The Library of America • Story of the Week
From *The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner* (The Library of America, 2010), pages 567–585.

Reprinted from *Much Ado About Me* (1956).

FRED ALLEN

The young Boston Irishman John Florence Sullivan worked for years in the stacks of the Boston Public Library. This may account for the extraordinary literacy of his patter when he went into show business under the name of Fred Allen (1894–1956). He entered vaudeville as a straight juggler, added gags, moved to comic monologues, and eventually rose from variety to *The Passing Show of 1922*, followed by *The Greenwich Village Follies* and similar intimate revues. In the 1930s he established himself as a popular radio comedian and his show, ultimately entitled *Town Hall Tonight*, became the longest-running hour-long variety program on the air. Its features included an opening topical monologue, the theatrics of "The Mighty Allen Art Players," the dialect comedy tradition perpetuated in *Allen's Alley*, and the ongoing (fictional) feud between Allen and his good friend Jack Benny. His inventions have been much imitated since, without acknowledgment, by a great many comedians, among them Johnny Carson, Rowan and Martin, and the *Saturday Night Live* crews. Partly because his wit was verbal, often ad-libbed, and his wizened face made for radio, partly because of running battles with censors, network executives, and sponsors in an attempt to preserve some vestige of intelligence in the scripts, Allen failed to make a successful transition to television. It was called a "medium," he said, "because nothing is well done." His own opinion of his career in broadcasting is summed up in the title of his 1954 retrospective *Treadmill to Oblivion*. On the other hand, the memoir *Much Ado About Me* (1956) contains one of the fondest, yet most clear-eyed, tributes to vaudeville left by one of its participants.

The Life and Death of Vaudeville

Vaudeville is dead. The acrobats, the animal acts, the dancers, the singers, and the old-time comedians have taken their final bows and disappeared into the wings of obscurity. For fifty years—from 1875 to 1925—vaudeville was the popular entertainment of the masses. Nomadic tribes of nondescript players roamed the land. The vaudeville actor was part gypsy and part suitcase. With his brash manner, flashy clothes, capes

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and cane, and accompanied by his gaudy womenfolk, the vaudevillian brought happiness and excitement to the communities he visited. He spent his money freely and made friends easily. In the early days, the exact degree of prosperity the smalltimer was enjoying could be determined by taking inventory of the diamonds that adorned his person. If he was doing well, the smalltimer wore a large diamond horseshoe in his tie and two or three solitaires or clusters on his fingers; his wife, dripping with necklaces, rings, earrings, and bracelets, looked as though she had been pelted with ice cubes that had somehow stuck where they landed. The smalltimer's diamonds didn't have to be good. They just had to be big. What difference if the eight-karat ring was the color of a menthol cough drop as long as the stone sparkled in the spotlight during the act? To the smalltimer, a diamond represented security. It impressed the booker, the manager, and the audience, but, more important, the diamond was collateral. Confronted with a financial crisis in a strange community, the smalltimer didn't have to embarrass himself by attempting to convince a tradesman or a hotel manager that his credentials were valid. To obtain emergency funds, he merely stepped into the nearest pawnshop, slipped the ring from his finger, and consummated a legitimate routine business transaction. When his diamonds were temporarily on location, the smalltimer avoided his friends and his usual haunts, knowing that the absence of his Kimberley gravel was an admission that the panic was on. The instant his luck changed, the diamonds were redeemed and returned to their customary places. Back in the spotlight, with the horseshoe pin and the rings sparkling, the smalltimer's necktie and his ring fingers resumed strutting their stuff.

The herd instinct was a dominant impulse in the vaudeville actor's behavior pattern. When the season closed, the smalltimers congregated at vacation resorts to revel in each other's company. The smalltimer lived in another world. He thought and talked only about his act and about show business. Nothing else interested him. If you said to him, "Do you remember the Johnstown flood?" he would probably reply, "Remember the Johnstown flood? Are you kidding? I and the wife were playing Pittsburgh that week. Eva Tanguay was the star. Walter Kelly was next to closing. After the first show the manager

comes running back and says, 'You kids is the hit of the bill!' He moves us down to next to closing for the rest of the week. Kelly is blowing his top. All week long I and the wife murder them!" Everybody in Johnstown could have been swept out of town: the smalltimer wouldn't know or care. He had nothing in common with anybody who was not in his profession.

