



STEVE COOGAN (L.) AND JOHN C. REILLY STAR IN 'STAN &amp; OLLIE.'

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## ON FILM

## 'Stan & Ollie' pays tribute to classic comedy team

A FINE CAST CREATES A RUEFUL AND AFFECTIONATE PORTRAIT.

By Peter Rainer / Film critic

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy made up the greatest comedy duo in film history, and one of the nice things about "Stan & Ollie" is that it will prompt audiences who have never seen their movies to discover them. But the film is much more than a mere memory jog. Directed by Jon S. Baird and written by Jeff Pope, it's a rueful and respectful tribute that stands on its own because of the extraordinary performances of Steve Coogan as Stan and John C. Reilly as Ollie.

It begins in 1937, on the set of "Way Out West," when the team is at its commercial and artistic zenith. A long, sinuous tracking shot, reminiscent of how Robert Altman opened "The Player," introduces us to Stan and Ollie as they walk across a studio backlot and into the office of their producer, Hal Roach (Danny Huston). It's clear that Stan, despite his on-screen air of befuddled innocence, is the hardheaded businessman while Ollie, despite his alimonies and racetrack losses, is content to not rock the boat and ask for more money.

A brief, bitter split between the two is

presaged before the film cuts to 1953 when, reunited, their movie careers very much on the wane, they undertake a tour of outlying British music halls hoping that the renewed attention will secure financing for a new movie project: a comedic version of "Robin Hood" that Stan is writing.

For all their fame, the turnout for these shows, mostly in second-rate venues, is sparse. And yet, troupers that they are, they perform some of their most renowned routines with the same aplomb as if they were playing to a packed house. It is only when their manager (Rufus Jones) insists they engage in publicity stunts that things pick up and they move on to London.

It is something of a showbiz truism that classic movie teams are not nearly as chummy in real life as they appear on screen: Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis, Rogers and Astaire – the list is long. "Stan & Ollie" mines the dissension between the men, but what makes the movie more than just a revisionist exercise is that it also shows, without undue sentimentality, the love that bound these two men together.

This double-edged approach would not have been possible without the deep understanding and conviction – the deep regard – that Coogan and Reilly have for their characters. Coogan, of course, is well known for his spot-on mimicry of everyone from Al Pacino to Sean Connery ("The Trip" and "The Trip to Spain," where he parries with fellow great impressionist Rob Brydon, are great entry points to his gifts). But his full-fledged rendering of Laurel is something else again. Coogan gets to the quick of Stan's despondency and resilience.

Reilly, fitted with extra jowls and padding, is equally strong as Ollie. (A shoutout to the film's makeup and hair designer, Jeremy Woodhead, and prosthetics makeup designer, Mark Coulier.) He perfectly captures Ollie's wide-girthed grace. We can see how illness has wearied the man, and yet he rallies each time he is on stage. This fortitude is what connects him to Stan; they are attuned by their art. This is also why, when they engage in a particularly bitter fight near the end, it is so excruciatingly sad to watch. "You betrayed me," Stan says to him. "You're hollow," Ollie counters. Contrast this with the film's tenderest moment, when Ollie tells Stan, "I'll miss this when we're gone."

I wish the film had been written and directed with a bit more verve. Baird dutifully draws on moments from classic Laurel and Hardy bits, such as a real-life scene where a large suitcase skitters down a steep flight of stairs, but they stick out as not much more than homages. It's revivifying when the pair's wives turn up – Shirley Henderson's Lucille Hardy and Nina Arianda's Ida Kiatava Laurel, both excellent – but the film could have employed them for more than momentary comic relief.

The film's end credits show us a clip from "Way Out West" with the real Laurel and Hardy doing their sublime little jig to the tune of "Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia." We've already seen Coogan and Reilly reproduce this number, but seeing it again here, in all its original glory, is a reminder of how great this team was and how right it is for this fine new film to exist.

■ **Rated PG for some language and smoking.**