

second runs Tom Panzenhagen

... a look at second-run films in the Detroit area

REMARKABLE

"A Night at the Opera," 8 p.m. Friday at the Michigan Theater, 803 E. Liberty at State in Ann Arbor, phone 668-4490, \$3.

Groucho Marx wrote in his autobiography, "The word genius was tossed around the film industry with the careless abandon of a cooch dancer wiggling her muscles at a carnival side show. I presume there were a number of them out there... but I met only one. His name was Irving Thalberg."

He also wrote of the Marx Brothers, "During our years in the movies we made 14 pictures. Two were far above average. Some of the others were pretty good. Some were deplorable. The best two were made by Thalberg."

Those two were "A Night at the Opera" (1935) and "A Day at the Races" (1936). High praise, indeed, that Groucho would credit a producer for the brothers' greatest successes. "Made by Thalberg."

Irving Thalberg died in 1936 at the age of 37. Largely because of him, the Marx Brothers will live on forever.

(Incidentally, F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel "The Last Tycoon" is about Thalberg, and a recent Robert De Niro film of that book and with the same title is certainly worth seeing.)

So what did Thalberg do for the Marxes?

Thalberg reunited them with two of their best writers, George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, and he gave substance to their jokes.

In previous Marx Brothers films, plots were non-existent. Their movies were actually old vaudeville bits and newer gags loosely strung together over 90 or 100 minutes.

"A Night at the Opera" changed all that.

For the first time there was a plot. Of course, the brothers and their best to tear the plot to shreds, but that's what makes this movie so funny. Despite their shenanigans, the seams of the plot hold fast.

As Groucho and Chico in the film rip into a legal contract — and its accompanying "Sanity Clause" — with relentless doubletalk and non sequiturs, the brothers rip into Thalberg's script.

But the contract bit wouldn't be funny without the understanding that the legalese is pretty funny in itself. And "A Night at the Opera" wouldn't be as hilarious without the realization that the Marxes' many outrageous segues all have a starting point and an end point in the script.

Thanks to Thalberg, the Marx Brothers weren't just monkeying around anymore. Also starring Margaret Dumont, Kitty ("What's My Line?") Carlisle and Allan Jones.

Also showing on the same bill: "Now Voyager" with Bette Davis and Paul Henreid, and live organ music during the intermission.

EXTRAORDINARY

"Bittersweet," 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Redford Theatre, 17380 Lahser at Grand River, phone 537-2560, \$2. (Organ recital begins at 7:30 p.m. each night. Recommend purchase of tickets in advance.)

A late Jeanette MacDonald-Nelson Eddy film (1940), perhaps not as well known, or as good, as the earlier "Naughty Marietta" (35), "Rose Marie" (36) or "Maytime" (37), but certainly worth a go.

Noel Coward tunes include "I'll See You Again" and "Tokay." Also starring George Sanders.

Lively, musical variety featured

By ERIC MOBEY

There was something for everybody Friday night at the Royal Oak Theatre.

The featured artist, Bonnie Raitt, shared the bill with Steve Nardella and the sensational Sippie Wallace. A lesser artist would have been threatened by the lively sets of Nardella and Ms. Wallace, but the confident Bonnie Raitt was unwavered.

Ann Arborites Steve Nardella and his band performed the show on a lively note. Their set featured an array of styles from Blues and Rockability to straight-ahead, vintage Rock and Roll. Their performance was admirable for an opening act and helped to set a good tone for the rest of the evening.

Eighty-one-year-old Sippie Wallace followed Nardella in a most memorable appearance. Bluesday Wallace charmed the crowd with her Depression-era ragtime blues.

Sippie is a favorite of Bonnie Raitt and she gave her ample room to steal

the hearts of the receptive audience. Backed by the tuxedoed Easy Street Jazz Band, Sippie worked her way through 11 songs.

Ms. Wallace suffered a stroke five years ago and was confined to a wheelchair. However, you can't keep a good woman like Sippie down for long and she has recuperated to where she can stand on stage once again.

SIPPIES' HUMOROUS song introductions and down-right assertiveness added to her still-strong vocals. She received appreciative applause every time she queried the audience with "how am I doin'?" Everytime she was ready to deliver a song, she would nod to her keyboardist with a demonstrative "Maestro, if you please" or "okay, maestro."

Bonnie Raitt joined Sippie and the Easy Street Jazz Band for the last two songs, closing the set with a roof-raising version of "Women Be Wise." This song showcased the fine band with solos from all members. Sippie had let

her fellow Detroiters know that this lady can still sing the blues.

Finally, after a brief intermission, Ms. Raitt took the stage and proceeded to rock the socks off all those in attendance. Her raw energy and strong vocals are not for the meek or laid-back. Unlike other female vocalists, who sometimes appear fragile alongside their all-male bands, Raitt steps right in and plays along.

HER ABILITY ON electric guitar adds greatly to the performance. Not one to play into the helpless female role, Raitt moves and plays in a style that would appear contrived by most female rock singers. Yet Raitt does not come off like the women in Sippies "Hard Boiled Mama."

Ms. Raitt seemed especially pleased to have Sippie Wallace along on this outing. Her admiration for Sippie was verbalized throughout the evening. While other teen-agers of her generation were influenced by pop music of the day, Raitt was sampling Sippie's old records. This seems odd when you consider her father is Broadway singer-actor John Raitt. Personally, I'm

glad she didn't get in, say, "Oaklahoma."

The concert was a good mix of several styles from Sam and Dave's "And I Thank You" to a different version of Del Shannon's "Runaway." She was particularly striking on "Three-Time Loser" with low-down blues vocal that was punctuated with a great saxophone solo.

In fact, horns were predominant throughout the evening. This fine musicianship lifted both Sippie and Bonnie's performance. On "Give It Up," Bonnie's band was joined by two members of the Easy Street Jazz Band. The combined force of trombone, two clarinets and Fred's tuba augmented Bonnie's vocal tremendously.

One seldom sees this abundance of talent and professionalism in one show. In these inflationary times performance seldom equal the hefty ticket prices.

I'm reminded of Sippie Wallace's song with the line: "You can make me, do what you want me to, but you gotta know how to do it." I don't know what this show did to get Nardella, Sippie and Bonnie to do what they did, but they did know how to do it.

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Sleeping Bear workshop includes a separate introduction for Zone System non-users.

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