

The Tragic And Twisted Tale Of The Three Stooges

Curly, Larry, Moe, murder, betrayal, brain damage...

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The Three Stooges are arguably the most popular and influential comedy institution in Hollywood history. Yet Moe, Curly and Larry (and Shemp) did not receive the recognition and reward you might expect. In fact, as Empire reveals, their tale is one of exploitation, grievous bodily harm... and even murder.



IN 1940, THE IMMENSE POPULARITY OF THE THREE STOOGES WAS DEEMED SUCH A POTENTIAL THREAT to the credibility of The Third Reich that Adolf Hitler added them to his personal death list. What roused the Führer's ire was a Stooges two-reeler called *You Nazsty Spy!*, a ruthless send-up of Hitler and his fascist regime released nine months before Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, a full year before America, still firmly isolationist, entered World War II, and produced in direct defiance of both the censorious Hays Code and the prevailing mood in Hollywood which was, with overseas markets already in jeopardy, to play nice and not rock the Nazi boat.

The image of The Three Stooges as fearless, anti-fascist crusaders, willing to put their livelihoods and their lives on the line in the noble cause of liberty, will come as a shock to

anyone who thinks of them — if they think of them at all — as a fifth-rate Marx Brothers knock-off whose principal contribution to the art of comedy was the twin-fingered eye-poke. And, to be honest, that would include most of the non-North American population of the planet and anyone in possession of a vagina. What will also come as a surprise to non-Stooge fans (and, as with Marmite and S&M porn, there is no middle ground when it comes to Stooge fandom) is not only that they were once sufficiently popular to get Hitler's dander up, but that said popularity has not waned one iota in the intervening decades. In fact, it's safe to say that The Three Stooges, 35 years after last remaining original Stooge Moe Howard gouged his last cornea, are more celebrated today than they were at the zenith of their prolonged, checkerboard career.

Larry, Moe and Curly (the classic Stooge line-up) are stitched into the cultural fabric of America in a way that few entertainers are, rivalling Marilyn and Elvis for kitsch-cult supremacy. They are, it's claimed, with some justification, the most popular comedy team in history, appearing in almost 200 shorts and feature films from the early 1930s to the early 1970s, hosting their own TV show and making countless stage and personal appearances.

If you want proof of just how ubiquitous the Stooges are, try, as Empire did, doing some research on them at the main branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. Just remember to wear some comfortable shoes. Far from a one-stop shop at the third-floor cinema section, your hunt for all things Stooge will take you up hill and down dale to, among others, Fiction & Literature, Social Sciences, Biography, Autobiography, Local History and even Cookery. Yes, The Official Three Stooges Cookbook by Chicago Sun-Times reporter Robert Kurson was published in 1999. Books on the Stooges abound, running the gamut from craven hagiography to pseudo-academic analysis (check out Stoogeology: Essays On The Three Stooges, edited by Peter Seely and Gail W. Pieper), and the internet, of course, might have been invented for the sole purpose of disseminating Stooge data. A personal favourite among the superabundance of Stooge sites is Stuart Yaniger's Three Stooges Wine Rating System which, instead of awarding stars or marks out of a hundred to wines in the traditional fashion, assigns them combinations of Stooges according to their character and quality. A typical entry reads thus: "Ah, a very pleasant bistro-styled '95 syrah from McDowell. Not deep, but nice varietal character and good balance. It's anywhere from a Larry Curly to a Double Larry, depending on the proclivities of the taster." If, as is highly likely, you're now wondering exactly what all the fuss is about — a trio of resolutely low-brow buffoons, whose ultra-violent slapstick makes Tom & Jerry look like Bagpuss, feted as cultural icons — then it's probably best to start at the beginning.

WITHOUT GOING INTO THE SOMEWHAT CONVOLUTED PRE-HISTORY OF THE STOOGES, it's sufficient to say that the three Horwitz brothers, Moses, Jerome and Samuel (better known by their stage names as Moe, Curly and Shemp Howard), were nice, blue-collar Jewish boys from Brooklyn, born without an ounce of theatrical blood in their veins.

