

Hal Erickson. *Military Comedy Films: A Critical Survey and Filmography of Hollywood Releases since 1918*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2012. Illustrations. vii + 418 pp. \$55.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6290-2.

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War Is Hell, But It's Funny Too

How can Hollywood find humor in something as destructive as armed conflict? In his extensive survey, Hal Erickson explores “service comedies.” These comedies are not films about war itself, but about the humor that comes from institutions that wage war and the way they wage it. Erickson defines “service comedy” as “any film in which the main purpose is to arouse laughter with leading characters who are members of one or another branch of the armed services, and/or any film which is dominated by a humorous slant on military life” (p. 4). This means that the humor must be rooted in stereotypes, practices, and situations that do not exist outside the military, not simply jokes in uniform; a performance of “Who’s on First?” in boot camp with Abbot and Costello in fatigues would not make the cut.

With this definition, Erickson defends his exclusions. The musical genre is excluded from his survey because though lighthearted and often humorous, the foundation of such films is music and song, not laughs and comedy (though there are several films with musical numbers that make the cut). Erickson also tosses out specific films, such as *1941* (1979), arguing that while the overwhelming majority of characters in the film are military personnel, the film’s humor does not reside primarily on military culture. Likewise he excludes *Tropic Thunder* (2008), noting that it is a satire of Hollywood in general, and war is just a facet of the film’s approach. Oddly though, despite his definition, Erickson includes *Renaissance Man* (1994), a film about struggling youth finding inspiration

in literature—a theme that does not require a military setting (and indeed has been done frequently in films set in high schools, devoid of any military connection at all). Lastly, as implied by the title, Erickson limits his scope to American films that had theatrical releases; television programs are axed, which is a pity for the sole reason of eliminating *Hogan’s Heroes* (1965-71) from the survey. Despite the restrictions, however, the book covers over two hundred films from 1918 to 2009.

There is one film that receives special attention in explaining its exclusion: *Stalag 17* (1953). Nobody who has seen *Stalag 17* can deny that it is funny. It is even listed on the Internet Movie Database as a comedic film, yet Erickson argues that while the film does draw laughs, it also has intensely serious scenes, preventing the film from being classified as entirely “comedy.” This is a missed opportunity. Rather than exploring an intriguing borderline between comedy and tragedy, Erickson simply dismisses the film; it does not fit into a nice, tidy category, so off with it. This is especially perplexing when later in the book he classifies *Kelly’s Heroes* (1970) as a military comedy “with random serious moments” (p. 229). There is far more humor in *Stalag 17* than *Kelly’s Heroes*. If *Kelly’s Heroes* is a comedy, then Erickson needed to either include *Stalag 17* or refine his argument for rejecting it.

After defining his scope, Erickson uses the remainder of his introduction to provide a brief survey of the use of

humor in war storytelling, starting with Aristophanes's ancient Greek play *Lysistrata* and continuing until the advent of motion pictures at the turn of the century. From that point, the discussion shifts to surveying American service comedies from the WWI era through the 1990s. Erickson argues that humor is a legitimate lens through which to view war and society, and that Hollywood has used this lens extensively and successfully, even with the intrusion of censorship and propaganda into filmmaking.

Analysis ends with the introduction. The remainder of the book is organized thematically with chapters varying greatly in length. Some themes are obvious (army, navy, marines, etc.), while others are unique and quite applicable (teams and duos, youth and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps [ROTC], the home front, and comedy as public relations). Each chapter introduces the theme, describes the major films and actors of the theme, and provides film synopses and a brief critique of the cinematic aspects of those films. Chapters often overlap and the reader is frequently referred other chapters in the book. With only two exceptions, each chapter ends abruptly without any final comments that tie the chapter together and revisit the theme. The reader is simply left hanging.

The book is best approached as a reference and consulted on a need-to-know basis. Other than Erickson's definition of "service comedy" there is no larger thesis or theme that the book asserts. The individual chapters are a fantastic resource for teachers and scholars to get a crash course in the filmography on a particular topic or era, and the book would also be a valuable resource for students in preparing research papers. It should not be read from cover to cover as an academic treatise, though Erickson's hilarious style and wit make the text as funny as the films he examines, and well placed photos and pictures nicely illustrate major elements and individuals covered in the text. Factually it is also accurate with one glaring exception: in the Marine Corps chapter, Erickson states that the "halls of Montezuma" in the Marine Corps hymn refer to twentieth-century expeditions in Nicaragua, not the capture of Mexico City during the Spanish-American War. The book is indexed, and includes a filmography and bibliography; however, there are no footnotes or endnotes, and the filmography is organized chronologically, not alphabetically or even thematically to match the themes of his chapters. The information is there, but readers will have to do some digging to find it.

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