The two vaudeville centers of the country were New York and Chicago. During the summer layoff season—theaters had no air conditioning then, and many closed during the hotter months—vaudeville colonies were formed. The Chicago acts rented or bought cottages near the lakes in Wisconsin or Michigan; the New York vaudevillians huddled together in Connecticut and down on Long Island. The most famous of the actors' colonies was founded at Freeport, Long Island. The stars first established summer homes at Freeport, and then the smalltimers precipitated a real-estate boom fighting to buy property and houses to make their home in Freeport to let the stars see how the other half lived.

The Long Island Good Hearted Thespians Society was formed. This was a social club whose members reduced the name to the Lights. The first president was Victor Moore. One of the traditional Lights Club functions was the celebration of Christmas on the Fourth of July. In December, most of the vaudeville actors were on the road, away from their homes, their families, and their friends. They spent their Christmas Days on trains, in dingy dressing rooms, or in drab hotels. Members of the Lights ignored the conventional Yule season and saved their Christmas greetings and presents until the return to Freeport. On July Fourth, though the temperature be in the nineties, the Lights' Christmas tree was decorated and lighted, Santa Claus was dressed in his heavy suit with the ermine trimmings, presents were placed under the tree, and the members and their children arrived in their furs, mittens, and earlaps, some even clattering into the club on snowshoes.

A vaudeville actor could relax and enjoy himself only in the company of another vaudeville actor. You could sit a vaudeville actor in front of a mirror and he would stay there contentedly for days on end. In cities on the road, the vaudeville performers congregated at the same boardinghouses or cheaper hotels. There was a time when the actor was *persona non grata* at the

better inns, and this was especially true of vaudevillians, who were presumed to be irresponsible from the very fact that their profession was uncertain and their living precarious. It was generally understood that vaudeville performers went in for wild parties in their homes and that their domestic habits were rarely awarded the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. Accordingly it was deemed best for hotel clerks to smile blandly when they were asked for rooms and inform the vaudevillian that the hotel was "full up." Stage folk, except for those who had attained stellar rank, were pretty much pariahs around the decent hotels.

Duke Pohl, the manager of the Breevort Hotel in St. Louis, once told me that he was traveling in a special train to attend an annual convention of the Greeters of America, the official organization of the hotel men. Each man was asked to name his hotel and tell something about it. Duke later told me that when he announced that his Breevort catered to stage folks, "I could almost hear the gasp that went around the circle. I told them I considered stage people the most maligned persons on earth. I said that my experience with vaudevillians had been uniformly pleasant, that they paid their bills, were quiet in their rooms, were sober, sedate, and serious people trying to make a living."

Duke defended the profession at a time when many hotel and rooming-house owners were complaining that some vaudeville people were stealing towels. This practice was so common that jokes were being told about it. One joke was about the vaudeville actor who died and left an estate of eight hundred hotel and Pullman towels. Then there was the charge that actors checked into their hotels with heavy suitcases, stayed a week or two, then disappeared without paying their bills. Credit had been extended because the manager had seen the heavy suitcases; when, later, these were pried open, they were found to contain nothing but a collection of bricks and old telephone books. Indigent vaudeville actors were known to lower their suitcases out the window in the back of the hotel, then walk through the lobby empty handed, reclaim their cases, and leave town. An actor who had a trunk in his room received an extension of credit. When the bill mounted,

the actor, anticipating that the manager would tip the trunk to ascertain its contents and to try to find out if clothing had been pawned, took the precaution of nailing the trunk to the floor. Ted Healy, a comedian, once owed a sizable bill at the Lincoln Hotel in New York. Ted brought the three stooges he used in his act up to his room and ordered each stooge to don two or three sets of his underwear, two complete suits of clothes, and an overcoat. Healy followed the stooges out of the Lincoln lobby wearing three suits and one topcoat, and carrying a raincoat with every pocket bulging. Healy left the Lincoln Hotel with two mementos of his stay: an empty room and an empty trunk. Things of this kind took place occasionally, and hotel owners were suspicious, but Duke Pohl believed in befriending actors, and they showed their appreciation. As Duke used to say, "I've never lost anything by it. They all paid me eventually."

