

Letter to Warner Brothers: A Night in Casablanca

Groucho Marx

While preparing to film a movie entitled *A Night in Casablanca*, the Marx brothers received a letter from Warner Bros. threatening legal action if they did not change the film's title. Warner Bros. deemed the film's title too similar to their own *Casablanca*, released almost five years earlier in 1942, with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. In response Groucho Marx dispatched the following letter to the studio's legal department:

Dear Warner Brothers,

Apparently there is more than one way of conquering a city and holding it as your own. For example, up to the time that we contemplated making this picture, I had no idea that the city of Casablanca belonged exclusively to Warner Brothers. However, it was only a few days after our announcement appeared that we received your long, ominous legal document warning us not to use the name Casablanca.

It seems that in 1471, Ferdinand Balboa Warner, your great-great-grandfather, while looking for a shortcut to the city of Burbank, had stumbled on the shores of Africa and, raising his alpenstock (which he later turned in for a hundred shares of common), named it Casablanca.

I just don't understand your attitude. Even if you plan on releasing your picture, I am sure that the average movie fan could learn in time to distinguish between Ingrid Bergman and Harpo. I don't know whether I could, but I certainly would like to try.

You claim that you own Casablanca and that no one else can use that name without permission. What about "Warner Brothers"? Do you own that too? You probably have the right to use the name Warner, but what about the name Brothers? Professionally, we were brothers long before you were. We were touring the sticks as the Marx Brothers when Vitaphone was still a gleam in the inventor's eye, and even before there had been other brothers—the Smith Brothers; the Brothers Karamazov; Dan Brothers, an outfielder with Detroit; and "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" (This was originally "Brothers, Can You Spare a Dime?" but this was spreading a dime pretty thin, so they threw out one brother, gave all the money to the other one, and whittled it down to "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?")

Now Jack, how about you? Do you maintain that yours is an original name? Well it's not. It was used long before you were born. Offhand, I can think of two Jacks—Jack of "Jack and the Beanstalk," and Jack the Ripper, who cut quite a figure in his day.

As for you, Harry, you probably sign your checks sure in the belief that you are the first Harry of all time and that all other Harrys are impostors. I can think of two Harrys that preceded you. There was Lighthouse Harry of Revolutionary

fame and a Harry Appelbaum who lived on the corner of 93rd Street and Lexington Avenue. Unfortunately, Appelbaum wasn't too well-known. The last I heard of him, he was selling neckties at Weber and Heilbroner.

Now about the Burbank studio. I believe this is what you brothers call your place. Old man Burbank is gone. Perhaps you remember him. He was a great man in a garden. His wife often said Luther had ten green thumbs. What a witty woman she must have been! Burbank was the wizard who crossed all those fruits and vegetables until he had the poor plants in such confused and jittery condition that they could never decide whether to enter the dining room on the meat platter or the dessert dish.

This is pure conjecture, of course, but who knows—perhaps Burbank's survivors aren't too happy with the fact that a plant that grinds out pictures on a quota settled in their town, appropriated Burbank's name and uses it as a front for their films. It is even possible that the Burbank family is prouder of the potato produced by the old man than they are of the fact that your studio emerged "Casablanca" or even "Gold Diggers of 1931."

This all seems to add up to a pretty bitter tirade, but I assure you it's not meant to. I love Warners. Some of my best friends are Warner Brothers. It is even possible that I am doing you an injustice and that you, yourselves, know nothing about this dog-in-the-Wanger attitude. It wouldn't surprise me at all to discover that the heads of your legal department are unaware of this absurd dispute, for I am acquainted with many of them and they are fine fellows with curly black hair, double-breasted suits and a love of their fellow man that out-Saroyans Saroyan.

I have a hunch that his attempt to prevent us from using the title is the brainchild of some ferret-faced shyster, serving a brief apprenticeship in your legal department. I know the type well—hot out of law school, hungry for success, and too ambitious to follow the natural laws of promotion. This bar sinister probably needled your attorneys, most of whom are fine fellows with curly black hair, double-breasted suits, etc., into attempting to enjoin us. Well, he won't get away with it! We'll fight him to the highest court! No pasty-faced legal adventurer is going to cause bad blood between the Warners and the Marxes. We are all brothers under the skin, and we'll remain friends till the last reel of "A Night in Casablanca" goes tumbling over the spool.

Sincerely,

Groucho Marx

Unamused, Warner Bros. requested that the Marx Brothers at least outline the premise of their film. Groucho responded with an utterly ridiculous storyline, and, sure enough, received another stern letter requesting clarification. He obliged and went on to describe a plot even more preposterous than the first, claiming that he, Groucho, would be playing "Bordello, the sweetheart of Humphrey Bogart." No doubt exasperated, Warner Bros. did not respond. A Night in Casablanca was released in 1946.

