

JESTER'S COURT

Written by

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Based on the life of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle

FADE IN:

INT. NOT MUCH MORE THAN A MUD HUT - KANSAS, 1887

A NURSE is seen towelling off a cherubic NEW-BORN BABY.

NURSE

A beautifully healthy baby boy.  
Very healthy! Must be almost 15lbs!

Clutching a CROSS around her neck, the MOTHER projects a question to the SHADOWS, where the baby's FATHER stands.

MARY ARBUCKLE

Oh William, what shall we call him?

A simple hardworking farmer, he clutches a bottle of HOOCH.

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE

...Roscoe Conkling Arbuckle.

MARY ARBUCKLE

After the politician? But why? You hate that man.

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE

That fatty is no son of mine,  
that's why!

EXT. OUTSIDE A VAUDEVILLE VENUE - CALIFORNIA, 1897

Cheeky and chubby, 10-YEAR-OLD ROSCOE creeps below a TICKET SELLER'S WINDOW. He pauses, underneath the glass.

His hands are strangely CUPPED, it becomes apparent why. He slyly and carefully raises them up to the GAP in the window.

Low on money, Roscoe instead delivers a FROG as payment. The animal sits for a moment, its eyes bulging at the seller.

The cashier soon notices it, creating a commotion inside the booth, as both human and frog BOUNCE around in panic.

Roscoe giggles and sneaks into the entrance. After a few moments of sheer fear, the seller opens the window and yells-

VAUDEVILLE TICKET SELLER

ROSCOE!!!

INT. VAUDEVILLE THEATRE - PRIVATE BALCONY

With a chair up against the door's handle, Roscoe watches with wonder the various performers in relative safety.

A flustered MAGICIAN can be seen messing up their last trick.

VAUDEVILLE AUDIENCE MEMBER

Boo! Get them off, get THE HOOK!

No hook appears however, just a smattering of applause from the half-full audience as the M.C introduces the next act.

VAUDEVILLE ANNOUNCER

Now ladies and gentlemen, time for  
a SONG, a very entertaining ditty.

Rescued from the magician, the crowd and Roscoe both CHEER. The PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT begins, and out comes a JOLLY FELLOW.

The song performed could perhaps be "THE LAUGHING SONG".

It is a curious jaunt, where the performer is required to have the special ability to be able to LAUGH IN TUNE.

Luckily, both this man and young Roscoe, are able to do so.

VAUDEVILLE SINGER

*As I was coming around the corner  
I heard some people say,  
Here comes a dandy dickie,  
Here he comes this way.  
His heel is like a snowplough,  
His mouth is like a trap,  
And when he opens it gently,  
You will see a fearful gap.  
And then I laughed...  
Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha  
I could not help from laughing  
Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha*

Consumed by the music, Roscoe practices copying the FOOTWORK and quietly SINGS along, surprisingly light on his feet.

The jig is up however, the door is SHAKEN OPEN, and in bursts the ticket vendor, who grabs Roscoe out by the ear.

VAUDEVILLE SINGER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

*And then I laughed-*

EXT. COUNTRY PATH ON THE WAY HOME - LATER

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE

*-Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha  
An actor came to see me  
About a week ago,  
He said to me come sing a song  
Down at our little show,  
And when he told me about the  
scenes, so nice and so complete,  
I could not stop my laughing  
From my head down to my feet.*

Roscoe has already mastered the choreography, but he is about to be interrupted. Some KIDS peer through the bushes, they LAUGH at the dancing boy and decide to intervene.

BULLY JACK

Hey FATTY!

The embarrassed Roscoe stops dead in his tracks.

BULLY JACK (CONT'D)

Don't stop! Keep dancing fat boy.

BULLY JILL

Yeah why'd you stop? Fat boy.

The bullies pick up STONES as a threat.

BULLY JACK

We said KEEP DANCING. Now DANCE!

Dodging a warning shot, Roscoe tentatively begins to do so.

BULLY JILL

Faster! Sing as well!

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE

*And then I laughed...  
Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha*

Beneath their veneer of violence, the bullies actually look quietly IMPRESSED. Roscoe feeds off it, gaining confidence.

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE (CONT'D)

*So now, kind friend, just listen,  
To what I'm going to say.  
I've tried my best to please you  
In my simple little way.  
Now, whether you think it's funny,  
Or quite a bit of chaff,  
Why all I'm going to do is  
Just to end it with a LAUGH.*

On *LAUGH*, Roscoe performs an especially spectacular move. The only issue is, his *SHOE FLIES OFF*, *HITTING BULLY JACK'S JAW*.

Roscoe doesn't wait around to see the consequences, he *RUNS*.

BULLY JILL

Get him!

The bullies chase him through *DIRT PATHS* and *COUNTRY FIELDS*. Singularly focused on getting away, Roscoe is much faster.

BULLY JILL (CONT'D)

Damn! That fat boy can run!

They give up, huffing and puffing, as Roscoe runs home.

INT. STILL NOT MUCH MORE THAN A MUD HUT

As Roscoe enters, his *FATHER* can be seen drinking alone.

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE

That you boy?

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE

Yes sir.

He rises unsteadily from the shadows.

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE

You been at that theatre again? I told you, those people are good-for-nothing scum... Where is your shoe?

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE

I... Lost it.

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE

You lost it?.. You think me and your ma' work our hands to the bone putting food in your fat belly and clothes on your big back so you can lose them?.. Answer me Fatty!

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE

I have a name you know.

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE

Talking back gets you the belt.

William undoes his *BELT*. His *TROUSERS* promptly *FALL DOWN*. He and his son lock eyes, Roscoe can't help but begin to *laugh*.

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE  
*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-*

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE  
 You miserable little wretch!

He chases Roscoe around the modest furniture, PANTS ROUND KNEES. Roscoe's MOTHER erupts through from the BACK.

MARY ARBUCKLE  
 William Goodrich Arbuckle! You dare hit that boy! Get behind me Roscoe.

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE  
 Get out of my way Mary, the little fatso's got no respect!

MARY ARBUCKLE  
 You think that's how you teach it?!

WILLIAM ARBUCKLE  
 Ah, to hell with him! And with you!  
 I'm going to get more cigarettes.

With that, he gathers up his trousers and leaves forever.

INT. VAUDEVILLE THEATRE STAGE

The same MAGICIAN performs in front of a packed crowd. He is less panicked this time however, as ROSCOE appears on stage with him, handing him his PROP at the crucial moment.

LATER - The Magician leaves the stage to a smattering of applause. He ruffles Roscoe's hair and hands him a COIN.

VAUDEVILLE MAGICIAN  
 Thanks kid. Here. That's 50 cents!

INT. MUD HUT

MARY ARBUCKLE  
 I saw the schoolmaster today.  
 You've been absent from class for three days. You needn't lie; I know where you've been. You need to make something of yourself, and that theatre's not the place to do it.

He offers up his plump hand to his mother. He shows the coin.

ROSCOE ARBUCKLE  
 I got this for you Mother.