Vaudeville could not vouch for the honesty, the integrity, or the mentality of the individuals who collectively made up the horde the medium embraced. All the human race demands of its members is that they be born. That is all vaudeville demanded. You just had to be born. You could be ignorant and be a star. You could be a moron and be wealthy. The elements that went to make up vaudeville were combed from the jungles, the four corners of the world, the intelligentsia and the subnormal. An endless, incongruous swarm crawled over the countryside dragging performing lions, bears, tigers, leopards, boxing kangaroos, horses, ponies, mules, dogs, cats, rats, seals, and monkeys in their wake. Others rode bicycles, did acrobatic and contortion tricks, walked wires, exhibited sharpshooting skills, played violins, trombones, cornets, pianos, concertinas, xylophones, harmonicas, and any other known instrument. There were hypnotists, iron-jawed ladies, one-legged dancers, one-armed cornetists, mind readers, female impersonators, male impersonators, Irish comedians, Jewish comedians, blackface, German, Swedish, Italian, and rube comedians, dramatic actors, Hindu conjurors, ventriloquists, bag punchers, singers and dancers of every description, clay modelers, and educated geese: all traveling from hamlet to town to city, presenting their shows. Vaudeville asked only that you own an animal or

an instrument, or have a minimum of talent or a maximum of nerve. With these dubious assets vaudeville offered fame and riches. It was up to you.

Vaudeville families endured for generations. The female of the species foaled on trains, in dressing rooms, in tank towns, and in the big cities. The show must go on. At the theater the baby slept in the top of the trunk in the dressing room. At the hotel a crib was improvised by removing a large bureau drawer and placing it on the bed or between two chairs. A large blanket filled the drawer nicely; the baby, wrapped in its quilt, rested serene in his drawer bassinet. The vaudeville baby carried its own baggage. A small valise contained milk bottles, nipples, safety pins, and emergency diapers. On a sleeper jump, vaudeville couples with a baby always had the same routine: at 1 A.M., with the train thundering through the night, a tiny cry is heard. In two berths, an upper and a lower, lights snap on instantly. The husband jumps down from his upper berth into the aisle. The curtains of the lower berth part just a crack, muted voices are heard, the clasps on the miniature valise click open, and a nippled bottle, filled with milk, appears through the curtains. The husband steadies himself as he sways down the aisle on his way to arouse the porter to warm the precious quota of milk. In the lower berth, the sounds of the mother's soothing voice and the baby's cries persist until the husband returns. The warm milk bottle is passed in, the baby gurgles and stops crying, the curtains close, the husband crawls back up into his berth. The lights go off in both berths, and it is dark and silent once again; the train hurries ahead into the night.

Arriving in the next town, and safe in their room, the family goes to work. The husband removes a small drawer from the dresser, places a rubber sheet over the drawer, and pokes it snugly down into the four corners. Then he fills the drawer half full of tepid water. The mother lowers the baby gently into the drawer to enjoy its bath after the train trip.

The smalltime vaudeville mother had the endurance of a doorknob. She did three or four shows a day as part of the act. She cared for her baby on the road and prepared its food. She did the family washing: there was always a clothesline hanging and dripping away in the dressing room and the boardinghouse, and the sinks were filled with diapers. As the family

grew larger, the kids were packed like sardines into upper berths. (Midgets often traveled in clusters in upper berths; an actor in a lower berth once complained that he had been kept awake all night by a midget with insomnia who had been walking up and down in the upper berth.)

Many wives cooked the family meals in the dressing room; before electricity became promiscuous, vaudeville wives carried tin plates, cups, knives and forks, and prepared tasty meals over flaming gas jets and blazing Sterno cans in dressing and hotel rooms. Then there was a special theatrical trunk, made by the Herkert and Meisel Trunk Company of St. Louis, which was constantly adding new features to lighten the burden of the vaudeville wife. The H & M wardrobe trunk had such special innovations as a metal compartment in one drawer to hold an electric iron; a small rubber-lined compartment which enabled actors to pack wet sponges, washcloths, and soap on hurried closing nights; a hat compartment for man or woman; a flat drawer under the wardrobe section to hold shoes; a jewel box; an ironing board that could be attached securely to the trunk to enable women to iron in the theater. These, and many other features of this trunk, made life easier for the vaudeville mother.

Vaudeville families flourished. The babies teethed on greasepaint, and their sitters were other acts on the bill who watched the tots while the parents were on stage. When the babies were able to walk, they were led on stage to take their first bows. Later, they learned to imitate their parents and many other acts who played on the different bills. After completing their schooling, most of the children grew up and went into vaudeville, and had children who grew up and went into vaudeville.

