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Well soitenly the Three Stooges live on

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

Some describe it as slapstick, a long-running act that featured three grown men, each with an identifiable stage persona, not to mention an equally distinctive hairdo. Think sight gags and lots of physical (or simulated physical) contact, along with a healthy sprinkling of over-the-top sound effects and wiseguy threats ("Why, I oughta. . ."). Maybe comedian Moe Howard got it right when he labeled this brand of entertainment as "farical comedy." But whatever it's called, one thing is clear: Generations of audiences have long laughed at the antics of the Three Stooges. And dedicated fans still collect a variety of memorabilia related to "Hollywood's Sensational Screwballs."

Beginning in the early 1920s, two brothers from Brooklyn, Moe and Shemp

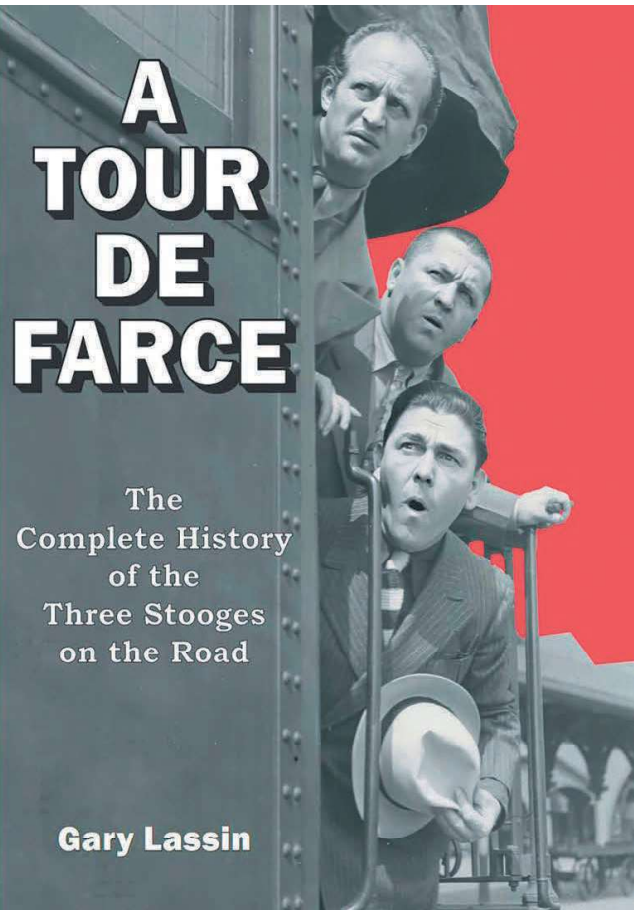
Howard, teamed up with a childhood friend to form a vaudeville act, "Ted Healy and His Stooges." Thus marked the beginning of show business careers that would endure for the next half-century. Along the way, the act evolved, as the Stooges became an independent act, not a backup to another comedian.

Several changes in personnel ensued, with the addition of Philadelphia Larry Fine. And while Moe and Larry remained the "constants" of the act, there would be four comedians who, for a variety of

pages.

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Below: The Three Stooges live on, in film and in wax.



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Three Stooges

FROM FRONT PAGE

reasons (including health), would come to fill the role of the third Stooge: Shemp, his brother "Curly" Howard, Joe Besser, and finally, "Curly Joe" DeRita

One thing that did not change, however, was the role that each Stooge played. Moe was the leader and brains (under his "bowl cut" hairdo) of the group. Larry was notably the guy in the middle, the one with frizzy hair, the "glue," in the words of longtime fan Gary Lassin. And the third Stooge, often with a shaved head, was usually the butt of the joke, the last to understand what was going on.

But that's getting ahead of the story. Making a living on the vaudeville circuit and hoping to hit it big was physically demanding. The Stooges lived out of steamer trunks, going from one stop to the next along the rail line, playing live shows at theaters along the way. Grueling, to be sure, Lassin agreed.

