



BY ALBERT E. JOHNSON

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## One Seat in the Peanut Gallery, Please

WHILE only the actor approaching one hundred and ten, and slightly addle-pated at that, is so nostalgically overwhelmed by the good old days of the theater as to pine for their ranting, asthmatic return, there is no denying their extraordinary zip, their hilarious improvisations and bursting vitality. The vast barn-like structures or the small, inadequate halls encountered on tour — ill-ventilated, poorly heated, uncertainly lit, and odoriferously occupied — are happily gone; but with them has disappeared, not so happily, some of the pungency and zest that made the earlier American theater a glorious adventure.

It is as well established a routine today as the jokes of Jack Benny that audiences will not be kept waiting in their seats for a performance to begin because the star has slipped off for a grand tour of the saloons. This would be shocking, disgraceful,

un-American. Yet we also will never savor the experience of that Boston audience about a century ago when the great and popular Junius Brutus Booth, father of Edwin, was finally located — pie-eyed — and rushed to the theater to play *King Lear*. Hearing the stamping and yelping of the impatient auditors, he stuck his head out between the curtains, shook his fist at the paying customers, and in a voice that made Sten-tor's sound like a case of laryngitis boomed: "Shut up! You shut up and in ten minutes I'll give you the damndest *Lear* you ever saw in your lives!" Dramatic history reveals that he did, too.

It is even more shocking and disgraceful when the player doesn't show up at all. But I for one would give the medal I won in dancing class or my snapshot of Warren Gammaliel Harding to have been in Wallack's Theatre that night in

1855 when Georgiana Hodson, the leading lady of the burlesque *Pocahontas*, suddenly and without telling the management, left New York for California. John Brougham, the then-famous comedian and author of the piece, and Charles Walcott agreed to play it anyway, without her: *Pocahontas* without Pocahontas. They improvised everything necessary in the proper verse, bobbing all over the stage to indicate the non-existent Poky's whereabouts. Everyone who reported on that performance labeled it one of the most hilarious in memory. And fifty years later it was still being talked, laughed and written about.

OUR sophisticated audiences today, quite rightly, will not tolerate atrocious acting. Yet in *Hamlet*, the once notorious and now forgotten Count Johannes (his real name was George Jones), lambasted by critics as the worst actor B. C. (before Corse Payton), outdrew the greatest *Hamlet* America had produced, Edwin Booth. Everybody called Count Johannes crazy, but there were a few, like William A. Brady, who detected the whiff of showmanship. At any rate, hissed off stages, booed and laughed at, he opened at the Bowery Theatre where, in competition with Booth at the Academy of Music, he enacted the greatest role in dramatic history — behind a net! Wise management, however, had not placed the net high enough to exclude

well-aimed tokens of appreciation from the gallery. During the graveyard scene when the cabbages were flying fast, the Count picked up one of them instead of Yorick's skull and substituted for his next speech this reasonable facsimile: "Alas, poor cabbagehead! Gaze upon thy brothers out yonder!" Crazy, he doubtless was, but some say he died crazy rich.

What a splendid thing it is that our actors these days learn their art, if not on Broadway itself, in legitimately organized professional or little theaters, or in the academic atmosphere and cultural environment of our colleges and universities! Thirty or more years ago almost every respectable actor who was dry behind the aural cavities had to admit that he had learned much of his business in a Tom-show. Since the debut of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 there were dozens upon dozens of adaptations and revivals all over this country, and in England even unto the twentieth century.

When by the '70's almost every tank town in the country had witnessed one version or another of the play, the old piece was given a hypodermic by presenting it with *two* Topsy's, *two* little Evas, *two* Lawyer Marks's, and so on. These double casts were not alternates but acted at the same time. For instance, in the auction scene, a Lawyer Marks on each side of the stage sold an Uncle Tom to a Simon Legree by

speaking the lines alternately.

And how about the bloodhounds, as famous as Eliza's crossing the ice? Although audiences accepted them with the delight born of vicarious terror, they were, in reality, almost always Great Danes and mastiffs. The genuine animal, besides being difficult and expensive to obtain, was too floppy-eared and droopy-looking to stir the veins of anything but another bloodhound of the opposite sex. The murderous growls of the Great Danes as they ferociously attacked Lawyer Marks, accompanied by his blood-curdling shrieks, always electrified the audience. This amazing realism depended upon an inconspicuous collar worn by the villainous lawyer. To it was attached and cleverly concealed, a rubber sausage for which the Great Dane had as ecstatic an infatuation as a cat for catnip.

