

# Chasing the Wealth: The Americanization of Il'f and Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs*

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*Robert Mulcahy*

"Life literally abounds in comedy if you just look around you."

Mel Brooks

"Half is mine, half is ours."

Ostap Bender

"Love is the most important thing in life; riches do not count."

Mel Brooks

Throughout his film career, US comedian, director, and producer Mel Brooks has engaged an amazingly varied assortment of cinematic genres in an irreverent vein: *The Producers* (1968) is a musical comedy about Adolf Hitler; *Blazing Saddles* (1974) satirizes the Western; *Young Frankenstein* (1974) spoofs the horror genre; *Silent Movie* (1976) takes on the silent film genre, especially its slapstick comedy; and *High Anxiety* (1977) parodies Hitchcockian suspense films.<sup>1</sup> Through no-holds-barred parody, as well as gags and slapstick humor, Brooks undermines expectations as he lampoons sundry venerable forms institutionalized in American society of the late 1960s and 1970s.

As an outsider Jewish-American comic with ethnic roots in Eastern Europe, Brooks has crafted an identity of considerable appeal to a large, diverse audience over his long career. As the son of first-generation immigrants from the former Russian empire, Brooks had an appreciation and image (however idyllic) of the pre-World War II era of his parents' generation. In choosing to base his second film on Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov's 1928 popular Soviet-era novel, *The Twelve Chairs*,<sup>2</sup> Brooks not only faced the challenge of adapting a book written in a different language about a specific period in a foreign country, but also had to decide how to translate humor and comic situations specific to Soviet society and make them understandable in an American setting. Brooks

wisely opted for the generalization of human foibles. The result is a film that focuses on the universal themes of obsessive greed and transnational brotherhood, while also engaging social satire.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter analyzes how Brooks transformed and extrapolated from Il'f and Petrov's plot, character types, humor, and themes, while at the same time stamping the picture with his own brand of humor, personal history, and philosophical outlook. In a sense, Brooks seems to be personalizing Il'f and Petrov's Russia by intermingling Jewish motifs with Russian and American references.<sup>4</sup> In *The Twelve Chairs*, Brooks manages to situate US, Russian, Soviet, and Eastern European-Jewish motifs and humor within the same work, effectively dissolving cultural borders. In fact, the scenes and characters that he presents—a conniving con man, an Orthodox priest, an aristocrat made destitute by the Russian Revolution, a drunken peasant, a snow-covered Siberia, smiling townspeople living in small Eastern European villages, Slavic-tinged urban locations, a frantic treasure hunt to claim a fortune in jewels—all co-exist as a distinctive reinvention of Russia for Americans living during an era of relaxed tensions between the two global superpowers. In other words, in *The Twelve Chairs*, Brooks is not simply striving for an authentic representation of the Soviet Union, but is creating his own personal Russian world, which consists not only of an actual Russia/Soviet Union, but also American influences and a hint of the Jewish Russia his parents came from. In essence, Brooks repackages the seminal literary work for an American audience, relying on his tried-and-true comedic devices, astute political commentary, and insightful exploration of the human condition in what ultimately borders on a buddy film, that most American of genres. Brooks emphasizes throughout the film that personal relations are more important than financial gain, and the film's two main protagonists, we are led to believe, are going to continue working together and taking care of each other long after the film is over. This is part of détente-era filmmaking, for the movement toward a buddy film that *The Twelve Chairs* traces shows the possibility of cooperation between individuals and collectives.

## IL'F AND PETROV'S NOVEL

Il'f and Petrov's novel can best be understood as part of the focus on satire in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, and this is a large part of what Brooks had to negotiate in reworking the film for an American audience. Many Soviet writers relied on satire to depict the shortcomings of contemporary Russia and to represent its citizens as "flawed and fragmented human beings."<sup>5</sup> Satiric writers of the era explored issues such as the quality of life in an industrial society, the necessity for new social values, and moral ineptitude, especially

