

PLUCK

Short Film Script
Written by Josh Aichenbaum

Inspired by *Harpo Speaks*
Written by Harpo Marx with Rowland Barber

FADE IN:

NIGHTMARE- INT. STOCK BROKERAGE FIRM. DAY

Stock ticker tape spills out onto the mahogany floor of a brokerage office. A dozen wing-tip shoes trample the tape. A dozen BROKERS jostle to get closer to a BANKER who reads off stock:

BANKER	BROKERS
AMERICAN CAN 86, UNION	SELL! SELL!
CARBIDE AND CARBON 59--	

HARPO MARX, 40, in a ragamuffin rain coat and top hat, tries to play his harp. The throng of brokers JOSTLE him. There's too much NOISE, too much CHAOS, for Harpo to play his music.

From his rain coat, he removes a pair of oversized scissors.

He cuts the ticker tape in two. The machine stops.

Without tape, the banker runs out of stocks to read aloud. The brokers fall silent.

Finally, quiet. Harpo lays fingers on the strings, about to play. Magically...

THE TICKER TAPE

...starts up again. The NOISE, the CHAOS is back.

BANKER (CONT'D)	BROKERS (CONT'D)
Anaconda Copper--	SELL!

The tape rises, now knee-deep. Harpo moves onto his stool.

A deathly pale BROKER stands at the edge of a too tall desk. He looks like he might-- Jesus! He jumps. He falls...

...into a ticker tape SPLASH! The BROKERS drown in tape.

The rising tide separates Harpo from his instrument. Harpo swims, HONKING his horn in pursuit.

He grabs hold and clings to his harp... his life raft. The tide pulls him under, drowning him and his harp--

END NIGHTMARE- INT. THEATER DRESSING ROOM. DAY

PLUCK! Harp strings shake.

Harpo wakes in a back stage dressing room.

GROUCHO MARX, 39, stands over him, having plucked the harp strings. Groucho's in his iconic stage make-up, in his grease-paint mustache and eyebrows. He hasn't slept in days.

GROUCHO
Get your telegram today?

Harpo clutches a telegram, stares at his harp. Groucho shakes his head, a hollow look in his eyes.

GROUCHO (CONT'D)
Monday was ten, Tuesday fifteen
grand and now... I can't go on...
What's the point of making money,
if I'm only going to lose it again?

He wipes off his stage make-up, makes a mess of it.

GROUCHO (CONT'D)
Remind me to never ask a mute for
advice.

He heads to the door.

HARPO
Hey, Groucho! Where are you going?

GROUCHO
To find a tall building. If Western
Union comes looking for me, let
them know I've moved to the
Allegheny County Morgue. I've got a
box there.

HARPO
You can't go. It's a two-a-day.

GROUCHO
(singing)
I cannot stay! I came to say...

Groucho exits, SINGING "Hooray for Captain Spaulding" as if it were a funeral dirge.

GROUCHO (O.S.) (CONT'D)	HARPO
<i>...I must be going."</i>	(calling after him)
	The show must go on!

Harpo sits in silence, in the too quiet room. He takes out his telegram and reads it, lips moving ever so slightly....

THE TELEGRAM READS: "SEND \$10,000 IN 24 HOURS OR ELSE FACE FINANCIAL RUIN AND DAMAGING SUITS. MUST HAVE \$10,000..."

Harpo says so much without saying anything, face etched with worry. HARP MUSIC FADES IN...

EXT. PITTSBURGH THEATRE. DAY

...over a lit-up marquee that reads: "The Four Marx Brothers in *Animal Crackers*." Below the marquee, a theatre poster of the Brothers' caricatures promises, "A Load of Laughs." No one enters the theater. No one walks the STREET.

THE HARP MUSIC FADES OUT...

INT. PITTSBURGH THEATRE- ON-STAGE. DAY

...in sync with the curtain closing. ON-STAGE, Harpo sits by his harp, listening to a SMATTERING of APPLAUSE dying out.

TWO STAGEHANDS rush in to carry his harp away. Harpo watches, as if in a REVERIE inspired by fear.

His harp disappears into the darkest recesses of backstage.

INT. PITTSBURGH THEATRE STAGE. DAY

Floodlights stage the climax of *Animal Crackers*, in which a POLICE OFFICER arrests Harpo (the mute thief). ART PATRONS, CHICO MARX and a STAND-IN for Groucho observe the arrest:

GROUCHO (STAND-IN)

Don't take him away, officer. He returned the painting.

POLICE OFFICER

All right. I'll let him go this time.

(to Harpo)

But I want to give you some advice. You're running around with the wrong crowd of people. Do you want to be a crook?