Nevertheless, at an early age — and not unusually for working-class Jews around the turn of the century — both Moe and Shemp decided on a career in showbusiness. The pair had moderate success in a variety of burlesque shows before teaming up for the first time in 1916 to perform a blackface routine. They continued this until 1922, when they encountered an old friend from their Brooklyn days, comedian Ted Healy, then a rapidly rising star in vaudeville. Healy recruited them to be his sidekicks, and when Philadelphia musician and comedian Larry Fine was brought into the act, The Three Stooges were born. As the Stooges' stock continues to grow,

Ted Healy has become an increasingly marginalised figure, remembered only for his poor treatment of his co-stars — who, history would have it, and have it incorrectly, outshone him from the get-go — and for the excessive drinking and wildly erratic behaviour that lead to his violent death. In fact, Healy was an enormously successful entertainer, one of the biggest stars of his era, who has been cited as a formative influence by such comedy legends as Red Skelton, Milton Berle and Bob Hope. As the young Stooges' mentor, he practically invented the style of brutal slapstick that has made them legends, and if, along the way, he stiffed them out of their fair share of the proceeds, his pivotal role in their history deserves to be recognised. That said, there is no doubt that Healy was a terrible boss, not only tight with a buck, but an abusive, volatile drunk to boot.

In 1930, Ted Healy & His Stooges (they were never billed as The Three Stooges while they worked for Healy) appeared in the Fox Studios feature film *Soup To Nuts*. It was not a hit. Healy's act, which relied heavily on ad libs and improvisation, never transferred successfully to film; neither was he exactly movie-star material, with a bulbous spud face and big boozer's nose. The Stooges, on the other hand, impressed the Fox brass, and they were offered a contract without Healy. Furious, Healy immediately put the kibosh on this by claiming the Stooges were his employees. The offer was duly rescinded. When Larry, Moe and Shemp got word of this, they decided to cut Healy loose anyway and struck out on their own. True to form, Healy was incensed, forbidding them to use any of their old routines, which he considered his own copyrighted material, even threatening to bomb theatres if the Stooges dared to play them. In desperation, Healy made a failed attempt to salvage his act by hiring replacement Stooges. Amazingly, in 1932, with Moe now the group's business manager, Healy and his Stooges settled their differences and began working together again. It proved anything but a joyful reunion. Healy's Jekyll and Hyde personality, exacerbated by his increasingly heavy drinking, so terrified the notoriously skittish Shemp that he left the act to go solo and was soon making comedy shorts for Vitaphone back in Brooklyn. This left the Stooges a man down. Shemp's proposed solution was that Moe's baby brother, Jerry, fill the gap. Healy was scathing. With all the foresight and perception that comes with drinking Wild Turkey for breakfast, he took one look at the future Curly Howard, the most beloved of all the Stooges, and dismissed him as not funny. Admittedly, Jerry did not much resemble his iconic alter ego at that point, sporting long red hair and a handlebar moustache. And, it must be said, neither Moe nor Larry had any confidence in Jerry's comic abilities either. Moe stated flatly to Shemp that Jerry had "no talent whatsoever". That changed abruptly when, at Shemp's urging, Jerry ran on stage in the middle of a Stooges routine sporting a freshly shaved head, wearing a bathing suit and carrying a tiny bucket of water. This earned him a huge laugh from the crowd (vaudeville audiences were obviously a push-over), and one of the most gifted comic performers of the 20th century had officially arrived. With Curly on board, Ted Healy & His Stooges signed a one-year contract with MGM to make five shorts and a couple of full-length features, none of which proved remarkable. The contract was not renewed, and in 1934 Healy and his Stooges finally went their separate ways.

TED HEALY, WHOSE CAREER FROM THIS POINT ON, ALTHOUGH STILL HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL, FADES FROM THE HISTORY BOOKS, could fairly be described as his own worst enemy. Not only was he prone to violent, drunken rages, he was apt to do some very dumb things indeed. Aside from insulting Charles 'Lucky' Luciano's Italian heritage and attempting, as a gag, to knock off one of Al Capone's private safes, perhaps the

dumbest thing he ever did was schtupping comic actress Thelma Todd while she was still married to mobster Pasquale ‘Pat’ DiCicco, Luciano’s eyes and ears in Tinseltown and confidant of the Hollywood high and mighty.