among mid-level Soviet bureaucrats and industrial managers. Near the end of the turbulent, contradictory, yet artistically productive New Economic Policy (NEP) era (1922–8), which introduced modified capitalism in order to stimulate a sluggish economy, Il’f and Petrov’s *The Twelve Chairs* (1928) appeared in serialized form in the journal *30 Days*. Published in book form the same year, *The Twelve Chairs* depicts three men racing to find a stash of jewels hidden in one chair of a dining-room set that has been sold. The chase takes the three pursuers—the young con artist Ostap Bender, the fallen aristocrat Ippolit Matveevich Vorob’ianinov, and the money-hungry priest Father Fedor—all across the European part of the Soviet Union. Their encounters and interactions with a variety of character types from the late Soviet NEP period provide rich material for much of the hilarious comedy and acrid satire in the novel. As Alexandra Smith points out, “the clashes between the old and the new worlds, based on strikingly different values, customs, and language, are all depicted in a satirical vein.”<sup>6</sup> The book focuses on technology and a new society in the process of creation, while at the same time highlighting the shortcomings of life in the Soviet Union in a humorous manner. Il’f and Petrov’s panorama of their own time showed that, through NEP, a contemporary Soviet Union was on the way to stability and prosperity, “if only some bureaucrats, thieves, and swindlers could be eliminated.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1927, as part of a government campaign against Trotskyism,<sup>8</sup> the editor of *30 Days* Vladimir Narbut had commissioned *The Twelve Chairs*.<sup>9</sup> He asked the journalist and novelist Valentin Kataev to write the novel; in turn, Kataev recruited his journalist brother, Evgenii Petrov, and Petrov’s friend Il’ia Il’f (born Il’ia Fainzil’berger) to help with the project. Eventually Kataev pulled out and the duo—who had both written sketches and reviews for satirical journals—took over the project. Il’f and Petrov had a good ear for the idioms of Soviet ideological language, especially in official and media outlets, and many of Bender’s statements and observations play on that discourse.<sup>10</sup> The two writers also pointed out contradictions in Soviet life; for example, Bender searches for riches and luxury in a society that is officially moving away from bourgeois values, and he is quite adept at exploiting people for his own purposes when official discourse promotes the communal society. The Soviet penchant for renaming streets and creating ponderous acronyms also offers targets for satire: Bender and a taxi driver roam around Stargorod for an hour and a half searching for a street that has been renamed several times, and no one seems to know where it is.

Bender became part of Soviet/post-Soviet literary folklore and he remains popular today. Numerous monuments to Il’f and Petrov (as well as to Bender) have been erected in various cities across the former Soviet Union. Moreover, several Russian screen adaptations of Il’f and Petrov’s works have been released over the years: Leonid Gaidai was the first director to adapt *The Twelve Chairs*,

in 1971;<sup>11</sup> Mark Zakharov's version was released in 1976; and in 2005 Maksim Papernik made a TV mini-series. The coveted role of Bender has been played by a number of well-known actors, including Archil Gomiashvili, Andrei Mironov, Nikolai Fomenko, and, more recently, Oleg Men'shikov in 2006 (in an adaptation of *The Little Golden Calf* (1931), the continuation of *The Twelve Chairs*).

Combining various attractive elements for almost any audience—an elusive fortune in jewels, a nationwide treasure hunt, colorful characters, a fumbling villain, and a gripping storyline—a tale like *The Twelve Chairs* simply cries out for cinematic hypertexts. And Mel Brooks was poised to make sure that a classic work of Soviet literature would gain a wider audience. In 1970, riding on the success of his first hit movie, *The Producers*, Brooks was ready to introduce the Soviet con man and former aristocrat to American audiences.

#### FROM VERBAL TO VISUAL: ADAPTING *THE TWELVE CHAIRS*

When it comes to transposing a comic drama or novel for film—a completely different medium—the director is faced with the difficult task of relaying the comedy in the novel, which is at the verbal level, to a visual representation of what the hypertext portrays with written words. Robert Stam contends that film is quite adept at depicting actual speech and the medium has the ability to convey discourse with its nuances: “in the sound film, we do not only hear the words, with their accent and intonations, but we also witness the facial or corporeal expression that accompanies the words”;<sup>12</sup> thus the verbal moves to the visual level and conveys meaning. Yet this task becomes more difficult when the original text is in a foreign language. In this case, the translator or adapter has to find a way to convey the essence of the humor, which is often very specific to an individual culture, to the audience. If the medium does not change, such as translating a novel from Russian into English in print, then the task is somewhat easier. In a print translation, the translator can rely on footnotes to explain a certain concept, but this cannot be done in film; rather, the adapter has to come up with various ways to explain the concept.

One of the biggest challenges Brooks faced in adapting the novel and writing the screenplay was how to make the film appealing to American audiences unfamiliar with everyday Soviet life and generally hostile to foreign films. To widen the film's appeal, Brooks relies on the tried-and-true comedic genre of the chase, made popular in cinematic productions by Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, and in animated “Tom and Jerry” and “Road Runner” cartoons. Brooks employs slapstick and lowbrow comedy, in which exaggerated impropriety gives his film a comic boost and makes it more accessible.