Harpo smiles big, insinuating, *yes, he'd like to be a crook*. The police officer reacts, aghast. REVEAL...

An empty house. Half-hearted CHUCKLES from the AUDIENCE.

POLICE OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Oh, why don't you go home?

CHICO (O.S.)

He ain't got no home.

A YOUNG MARRIED COUPLE watches, not having the best of times.

THE THEATRE WINGS

Two playwrights talk to each other. One is GEORGE S. KAUFMAN, sardonic and tall. The other is MORRIE RYSKIND, congenial.

MORRIE RYSKIND

Everyone has lost something.

GEORGE S. KAUFMAN

Don't be sorry for me. Anyone who buys a stock because a Marx Brother recommended it deserves to lose ten thousand.

ON-STAGE

Every time the Police Officer shakes Harpo's hand-- [CLANG]-- stolen cutlery falls from Harpo's sleeve. The Officer starts and stops, playing the perfect straight man.

POLICE OFFICER

Go home for a few nights. [CLANG] Stay home. Don't you know your poor old mother sits there night after night [CLANG] waiting to hear your steps on the stairs [CLANG]--

CHICO

He's got no stairs.

POLICE OFFICER

And I can see a little light burning in the window--

GROUCHO (STAND-IN)

No, you can't. The gas company turned it off.

POLICE OFFICER

What I'm telling you is for your own good. [CLANG] And if you listen to me [CLANG], you can't go wrong.

A drawer's worth of cutlery falls from Harpo's sleeve.

GROUCHO (STAND-IN)

This may go on for years. I can't understand what's delaying that coffee pot.

The coffee pot falls out, the perfect PUNCHLINE.

THE HALF EMPTY AUDITORIUM erupts with LAUGHTER.

ON-STAGE

POLICE OFFICER

There's no use giving you advice.

GROUCHO (STAND-IN)

There's no use giving him anything.
He'll only lose it on margin!

The joke's too close to home, for Harpo and for the YOUNG COUPLE, now exiting their aisle. Everyone's down-and-out. Harpo forgets he's on-stage. He watches the couple leaving, to the sound of muffled MURMURS and COUGHS of discontent.

INT. PITTSBURGH DRESSING ROOM. NIGHT

THE TELEGRAM: "Send \$10,000 in--" Harpo crumples the telegram. He hurls it against his dressing room mirror.

The crumpled paper lands on the counter, rests there. Inert.

Harpo looks to his harp.

HARPO

Nothing to say. I have to sell you.
(pause)
One last song.

He lays his fingers on his instrument, about to play.

The Groucho stand-in enters. Harpo watches the stand-in wipe off Groucho's iconic grease-paint make-up. REVEAL...

The stand-in is ZEPPO MARX (28), the unheralded fourth Marx Brother. Classically handsome, the youngest, Zeppo likes to act like a tough egg.

ZEPPO

What a lousy show.

HARPO

No one knew you weren't Groucho.

ZEPPO

No one knows I'm Zeppo. No matter
how I play it, I'm invisible.

Zeppo's down to his briefs, putting on his suit pants.

HARPO

I think... Groucho has it right. I might join him at the Allegheny County morgue.

ZEPPO

I'm glad he's finally made a good investment.

The joke catches Harpo off-guard. He LAUGHS. Zeppo, too.

HARPO

Feels good.

ZEPPO

It's funny when you're not the butt of the joke.

HARPO

Yeah.

ZEPPO

This ain't worth killing yourself over. Even Groucho knows that.

Zeppo looks to the crumpled telegram.

ZEPPO (CONT'D)

How much are you out?

HARPO

I'd rather live on the streets with strings for a pillow than--

ZEPPO

You're not selling the harp.

(inspired)

Listen, I just met a guy. If we play him right, he'll fork over like three Liberty bells lined up.

(pause)

How would you like to meet a crook?

ON Harpo, uncertain.

EXT. STREET BY RIVER- NIGHT

It's cold out. Harpo waits outside, shivering. Looks around--

There's Zeppo exiting the hotel. Both brothers are in three-piece suits and fedoras, like a pair of rum-runners.

ZEPPO

We've a boat to catch. Let's go.

Zeppo strides briskly up-street. Harpo follows.

EXT. RIVER BOAT. NIGHT

The two brothers jog up to a RIVER BOAT. Christmas-style lights decorate the MAIN DECK. JAZZ beckons the brothers forward, like siren music hailing the shipwrecked. The roaring 20s died with the crash, everywhere but here...

HARPO

I don't have the stomach for this.