When Todd turned up dead in 1935 (ruled a suicide but almost certainly DiCicco’s work), a spooked Healy swore off actresses for good and took up with a beautiful UCLA student named Betty Hickman, whom he later married. Unfortunately, he neglected to swear off getting drunk and acting like a prick in public, and three years after Todd’s death, while out celebrating the birth of his first child, he ran into DiCicco again. Already several sheets to the wind when he arrived at the Trocadero on the Sunset Strip, Healy lost no time in mixing things up with another famously belligerent drunk, character actor Wallace Beery, who was drinking at the bar with DiCicco. Healy suggested they take things outside. They duly did, and Beery and DiCicco proceeded to beat Healy to a pulp. The beating was so savage, in fact, that the following day Healy fell into a coma and died.

There was little or no serious investigation into Healy’s death, and a farcical autopsy, performed after his body had been embalmed, concluded that he had died of acute alcoholism, noting that his organs were soaked in alcohol — as of course they would have been, having just been embalmed. When his wife Betty, by then an MGM contract player, complained to the press about the lack of interest in Healy’s death, she was summarily fired by the studio and never worked in Hollywood again. Shortly after Healy’s death, Wallace Beery took a three-month vacation in Europe.

Shemp Howard’s wife Babe firmly believed that Louis B. Mayer deployed his infamous fixers Eddie Mannix and Howard Strickling to protect Beery, one of his top stars, by covering up the incident. MGM story editor Samuel Marx confirmed this in an interview shortly before his death in 1992. Marx had earlier exposed another of Mayer’s cover-ups, the murder of Jean Harlow’s husband, his close friend Paul Bern, in the 1990 book *Deadly Illusions*.

Babe Howard also believed that the Stooges themselves were well aware of the MGM cover-up but, although shocked and appalled by Healy’s death, were too intimidated by DiCicco to make waves. And by then, they had quite another ruthless sociopath to contend with.

AT THE TIME OF HEALY’S DEATH, THE THREE STOOGES HAD BEEN UNDER CONTRACT TO THE MONSTROUS HARRY COHN’S COLUMBIA PICTURES FOR THREE YEARS. They were on the brink of their greatest success and had honed their act into the classic Stooge mode that defines them to this day. By this point, with almost 30 shorts and five features for Columbia under their belts, the individual Stooge personalities were fully formed, and the group dynamic, on which the Stooges’ comedy rested as heavily as the brutality and the pie fights, had emerged.

The internal mechanism of The Three Stooges is deceptively simple. It’s based on the premise that all of them are stupid, but some are more stupid than others. Moe, with his gravelly voice, permanent scowl and menacing helmet of bowl-cut hair, was the leader, invariably the under-boss entreated with overseeing whatever hopelessly doomed endeavour the Stooges found themselves pursuing (and whatever it was, you can bet it involved heavy objects and the potential for maximum mayhem; plumbing, not surprisingly, was a favourite Stooge profession).

Curly, his hulking frame bursting out of a too-small suit, was the irredeemably incompetent man-child, the knucklehead's knucklehead and recipient of most of Moe's abuse — a litany of punches, slaps and smacks, bonks on the head and, quintessential Moe, the twin-pronged poke in the eye. (Moe actually had his brother Shemp to thank for his signature move. Once, during a card game, Shemp became so convinced that Larry was cheating him he leapt up and poked him in both eyes. Moe made a note of it and duly incorporated it into the act.)

Larry, too often underestimated, was the all-important bridge between Moe's authoritarian bully and Curly's babyfaced clown. An easygoing simpleton, Larry was the essential, non-threatening intermediary, and he brought a special genius to the role. "As in Waiting For Godot," writes Ted Levitt in his essay *Larry: The Existential Stooge*, "if Curly and Estragon are body, Vladimir and Moe are the intellect, then they are waiting for Larry in order to be complete, to have a sense of their own existence." Of course, he also got hit in the head with a wrench now and then, too. Even given the quick-fire production schedule for shorts, the Stooges were extraordinarily prolific during their Columbia years, churning out film after film of, more often than not, admirable quality in terms of writing, direction and production values, given they were shot in a mere four or five days. And their films were hugely popular, often getting a more positive response than the features they were designed to accompany. The Stooges made a fortune for Columbia, playing a large part in boosting the studio's fortunes, transforming it from a second-string Poverty Row outfit into a bona fide major. Naturally, their talent, industriousness and lucrative bankability were rewarded with all the bounteous largesse for which Harry Cohn was justly famous. Right.