The smalltimer plying his profession was exposed to many irritations. When his act laid an egg in one town, he couldn't wait to leave for the next town, where, he hoped, things would be better. When the audience was bad, the whole community was terrible; the hotel, the restaurants, the food, the newspapers, and the people all became impossible. When the smalltimer was a riot, his environment was perfect. Using the smalltimer's psychology, if his act went badly in Detroit, Detroit as a metropolis was a bust. If his act went big in Eureka, Eureka was Utopia.

Next to the audience, in its importance to the smalltimer, stood the theater orchestra. If the orchestra could not play his wife's ballad properly, if the tempo of his dance music was too fast or too slow, if the drummer didn't catch his pratfalls with a well-timed roll and crash or tear the cloth on cue as he pretended to rip his trousers, the actor fought with his wife and sulked in his dressing room until the next show. Vaudeville orchestras varied from one piece—a piano—to seven or eight pieces. The usual smalltime theater had piano, cornet, and drums. The drums were very important: they accentuated the falls and crashes of the comedians and played long rolls for the aerialists' sensational slides. For his music, the smalltimer carried eight or nine parts in cardboard or leather covers. Playing the cheaper theaters, which had only a piano and drum, only the piano and drum parts were used. After the smalltimer had played several weeks in dumps, and was then booked into a big theater, he would occasionally brag at rehearsal in order to leave the musicians with the impression that he was accustomed to playing good theaters. He couldn't fool the musicians, however, because the minute they saw the smalltimer's music they knew where the act had been playing. The violin, clarinet, cornet, and bass parts were brand-new; the piano and drum parts were filthy. At rehearsal in a new town, the smalltimer, sensing that the orchestra wasn't too friendly, examined his music. It explained everything. The drummer in the last town had written on the drum part, "This act is lousy." The clarinet player had written, "He died here." The cornet player had summed everything up by simply writing one word: "Stinks."

The smalltimer's billing was a matter of great concern. Before the opening show at each theater he examined the front of the theater to check on the size of his name and his position in the list of acts. The vaudeville headliner often had a clause in his contract assuring him of top billing. The smalltimer's billing depended on the whim of the local manager or the man who printed or painted the theater signs. Seeing his name in runt letters could catapult the smalltimer into a three-day funk. His position on the bill was of major importance. If his act had been next to closing and he suddenly found himself second on the bill, wires were dispatched to the booking office and his agent, and the theater manager was summoned to the

dressing room before the smalltimer deigned to do the first show. Headliners had clauses in their contracts that entitled them to the best dressing rooms. The smalltimer dressed where he was told. If he used the same dressing room as his wife, the smalltimer immediately examined all walls and connecting doors for holes. A few depraved actors carried gimlets and bits around with them, and drilled holes in the walls to watch the sister act or the single woman in the next room undress. If holes were discovered, the stage manager was notified and the apertures were filled with shoemaker's wax. One worry less for the smalltimer.

The censoring of his act also upset the smalltimer. When Paul Keith, after running a museum on Washington Street in Boston, opened his first theater, the Bijou Dream, he insisted on clean entertainment. Mrs. Keith instigated the chaste policy, for she would tolerate no profanity, no suggestive allusions, *double-entendres*, or off-color monkey business. As the Keith circuit grew, every theater carried a sign on the bulletin board:

NOTICE
TO PERFORMERS

Don't say "slob" or "son-of-a-gun" or "hully gee" on this stage unless you want to be cancelled peremptorily. Do not address anyone in the audience in any manner. If you have not the ability to entertain Mr. Keith's audiences without risk of offending them, do the best you can. Lack of talent will be less open to censure than would be an insult to a patron. If you are in doubt as to the character of your act, consult the local manager before you go on the stage, for if you are guilty of uttering anything sacrilegious or even suggestive, you will be immediately closed and will never again be allowed in a theatre where Mr. Keith is in authority.

Long after Mr. Keith's death the circuit was still waging its campaign against suggestive material. For many months *Variety* published a column called "You Mustn't Say That" which featured deletions in stage material ("Hell" or "Lord Epsom, Secretary of the Interior," or "An old maid taking a tramp through the woods," and so on) made by the Keith censorship bureau. As most of the gamy lines and jokes were his biggest laughs, the smalltimer would fight to the death to keep them in his act.

