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MILTON BERLE, PICTURE SNATCHER

Director Stanley Kramer was surprised how well his all-star cast of comedians got along while making It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World in 1964. The funny actors, who played a bunch of greedy motorists in search of stolen treasure, enjoyed the challenge of making each other laugh. Only the scene-stealing antics of Milton Berle threatened to disrupt the company's harmonious relations. The renowned joke thief found irritating ways to be the last one left in the camera shot. Berle's upstaging trickery included dropping his hat and staring at what everyone looked at just a few seconds longer. Uncle Miltie's subterfuge did not go unnoticed. In one sequence, his obnoxious mother-in-law, played by Ethel Merman, belted him several times with her purse. Afterward, Berle angrily complained to director Kramer that Merman really hurt him. The famous singer of show tunes opened her handbag and pulled out some heavy costumed jewelry. "Oh, I must have forgotten these were in here," she remarked, without any apparent remorse.

Extra: Ethel Merman (1908-1984) and Milton Berle (1908-2004) spent so much time together on It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World that the two show-business legends reminded their co-stars of a bickering married couple. After Berle found out the name of Merman's new dentist, he hinted that the same hygienist recently made a painful mess of his teeth. Merman was apprehensive for a week before discovering that she'd been tricked and plotted revenge. Ethel casually let it slip to Berle that she was getting higher billing than her Mad World co-stars. Not realizing he'd been lied to, the angry ex-television clown immediately called his agent and demanded equal treatment.

Extra: Uncle Miltie, one of TV's earliest stars, used to drive his fellow comedians crazy with his joke stealing. Famed gossip columnist Walter Winchell (1897-1972) once dubbed Berle "The Thief of Bad Gags." Milton once bragged to Groucho Marx, "Groucho I took some of my best material from your act."

"Then you weren't listening!" Marx angrily snapped back.

Extra: Milton Berle once testified in a courtroom trial after being instructed by his lawyer only to answer yes or no. While in the dock, the old vaudevillian stated that he was the greatest comedian in the world. Later, the legal expert admonished him for not following instructions. Milton shrugged, "Hey, I was under oath."