Evoking the silent era of film and Saturday morning cartoons, Brooks includes fast-motion chases and scuffles, high-speed dialogue, and verbal mugging, or close-ups of his actors' faces to depict specific emotions.<sup>13</sup> He includes visual gags and sequences, such as the in-your-face physical comedy of the Dom DeLuise scenes, where Father Fedor fights his adversaries, chases after various chairs and characters, climbs an insurmountable rocky structure, and prostrates himself on the beach.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, near the end of the film Bender and Vorob'ianinov escape the Railway Workers' Clubhouse by jumping on a horse, which subsequently collapses to the ground; a visual stunt that evokes those of the Marx Brothers and earlier slapstick comics.

In *The Twelve Chairs* Brooks depends on comedy and humor to explore the human condition, emphasizing the theme of obsessive greed to show what people are capable of when in the throes of monomania. The nobleman Vorob'ianinov degenerates from a privileged member of society into essentially a mad dog, whose obsession is to find the diamonds; while the priest, Father Fedor, quickly abandons his so-called religious faith once he learns about the jewels and is consumed by treasure fever. Brooks shows that the desire to accumulate wealth and its destructive consequences, as depicted by Il'f and Petrov, are universal, resonating across borders and making for a compelling and universal story that serves as a moral lesson of love conquering greed.

Generally, audiences are drawn to films featuring exciting adventures as the protagonists make their way toward a specific goal, while overcoming obstacles along the way. Frequently, suspense in an adventure/heist movie is created when two rivals, engaged in a desperate race to be the first to find the treasure, resort to trickery and place obstacles in each other's paths. In *The Twelve Chairs*, Brooks's slower pace and longer scenes reveal a great deal about the psychological motivations of and developing partnership between Bender and Vorob'ianinov, rather than simply being employed as a device to advance the plot. Brooks does not show the two protagonists traveling (except for a few shots of a train, a rowboat, and a long walk back to Moscow); instead he uses a fade-to-black technique between sequences that retards the film's forward momentum, letting the viewer reflect on the events. For instance, an overwhelming sense of sadness and despair is evoked in the more-than-two-minute sequence in which Bender and Vorob'ianinov slowly make their way back to Moscow from Yalta, travelling through the deserted countryside in late autumn and winter. The leisurely pace, long shots, and melancholic music in this sequence emphasize the emotional state of the two treasure hunters—both walk with their heads down, with Bender leading the way. In fact, there is a palpable sense of despair that the duo will not find the final chair and thus the family jewels. Also, the physical distance between them suggests that their partnership is under stress. In contrast, the scenes with DeLuise move more quickly: Brooks speeds up the camera and voices when Vorob'ianinov chases Father Fedor, who runs away with a chair

twice in the movie. Additionally, the slapstick routines in DeLuise's scenes with Engineer Bruns and his wife are fast-paced and over-the-top. Yet the overall effect of the DeLuise scenes is to distract from the Bender and Vorob'ianinov storyline, and they could have been shortened. In both the novel and Gaidai's hypertext, Father Fedor, while an important character as the villainous rival, does not have as prominent a role as he does in Brooks's film. Instead, the various characters Bender and Vorob'ianinov encounter, the circumstances with which they are forced to cope, and fate itself serve as obstacles on their quest. Clearly, DeLuise is meant to provide much of the comic punch in *The Twelve Chairs*, but his raucous and exaggerated antics detract from, rather than add to, the overall atmosphere of the film.

To create a more or less nostalgic, appealing version of the Soviet Union in 1927, Brooks shot *The Twelve Chairs* in Yugoslavia over four months for \$1.4 million. Several outdoor scenes in the film have a documentary feel that show happy people going about their daily lives (the opening market sequence; a parting scene at a railway station; a policeman directing human traffic in Moscow), which adds to the film's universal appeal by depicting Soviet citizens as "normal" human beings living productive lives in a fictional and personal Slavic world that Brooks created, in a sense, from his own memories of growing up in a Yiddish-speaking environment. The Yugoslav local extras lend the film an "authentic" Slavic feel; Russian phrases are scattered throughout; and Roy Moody assumes a Russian accent (although it disappears periodically). Also, some of the film's opening credits are in Russian. In order to make his patchwork Slavic world believable to an American audience of the Brezhnev era, Brooks decorates the *mise-en-scène* with typical stereotypes of Russia and Jewish life: The village settings evoke the stories of Sholem Aleichem and *Fiddler on the Roof* (the Broadway play 1964; the film 1971); the peasants are often shown as drunk after imbibing vodka; and Siberia is depicted as a frozen, inhospitable wasteland (when Father Fedor arrives in Irkutsk by train, he opens his window, which opens into a gigantic snow-drift). Cinematographer Djordje Nikolic deftly captures colorful, bright sets, which in concord with stunning shots of the Adriatic Sea coast and rolling green hills, evoke a Slavic atmosphere. Belgrade stands in for Moscow, and other Yugoslavian cities, including the medieval Dubrovnik, create a pseudo-Russian city feel. Vorob'ianinov's flashbacks are tinged in soft focus, lending a nostalgic cast to the upper-class lifestyle in the pre-revolutionary era. The last shots of the film depict Vorob'ianinov, splendid in his new role as beggar, having an epileptic fit on a Moscow street, then the frame freezes and changes into a painting reminiscent of early twentieth-century depictions of village life in the work of Marc Chagall. This final scene suggests that although Bender and Vorob'ianinov did not acquire the jewels, their partnership has been renewed, and the cunning duo will embark on more adventures.