Many smaller acts who used one or two jokes, or a few comedy lines, and could not buy special material subscribed to *Madison's Budget.* For twenty years—from 1898 to 1918—a man named James Madison published an annual collection of monologues, cross-fire jokes, sketches, minstrel-show afterpieces, and parodies. This assortment of humorous matter sold for one dollar and was known as *Madison's Budget.* If a comedian found six or eight jokes in the *Budget* that he could adapt to his act, his dollar investment had returned a hearty dividend.

Comedy acts were always the targets of the pirates. If a comedian was original and wrote his own material, or if he frequently bought new routines and songs to keep his act up to date, he soon found that other comedians were stealing parts of his act. For many years performers had no way to protect their gags, parodies, or bits of business. Copyright laws were ignored, and good gags spread like bad news. One blackface comedian on the big time stole so much material that he couldn't use it all in his act; he hired another blackface act and paid him a salary to play the smalltime using the stolen material he had left over. There was a young comedian whose father regularly attended the opening show at the Palace. If any of the acts had new lines, jokes, or song titles, the father copied them down and wired them to his son. The act continued convulsing the Palace audience in New York, little dreaming that its best jokes were being told in Omaha, San Francisco, or wherever the son happened to be playing.

Original material was spread around in many ways. For instance, when blackface acts and other comedy teams split up, many times the men or women took new partners, and both new acts continued to do the same routines. After a series of splittings it was not unusual to find four or five teams all doing the same act. Burlesque shows lifted scenes bodily from Broadway revues. Social directors at summer camps spent the winter copying down anything they found in the Broadway theaters which they thought they could use at the camps next summer. Johnny Neff, a monologist, used to explain to his audiences how crazy comedians were to buy jokes. Johnny would relate how Frank Tinney had paid a hundred dollars for a certain joke. Johnny would then tell the joke to prove that Tinney was

insane. When Johnny had finished explaining how much money Raymond Hitchcock, Ed Wynn, Jack Donahue, Leon Errol, and Richard Carle had paid for their jokes, and after he had told all these jokes himself, Johnny had a hilarious monologue that hadn't cost him a penny. And Milton Berle for years has been bragging to audiences that he has stolen jokes from other comedians. There has been no reason to doubt his word.

When Mr. Albee founded the National Vaudeville Artists, Inc., after breaking the White Rats' strike (the White Rats had been the original vaudeville performers' association), one of the inducements to attract members was the new organization's Protected Material Department. Any member could protect his act. All he had to do was to enclose a copy of his material in a sealed envelope and deliver it to the N.V.A. office. The envelope was placed in the Protected Material files. Later, if a plagiarist was brought to bay, the act preferred charges, the sealed envelope was opened, and the N.V.A. officials dispensed justice. Hundreds of acts protected their material through this service. After Mr. Albee's death, vaudeville started over the hill and took the N.V.A. club with it. Before the members vacated the clubhouse on Forty-sixth Street, some official, by whose authority nobody will ever know, sold the entire contents of the N.V.A. Protected Material Department files to Olsen and Johnson.

Superstitions and irrational beliefs influenced the vaudevillian as he made his decisions and planned his daily activities. Many credulous omens the performer treated with respect. He thought bad luck ensued if he whistled in the dressing room, found peacock feathers anywhere in the theater, saw a bird on the window sill, threw away his old dancing shoes, and so forth. There were many other bad omens, but there were only two portents that assured the performer future happiness. Good luck was sure to follow if an actor put his undershirt on inside out, or if he touched a humpbacked person.

Vaudeville acts often assumed strange names to atract attention. An unusual name was easily remembered by bookers, managers, and audiences. A few uniquely named acts were: Fyne and Dandy (acrobats), Sharp and Flat (musicians), Willie Rolls (roller skater), Amazon and Nile (contortionists), Nip

and Tuck (acrobats), North and South (musical act), Worth and While (sister act), Possum Welch (dancer), and Darn, Good, and Funny (comedy trio).

