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Laurel And Hardy Big Business

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Laurel and Hardy's "Big Business": A Masterclass in Chaotic Comedy

When discussing the golden age of silent and early sound comedy, few names resonate as powerfully as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. This iconic duo, with their perfect blend of slapstick, pathos, and impeccable timing, created a body of work that remains beloved nearly a century later. Among their many classic shorts, one stands out not only for its sheer hilarity but also for its deceptively simple premise: **Laurel and Hardy Big Business**. Released in 1929, this film is a perfect example of how the duo could turn a mundane, petty dispute into an escalating symphony of destruction. This article explores the film's plot, its comedic genius, its historical context, and the enduring legacy of this masterpiece of mayhem.

The Simple Premise of "Big Business"

At its core, **Laurel and Hardy Big Business**has a plot so straightforward it could be summarized in a single sentence: Two Christmas tree salesmen (Laurel and Hardy) try to sell a tree to a reluctant homeowner, leading to a tit-for-tat war of vandalism. Yet, within this elementary framework, Laurel and Hardy construct a comedic edifice that is both sophisticated and universally funny. The short begins with Stan and Ollie driving a rickety car, laden with Christmas trees, through a residential neighborhood. They are not successful salesmen; their enthusiasm is matched only by their incompetence. When they attempt to sell a tree to a grumpy homeowner (played by the excellent James Finlayson), the encounter quickly sours. Finlayson refuses to buy, and a small misunderstanding—Stan accidentally snapping a branch off his tree—ignites a chain reaction of revenge and retaliation.

The Art of Escalation: How "Big Business" Builds Its Gags

What makes **Laurel and Hardy's Big Business**so brilliant is its methodical escalation. It is not a single joke but a careful, almost mathematical escalation of violence. After the initial snub, Hardy deliberately destroys Finlayson's garden hose. In response, Finlayson cuts the rope holding their Christmas trees onto the car, causing them to fall. Laurel and Hardy then retaliate by breaking his front windows. This back-and-forth continues: they rip the door off his house, he slashes their car tires, they pull off his front porch. Each act of vandalism is carried out with a strange, almost polite solemnity. The comedy lies not in the aggression itself, but in the calm, methodical way the characters perform these destructive acts. A near-ritualistic quality emerges: each new act of revenge is seen as a necessary, almost logical response to the previous wrong.

This escalation is punctuated by Laurel's iconic, perplexed crying—a mix of childish frustration and genuine despair—and Hardy's slow-burn anger, which often turns into a defeated shrug. The visual gags are perfectly timed. The destruction of the car, the house, and the Christmas trees is shot in a clear, uncluttered style that allows the audience to appreciate every detail of the demolition. The film is a masterclass in screen direction, where every action and reaction is given its due weight. The tension builds not from danger, but from the sheer absurdity of the situation.

Character Dynamics: The Perfect Foil

One cannot discuss **Laurel and Hardy's Big Business** without examining the characters themselves. Laurel's Stan is the well-meaning but hapless innocent, whose actions inadvertently trigger the chaos. Hardy's Ollie is the proud, easily flustered "leader" who tries to impose order but is constantly undermined by his partner's simplicity and his own short temper. The interplay is crucial. When Stan accidentally damages the tree, Ollie's exasperated look at the camera—the famous "slow burn"—is a moment of pure comedic gold. Later, when they decide to "get even" with Finlayson, Ollie's calm explanation of the plan contrasts hilariously with his subsequent, furious actions. Finlayson, as the third party, is the perfect antagonist: cantankerous, quick to anger, and completely unwilling to back down. His double-takes and uncontrollable rage are the ideal foil to Laurel and Hardy's more measured, if equally destructive, approach.

Historical Context: Silent to Sound

Big Business was released in 1929, a pivotal year in cinema history. It was a transitional film, originally released as a silent but with a synchronized music and sound effects track. The dialogue is minimal—a testament to the duo's roots in silent comedy—but the sound effects (the breaking of glass, the ripping of wood, the honking of the car horn) are used brilliantly. The film demonstrates how Laurel and Hardy navigated the shift from silent to sound cinema. They understood that sound could be used to enhance visual comedy, not replace it. The cacophony of destruction—the shattering windows, the splintering wood, the sputtering car engine—adds a sensory layer that amplifies the visual mayhem. This short is a prime example of how the early sound era could still produce classic physical comedy, a genre that many feared would be killed by the introduction of talking pictures. The film is also notable for its use of a single, continuous set (the house and the street), which gives the action a theatrical, almost farcical feeling.