TODAY, we expect authenticity in costume and scenery; we are quick, if not indignant, in detecting anachronisms. But some eighty years ago when Edwin Booth was on tour as Hamlet, so engrossed was the audience in the play and the acting that it noticed nothing incongruous in the fact that Hamlet interviewed the spirit of his dead father in a dense wood; or as Shylock, when he made his hideous bargain of the pound of flesh not in Venice but on an American Main Street decorated with advertisements of feed stores and the local undertaker!

Maybe Barry Sullivan, whom Shaw considered the finest actor he had ever seen, was right when he said of an excellent and authentic setting for *Richard III*: "Take it away! Give me a simple street drop and an arch. I want the audience to look at me, not at the scenery."

Thank heaven our present-day actors have a month or two to learn their lines and do not have to resort to "winging a part" — memorizing the lines in the wings and then going on to speak them before they are forgotten. But odious and all too necessary as the practice was, it produced some delectable anecdotes. A company with which Henry Irving had been associated in his early career was playing at Leeds, England, and had for one week as its star attraction a "Dog-man." That is, the star performed with two trained dogs who seized the villain, aided the hero, and pranced in with the mortgage money at the climactic moment. Since his play fell flat with the public, he was asked to substitute a sure-fire, pull-'em-in drama, by title *Hamlet*. He was delighted.

"A GOOD IDEA!" he agreed. "Use the dogs — Hamlet's dog. Let him rescue the King in the last act."

The stage manager tactfully inquired if he had ever played Hamlet.

"No, but that's all right. I'll wing the beggar!"

But the length of the role and the enormous number of lines so amazed

our ex-Dog-man that he gave up the idea with the exclamation: "That bloomin' Dane sure cackles, though, don't he?"

Thank heaven, also, that our acting companies have expert and minute direction, that they are carefully, nay painstakingly rehearsed. We expect no less than that our stars should know where to move on the stage, when to turn, when to nod the head or drop the jaw. But for juicy remembrance I would donate my first edition of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* to charity if I could have been one of the eight thousand who in the 1880's (in Ohio, I think) watched a stageload of famous stars — Mary Anderson, Clara Morris, John McCullough, and Lawrence Barrett — in *Othello*.

McCullough was to have directed the only rehearsal, but didn't. Since Miss Anderson hadn't the foggiest notion how McCullough and Barrett played the tragedy, she turned to Miss Morris for help; but that young lady was equally nonplused. They decided to trust Lady Luck.

According to Mary Anderson's own account, whenever Desdemona announced that her lord was coming from one side, he invariably entered from the other. A little later, when the two ladies were alone onstage, the cue was given for Othello to enter, but he did not appear. To fill in the pause Desdemona ad-libbed, "Ah, here comes my noble lord!" Still no Othello.

Not to be outdone in this emergency, Clara Morris brightly remarked, "Patience, good lady. I will go and seek the Moor."

This brilliant inspiration left Mary Anderson completely alone on the vast stage for what must have been one of the longest of stage waits. Fortunately, she had some embroidery with her, so she sat down, smiling cheerfully, and embroidered for something like three minutes as happily as though it were a part of the script. After what seemed an eternity, she caught a glimpse of Clara tugging in Othello. Blissfully unaware of the error, he had gone to change his costume for the next scene. Springing to her feet, Mary tossed the embroidery into the air and cried out in what must have been the understatement of the year: "O, be praised, ye heavens, here comes the noble Moor at last!"

The theater brought 'em up hard in those days, but they prospered and the audiences loved 'em. Critically, ham a number of them were, but we could use a little of its robustiousness today. At least you could *hear* it and *feel* it. It struck you squarely in the solar plexus, bounced off the walls of the auditorium, and all but blew out the gas jets or shivered the electric chandeliers. There was in it both a power and a glory.

I think we could do with a slice or two of ham. Today, we get mostly canapés.

BOOK CONDENSATION

*The*  
TWENTY-YEAR  
REVOLUTION

*By Chesly Manly*



HENRY REGNERY

CHICAGO 1954