Although the legend that in the 23 years they spent at Columbia the Stooges never received a pay raise is untrue, it is rooted in reality. Playing his customary dual role of ruthless businessman and enthusiastic sadist, Cohn kept the Stooges on a one-year contract throughout their career at the studio, forcing them to re-negotiate their employment every 12 months, browbeating them into signing for a pittance with warnings that the shorts department was in financial trouble. In fact, thanks largely to the Stooges, Columbia's shorts department thrived throughout the late '30s and '40s. Keeping its biggest stars in the dark as to their true value was a deliberate ploy to ensure they worked cheap.

It would be easy to blame the Stooges for their predicament; why, for instance, didn't they simply tell Cohn to shove it and take their business elsewhere? They could have, but didn't for several reasons. For one, they were terrified of Cohn and his Mob connections, as were a good many people in Hollywood. They were also egregiously screwed by their manager, Harry Romm, a good friend of Cohn's who they signed with at the studio boss' insistence. Romm was happy to feather his own nest while keeping in with Cohn by perpetuating the outright lie that the Stooges weren't making any money for the studio and that the shorts department was under imminent threat of closure. As working-class guys, fearful of losing their livelihood, they were happy to take what they were given. But if Cohn was a bastard in his financial dealings with the Stooges, he outdid himself for sheer moustache-twirling villainy when Curly Howard's health began to fail in the early 1940s.

AS EARLY AS 1942, THE LIFE OF A STOOGES HAD BEGUN TO TAKE ITS TOLL ON CURLY. Playing a human punchbag day in, day out for years, enduring constant blows to the

head — most of which, according to Moe Howard, were every bit as real as they looked — brought on a series of minor cerebral haemorrhages that slowed him down to the point that he was unable to make personal appearances. Shemp, now under contract to Columbia himself, was brought in to replace Curly in live performances. Curly's doctors insisted that he also take time off from his punishing filming schedule. Cohn flatly refused to give Curly leave of absence, and it was not long before his declining health became evident on screen. His deterioration can first be seen in 1945 short *If A Body Meet A Body*. By this time, Curly was forgetting his lines, and his balletic physicality and tireless energy, vital components of the Stooges' comedy, were visibly ebbing away.

There's no doubt that Curly's hard-partying lifestyle contributed to his health problems — he was a massive drinker and, pinhead appearances to the contrary, a voracious womaniser — but neither is there any disputing that Harry Cohn forced him to keep working while he was clearly seriously ill, exacerbating his condition until, later in 1945, the inevitable happened and Curly, aged 42, suffered his first major stroke.

This should have signalled, at the very least, an extended period of rest and recuperation. Yet, incredibly, he was back at work within a month, despite physical impairments that rendered his performances so sluggish and lacklustre they're painful to watch. The team's directors, most often Del Lord or Edward Bernds, attempted to disguise Curly's dire state by using old footage and putting more emphasis on Moe and Larry. For their part, the other Stooges took on the extra responsibility willingly, hoping that Curly would eventually recover sufficiently to resume his role. The results of this combined effort were better than might be expected, in spite of Curly's infirmity and ravaged appearance (his fat cherub look was a thing of the past).

But it was a losing battle and in 1946, between takes on the short *Half-Wits Holiday* (a remake of the 1935 two-reeler, *Hoi Polloi*), Curly suffered a massive, paralysing stroke. His days as a Stooge were over, his career and his health wrecked by dedication to the un-gentle art of slapstick and by Harry Cohn's gross callousness — callousness compounded with stupidity since his treatment of Curly had cost him one of his studio's most valuable assets.