ZEPPO

Stomach it. I'm taking you to the only source in town for raising the kind of dough you need.

HARPO

I couldn't look a royal flush in the face after all I've lost.

ZEPPO

We're not here to gamble.

HARPO

Then how will I get--?

ZEPPO

How thick can you get? Honk. Honk.

Zeppo pinches Harpo's cheek. Harpo lights up. He understands.

HARPO

Pinchie Winchie?

ZEPPO

You've got it. Supply and demand. You got what everybody else needs.

They head up the GANGWAY, with a shared secret plan...

INT. RIVER BOAT- GAMBLING ROOM- NIGHT

...onto the ship. Harpo and Zeppo take it all in. Blackjack and roulette tables. The music outside... a false promise of good times. Inside... a COUPLE DOZEN PATRONS, CROOKS and HIGH SOCIETY, a handful of GAME DEALERS, WAITERS and THE HOUSE BAND. Like the theater, it's slightly too empty, too quiet.

HARPO
I'm grabbing a drink.

ZEPPO
Be quick. Our stooge approaches.

They look to... MILT JAFFE, 45, a lumbering fellow, who means business. Cigar in his mouth, cheeks ruddy from drink, Jaffe shakes hands with PATRONS at the tables.

ZEPPO (CONT'D)
He doesn't know what's coming.

Harpo takes off to...

THE BAR

...where A BARTENDER cleans glasses, back turned. Harpo's up to no good. He reaches to steal a half-full bottle of wine.

BARTENDER
What can I getcha?

Harpo feigns innocence. He waits for the bartender to turn. Then he leans over. He nabs the bottle.

JAFFE

claps patrons on the back, approaching Zeppo.

HARPO

hurries. He plucks the cork, leaves the bottle with a GAMBLER, who looks up from having his head-in-his-hands.

JAFFE

arrives to Zeppo, right as Harpo does, in the nick of time.

ZEPPO
Milt, meet my older brother, Harpo.

Harpo stashes the CORK, shakes hands with Jaffe.

MILT JAFFE
Zeppo's told me all about you. You play the dummy.

HARPO
Like a harp.

Harpo plays "the dummy" like a harp. He tickles Jaffe's belly. Jaffe pushes Harpo off, not the least bit amused.

MILT JAFFE
So, the kid can speak.

Jaffe recovers. He leads the Brothers past GAMBLING TABLES.

MILT JAFFE (CONT'D)
Welcome to the Rio Grand.

INT. RIVER BOAT LOUNGE. NIGHT

A decadent office lounge. Zeppo and Harpo sit on a chesterfield sofa across from Jaffe. A WAITER, 60s, delivers three whiskeys on the rocks to them.

MILT JAFFE
Let's cut the cheap talk. I hate it but I have to be honest with you.

ZEPPO
We hate it, too. Let's all promise to be dishonest and get on with it.

Jaffe tastes his drink, disapproves. He looks for the waiter, but the waiter has left. Jaffe crosses to the wet bar.

MILT JAFFE
It's tough times for everyone.

While Jaffe's at the bar, Zeppo hands Harpo a lighter. Harpo takes the stolen cork from his pocket and lights it.

The cork BURNS BLACK.

MILT JAFFE (CONT'D)
It's not easy keeping this place afloat-- "Afloat," I could be a comedian.

ZEPPO
The world's thanks for sparing us.

Jaffe LAUGHS at his own joke. Stops. SNIFFS the air.

MILT JAFFE
Is something on fire?

Harpo pockets the burnt cork. The lighter, too.

ZEPPO
I don't smell a thing.

MILT JAFFE

It must be the drink. I've only
been going at it since noon.

Jaffe's had a rough few days. He sits down, with a whiskey
bottle, decides against adding more to his drink.

MILT JAFFE (CONT'D)

I don't know how much I can do for
you, boys. If I helped everyone in
town, I'd be out of sorts.

ZEPPO

Let's not think about the times.

HARPO

I got an idea.

MILT JAFFE

What's that?

HARPO

A game.

MILT JAFFE

You boys coming to me like this, I
couldn't allow it.

HARPO

'Pinchie Winchie's' not that kind
of action, eh, Zep? It's a lot of
laughs.

ZEPPO

Sure, but we would need a fourth.

HARPO

I'll grab someone.

Harpo runs out.

Zeppo and Jaffe sit across from each other. Alone.

MILT JAFFE

I'm not as flush as you think.

ZEPPO

We're not asking much. One game.

In the doorway, Harpo pauses, having overheard the
disheartening exchange. He drags the Waiter back in.

HARPO
 (to the waiter)
 Sit here.

