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TIMES OF TRENTON ENTERTAINMENT

Theater: Frank Ferrante in 'An Evening with Groucho' at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse



Frank Ferrante appearing as Groucho Marx in "An Evening with Groucho" (*Courtesy Photo*)

By **Ted Otten**

For The Times of Trenton

The latest attraction at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse's winter lineup called Visiting Artists Series is the return of Frank Ferrante in "An Evening with Groucho" through February 25, and the event kicked off with a special performance at the Inn of Barley Sheaf Farm, former home of acclaimed playwright George S. Kaufman who created such Broadway hits as "Animal Crackers" and "The Cocoanuts" for the Marx Brothers before they went off to Hollywood.

Groucho Marx and his brothers were frequent visitors to New Hope there, and Groucho credited Kaufman as the person who "gave me the walk and the talk" for Broadway. Kaufman also wrote the film versions of Marx Brothers' Broadway hits as well, and, partnered by Morrie Ryskind, Kaufman also scripted their film classic "A Night at the Opera" although today Kaufman is best remembered for his partnership with Moss Hart

which produced such stage classics as "The Man Who Came to Dinner" and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "You Can't Take It with You."

Frank Ferrante has been called "the greatest living interpreter of Groucho Marx's material," and this California-born actor and director began his stage appearances as Groucho 1985 in "Groucho: A Life in Revue," a play by Groucho's son Arthur Marx and Robert Fisher in which he played Groucho from ages 15 to 85. This production took him to New York's Lucille Lortel Theatre for 254 performances and to London for six months where it earned Ferrante an Olivier Award nomination and was also seen on TV as a PBS special.

Ferrante's current show, "An Evening with Groucho," is vaguely like a famous double LP of the same title which appeared in 1972. At New York's Carnegie Hall, Groucho, introduced by Dick Cavett and accompanied by Marvin Hamlisch at the piano, presented not only songs and sections of the famous Marx Brothers movies but also shared family stories. Groucho's own career had begun in 1905 as a vaudeville act with his brothers which eventually took them to Broadway and Hollywood, continued on radio and TV where Groucho hosted a quiz show called "You Bet Your Life" from 1947 to 1961 and his own one man show with which he toured in his later years.

Ferrante spoke of the Barley Sheaf Farm visit and revealed that he was fascinated by photos of John Steinbeck and what he had learned about the friendship between Steinbeck and Kaufman who had great respect for each other's talent. In 1937, Kaufman directed the first Broadway production of Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men."

"It was great, thrilling actually, incredible, seeing photos of those men and seeing photos with Harpo and the others together, the whole gang, and being where they had been," said Ferrante who has worked often as both actor and director in Philadelphia at Walnut Street Theater. In 1998 at the Walnut's Studio Theatre, he wrote and starred in "By George," a play about Kaufman.

"The current show," said Ferrante, "although it has the same title as that famous recording, isn't just that event which occurred near the end of Groucho's life. What I want is for the audience to feel what it must have been like to experience Groucho live in his prime in the 1930's. That couldn't have happened in the thirties because he always performed with his brothers. How great that must have been to work with them and with memorable people like Margaret Dumont, Groucho's comic foil! And I get to sing some songs associated with Groucho's career like 'Hooray for Captain Spaulding' by Kalmar and Ruby and 'Lydia the Tattooed Lady' by Arlen and Harburg that were featured in their shows and subsequent films.

"What makes it different every performance is that about a third of the show is adlibbed and the rest of it scripted. I can keep doing the show because of the unexpected nature of that adlibbed section and not knowing where the interaction with the audience will take

me," said Ferrante who went on to praise the work of his director, Dreya Weber, and his accompanist, Gerald Sternbach, and he noted that Sternbach had accompanied Mel Brooks on his recent comedy tours.

"It's not just an entertainment," said Ferrante, "because it's also the reflection of that unique man. Here was a man who cared about his intellect and his sense of humor. He was a voracious reader, had a friendship and correspondence with poet T.S. Eliot, and was a great fan of the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. He was very proud of his work in a TV version of 'The Mikado' opposite Helen Traubel, and I include Koko's most famous aria, 'Tit Willow,' from that operetta. He was also a great fan of classical music, and his son told me that he kept a dictionary in his car and was fascinated by words. You might think that strange of a man who never went beyond sixth grade. All that's also within the piece along with the dancing and craziness."

Ferrante has performed his Groucho role over 2500 times, and his tours with the show have taken him to more than 500 cities around the world including a recent tour to Australia for eight weeks. He pointed out that audiences aren't just people who remember Groucho from the past but also include many young people who have what Ferrante calls "the joy of discovering Groucho."

"Sometimes it depends on the community where I'm performing or how the show is marketed," said Ferrante, "but most often I have a very mixed audience when it comes to ages. His humor is subversive and cutting, hip and dangerous, and audiences are not just older people who remember the laughter from the past. They are also young people, even children, who find something special and uncommon in Groucho's humor."

"I remember one performance in New Mexico where there was a little boy sitting next to an older lady. I kibitzed with them in character and found out he was seven and she was 94. She had seen the Marx Brothers touring in the 1920's, and he had just discovered them. It was not really surprising to me," said Ferrante, "that they both laughed at the same things."

IF YOU GO

"An Evening with Groucho"

Where: Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, PA

When: through February 25, Thursday at 7:30; Friday and Saturday at 8 with matinees at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

How much: Tickets are \$35 to \$55; group rates for 10 or more

Contact: (215) 862 - 2121 or at buckscountyplayhouse.org.