

The Geisha Boy

The comedy team of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis was born in 1946. The duo quickly became a hugely popular act. In 1949, Paramount Pictures producer Hal Wallis signed them for their first film, *My Friend Irma*, where they served as the comedy relief. Audiences loved them. After the independently produced *At War With the Army* (their first starring vehicle), Martin and Lewis were back at Paramount to do a string of successful comedies, which, along with their nightclub appearances, made them the hottest comedy team working – until 1956, that is, when Dean Martin ended the partnership. Martin immediately had success doing films like *Rio Bravo*, *Some Came Running*, and some light, frothy comedies; he also scored in heavily dramatic films like *Toys in the Attic*. Jerry Lewis stayed at Paramount and became one of their biggest stars with his first solo feature, *The Delicate Delinquent* (1957). That was followed by *Rock-a-Bye Baby* and *The Geisha Boy* – both directed by the great Frank Tashlin (Lewis had yet to make his directorial debut – that would happen a couple of years later with *The Bellboy*). Tashlin had started out in animation and had moved on to live action moviemaking in the early 1950s. He'd already directed Martin and Lewis in *Artists and Models* and *Hollywood or Bust*, and his wacky visual sense of humor and his way with sight gags made him and Lewis a natural team.

The Geisha Boy is one of Lewis's best films. It has everything, from gorgeous photography (in Technicolor and VistaVision) to huge laughs (there are sequences in the film that are fall-out-of-your-chair funny) to truly touching sequences that never become too maudlin. Lewis plays magician Gilbert Wooley aka The Great Wooley, who is on his way to entertain GIs in Japan with his rabbit, Harry Hare. He meets his USO liaison (played by Suzanne Pleshette in her screen debut), and once in Japan he has some unfortunate mishaps with the headliner of the show (played by Marie "The Body" McDonald). Viewing the mishaps is an orphan

named Mitsuo Watanabe – seeing Wooley's pratfalls and mishaps causes the boy to laugh for the first time since his parents' death. He and Wooley become close, and Wooley meets the boy's aunt and grandfather (played by Sessue Hayakawa of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* fame). Meanwhile, the USO liaison falls for Wooley, and complications and hilarity are the order of the day. There are also some wonderful and warmly touching scenes between Wooley and Mitsuo.

There are brilliant gags throughout the film. The opening sequence with Wooley at the airport and the problems with Harry Hare are classic Lewis and Tashlin and howlingly funny. In Japan, there are also some wonderful Tashlin touches: When Lewis sees Mount Fuji in the distance, suddenly the arc of stars in the famous Paramount logo appears and Lewis does one of his patented double takes. Then there's the great gag where Hayakawa has some workers build a small bridge in his yard while whistling the "Colonel Bogey March;" Hayakawa tells Lewis that he's often mistaken for the actor in *Kwai* and then says, "I was building bridges long before he was." The screenplay (by Tashlin) is filled with such moments.

Tying all of the film's elements perfectly together is the tuneful and great score by Walter Scharf. Born in 1910, Scharf began his career as an orchestrator and accompanist. He was one of the orchestrators for George and Ira Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* on Broadway, and was the accompanist for Helen Morgan and Rudy Vallee. His work in Hollywood began in 1933 as an arranger for Al Jolson, Alice Faye and Bing Crosby. Scharf orchestrated the original version of Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" for the film *Holiday Inn*. From 1942 to 1946 he was the head of music at Republic Pictures. In the 1950s he did *Hans Christian Andersen* with Danny Kaye, and then began working (uncredited) on the Martin and Lewis films, as well as the classic Danny Kaye movie *The Court Jester*.

Scharf soon became Lewis's go-to composer. Their relationship lasted for years, resulting in great scores for *The Sad Sack*, *Rock-a-Bye Baby*, *The Bellboy*, *Cinderella*, *The Ladies Man*, *The Errand Boy*, *It's Only Money*, and, of course, *The Nutty Professor*. During that time, Scharf also scored a couple of Elvis Presley movies, did some episodes of the classic TV series *Bonanza*, and provided scores for *Where Love Has Gone*, *Guns at Diablo*, *Pendulum*, *If it's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium*, *Ben* (from which came the hit song sung by Michael Jackson), and *Walking Tall*. He scored several television specials for both Jacques Cousteau and the National Geographic Society and also worked on *Funny Girl* and *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Along the way, Scharf received ten Oscar nominations. He passed away in 2003 at the age of ninety-two.

Scharf was one of the great composers of comedy films. He knew what to score and what to leave unscored, and he had the uncanny ability to give frivolity and lightness some unexpected depth. *The Geisha Boy* is a gorgeous score with a memorable main theme and beautiful variations on it that capture every mood and emotion, making the comedy even funnier and the pathos even more touching.

The Geisha Boy had an LP release on Jubilee Records. That LP version is presented here in its entirety, from the original stereo album masters, supplemented by previously unreleased music from the Paramount Pictures archives.

Walter Scharf is seriously underrepresented on CD, and it's a treat to be able to issue the first CD release of one of his classic Jerry Lewis films – in fact, the first CD release of any of the classic Golden Age Jerry Lewis films. Here's to many more.

— Bruce Kimmel