The early vaudeville performers were inventive; they had to create the unusual specialties they performed. Vaudeville grew, and new acts came along to help themselves to the ideas of the originators, and to elaborate on and embellish them. Many specialty artists, in constructing their acts, came up with some weird innovations. One of these was Orville Stamm. Not long ago I got a letter from Orville, asking if I remembered him. It was not easy to forget Orville. He billed himself as the "Strongest Boy in the World." To demonstrate his great strength, Orville played the violin; as he played, he had suspended from the crook of his bow arm an enormous English bulldog. The bulldog made graceful arcs in the air as Orville pizzicatoed and manipulated his bow. For the finish of his act, Orville lay flat on the stage and arched his back; in the better acrobat circles, this was known as "bending the crab." When Orville's chest and abdomen attained the correct altitude, a small upright piano was placed across his stomach. An assistant stood on Orville's thigh and played the piano accompaniment as Orville, in his "crab" position, sang "Ireland Must Be Heaven, 'Cause My Mother Came from There." This finish was a sensation, and I'm sure it was Orville's own idea.

Raymonde, a female impersonator, also originated an unusual finish. After doing his entire act as a girl, Raymonde took a bow and removed his wig. The audience, seeing man's hair, was amazed to find that the girl was a boy. As the applause continued, Raymonde removed the man's wig, and blond tresses tumbled down over his shoulders. The boy was now a girl again. The audience, again duped, was frantic. Raymonde took another bow or two to thunderous applause, then removed the girl's wig and was a boy again. Raymonde, emulating the manner of a female impersonator's conception of a truck driver, swaggered off the stage to absolute bedlam.

A man named Willard was billed as the "Man Who Grows." As he talked, he stretched his arms out a foot or more beyond their normal length. For his finish Willard grew four or five inches in height. I watched Willard many times backstage

without being able to discover his secret. He must have been able to telescope his skin.

An inventive monologist in Chicago featured a singing goat. Following a dull fifteen minutes of talk, the monologist would introduce his partner, the Singing Goat. The orchestra would play "Mammy"; when the monologist finished the verse and started the chorus, the goat would join him in singing "Ma-a-a-a-my! Ma-a-a-a-my!" The act stopped the show. One matinee, a representative of the S.P.C.A. called at the theater and removed the goat from the premises. When the theater manager remonstrated, the S.P.C.A. man showed him the goat's lacerated buttocks; the monologist had been prodding his rump with a sharp-pointed nail.

This sort of thing often happened in animal acts. Trainers who exhibited lions and tigers could seemingly cause them to growl and snarl on cue. The audience little suspected that the beasts worked on metal flooring, and that the lions and tigers would naturally growl or snarl after this metal flooring had been charged with electricity. Similarly, dog acts often astounded audiences when the little white terrier climbed the ladder, rung by rung, hesitated on the top rung for a second, and then jumped into space, landing in its master's arms. Little did the audience know that the top rung of the high ladder was electrified. When the little white terrier hesitated on this top rung, he wasn't kidding; he was frightened. A short shock through the rung, however, and the dog jumped.

Another great inventive act was that of Will Mahoney, who danced to his own melodies by attaching xylophone hammers to the toes of his shoes, and then danced atop the xylophone. If Will had spent the same amount of effort in thinking that he did on his xylophone, he might have discovered penicillin. I am sure that if all the hours vaudeville performers spent trying to improve their acts had been donated to science, automation would have been here fifty years sooner.

Vaudeville old-timers may not be wallowing in affluence in later life, but each smalltimer has his store of memories that will help him to escape from the unhappy present into the happy past. When the time comes that I find myself confined to the rubbish heap of humanity, I can temper my plight by

conjuring up random recollections from my smalltime years. I can recall . . .

The manager of the vaudeville theater at Sandusky, Ohio. The audience there was so bad that he felt sorry for the acts. He invented an applause machine and installed it in the back of the theater. The machine manufactured applause by slapping a series of wooden paddles together. When an act finished and the audience sat there in its customary silence, the manager turned on his applause machine. To the sound of the wooden clatter, the act returned, took one or two bows, and withdrew.

The manager at Sherbrooke, Ontario, who was in the raincoat business. I remember that on the last night of my stay there he tried to talk the actors into taking their salaries in raincoats.

The manager at Torrington, Connecticut, who, on closing night, was driving me and a contortionist back to New York. Speeding through one small Connecticut town at midnight, the car was overtaken and stopped by the local policeman. The manager stepped out of the car to explain. He said, "I'm sorry, officer. I'm the manager of the theater at Torrington."

"I don't know nothin' about that," said the rube. "You was doin' sixty-five."

"I've got to get to New York," pleaded the manager. "I've got a contortionist in the car. He has to catch a train."

"You got what in the car?"

"A contortionist."

"A *contortionist*?"