Naturally, Cohn didn't see things that way. His opinion of the Stooges, even while they were raking in money, was that their act was so lacking in sophistication that they were effectively interchangeable, and that pretty much any comic performer who looked funny enough could fill Curly's shoes in a second. In this he was as mistaken as many observers have been since. The Stooges might not have had the finesse of Chaplin or Keaton, the humanity of Laurel & Hardy or the transcendent novelty of the Marx Brothers, but their chemistry was unique. And if it was not immediately apparent to Cohn what replacing Curly entailed, the endless auditions for a new third Stooge alerted him to what Moe and Larry already knew: they were not going to find another Curly.

IN RETROSPECT, THE SOLUTION SEEMS OBVIOUS. But the decision to bring Shemp back into the act was not that simple. First of all, since abdicating his Stoogedom in 1932, Shemp had forged a successful career as a solo performer, and he was reluctant to sacrifice all that he'd achieved on his own to be reabsorbed into a team he'd opted out of 14 years previously. Secondly, he was now over 50, a dedicated family man, and did not relish the prospect of lengthy

road trips or the Stooges' arduous schedule of personal appearances. Thirdly, there was the prospect of his living in Curly's substantial shadow, a very real concern, albeit an ironic one given Curly had originally replaced — and comprehensively eclipsed — him. After some initial trepidation, Harry Cohn was keen for Shemp to rejoin the act, and with Shemp under contract to Columbia, Cohn began to exert his influence (of course, he expected Shemp to take a 50 per cent pay cut for relinquishing his hard-won independence). In the end, though, it was Shemp's loyalty to his brother Moe and old friend Larry that persuaded him to rejoin the Stooges; he knew if he didn't the act was over, and with it Moe and Larry's careers. Reluctantly, he signed on — but only, he insisted, until a permanent replacement for Curly could be found. In the end, Shemp remained a Stooge until his dying day.

There are two schools of thought on Shemp's return to the fold. One is that, after Curly retired, Shemp did a valiant job but there was always something missing. Using the Three Stooges Wine Rating System in reverse gives a succinct, if harsh, summation of this position: "Some wines, without being actively bad, are bland or clumsy, really more lame than awful. They're recognisably wine, but poor substitutes for the REAL experience. Such wines are Shemps."

The opposing opinion is that Shemp injected a new energy into the act that had been sadly missing during the years they'd struggled with Curly's ailing health. And, in truth, Shemp was a talented comedian in his own right, not blessed with his baby brother's physicality, but a brilliant improviser and a genius with a wisecrack. From the mid-'40s to the mid-'50s, the Stooges made some of their best films, Curly's absence only jarringly apparent when Shemp was compelled by producer-director Jules White to imitate his brother rather than play his own character.

Whatever your perspective on the Shemp years, they were the Stooges' last great era. Columbia downsized its shorts department in the early 1950s; budgets and shooting schedules, already tight, were slashed to the point where Jules White, now virtually running the department on his own, was making 'new' Stooge shorts almost entirely from recycled footage. The team's personal life was rocked in 1952 when Curly died; three years later Shemp followed him: dead from a heart attack at 60.

Although devastated, Moe and Larry kept the act alive, recruiting comedian Joe Besser as the third Stooge. This, as any Stooge fan will tell you, was the beginning of the end. Besser was never happy as a Stooge and, wary of what had happened to Curly, had a clause in his contract forbidding Moe from hitting him.

By now, Columbia was the only studio in town producing shorts, and in 1957, with television taking over the market, the department was shut down. In December of '57, the studio declined to renew the Stooges' contract and, after 23 years' service, they were unceremoniously fired. A few weeks later, Moe returned to the studio to say goodbye to some old friends. He was refused entry by a security guard. Shortly afterwards, amid negotiations for a live tour, Joe Besser left the act.

By rights, this should have been the end of the road. But, in a supremely ironic twist of fate, the Stooges were actually on the brink of a major comeback. In 1958 Columbia offered a package of 78 Curly-era shorts for TV broadcast. Picked up by a number of networks across the US, they were an instant hit, particularly with children, and soon all 190 Stooge shorts were in circulation

and drawing huge audiences. Suddenly the Stooges were in big demand, and Moe and Larry once again revived the act with Joe ‘Curly-Joe’ DeRita stepping into the breach. With Moe and Larry now getting on in years, this was the Stooges’ last hurrah. But it was, in many ways, a triumphant one. From 1959 to 1965 they made a series of feature films in the classic Stooge vein, including the infamous Snow White And The Three Stooges (which is not nearly as bad as people would have you believe — well, not quite). They also recorded 41 live wraparound segments for The New Three Stooges cartoon series. In 1969, Moe, Larry and Curly-Joe shot a pilot for a proposed TV show called Kook’s Tour, a Stooge-style travelogue. It was not to be. In January 1970, Larry Fine suffered a debilitating stroke, ending his career. Longtime Stooge co-star Emil Sitka was contracted to replace him, but no footage was ever shot with Sitka as a Stooge.