Attempting to preserve the satire of the Soviet hypotext, Brooks infuses his film with a sophisticated satiric edge that engages with issues familiar to Americans in the late 1960s. The film takes on politics, religion, bureaucracy, and specific character types in order to comment on contemporary American society. Brooks drops the specific Soviet satire, but keeps the general satire ironizing man's social, cultural, and political pretensions.<sup>15</sup> Political satire is universal; for instance, both the Soviet Union and the US strove to make all their citizens equal (at least on paper). Brooks presents the socialist society as a world of cons and hustlers, not unlike the political scene in the United States in the early 1970s. It was only a few years after the film was released that US President Richard Nixon, whose criminal actions, cover-ups, and outright lies were headline news, became the first president to resign from office in 1974. Although political satire permeates Il'f and Petrov's novel through depictions of corrupt government bureaucrats, money-hungry journalists, prop-selling theater workers, fame-seeking provincial chess players, and fashion-conscious Muscovite housewives, Brooks avoids the specifics of Soviet life, such as the cramped living conditions, food shortages, and money-making antics, and instead focuses on more overt and generally recognizable political satire. For instance, Brooks shows names of streets that have been crossed out and changed multiple times; pictures and busts of Lenin (indeed, Vorob'ianinov himself resembles the revered Bolshevik leader, with his cap and goatee); references to class (the Columbus Repertoire Theatre is staging a play called "The Rise and Fall of the Upper Classes: A Comic Spectacle"); displaced aristocrats; and frequent references to "comrade." In Brooks's socialist saga, "the most corrupt self-seekers exploit the slogans of socialist idealism":<sup>16</sup> both Vorob'ianinov and Father Fedor claim the chairs according to the Soviet principle articulated by the Orthodox priest: "It's not yours. It's nationalized property ... it belongs to the workers." He further observes, "The church must keep up with the times"—a hypocritical rationalization of his greed, which confirms his shifty nature. Although political satire is often difficult to transpose to another culture, Brooks manages to engage with Soviet politics in a way that broaches universal frailties.

As a social institution that crosses borders, the Christian Church has both united and divided believers for centuries. Brooks has famously taken on religion throughout his career, often poking fun at stereotypical Jewish types. The taste of his religious jokes, which are often base and crude, does not really matter; instead, irony and sadness provoke laughter, making it easier to deal with life's hardships. In *The Twelve Chairs*, Brooks makes the Russian Orthodox Church—an institution many Americans likely perceive as exotic—familiar to a non-Russian audience by depicting Father Fedor as a corrupt bureaucrat consumed with the pursuit of personal gain instead of the spiritual wellbeing of his parishioners. The film's opening scene shows a cross in the lower

right part of the frame, with Vorob'ianinov's dying mother-in-law, Madame Petukhova, in the background. A huge icon dwarfs Madame Petukhova when she proclaims, during her final confession, that she had hidden her jewels in a dining room chair. Both Il'f and Petrov and Brooks emphasize the fact that, during a moment traditionally used to cleanse one's soul before death, Madame Petukhova is more concerned that her son-in-law locate the lost jewels than with her immortal soul. Brooks also portrays in Father Fedor an Orthodox priest who is ready to change his allegiances whenever the opportunity presents itself. Yet again, Brooks breaks down barriers by depicting scenes that no doubt resonate with Americans, many of whom surely can recognize aspects of their own collective lives in the antics of Brooks's on-screen characters.