The Waiter sits in-between Harpo and Jaffe. As Harpo sits back down, Zeppo and Harpo exchange a look of exasperation. *This isn't going to work.* They hold the look, *'Now or never.'*

ZEPPO
 Care to explain?

HARPO
 The game is simple. I pinch my neighbor, and I say, "Pinchie Winchie!" Now you pinch him on the same spot and you say what I said.

The waiter pinches Jaffe.

WAITER
 'Pinchie Winchie?'

HARPO
 We go in a circle as fast as we can until it gets back to me. My turn again, 'Pinchie Winchie.'

Harpo administers a new pinch on the waiter.

HARPO (CONT'D)
 And we keep going, faster, faster, until somebody slips up and they drop out of the game. Questions?

Jaffe ROARS with laughter. He points at the waiter.

MILT JAFFE
 He's got, he's got--

Zeppo casually lowers Jaffe's hand. REVEAL... the Waiter has two black smudge marks on his face where he's been pinched.

ZEPPO
 Does everyone get it?

WAITER
 There doesn't seem much to it.

Jaffe tries to contain his laughter. At long last, he nods.

ZEPPO
 Then let's get started.

CLOSE ON Harpo's fingers rubbing the burnt cork, turning his fingers black. He squeezes the Waiter's nose.

HARPO

Honk Honk.

The 'Pinchie winchie' makes its way around.

WAITER
Pinchie winchie.

MILT JAFFE
Pinchie winchie!

ZEPPPO
Pinchie winchie!

HARPO
Pinchie winchie!

Jaffe struggles to hold in laughter, red in the face. The pinchie winchie goes around, faster, faster...

WAITER
Pinchie winchie!

MILT JAFFE
Pinchie winchie!

ZEPPPO
Pinchie Winchie!

HARPO
Pinchie winchie!

...and the Waiter's face becomes even more smudged, as if a toddler wandered into a coal mine, played, and then made the Waiter's face into his finger-painting masterpiece.

Jaffe can't hold it in any longer. He ERUPTS, nearly falls out of his chair he's laughing so hard. The Waiter stands.

WAITER

It's a peculiar game. I don't think
it will catch on like Mah Jong in
'24.

MILT JAFFE

No, no.

Jaffe turns the Waiter to a mirror so the Waiter can see his reflection. The Waiter's immediately embarrassed.

WAITER

Last time I serve a Marx Brother!

The Waiter sees his three pranksters BELLY-LAUGHING, slapping knees, and swings from being embarrassed to wanting in on it.

WAITER (CONT'D)

Who can I get? I'm grabbing Daniel.

MILT JAFFE

Get Daniel, get Daniel--

The Waiter runs out of the room.

MILT JAFFE (CONT'D)
 (calling after him)
 Sam, wash up, you'll ruin the joke!

SEQUENCE OF SHOTS- RIVER BOAT VARIOUS. NIGHT

1. THE LOUNGE, Harpo pinches DANIEL, the BLACKJACK DEALER, who plays but doesn't understand why the waiter LAUGHS so hard. As the pinchie winchie goes around the circle, REVEAL Daniel's ridiculous face full of smudges. TIME CUT TO:

2. ...the circle grows. Daniel now delights as an ARISTOCRAT receiving a smudge mark. She's now the butt of the joke.

3. THE MAIN GAMBLING HALL, the aristocrat pulls her depressed HUSBAND, away from a blackjack table...

4. THE LOUNGE, the wealthy aristocrat HOLDS IN HER LAUGHTER, her husband plastered by Harpo's smudge marks. TIME CUT TO:

5. ...the circle, now TWENTY PEOPLE. The game unites a devastated country through LAUGHTER-- white men and black men, CIVILIANS with tough-looking GANGSTERS, each and every one of them doubled over with LAUGHTER, all because of Harpo.

Jaffe, red in the face, falls out of his chair. He rolls on the floor, struggling to breath he's LAUGHING so hard.

ZEPPO
 Somebody call an ambulance.

Harpo pretends to be an ambulance. Zeppo jumps on his back, and away they go, running over furniture. The room is in STITCHES. CLOSE ON THEIR DIVERSE AND VARIED LAUGHING FACES:

END SEQUENCE OF SHOTS

INT. RIVER BOAT LOUNGE. NIGHT

The room empties out save for Harpo, Zeppo, and Milt Jaffe, who wipes his eyes of tears. Jaffe's gaze lands on Harpo.

He motions for Harpo to follow him. Zeppo hangs back.

MILT JAFFE
 How much do you need?

HARPO
 I wouldn't ask you for anything but
 I'm at wit's end--

MILT JAFFE

How much?