TRADUCCIÓN (MEDIocre) QUE ENCONTRÉ:

Queridos Warner Brothers

Al parecer hay más de una forma de conquistar una ciudad y de mantenerla bajo el dominio propio. Por ejemplo, hasta el momento en que pensamos en hacer esta película, no tenía la menor idea de que la ciudad de Casablanca perteneciera exclusivamente a los Warner Brothers. Sin embargo, pocos días después de anunciar nuestra película recibimos su largo y ominoso documento legal en el que se nos conminaba a no utilizar el nombre de Casablanca.

Parece ser que en 1471, Ferdinand Balboa Warner, su tatarabuelo, al buscar una tajo hasta la ciudad de Burbank, se tropezó con las costas de Africa y, levantando su bastón (que más tarde cambió por un centenar de acciones en la bolsa), las denominó Casablanca.

Sencillamente, no comprendo su actitud. Aun cuando piensan en la reposición de su película, estoy seguro de que el aficionado medio al cine aprendería oportunamente a distinguir entre Ingrid Bergman y Harpo. No sé si yo podría, pero desde luego me gustaría intentarlo.

Ustedes reivindican su Casablanca y pretenden que nadie más pueda utilizar ese nombre sin permiso. ¿Qué me dicen de Warner Brothers? ¿Es de su propiedad, también? Probablemente tengan ustedes el derecho de utilizar el nombre de Warner, pero, ¿y el de Brothers? Profesionalmente, nosotros éramos Brothers mucho antes que ustedes. Hacíamos ya la ronda de las candilejas como The Marx Brothers cuando la Vitaphone era todavía un simple destello en el ojo del inventor, e incluso antes de nosotros ha habido otros hermanos: los Smith Brothers [fabricantes de pastillas para la tos], los Karamazov Brothers; Dan Brothers, un centrocampista del Detroit; y Brother, can you spare me a dime? (que originalmente se llamaba BrotherS, can you spare me a dime? pero esto era reducir demasiado la moneda, así que despacharon a un hermano, dieron todo el dinero al otro y lo dejaron en Brother, can you spare me a dime?).

Y ahora, Jack, hablemos de usted. ¿Diría Usted que es el suyo un nombre original? Pues no lo es. Se utilizaba mucho antes de nacer usted. Sobre la marcha, recuerdo dos Jacks: había el Jack de JACK AND THE BEANTALK [cuento infantil] y el Jack el Destripador, que se hizo un bonito renombre en su día.

En cuanto a usted, Harry, seguramente firmará sus cheques con la firme convicción de que es usted el primer Harry de todos los tiempos y de que todos los demás Harrys son impostores. Recuerdo a dos Harrys que le precedieron. Existió Lighthouse Harry de fama revolucionaria [se refiere a LightHORSE Harry, apodo de Lee Henry, héroe de la revolución de EEUU], y también un Harry Appelbaum que vivía en la esquina de la calle 93 con Lexington Avenue. Desgraciadamente, Appelbaum no era demasiado conocido. La última vez que supe de él, vendía corbatas en Weber y Heilbronner.

Hablemos ahora del estudio de Burbank. Creo que es esto lo que ustedes, hermanos, llaman su cuartel general. El viejo Burbank ha desaparecido. Quizá se acuerden de él. Era un hombre muy hábil en la huerta. Su mujer decía a menudo que Luther tenía diez pulgares verdes. ¡Qué mujer debe de haber sido! Burbank era el mago que entrecruzaba todos esos frutos y legumbres hasta dejarlos en tal estado de confusión e incertidumbre que nunca llegaba a decidir si debían ir al comedor en el plato de la carne o en el de los postres.

Esto es una simple conjetura, desde luego, preo, ¿quién sabe?, quizá los supervivientes de Brubank no sean demasiado felices ante el hecho de que una fábrica de películas a destajo se haya instalado en su ciudad, se haya apropiado del nombre de Burbank y lo utilice como presentación de sus films.

Y no quiero entrar en discusiones duras, porque muchos de mis mejores amigos son Hermanos Warner. Intuyo que todo es un error del horrible y triste departamento legal de la empresa, controlado por alguno de esos tipos con problemas escolares, un trepa necesitado de fama y admiración, y demasiado ambicioso para respetar las leyes naturales de la promoción.

En fin, sea quien sea, no lo conseguiremos. ¡Lucharemos hasta el final!, ¡hasta la Corte Suprema!

Ninguna estupidez de este tipo va a ser causa de pelea entre los Warner y los Marx, y la sangre no llegará al río. Porque todos somos hermanos bajo nuestra piel y seguiremos siendo amigos después de que pase por la bobina el último rollo de "Una noche en Casablanca".

Sinceramente, Groucho Marx.