The biggest change Brooks makes is in the ending of his hypertext: Il'f and Petrov have Vorob'ianinov kill Bender so as to keep all of the envisioned loot to himself (though the authors miraculously resurrect the dashing *picaro* in their sequel *The Little Golden Calf*). Brooks's ending is in line with his overarching theme of man's need to outgrow his obsessive selfishness and consuming greed: Vorob'ianinov grows and matures throughout the film, and a bond of trust and perhaps real friendship develops between the con man and the aristocrat. The cinematic ending not only reflects this emerging fraternal tie, but also offers the typical Hollywood happy ending: Though the two do not get the treasure, their commercial partnership grows into something resembling a real friendship. Indeed, it looks as if their collaboration will continue; the last scene shows Vorob'ianinov once again faking an epileptic fit, while Bender summons the people to help out a poor sufferer. In line with the communal message of the film, Brooks stresses the celebration at the Railway Workers' Communal House of Recreation, completely refurbished with the proceeds from the jewels discovered in Vorob'ianinov's chair, to indicate that everyone has benefitted from the treasure. Indeed, at the event a starving Vorob'ianinov dives into the free food like a pig, indulging (albeit unknown as yet to him) in the fruits of his own property in a fitting tribute to the maxim "share the wealth." In making a kind of parallel between greed in 1920s Soviet Russia and contemporary American times, Brooks translates the notion of socialism to an image to which an American audience could relate.

#### CONVEYING BROOKS'S CINEMATIC VISION: THE CHARACTERS AND ACTORS

Arguably one of the most recognized heroes in Soviet literature, Ostap Bender is a crafty, cynical, and witty rogue, whose antics poke fun at corrupt bureaucrats and greedy philistines in the NEP era. Like the picaresque protagonist, Bender understands people's motivations, has a perceptive intuition,



and knows how to maneuver himself throughout the world. As a genre, the picaresque usually emphasizes “poverty, delinquency, ‘upward mobility,’ travel as an escape from despair, [and] social satire of a system unresponsive to the needs and desires of a growing active community of ‘have-nots’”;<sup>17</sup> it frequently depicts a lower-class character living by his wits. Bender is intellectually brilliant, charismatic, well informed, possesses a mastery of Soviet language, recognizes people’s weaknesses, and has the ability to think quickly on his feet, yet he is not a sympathetic character. He preys on people, using them for his personal gain, and then moves on. The challenge for any actor playing Bender is to convincingly convey these underhanded qualities while simultaneously making the audience believe that Bender is sincere behind the various masks he wears. Yet many of the subtleties of the novel are lost in Brooks’s casting choices in *The Twelve Chairs*.

In one of his first cinematic roles, New York stage actor Frank Langella plays Bender as a tall, dark, and brooding leading man, who, in addition to finding the jewels, attempts to keep Vorob’ianinov in line. Indeed, Langella is sober in the film, and not very funny; he plays the straight part in a comedy and is usually the one to scold and discipline the childlike Vorob’ianinov. In fact, he is not unlike Dracula in his later romantic embodiment of the vampire as tragic hero. In his performance, Langella removes almost all traces of the picaresque hero from Bender, making him into a one-dimensional, aloof con man cut off from life, whose sole dream is to make money.

Ron Moody, who plays Vorob’ianinov, is a British actor probably best known at the time for his role as Fagin in Lionel Bart’s musical *Oliver!*<sup>18</sup> Il’f and Petrov describe the fallen aristocrat as a tall (185 centimeters, or slightly over six feet), grey-haired old man (although he is only fifty-two), with a full mustache. By contrast, Moody is short, with dark hair and a goatee. Brooks’s close-ups of Vorob’ianinov’s facial expressions show his selfishness and obsession. Moody often acts doglike: he barks, makes sad eyes, and, at times, essentially runs after his master, Bender, who frequently scolds him. Through this portrayal of Vorob’ianinov as a child out of control, Brooks depicts how greed and obsession infantilize grown men—a transformation that can be funny and frequently induces laughter in an audience. The ridiculous extent of Vorob’ianinov’s obsession is portrayed when he obliviously walks a tightrope to confiscate one of the chairs from a Finnish aerialist, dressed, in stereotypical fashion, as a giant black bear. In general, Vorob’ianinov produces most of the laughs in Brooks’s adaptation, while the humor stems more or less equally from the two business partners in the novel.

In *The Twelve Chairs*, Brooks focuses on the evolving relationship between Bender and Vorob’ianinov, both of whom undergo a journey—not unlike in a *Bildungsroman* or buddy film—and arrive at a new understanding of themselves through their experiences. Brooks transforms the novel in this way in

order to transpose the situation better for an American audience, for whom the “buddy film” is a familiar genre, and to create a more “positive” picture of Russia for American audiences. In the novel, Vorob’ianinov kills Bender, and, as Mark Lipovetsky points out, he “loses the remnants of his own humanity: ‘It was an insane, impassioned wild cry—the cry of a she-wolf shot through the body.’”<sup>19</sup> By contrast, in the celluloid hypertext, the two arrive at a kind of humanity through cynicism and deceit. Vorob’ianinov evolves from a selfish, egotistical, and isolated former aristocrat into someone who establishes a human bond with another person and ostensibly overcomes his animal nature. A perceptible change in Vorob’ianinov begins to occur when Bender abandons him on the riverbank after they are cast off the actors’ boat. As Vorob’ianinov throws aside his traveling bag and swims to Bender’s rowboat, he seemingly undergoes a watery rebirth. No longer eager to engage in yet another battle of wits with Bender, Vorob’ianinov calls his business companion “a good soul” and personifies a lost and shivering child seeking shelter and comfort. Somewhat surprisingly, Bender steps in to provide that service.

