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Entertainment & Life

Renowned Groucho Marx impersonator brings 'An Evening with Groucho' to Bucks County Playhouse



Frank Ferrante will perform "An Evening with Groucho" at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope through Feb. 25.

Frank Ferrante has spent more than three decades portraying perhaps the most famously irreverent comedian in American history, but the star of "An Evening with Groucho" hasn't lost his child-like wonder for the man who's most influenced his career.

Ferrante's sentimental side was on full display Monday morning as he toured the Inn at Barley Sheaf Farm in Holicong, the former home of legendary writer/director George S. Kaufman, whose extensive credits included co-writing Broadway musicals "The Cocoanuts" and "Animal Crackers" for the Marx Brothers, as well as the screenplay for "A Night at the Opera."

"It's very moving to me, just thick with atmosphere," a wide-eyed Ferrante said as he stood inside the room in the inn where Kaufman did much of his writing, now called "Stage Door" after his 1936 play. "To think of that kind of genius and creativity ... I always like going to these types of settings. It's inspiring."

Ferrante, 54, was in town to prepare for a 14-show run of “An Evening with Groucho” through Feb. 25 at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope. It’ll be the first time he has performed at the theater, which is already part of Marx Brothers lore — the perpetually silent Harpo Marx actually once spoke on the Playhouse stage, portraying a character based on himself named Banjo in a summer 1941 production of Kaufman and Moss Hart’s “The Man Who Came to Dinner.”

“I’ve known about the Bucks County Playhouse for 30 years,” Ferrante said. “It’s a fitting spot to be doing ‘An Evening with Groucho.’ Harpo and Groucho would often visit Kaufman at his estate here in (Bucks County).”

Not that “An Evening with Groucho” needs a historic venue to be successful — or even an audience familiar with the Marx Brothers. The show, which features Ferrante accompanied by pianist Gerald Sternbach, is described by its star as “a fast-paced comedy with music, packed with improvisation.” There is physical humor, storytelling, audience interaction and, of course, the type of acerbic, quick-witted wordplay that made Groucho Marx so beloved and influential. There is also a video element new to this production.

“What I’m trying to show is what it would have been like to see the Marx Brothers, and specifically Groucho, live,” Ferrante said in a telephone interview last week. “It’s not a tribute show, it’s really more of what it would have been like to experience him onstage in the 1930s if he ever did a one-person show, which he never did.”

Ferrante, a Southern California native, has been a fan of the Marx Brothers since seeing their 1937 movie “A Day at the Races” on TV as a 9-year-old. For a young, Catholic school-educated boy forced to play by society’s rules, their brash humor, misbehavior, unpredictability and disdain for the status quo were intoxicating.

“I was somewhat of a shy kid, but watching them behave the way they did in the movies, so free and outrageous, in-your-face, with no filter, that was appealing to me,” said Ferrante, who calls “Duck Soup” (1933) his favorite Marx Brothers film. “As I got older, I really appreciated their wit and craft. Through their comedy, the way they behaved, questioned and stirred things up, you could really see other ways of looking at life.”

Ferrante’s passion for the Marx Brothers was still burning in 1985 when, as a theater major at USC, he performed a nascent version of “An Evening with Groucho” as his senior project. His invited guests included Groucho’s children Miriam Allen Marx and Arthur Marx, as well as 89-year-old Morrie Ryskind, who wrote or co-wrote some of the most famous Marx Brothers material. Ryskind, who died that August, has been quoted as calling Ferrante “the only actor aside from Groucho who delivered my lines as they were intended to be.”

Arthur Marx was so impressed that he asked Ferrante to star in a new show he was working on about his late father. “Groucho: A Life in Revue,” featuring Ferrante playing him at four stages of his life, from 15 to 85, premiered at a Kansas City dinner theater in late 1985 and by the following year was playing off-Broadway. A production on London’s West End followed, as did multiple awards, accolades (from the likes of Hal Holbrook) and opportunities for the show’s young star, who has gone on to enjoy a successful career as an actor and director, including regular work at the Walnut Street Theatre.

These days, he does about 20 regional dates of “An Evening with Groucho” a year. Whether audience members know Marx and his brothers from their classic movies, or from his years hosting “You Bet Your Life,” or are merely familiar with the persona, Ferrante believes there’s an enduring appeal that transcends generations.

“I was doing a show in New Mexico where a 7-year-old and a 94-year-old were laughing at the same jokes,” he said. “There’s something contagious about what they do. I think we all live vicariously through their wildness and the freedom they had.

“Also, the material was expertly written. With people like George S. Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind, their personas were so well developed. It was clear what Groucho was about. You know what he’s thinking when he raises that eyebrow.”

Groucho Marx was also full of surprises, as Ferrante discovered the only time he met him in 1976, a year before his death. Ferrante was 13, attending a Marx public appearance with his dad at the old Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Marx, 86, showed up three hours late, looking old, non-communicative and disinterested.

Finally, he started taking questions from the audience, and the familiar persona returned.

“Groucho, are you making any more Marx Brothers movies?”

“No, I’m here answering stupid questions.”

The audience erupted in laughter.

“He was as irreverent as ever, as brash as ever, as insulting as ever,” Ferrante recalled. “He got through the 10, 15 questions and walked off into the sunset.”

Ferrante followed Marx to his car and got a blurry photo taken with him. Ten years later, to the week, he was playing him in “Groucho: A Life in Revue.”

“Remarkable,” Ferrante said. “It’s been a fun journey. Hearing that kind of laughter never gets old.”