"Yes."

"What's a contortionist?"

The contortionist couldn't stand it any longer. He jumped out of the car in the dark, ran around in front of the headlights, and ripped his coat off. He did a handstand, twined his legs around his neck, and ran around in circles on his hands.

The rube watched him for a few minutes and said, "That's a contortionist, eh?"

"Yes," said the manager.

"I'll be damned," the policeman said. "Go ahead!"

I can remember, too, the little theater at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, that had the bowling alley upstairs. Just as I came to the

punch line of my joke, somebody in the bowling alley made a strike and the audience heard nothing but the awful crash.

And then there was the butcher in the small Ohio town who converted his shop into a theater at night and showed pictures and Gus Sun smalltime vaudeville acts. In the window of the butcher shop he hung a sign:

Hamburger—10¢ lb.
Pork chops—20¢ lb.
Veal—25¢ lb.
Theater tonight—20¢

There was a theater at Bayonne, New Jersey, where, during my act, a cat came down the aisle, emitted a series of bloodcurdling cries, and delivered a litter on the carpet. An usher rushed down the aisle with a coal shovel, scooped up the kittens, and returned, followed by the mother, to the back of the house. The audience was in a tumult. All I could do in feeble rebuttal was to coin the line "I thought my act was a monologue, not a catalogue."

The Jefferson Theatre, on Fourteenth Street in New York, had a mongrel audience: the theater was going to the dogs. Situated between Second and Third Avenues, it attracted patrons of all nationalities. Third Avenue at Fourteenth Street was an uptown Skid Row, and should have been renamed the Bowery-Plaza. Alcoholics of all sizes and in varying conditions frequented the neighborhood and used the Jefferson as a haven from the elements and a slumber sanctuary. At some performances the Jefferson took on the appearance of a flophouse that had put in vaudeville. At one supper show, during my monologue I heard a sort of "clunk!" noise that was repeated at regular intervals. It sounded like someone dropping wet wedges into a bathtub. I'd talk for thirty seconds—then a clunk. Another thirty seconds—and another clunk. Finally I located the source of the clunks. On the aisle, in the third row, sat a simian-faced specimen. Between his feet he was holding a wooden bucket; on the seat next to him he had a bag filled with oysters. As I was struggling through my monologue, this combination bivalve addict and theater patron was shucking his oysters and dropping the shells into the bucket.

I can remember, too, *l'affaire* midget at the depot at Quincy, Illinois. The headline act, a midget troupe, was leaving to open at Galesburg. One midget on the platform was berating the manager of the act, and demanding in squeaky words that he be given a raise in salary. The train started, but the midget refused to get aboard unless he was assured of more money. As the baggage car went by, the manager calmly picked up the midget and threw him in through the open door.

When I try to clamp the lid tightly on the past, names keep popping up. There was Eddie Borden, who did an English act with a partner called Sir James Dwyer. Eddie read a magazine ad for a preparation guaranteed to cure skin blemishes. The ad claimed that you could save the expense of a trip to Hot Springs by buying a bottle of the company's elixir and taking your own curative baths at home. Eddie, who was concerned about an acne condition, mailed in the coupon. At Minneapolis, the fluid arrived with full directions. To enjoy the Hot Springs bath at home, the patient had to close the bathroom door tightly, fill the tub with steaming hot water, pour in a given amount of the magic fluid, and lie in the tub to soak for an hour or more. Eddie followed the directions implicitly, finished his soaking, and went to bed. The next morning he opened the bathroom door, and instead of the pure white bathroom he had entered the night before, he now found a room with a brown ceiling, brown walls, brown tub, brown toilet seat and bowl, brown medicine cabinet, and a brown door. The Hot Springs elixir had contained sulfur, and the steam had transformed Eddie's suite into mahagany.

Jack Inglis was a funny nut comedian. One season, work was scarce. Jack lived in a rented house in Jersey with his wife and four children. A butcher friend of his knew that things were bad, and that the family wouldn't have a very happy Thanksgiving. Early in October, he gave Jack a live turkey. He told him he could keep it out in the yard in Jersey, and when the time came, he could kill the turkey for the family's Thanksgiving dinner. Jack took the turkey—a plump specimen—home, and turned it loose in the back yard. Every day for six weeks Jack's kids played with the turkey and chased it around. By the time Thanksgiving arrived, the turkey, after running

away from the kids for six weeks, had lost some twenty pounds. For their Thanksgiving Day dinner that year the Inglis family had what looked like a tall sparrow.