Despite their decades-long popularity, the Three Stooges were not an overnight success. Working steadily for years on vaudeville stages, they were "getting their comedy chops in order," he continued. As the popularity of motion pictures grew and vaudeville acts faded away, the "Boys" got their first big break in 1934, a contract with Columbia Pictures, which led to their appearance in approximately 200 comedy shorts. Lassin acknowledged that, while the Boys were good actors, they worked with talented producers and directors, as well as supporting actors and sound effects artists. And thanks to films, their work would not be lost to time.

All the while, the Stooges continued to perform live. In his recent 765-page book, "A Tour De Farce: The Complete History of the Three Stooges on the Road," Lassin documented more than 1,500 personal appearances made by the Stooges at a myriad of venues. Wherever they appeared, the Boys were met by



Above: With nearly 100,000 artifacts housed in the Stoozeum, there's no wasted space. The Boys have their eyes on you, even in the back stairwell.

enthusiastic crowds at venues as varied as theaters, military bases, and amusement parks, as well as hospital wards, the circus, and a corn palace. Over the years, the Stooges never turned down an opportunity to sign an autograph or pose for a photograph. When approached, they routinely went into their act, because, as Lassin notes, "They were hams."

With the end of their Columbia contract in 1957, a new generation of fans were introduced to the Stooges, thanks to the airing of their work on television. Although they continued to make public appearances, the days of the act were numbered: Larry suffered a paralyzing stroke in 1970, thereby bringing an end to nearly 50 years of laughs.

These days, comedians work solo. And the nature of their humor is certainly different than that of a century ago. But the legacy of the Three Stooges lives on, thanks in large part to Lassin's efforts. What began as a childhood interest in the comedy team became personal when he married the granddaughter of Larry's

brother. As a Stooge-in-law, Lassin continued his own hunt for memorabilia related to the act. Surprisingly, he noted that there was never an attic full of Stooge-related souvenirs in the family ("they were relatives, not movie stars"). "Just a comic book here, a letter there" is how he described what was kept.

Lassin's work to preserve the legacy of the Stooges took a new direction when, approximately 40 years ago, he assumed the leadership of the Three Stooges Fan Club; he proudly noted it is one of the longest continuously running fan clubs in the country. Not surprisingly, he estimated that 90 percent of the approximately 2,000 club members are men.

And then, in 2004, Lassin opened what serves as the club's headquarters, the Stoozeum, located in Ambler, Pennsylvania. Open by appointment, the public is welcome to tour this 10,000-square-foot, three-story museum that houses nearly 100,000 Stooge-related artifacts. And "soiently," there is a gift shop. On the other hand, Lassin draws the line to those devoted fans who have requested permission for having their ashes scattered at the Stoozeum.



Above: A mecca for fans of the Three Stooges, The Stoozeum opened in Ambler, Penn., in 2004. Lassin has refused requests for those wishing that their ashes be scattered there.

As for those beginning a Stooge collection, Lassin suggested that one strategy might be to assemble a complete set of trading cards, purchased individually for a few dollars (to be upgraded later on). A previously read Three Stooges comic book can be procured for about \$20. Early collectibles include autographs, photographs, and contracts, as well as costumes and props that are "incredibly rare." (Note: Lassin cautions that fakes and reproductions abound.) More accessible are newspaper clippings, posters, and playbills. And during the 1950s and beyond, "everything from soup to nuts" was made, including toys, games, and toilet paper with Three Stooges trivia questions.

So how does Lassin describe the Three Stooges? In the end, he offered his insight into what made the Three Stooges "click," and why their fans continue to adore them. "The best way I can explain it is that they were human cartoons." If a bomb were to blow up at your feet, your clothes might be "torn and tattered, but you'd live to tell about it." Hit in the head and knocked unconscious? A splash of water will make it right again. Angry at your boss? "Give him a swift kick in the rear end" (and not lose your job). And, for the record, no one ever lost their sight from all those pokes in the eye, because in the world of the Three Stooges, "nothing is real." Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk!

stoozeum.com



Above: Two of 765 pages of "Tour de Farce," a heavy tome that meticulously documents the Three Stooges' life on the road.

Below: The Three Stooges enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in the 1950s, and with that came a flood of Stooge-related items that are now collectible.



Above: Scores of comic books were inspired by the comedy act.

Below: All the world's a Stooge, as evidenced by this collection of posters.