One of the more emotionally powerful scenes in both the novel and the film is Bender’s irreverent orchestration of Vorob’ianinov’s enactment of an epileptic fit to get sympathy money from passers-by, thus finally bringing the proud aristocrat down from his elevated pedestal. Brooks changes this key scene from the hypotext to reflect his ideas on partnership. Unlike in the novel, however, this scene does not take place in Piatigorsk, on the spot where Mikhail Lermontov had his fatal duel with Nikolai Martynov, but in Yalta, in front of a bust of a thinking Dostoevsky, a change that no doubt reflects the Western audience’s greater familiarity with the Russian novelist than the Russian romantic poet. Bender’s brainwave is prompted by the sight of the nobleman sitting in the same pose as Dostoevsky. Initially Vorob’ianinov’s objections take a violent form; he strikes Bender, who, in turn, kicks the aristocrat and calls him a “blood-sucking parasite.”<sup>20</sup> Bender informs Vorob’ianinov that he has begged all of his life and now it is time for the proud nobleman to learn how to do so. Once Bender calms down, he shows compassion for his partner and sits on the ground with him, thus stressing that they have both been brought down to the same level. The scene ends with an overhead shot showing the two men working together in partnership once again. This scene underscores the idea that pride is a luxury that no one can afford in troubled times. In order for Vorob’ianinov to come to terms with his new circumstances and move forward, he needs to let go of his past. Both Bender and Vorob’ianinov grow into friendship, but before they do, they have to redefine what they want and need from each other.

Brooks finds common ground in a Soviet critique of the Church and a critique of greed that American audiences could relate to. Unlike in the novel, the cinematic Father Fedor is solitary, isolated, and wifeless. He is exclusively

obsessed with acquiring the jewels and it is his greed that eventually destroys him. Although he goes through the motions of a religious figure at the opening of the film (he hears Madame Petukhova's confession, prays on his knees to God, and is constantly blessing people), the treasure hunt results in Father Fedor's complete secularization and descent into monomania. DeLuise's physical appearance fits his role quite well; his "cherubic face and serpentine civilities accentuate his greed,"<sup>21</sup> which destroys any religious feeling that he once had. Father Fedor's plotline ends with the forlorn and despairing priest stranded at the top of a high rock with a chair devoid of jewels, seemingly with no hope of rescue, and utterly alone—his God has abandoned him, his rivals have left him, and his dream of riches has vanished. Fedor's wailing cry: "Oh Lord, you're so strict!" reveals that through his greed and the realization that God has double-crossed him, he almost becomes human again, but he is left to reflect on his enlightenment all by himself, as Bender and Vorob'ianinov trek off to Moscow in search of the final chair. By contrast, in the novel Father Fedor joins the priesthood to avoid conscription and his dream is to open his own candle factory. The novelistic Fedor is eventually rescued from his aerie by the local fire brigade, but he has already descended into madness and is taken to an insane asylum. The image of a corrupt religious figure, who is a person endowed with authority, is another universal motif and presents a harsh critique of the Church.

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### THE FILM'S MIXED RECEPTION

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Even though *The Twelve Chairs* investigates Brooks's (by now) trademark themes of greed, love, and togetherness, his film was not critically or economically as successful as other films he directed, in part because he was trying to combine several worlds into one in order to recreate a nostalgic image of Russia and make a serious movie about overcoming social, economic, and political boundaries. There is an overwhelming atmosphere of sadness throughout *The Twelve Chairs* that conveys Eastern European sensibilities (epitomized in the theme song "Hope for the Best, Expect the Worst") and conjures up images of a pre-World War II romanticized world that no longer exists. Seemingly, Brooks's juxtaposition of Russian, Jewish, and American cultural themes and depiction of a (largely) sympathetic Slavic world—whose denizens struggle against a number of political, social, and economic obstacles, yet still manage to find humor, understanding, and friendship in the end—was not appealing to American audiences long accustomed to perceiving the Soviet Union as the enemy.<sup>22</sup> Notably, Brooks's film eschews overt political commentary, instead focusing on universal human traits that bring people together.

