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ABBOTT AND COSTELLO LED AMERICA TO THE MILITARY

DAYTON, Ohio — Without the cinematic leadership of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, would Americans have accepted the first U.S. peacetime draft?

Abbott and Costello were the first comics in film to persuade Americans to support Roosevelt’s draft, passed in September 1940, at a time when isolationists were aggressively trying to preserve U.S. neutrality in the war in Europe, says Donald Morlan, chair of the communication department at the University of Dayton.

Slapstick comedy was the only film genre that got away with this early propaganda, he says. “We think of comedy, especially slapstick comedy, as just throwaway stuff, to laugh at and forget about it, but some had more serious intent,” says Morlan.

“There were other movies about war preparedness, but the dramas and serious movies were being criticized for ‘fanning the flames of war.’ Comedies got by with it, and they were playing to a lot of people. The message was really getting out. ‘Buck Privates,’ which was Abbott and Costello’s first starring feature film, was a big hit.”

Morlan presented his study on “Abbott and Costello’s Film Contributions to World War II Preparedness Propaganda” at the Midwest Popular Culture Association convention Oct. 9 in Indianapolis.

Abbott and Costello released three films in 1941 prior to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent wave of pro-war sentiment in America. “Buck Privates,”

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released in January, finds the pair as unintentional volunteers in the Army; “In the Navy,” released in May, shows them serving on a battleship; and “Keep ’Em Flying,” which came out in November, is set at an Army Air Corps academy.

“‘Buck Privates’ is clearly trying to win approval for the draft,” says Morlan. “The whole theme of the movie is that military life is good, about what it means to be patriotic and join the military — sort of ‘hip hip hooray’ for the red, white and blue. But it’s not a war picture at all. The entire movie takes place at the induction center and boot camp.”

Hollywood cranked up the film industry to boost morale at home and in the military services, but not until after Pearl Harbor was attacked. Before that, studio heads were reluctant to make political films that wouldn’t make money in their lucrative European markets, and the movie industry’s self-censoring Hays Office, particularly director Joseph Breen, threw up obstacles to political film themes. Congress got into the act in 1941 when a subcommittee of the Senate’s Committee on Interstate Commerce investigated war propaganda in the motion picture industry. But not one of the films targeted by the committee was a comedy.

“The bombing of Pearl Harbor totally shut down the isolationist voice because you couldn’t be against the war after that,” says Morlan. “Then everybody made World War II films because no one was complaining.”

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NOTE TO EDITORS: For media interviews, call Don Morlan at UD at (513) 229-2028.