In December 1974, Larry suffered another stroke and, the following month, he died at the age of 72. With near unbelievable fortitude, Moe vowed the Stooges would soldier on, approaching veteran Ted Healy-era Stooge Paul ‘Mousie’ Garner. Tragically, while negotiating a number of movie projects, Moe was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. He died on May 4, 1975.

BUT THE THREE STOOGES LIVE ON. In the States it’s impossible to get through a week, a day even, without encountering a Stooge reference — images, clips, signature lines (“Calling Dr. Howard, Dr. Fine, Dr. Howard” from 1934’s Men In Black crops up continually in films and on TV), catchphrases (“I’m a victim of soicumstance!” etc), noises (particularly Curly’s trademark “nyuk, nyuk, nyuk, nyuk, nyuk!” and “woo, woo, woo!”), even sound effects — the Stooges’ ‘frying pan’ is a classic for the ages, still famously used by Vic & Bob.

During the late ’70s, a popular kids’ cartoon series, The Robonic Stooges, appeared. And in 2000, Mel Gibson, perhaps the most famous Stooge fan, produced a Stooges TV biopic for ABC. The Simpsons is littered with Stoogeisms, so many they have their own website. Michael Jackson was also a huge fan, who drove around Neverland in a customised Stooge RV; he based his moonwalk on the Curly Shuffle, a move invented by Curly that made it look as if he was walking backwards.

It’s further claimed that Curly invented breakdancing: in times of stress he would fall to the ground and run in a circle using his shoulder as a pivot. The Stooges have even inspired poetry. Russell Thorburn’s Watching The Three Stooges, After Fifty, In The Hospital concludes with the verse:

*Later, when stillness settles like an X-ray,
you hear the most perfect line,
the child in you laughing at its insistent plea
that you imagine Dr. Howard, Dr. Fine, Dr. Howard
paged on the public address, as they weave
through the hall on carts, ride the snorting trot
of horses to surgery, Moe’s sour grape face
wanting to pummel that tenor to a gasp
and shell him with scatterbrained buckshot*

However you feel about the Stooges, such devotion is not born from an eye-poke alone, two-fingered or otherwise.

FOOL'S GOLD *Just a few cinematic Stooge tributes*

Crazy cop Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) goes Moe on some drug-dealer's ass. Gibson claimed that Riggs, a tortured insomniac, would definitely have been a Stooge fan, Late Show re-runs being the accompaniment to his dark nights of the soul.

PULP FICTION (1994)

When John Travolta plunges a syringe into Uma Thurman's heart, Brideless Groom is playing in the background. Showing the Stooges was prohibitively expensive, so instead, Emil Sitka is heard singing, "Hold hands you lovebirds!", QT's fave Stooge line.

DEAD MEN DON'T WEAR PLAID (1982)

Spliced into a scene with Kirk Douglas from I Walk Alone, detective Rigby Reardon (Steve Martin) dresses down a trio of Douglas' goons with a burst of Stooge schtick, stamping on one's toe and downing another's flies with a "Ziiip!" Funnier than it sounds.

TRADING PLACES (1983)

The plot of John Landis' comedy, in which Don Ameche and Ralph Bellamy's billionaire brothers bet on whether Eddie Murphy's street hustler can be transformed into a stuck-up stockbroker, is a dead ringer for the 1935 Stooge short, *Hoi Polloi*.

THIS IS SPINAL TAP (1984)

In Rob Reiner's, if you will, 'rockumentary', one of the clueless combo's replacement drummers is named Joe 'Mama' Besser, an homage to replacement Stooge Joe Besser — as well as a very clever pun on the phrase "yo mama!"

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