In his imagined cinematic world, Brooks shows how people can (and implicitly should) reach across borders in order to work together for the collective

good.<sup>23</sup> Bender, the low-class con man, and Vorob'ianinov, the down-on-his-luck aristocrat, manage to put aside their individual interests and prejudices to work together for a common (collective) goal—finding the fortune in jewels. Unexpectedly, they cultivate a partnership cum friendship along the way. Social boundaries are broken down between the lowborn thief and the blue-blood nobleman as they find a way to pool their efforts for mutual benefit. In essence, love and friendship win in the end over money and power in a moral fairy tale that eliminates boundaries.

What accounts for the lackluster reception among critics and American audiences? The film lacks a strong audience draw, such as a leading romantic couple to maintain the interest of an American audience that flocks to romantic comedies. Brooks excludes almost all of the female characters in Il'f and Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs* from his adaptation in a decision that reflects his overarching theme of fraternity and male bonding.<sup>24</sup> Although buddy films typically privilege male bonding over romance, even if they include male–female relationships, the lack of a strong female lead, along with the film's visual aesthetics and European setting, “where audiences half-expected the movie to be subtitled,”<sup>25</sup> may have been off-putting to American audiences. Drawn to the cinema for escapist entertainment, American cinemagoers tend to avoid foreign films, opting for fast-paced Hollywood movies with attractive protagonists and the quintessential happy end. The lack of recognizable Hollywood stars no doubt contributed to the film's less-than-stellar receipts at the box office. Finally, Moody and Langella were known as serious actors, not comedic.

In *The Twelve Chairs* Brooks combines gags and slapstick humor with a narrative that illustrates the gradual process of achieving accommodation, tolerance, and good will. Overall, Brooks successfully captures the comic situations, political satire, and social critique inherent in Il'f and Petrov's novel, while presenting them in a way that is comprehensible to an American audience. Indeed, by the end of the film there is a sense that Bender and Vorob'ianinov are acting according to a moral code, or a kind of honor among thieves, and the viewer has the impression that a genuine human connection has actually begun to develop between the two. The film's theme song proclaims “hope for the best, expect the worst,” yet Brooks provides a hint of optimism that, by recognizing the humanity in someone, people—especially those living in a divided world—can reach out, find their similarities, and try to establish some sort of rapport to co-exist in a hostile world.

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank Helena Goscilo and Alexander Burry for reading earlier versions of this chapter. Their insightful comments, suggestions, and overall support are much appreciated.

2. Brooks's adaptation is actually the fourth remake of the novel in English to date. The first two loose adaptations are *Keep Your Seats, Please* (1936), a British comedy directed by Monty Banks, and the US film *It's In the Bag!* (directed by Richard Wallace, 1945). The third adaptation is an Italian–French production called *12 + 1* (directed by Nicolas Gessner and Luciano Lucignani, 1969), starring Sharon Tate (in her last film before her murder) and Orson Welles.
3. Not only Brooks, but also critics have pointed out frequently that the major themes in his movies are friendship and love. Accordingly, in a reversal of the quintessential Hollywood happy end, Brooks's protagonists do not get the riches in *The Producers* or *The Twelve Chairs*. And in *Life Stinks* (1991), Brooks's character comes to realize that love, not material gain, is the most important thing in life.
4. For instance, the film's theme song juxtaposes Lev Tolstoi, a famous Russian novelist, and Fannie Hurst, a forgotten Jewish–American one; several of the actors speak with New York accents or are identified with the city (DeLuise, Langella, Brooks), and the narrative focuses on get-rich schemes and rags-to-riches (in this case failed) dreams that historically have fueled America's capitalist society and the immigrant community. Based on Brooks's work on the stage and television, and his first feature film, audiences likely expected another upstart, obnoxious, and slapstick adventure comedy rather than a film that mixes highbrow aspirations with broad farce.
5. Maguire, "Introduction," xvi.
6. Smith, "Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov," 151.
7. *Ibid.*, 153.
8. Lev Trotsky (1879–1940), a prominent Bolshevik and one of the leaders of the October Revolution in 1917, disagreed with the policies of Josef Stalin (1878–1953), who was consolidating his power in the late 1920s after the death of Lenin in 1924. His beliefs differed from Stalin's increasing dictatorial tendencies and growing bureaucracy, and Trotsky advocated a global revolution, rather than building socialism in one country. Trotsky was removed from power in 1927 (he was one of the first members in the ruling Politburo) and went into exile. He was killed on Stalin's orders in August 1940 in Mexico. Il'f and Petrov were enlisted as part of an official campaign against Trotsky's policies.
9. Odesskii and Fel'dman, "Legenda o velikom kombinatore"; Lipovetsky, *Charms of the Cynical Reason*, 91–3.
10. Henry, *Classics of Soviet Satire*, 28.
11. The Brooks and Gaidai versions of *The Twelve Chairs* include some scenes and cinematic techniques that are remarkably similar, making one wonder whether the two were aware of each other's work. Brooks was filming in Yugoslavia from September–December 1970, while Gaidai filmed near the Black Sea. Both directors use speeded-up action during some of the chase scenes between Vorob'ianinov and Father Fedor. Also, the scenes where Father Fedor finally pesters the Bruns into selling him the chairs are remarkably similar: both are shot on a patio overlooking the Black Sea (in Brooks's case, the Adriatic Sea substitutes); Father Fedor prostrates himself before the married couple and also appears in the trees above the patio.
12. Stam, "Introduction," 19.
13. In his movies Mel Brooks's humor is visual, physical, and slapstick, and, at times, extremely vulgar. Consider the physical interplay between Bialystock and Bloom in *The Producers*; the scuffles between Father Fedor and the Bruns in *The Twelve Chairs*; and the fireside bean eating scene of flatulence in *Blazing Saddles*.
14. New York comic actor Dom DeLuise plays the money-grubbing priest Fedor, who is used as a contrast to Bender and Vorob'ianinov.

15. Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 90.
16. *Ibid.*, 89.
17. Sieber, *The Picaresque*, 9.
18. The musical opened in London's West End in 1960 and on Broadway in 1962.
19. Lipovetsky, *Charms of the Cynical Reason*, 97–8.
20. By contrast, in the hypotext Bender describes Vorob'ianinov as being transformed. "He [Ippolit Matveevich] puffed up his chest until it stuck out as much as the Palace Bridge in Leningrad, his eyes flashed fire, and a thick smoke came boiling out of his nostrils—or at least that's what it looked like to Ostap. His mustache slowly began to rise." Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs*, 453.
21. Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 93.
22. Brooks's films evidence just how attuned he is to social and political currents in American life. In the early 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union, as the two global superpowers, stood on the brink of nuclear war, a time epitomized by the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. A decade later, however, attitudes in the US had changed, with the Nixon–Kissinger policy of détente largely replacing the "good vs. evil" attitudes that had dominated during the peak of the Cold War in the 1950s. In fact, by the end of the 1960s, the more tolerant US political stance in relation to the Soviet Union was reflected in Hollywood's portrayal of the Soviets, who, although still perceived with suspicion, were no longer demonized. Three films of that era highlight those changing outlooks: Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) depicts the bilateral idiocy of bringing the world to a nuclear standoff; Norman Jewison's *The Russians Are Coming The Russians Are Coming* (1966) shows that it is possible for Americans and Russians to work together, while David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) takes a more neutral stand on Soviet politics, choosing instead to focus on personal melodrama. The general atmosphere was more optimistic. For more on these films, see Chapter 1 by Thomas Leitch in this volume.
23. Mel Brooks has a hilarious cameo in the film as Vorob'ianinov's loyal, drunken, and faithful servant Tikhon. Brooks invigorates a role that is not very developed in the novel by relying on slapstick comedy and over-exaggerated antics in such a way that prompted *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael to remark that the film "never quite recovers" from the loss of "fervid enthusiasm" and "comic tension" when his role as Tikhon is over. Kael, "The Twelve Chairs," 180.
24. Not one to eschew female roles in his work, Brooks has cast a number of female actors in his films: Lee Meredith as Ulla, the Swedish bombshell secretary in *The Producers*; Madeline Kahn as a Marlene Dietrich-like cabaret singer in *Blazing Saddles* and the sex-addicted wife who falls in love with the monster in *Young Frankenstein*; and Cloris Leachman as the psychotic, sadomasochistic Nurse Diesel in *High Anxiety*. In contrast to Brooks's adaptation of *The Twelve Chairs*, Il'f and Petrov saturated their novel with zany female characters representing different types of women living in Russia in the 1920s. Perhaps two of the most memorable women are the Widow Gritsatsueva, whom Bender marries in order to gain one of the chairs, then abandons at the wedding reception, and the self-absorbed Ellochka the cannibal (Liudoedka Ellochka), a celebrity-obsessed housewife with a lexicon of a mere thirty words who is a caricature of *petite-bourgeoisie* mentality. Brooks's film could have benefitted from the inclusion of such delightful female roles and added a comedic flourish that might have resonated with audiences, who likely would have recognized such universal character types.
25. Kalat, "The Twelve Chairs."