

## Cinematic Zelig

by Elizabeth Tamny '88

### Jack Carson made more than 100 movies, but he's little remembered today

You might call Jack Carson a cinematic Zelig, appearing as he did in so many 1930s and 1940s films, except that he was never invisible, "registering with audiences even in the tiniest of parts," as film critic Leonard Maltin put it. By the end of his career—he died in 1963—he had appeared in more than a hundred movies, working with people as diverse as Alfred Hitchcock and Doris Day. His tall, broad frame and distinctive strong features always made viewers take notice, though today he is remembered mostly by film buffs.

Known in his late 1920s college days as John Elmer Carson, he attended Carleton for nearly two years, getting kicked out twice. The Milwaukee native liked to say that he majored in football, although he did well enough academically, maintaining a B average. It was not his grades but his behavior that caused him trouble at Carleton, where he was known for cutting classes and pulling pranks—including, according to his nephew, once filling the chapel organ's pipes with flour.

Although Carson was ultimately expelled for drinking and gambling, he always credited Carleton as the place where he discovered his taste for the roar of the crowd. Picked to play Hercules, probably because of his size, Carson knocked over some scenery, got a laugh, and never looked back. Soon he was working the Midwestern vaudeville circuit and by the mid-1930s had been signed on as a bit contract player at RKO Studios—a stint he later called "great training but a nightmare."

The studios worked their contract players hard in those days, and few worked harder than Carson, who claimed to have made 26 films in his first year, and to have set a record for costume changes, with 15 in one day. One Sunday he completed a picture at 2:30 a.m. and began another at 7:00 a.m. After dozens of films at RKO, including bits in classics like *Stage Door* and *Bringing Up Baby*, Carson switched to Warner Brothers in 1941 in search of bigger parts.

The gambit worked, and soon Carson was appearing opposite box-office star Jane Wyman in *Make Your Own Bed* (1944), opposite Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and with Judy Garland in *A Star Is Born* (1954). Although his typical screen persona was the oaf, big lug, blusterer, and loud-mouthed comedian, Carson's talent had more range than that description suggests. Usually earning second or third billing, he played the kind of characters who filled in the cracks, representing the film's necessary but unpopular points of view. He played not the romantic leading man but the catalyst, the character who unwittingly drives the plot forward.

An accomplished song and dance man during his vaudeville days, Carson also performed on radio and later was among the first film actors to successfully make the move to television (his last film, *Sammy the Far-Out Seal*, was made for *The Wonderful World of Disney*). He played dozens of guest spots on shows like *Playhouse 90*, made a memorable turn on *The Twilight Zone* as truth-telling car salesman Harvey Hunnicutt, and hosted many variety programs, including *The Colgate Comedy Hour*.

To see Carson these days requires renting one of his films or tuning in to the Turner Classic Movies channel, which often hosts a Jack Carson tribute on October 27, his birthday. But old movies don't give any sense of the man, whose character was described by friends as his film persona's opposite—quiet, self-effacing, intelligent, thoughtful, and humble. "A fan club is a group of people who tell an actor he's not alone in the way he feels about himself," he once said. Or, as he told another interviewer, "If I tried to put on airs because of the breaks that have come my way, I'm afraid I'd die laughing at myself."

He never forgot Carleton, though, true to form, he usually tried to get a laugh out of his academic history. In the early 1950s he told the *Minneapolis Tribune* of his Carleton experience, "Perhaps I'm prouder of it than it is of me. I'm not certain how college authorities react to alumni who become comedians. . . . It is a good school and was good for me. I'll always be grateful that my parents could and did send me to Carleton. The only trouble with Carleton is that the name doesn't lend itself easily to any good vaudeville gags." v

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