Jaffe pulls back a painting on the wall, revealing a wall safe. He works the combination, opens it.

HARPO

I'd have to sell my harp, and I--

MILT JAFFE

You're standing before an open safe. I'll slap you over the head with the money, if that's what it takes. How much is he out?

ZEPPO

Ten Gs.

Jaffe counts the money. Jaffe wasn't lying. He may be better off than the rest of the country. But he's not rolling in it. He snaps a rubber band around the money.

MILT JAFFE

This will get you most of the way. You'll have to figure out the rest.

Harpo refuses it.

MILT JAFFE (CONT'D)

He is a dummy.

Zeppo slaps the back of Harpo's head.

ZEPPO

Take it.

HARPO

Is there a security?

MILT JAFFE

No security.

Slap.

ZEPPO

Take it.

HARPO

Hey--! Interest or something?

MILT JAFFE

None.

Slap.

ZEPPO
Just take it already.

HARPO
What's the catch?

MILT JAFFE
You know what I like about you. A
guy who has to blow his wad for fun
is a bad risk. You know how to have
a good time, without spending a
nickle.

HARPO
I don't know if I'll ever be able
to pay you back.

MILT JAFFE
All I ask in return is one thing.
Someday, you owe me another game of
Pinchie Winchie.

Jaffe pinches Harpo's cheek. The pinch leaves a black smudge. From his pocket, Jaffe holds up a victorious burnt cork of his own. Look at Jaffe, at the man who started out the evening in the dumps, laughing so hard he can hardly breathe.

EXT. RIVER BOAT. NIGHT

Harpo and Zeppo exit, side-by-side, down the gangway...

EXT. STREET. NIGHT

...into the vacant night. Gone are the river boat lights, the jazz, the milieu of the roaring twenties. In its place is the unsettling feeling that worse times are on their way.

FOUR VAGRANTS populate a street corner by a trash can fire.

Zeppo takes a step back, leaving Harpo alone in the dark, watching the vagrants in the Hooverville-like setting.

HARP MUSIC STARTS, as if it were...

A DREAM

...the trash can fire goes out. Charred ticker tape fills the dying fire to the brim. The harp music now rises, the vagrants shivering, a black baby grand gliding up to them.

REVEAL... The vagrants are the four Marx Brothers in costume.

They shiver. Chico approaches the black baby grand.
 He plays it, at first slowly, in sync with the harp melody.
 His pace picks up. He "shoots" the keys.
 Zeppo and Groucho take turns playing the keyboard with him.
 The music, now reckless. Three brothers jump on the piano.
 They're the best kind of zoo animals, let loose, causing...
 ..the baby grand to SPLINTER into PIECES--

INTERCUT

--fingers playing the strings of a harp on a bright
 theatrical stage--

WITH THE VAGRANTS IN THE DREAM

--adding piano wood to the fire. Charred ticker tape curls.
 Flames lick and lash, the harp melody INTENSIFYING.

Three of the four Marx Brothers brothers warm by the fire.

The fourth, Harpo, stands over the broken baby grand. His
 foot nudges the piano remains. The piano's inner skeleton is
 golden, harp-like.

Harpo rests the golden skeleton on his knee. He plays it like
 a harp, as if his music, could make **THE DARK DREAM GO AWAY**.
 The night transforms into...

REALITY- INT. PITTSBURGH THEATRE. SAME

...the flare of **FLOODLIGHTS**. On-stage, strings obscure Harpo.
 He plays the harp, eyes closed, a contemplative artist.

THE THEATRE WINGS

Zeppo and Chico stand by Groucho, listening to the music.

ZEPPO

Back from the morgue?

GROUCHO

Cold bed. You'd have to be dead to
 find it comfortable.

(MORE)

GROUCHO (CONT'D)

I couldn't stand it. I can't stand
you, but I'm here all the same.

ZEPPO

I'll buy you a comforter.

CHICO

I'll lend ya warm pajamas.

It's as warm a moment as you'll ever get from them.

CENTER-STAGE

Harpo plays through the pain. Nothing in the world can stop
him. Fingers and strings blur.

He plucks a last round of plaintive chords.

He quiets the strings.

Silence.

THE FULL HOUSE rises into a STANDING OVATION.

They cheer RAUCOUSLY, so loud that our on-stage mute feels
comfortable enough to lean in. He whispers to his instrument:

HARPO

What a song.

FADE TO BLACK:

SUPERIMPOSE :

The Marx Brothers made eight of their thirteen films during
the Great Depression.

When everyone needed a laugh, they entertained a nation.