Thematic Depth: A Satire of Property and Pride

Beneath the slapstick, **Laurel and Hardy Big Business** offers a subtle critique of consumer culture and masculine pride. The central conflict is about a Christmas tree—a symbol of holiday cheer and domestic happiness. Yet, this symbol becomes the catalyst for a senseless war. The men are not fighting over a principle or a life-or-death matter; they are fighting over a piece of merchandise. The film satirizes the petty grievances that can escalate into full-blown conflicts, especially among men who feel their pride has been wounded. Hardy's pride is hurt when he is rebuffed as a salesman. Finlayson's pride is hurt when his property is damaged. Neither is willing to be the first to back down. The film culminates in a scene where the three men stand amid the rubble of their mutual destruction, exhausted and defeated. A policeman arrives, but even he is baffled by the senselessness of it all. It is a bleakly comic commentary on human folly—a reminder that our attachments to things and our need to "win" can lead to mutual ruin.

The Legacy of "Big Business"

Today, **Laurel and Hardy's Big Business** is considered one of the duo's finest short films. It is a staple of comedy collections and is frequently studied by film scholars and comedians alike. The film's influence can be seen in countless later works, from the Three Stooges' violent slapstick to the absurdist conflicts in cartoons and sitcoms. The simple formula of a minor dispute escalating into full-blown property destruction has been replicated many times, but rarely with such perfect rhythm and character clarity. The film also exemplifies what made Laurel and Hardy so special: their ability to evoke sympathy even as they cause chaos. We laugh at their stubbornness and their lack of foresight, but we also feel a pang of recognition. After all, who hasn't been involved in a petty argument that spiraled out of control?

For modern audiences, the film remains a masterclass in physical comedy and storytelling restraint. It is a short, tightly wound engine of humor, with every scene serving a purpose. The pacing is impeccable; it never drags and never rushes. The jokes are visual, timeless, and require no translation. This universality is why

Laurel and Hardy remain popular worldwide. The Christmas setting adds a layer of irony—the season of goodwill becomes a backdrop for absolute discord. The film's title, "Big Business," is itself a joke, referring to the monumental triviality of their enterprise.

Analyzing Key Gags and Sequences

To fully appreciate the genius of **Laurel and Hardy Big Business**, it is worth breaking down a few specific sequences. The first major gag occurs when Hardy tries to sell the tree. He presents it with a flourish, only for Laurel to accidentally snap off a large branch. The look of horror on Hardy's face is priceless. He then tries to pass off the damaged tree as a "special" design—a lie that Finlayson immediately sees through. This sequence establishes the incompetence of our heroes. The next key gag is the retaliation. Hardy walks over and deliberately breaks Finlayson's garden hose. The action is performed with a nonchalant, almost bored expression, as if he is completing a routine chore. This calculated calmness heightens the comedy. Finlayson's reaction is explosive; he sputters and fumes, but then, instead of confronting Hardy directly, he retaliates by cutting the tree rope. The pattern is set.

The most iconic sequence is the destruction of the house's front door. After Finlayson rips the door off its hinges, Hardy picks it up and, after a moment of consideration, methodically breaks it over his knee. The sound of cracking wood is satisfying and absurd. Then, in a stroke of genius, Laurel picks up a piece of the door and hands it to Hardy, who throws it away. This "passing of the debris" becomes a running joke, a ritualized cleanup that is itself destructive. The film's finale, where the three men stand among the ruins of the house and car, is a perfect visual punchline. They are literally surrounded by the consequences of their anger. A final gag with a police officer and a telephone book provides a coda that is both hilarious and oddly deflating.

Why "Big Business" Remains Relevant

In an age of high-octane action comedies and sophisticated verbal wit, the simple physical humor of **Laurel and Hardy's Big Business**still holds power. It reminds us that comedy does not need complex plots or expensive special effects. It needs clarity, timing, and characters we care about. The film is a testament to the idea that laughter can come from frustration, embarrassment, and the sheer absurdity of human behavior. It is a comedy of destruction, but it is also a comedy of human connection—however strained. The three men, despite their animosity, are inextricably linked by their shared descent into madness. The film is a perfect capsule of the Laurel and Hardy ethos: they are flawed, silly, and sometimes petty, but they are always, ultimately, human.

The film also holds a special place in the hearts of Laurel and Hardy aficionados because it showcases the duo at the peak of their creative powers. The chemistry between Stan and Ollie is electric; their timing is flawless. James Finlayson provides the perfect adversary, his comical fury a perfect match for their befuddlement. Together, they create a short film that is as laugh-out-loud funny today as it was in 1929.

Conclusion: A Timeless Treasure of Comedy

In conclusion, **Laurel and Hardy's Big Business**is far more than just a funny film—it is a masterwork of comedic structure and character interplay. Its simple premise of a Christmas tree sale gone wrong expands into a beautifully orchestrated symphony of retribution. The film demonstrates the enduring power of physical comedy, the importance of character dynamics, and the timeless appeal of watching well-meaning idiots tumble into disaster. Whether you are a longtime fan or a newcomer discovering the duo for the first time, "Big Business" offers a perfect introduction to the genius of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. It is a reminder that sometimes the biggest business is the business of making people laugh—and in that business, Laurel and Hardy remain unrivaled masters.

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