned an estate just south of New Hope, between Lahaska and Doylestown, and Harpo was a frequent guest. A Sept. 6, 1937, Life magazine story headlined “Life Goes to a Party” featured several photos of Harpo and his wife, actress Susan Fleming, who had married a year before, visiting the Kaufman estate with other guests. The cover of that magazine also featured a photo of shirtless Harpo, wearing a Caesare-like head wreath.

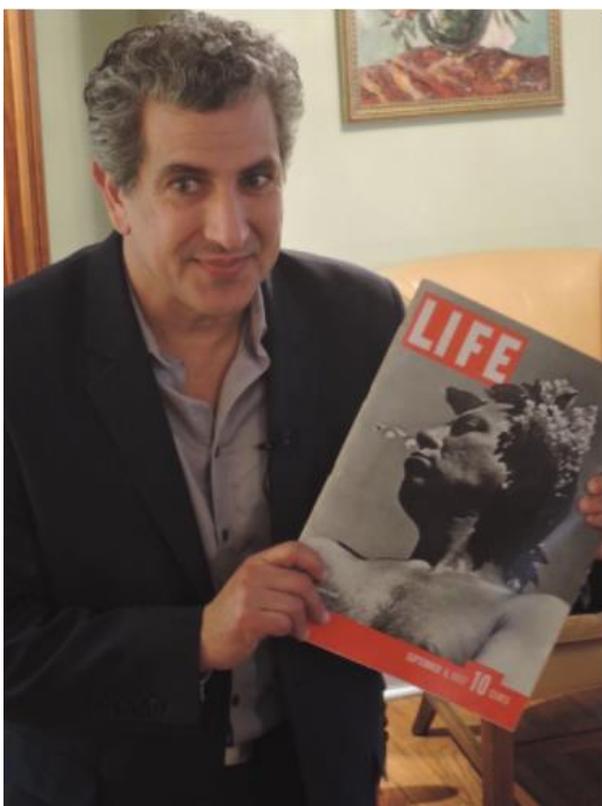
The Kaufman estate, his primary residence from 1936 until he sold it in 1950, is now home to The Inn at Barley Sheaf Farm, a historic bed and breakfast in Bucks County, owned by Mark Frank.

The inn and its connection between Kaufman and the Marx Brothers provided the perfect backdrop for a media event to preview the Bucks County Playhouse’s latest production, “An Evening with Groucho,” starring Frank Ferrante as Groucho Marx, that opened on Valentine’s Day Feb. 14 and will run through Feb. 25.

Ferrante, described by The New York Times as “the greatest living interpreter of Groucho Marx’s material,” will offer a 90-minute show that features the funniest of Groucho’s one-liners, anecdotes and songs, including “Hooray for Captain Spaulding” from the 1930 Marx Brothers film “Animal Crackers” and “Lydia, the Tattooed Lady,” both from the 1939 film “At the Circus.”

“Groucho loved George Kaufman,” Ferrante says. “They go back to around 1925, when they were both in their mid-30s. It was perhaps the greatest American comedy writer and perhaps the greatest American comedian together. What Groucho said about George was that ‘Kaufman gave me the walk and the talk.’ Meaning that Kaufman helped define Groucho’s persona, gave it intelligence, and East Coast sensibility. Groucho referred to George S. Kaufman as his ‘god’ with a small G.”

Ferrante has been portraying Groucho Marx for nearly 35 years. He was discovered by Groucho’s son, Arthur Marx, when Ferrante was a drama student at the University of Southern California.



Frank Ferrante, who is playing Groucho Marx at the Bucks County playhouse, pictured with a Life magazine featuring Harpo Marx. The photo was taken at the former home of George S. Kaufman, who wrote the Marx Brothers' earliest Broadway shows.

He originated the off-Broadway title role in "Groucho: A Life in Revue" — written by Arthur Marx — portraying the comedian from age 15 to 85. Ferrante then reprised the role in London's West End was nominated for the Laurence Olivier Award for "Comedy Performance of the Year."

Ferrante has now performed the Groucho role more than 2,500 in more than 400 cities worldwide.

He remembers how liberating it was to first play Groucho right out of school.

"His humor was so free and so wild and outrageous," Ferrante says. "At my core, I'm fairly shy actually. So be able to run wild on the stage and hear that kind of laughter and to improvise for the first time, there was nothing more exhilarating."

The role has evolved as Ferrante has matured.

"It's wilder, there is more improvisation, there is more audience interaction," he says. "As I get older, my point of view changes. I think it's [the show] smarter now that it was 35 years ago and I think it reflects Groucho's own interest in music and reading. It's not just a wacky show. It think there are slices of Groucho's spirit throughout. And it matters as I get older to really represent this great comic master to audiences around the world."

Ferrante will be accompanied in the Bucks County Playhouse performances by musical director Gerald Sternbach. Dreya Weber will direct.

Frank Ferrante is appearing in "An Evening with Groucho" at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, Pennsylvania, Feb. 14-25. For tickets and information, go to [www.bcptheater.org](http://www.bcptheater.org) or call 215-862-2121.