

cloth. There's a likelihood that Warner Bros.' conscription comedy *You're in the Army Now* was originally planned for a solo star. But by the time the Warners film was released on Christmas Day of 1941, there were two powerhouse comedians in the leading roles. The studio claimed to have tested 22 different comic combinations before deciding upon Jimmy Durante, whose flagging screen career had recently received a booster shot with Warners' *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, and Phil Silvers, borrowed from 20th Century-Fox. In his autobiography, Silvers stated that he and Durante were longtime pals who respected each other's talents and didn't squander energy trying to upstage each other. Frankly, they didn't have to. Though Warners insisted in its ad copy that Durante and Silvers were a team in every sense of the word, *You're In the Army Now* is scripted and staged as a Jimmy Durante vehicle pure and simple, with Phil Silvers merely an added attraction (Jimmy also received ten times Phil's salary).

Silvers has written that both he and Durante were amused rather than disheartened by the understanding that their film was a deliberate *Buck Privates* ripoff. The two stars also found it risible that Warners was so intimidated at the prospect of turning an "A" picture over to a pair of homely laugh makers that the studio submitted Jimmy and Phil to the traditional Hollywood glamour treatment, including a pair of lavish toupees for the two famously follicle-challenged funsters. Durante in particular seemed determined to have as much fun as possible on and off the set, endlessly ribbing Warners' top producer Hal Wallis by referring to Wallis' actress wife Louise Fazenda as "Trixie Friganza." These extracurricular hijinks undoubtedly contributed to providing *You're in the Army Now* with a carefree buoyancy that many of the other *Buck Privates* wannabes sorely lacked.

Durante and Silvers are cast as Homer Smith and Breezy Jones, door-to-door salesmen for the Whirlaway vacuum cleaner company. Ever on the prowl for customers, the boys try to hawk their wares at an Army recruiting station, only to accidentally sign up for a one-year hitch. There are some mirthsome moments as Homer and Breezy try to adjust to their ill-fitting uniforms and Homer is forced to go barefoot during a marching drill before the plot proper rears its head. The film's "straight" lead Captain Joe Radcliffe (Regis Toomey) is trying to convince stubborn Colonel Dobson (Donald MacBride), an old-school Cavalry officer, to replace the outmoded horses in his unit with up-to-date tanks. Radcliffe also happens to be in love with Dobson's perky daughter Bliss, played by Jane Wyman at her pre-*Johnny Belinda* cutest. Homer and Breezy try to help Radcliffe win the Colonel over by using tank power to move the Dobsons' house to a new location. Unfortunately the house ends up teetering on the ledge of a high cliff, but the boys save the day by deploying

a tank to pull the structure and its occupants to safety.

Working on the theory that the secret to Abbott & Costello's success was the team's reliance upon old jokes, the scriptwriters crammed *You're in the Army Now* with some of the most cobwebbed material they could dredge up, including that venerable 2-reel comedy cliché involving alum and pursed lips (though this routine is brightened by an unanticipated twist). A camp-show sequence borrows from both Buster Keaton's *Doughboys* and Joe E. Brown's *Sons o' Guns*, with Durante donning drag as an involuntary participant in a violent Apache dance. And the house-on-the-precipice climax was lifted bodily from Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* — a fact that did not go unnoticed by Mr. Chaplin, who threatened to sue Warners for plagiarism. Apparently, however, nobody in 1941 took notice of *You're in the Army Now*'s curious homage to Jean Renoir's *Le Grande Illusion*: Repeatedly sentenced to the stockade, Durante begins to cultivate a potted plant in the window of his cell, a plant that grows larger and larger the more time Jimmy spends in stir.

Fans of Jimmy Durante will probably enjoy *You're in the Army Now* more than anyone else, since the star is given several opportunities to strut his stuff musically, beginning with a characteristic “poundin’ the ivories” number titled “If You Own a Whirlaway.” Though eclipsed by Durante's shadow for the most part, Phil Silvers does get a couple of shining moments, repeating his classic “elocution lesson” routine and joining Jimmy and Jane Wyman for the ensemble number “I'm Glad My Number Was Called.” Durante and Silvers aside, *You're in the Army Now* is best remembered for a well-circulated bit of Hollywood trivia. According to several “authoritative” sources, a love scene between Jane Wyman and Regis Toomey set a record for the longest sustained kiss in film history, lasting three minutes and five seconds. Alas, at this point we must assume the mantle of mythbuster: A recent viewing of *You're in the Army Now* reveals that the legend of the long kiss is just that — a legend. At most, Wyman and Toomey lock lips for a few seconds shy of one minute, in a scene broken up by several cutaways to supporting player Donald MacBride. (In any event, this “record” was shattered by the six-minute smooch in 2005's *Kids in America*, which is not an Army comedy and won't be mentioned again if we can help it.

Another fabricated comedy duo came to us by way of Monogram Pictures. Borrowing its title and nothing else from a 1928 Wesley Barry vehicle (see **Chapter 2**), Monogram's *Top Sergeant Mulligan* (1941) stars Nat Pendleton, the topkick who'd bullied and browbeaten Abbott and Costello in *Buck Privates*, as the title character. The comedy team in this one (“Look What the Draft Blew In!” trumpeted the film's newspaper ads) consists of prolific supporting players Frank Faylen and Charlie Hall, the latter beloved of Laurel & Hardy fans for his superlative fall-guy work in