

# The **FILMCLUB** Guide to...

## SONS OF THE DESERT (1933)



*"Well, here's another nice mess you've gotten me into!"*

### **What's it about?**

In what is often regarded as Laurel and Hardy's finest film, the hapless pair sneak away from their wives for an annual get-together with their pals under the pretence of going on a recuperative cruise. Much slapstick mayhem ensues - but the wives are tipped off to the ruse and on their return, it looks like there's hell to pay. For comedians best-known for physical comedy, the film has a surprising amount of snappy dialogue, and it's a sign of the esteem their fans hold the movie in that the International Laurel & Hardy Society, the Sons of the Desert, take their name from it.

### **Who made it?**

William A. Seiter (1890 - 1964) directed the film and it was his only collaboration with Laurel and Hardy. He also worked with other leading names such as Shirley Temple, Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers, Rita Hayworth and the Marx brothers.

Stan Laurel (1890 - 1965) and Oliver Hardy (1892 - 1957) teamed up in 1926 at Hal Roach Studios. They made 106 films together including silent and sound shorts and feature-length films. They quickly became an international comedy success and won an Oscar for their short *The Music Box*. However, many critics and fans believe that *Sons of the Desert* is their greatest achievement. Hal Roach Studios was where Laurel and Hardy were able to make their most successful films. It was Hal Roach that was responsible for teaming them up in the first place.

### **Backstory**

The film was released in America in 1933. It's actually a partial remake of another short called *We Faw Down* (also included on the DVD)

Contrary to their on-screen characters it was Stan Laurel that was the ideas man. He would write many of the scenes and sketches and took a large role in things such as sound and editing. Hardy contributed to some of the sketches but was generally happy to let Laurel take the lead.

On screen however, it is Laurel that is often bullied by Hardy. In fact, Laurel's daughter disliked Hardy because of this and encouraged Laurel to include a revenge scene at the end of *One Good Turn* when Laurel finally gets one over on Hardy.

## The reviews

"Funny all the way through." **The New York Times, 1934**

"The whole tightly controlled film shows the pair at their best, fighting to maintain their dignity in a world almost as absurd as they are. Few comedy duos created and maintained characters of such lovable dimensions." Derek Malcolm, **The Guardian, 1999**

## What happened next?

In 1940, seven years and nine films after *Sons of the Desert*, Laurel and Hardy left the Hal Roach Studios and signed with major studios 20th Century Fox and MGM. Between 1941 and 1945 they made eight feature films, but had little creative control and quickly became disillusioned. After that the team concentrated on their stage show, embarking on a musical hall tour of England, Ireland and Scotland. They made their last film, the disastrous production *Atoll K*, in 1950 before retiring from the screen altogether.

## Talking points

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- Close your eyes and think of the film – which of the film's images comes to mind?
- Do you think these older comedies are still funny? Does the humour translate into our modern lives?
- Do you think there are any serious issues being discussed in the film, such as relationships or the role of women?

## Look out for

Note the scenes where Hardy looks directly into the camera - often to share his frustration at Laurel with the audience. This is called 'breaking the fourth wall'.

To achieve a traditional clown-like appearance both actors wore pancake make-up. Additionally, the lighting and film crews were told to arrange scenes so that facial lines and wrinkles would be washed out.

## Review starter

*Sons of the Desert* has been described as Laurel and Hardy's funniest film ever.

## What we think

If you like cartoon humour and Tom and Jerry-esque tomfoolery, you'll certainly be charmed and amused by one of the films that gave birth to such traditions. Laurel and Hardy made many films but none balance the visual, slapstick humour with witty dialogue in the way that *Sons of the Desert* does.