The Billy Doss Revue was a smalltime girl act featuring Bill, a blackface comedian. I played on the bill with this act in Kansas City, Florence, Topeka, and Wichita in Kansas, and some dry oil wells in Oklahoma. The last chorus number of the revue was sung on a Southern dock with a river boat tied up in the background. On the dock there were bales of cotton, and on one of the bales sat a buxom mammy. For the act's finale the mammy jumped off the cotton bale and did an agile wooden-shoe dance to great applause. The mammy was really a boy in blackface wearing a bandana and a well-stuffed calico dress. The boy sat on his bale for three or four shows a day, looking at audiences, and with audiences looking at him. The only thing unusual about this is that the boy was wanted by the police. When they finally caught up with the blackface mammy, he was washed up for ten years, which he spent in the Ohio Penitentiary.

Nelson's Cats and Rats were a big-time act. The cats and rats, traditional enemies, performed together to the astonishment of audiences. One time, on a bill in Chicago, Fanny Brice was the headliner. As she arrived at the theater one evening and opened her dressing-room door, she shrieked. The stage manager rushed over to her and said, "What's wrong, Miss Brice?" Fanny gasped, "A rat! There's a big rat in my dressing room!" The stage manager, no fool, called Nelson, the cat and rat authority. Nelson rushed in, cornered the rat, caught him in a heavy towel, and took the rat out of the dressing room. A few weeks later, I was on the bill with Nelson's Cats and Rats. I asked Nelson what had happened to the rat he had caught in Fanny Brice's dressing room. He said, "The next show, watch the finish of my act." I watched the finish, and saw a big black rat walk across the tiny platform carrying an American flag. "That," said Nelson, "is the rat."

The smalltimer, as he trudged through the seasons, always felt that he was getting closer to his goal. Every vaudeville actor dreamed of his personal utopia. Weekly sums were banked or mailed home against the day the smalltimer "quit the business." Then he would open his restaurant, filling station,

real-estate office, chicken farm, dancing school, or other project that he had envisioned supporting him through his remaining years. Very few smalltimers saw their dreams take dimension. As the vaudeville monologist would explain it, "A funny thing happened to my savings on the way to my utopia." Sickness, relatives, going into businesses he didn't understand, meeting real-estate salesmen, joining collapsible building and loan clubs, gambling, lending money to other actors who never repaid him, playing the stock market, and a thousand other mishaps dissipated the smalltimer's savings and shattered his hopes. The few that did realize their ambitions found that after the travel and excitement of vaudeville, the dull and sedentary routine imposed on them as they tried to run some picayune enterprise in a small town was boring.

One vaudeville actor I knew couldn't wait to retire and start his own chicken farm. After he had bought a farm in California and tried to operate it for a few months, he was very unhappy. I went out to visit him one afternoon and found him sitting out in the yard under a tree, griping. Scampering around in a large wire enclosure were hundreds of White Wyandottes. The bottoms of these white hens had red circles on them; scooting by, they looked like little Japanese flags with legs on them. I asked the actor if his chickens had unusual markings. He said no, that he had seen an ad for Lay or Bust Feed that would increase the size of any hen's eggs, and that he had been giving his hens plenty of it. The hens started laying eggs that were too large for their disposal equipment. Laying the big economy-size eggs had sprung the hens' hips and split their sphincters. "That accounts for the red circles on the bottoms of the hens?" I asked. "Yes," he answered. "I had to catch every lousy hen and dab her with mercurochrome!"

The smalltimer was never happy in retirement. Had it been within his power, the vaudeville performer would have been a timeless wanderer, spanning the generations by using the bridge of his talents.

But vaudeville is dead. Vaudeville was more a matter of style than of material. It was not so much what the two- and three-a-day favorites said and did, as how they said and did it. For fifty years vaudeville's minstrels found their way into all lands, preaching their gospel of merriment and song, and rousing the

rest of the world to laughter and to tears. A few diehards who knew and enjoyed vaudeville hover over their television sets, hoping for a miracle. They believe that this electronic device is a modern oxygen tent that in some mysterious way can revive vaudeville and return its colorful performers of yesteryear to the current scene. The optimism of these day and night dreamers is wasted. Their vigils are futile. Vaudeville is dead. Period.

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