

The Kid's Clever

By Gus Edwards

Lillian Walker, Lew Brice, Bert Wheeler, Herman Timberg, Louise Groody—discovering potential stars has been a hobby with Gus Edwards

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THE "School Days" show was the first real revue of its kind in the history of the American stage. It was the pioneer of the "Scandals" and the "Follies" and shows of the sort. The success of that type of play, starring kids, caused me to ask myself:

"Why couldn't a show like this with adult performers be just as big a success?"

The idea for such a revue persisted. I had a fair-sized bank roll and was ready to risk that in the experiment. But my funds weren't sufficient. So along in 1908 I began looking around for financial backing and, having secured it, I neglected everything else and concentrated on the building of such a play.

I called it "The Merry-Go-Round" and put it in rehearsal in what then was called "Gus Edwards' Music Hall" in New York, a show house which later was renamed the Circle Theater.

I had visions of achieving the mightiest success in stage annals. But the show was a flop in New York. It flopped on the road. The gross loss was close to \$100,000.

I had concrete ideas as to how that show should be staged. But generally they were opposed by my partners—one of them a politician, another little more than a novice in the show business. They issued orders as to who should be hired—and who shouldn't. Because they put up the money, they wanted this done and that done, whether it was consistent or not. And when those orders were accompanied by threats of "otherwise we will withdraw," I went ahead and did their bidding.

When the show finally went on, it

was a hodgepodge of things and for every bit of strength it had in certain spots, it had visible weaknesses in others.

Dorothy Jardon, then comparatively an unknown, got her first real singing chance in that show. She made good in such a way that soon she became the toast of Broadway. "The Merry-Go-Round" also served as the vehicle which introduced James Morton, Johnny Cantwell, George McKay and Fay Tincher to the public.

After it had absorbed all the loose cash and was \$27,000 in debt, my partners were disgusted. Still having faith in the show, I decided to buy out those fellows, take the show on the road and try to retrieve my losses. I paid \$5,000 down in cash for their interests, and gave them a series of notes, the total sum, if I remember correctly, being \$40,000. Then I took "The Merry-Go-Round" on tour.

Forerunner of the "Follies"

But it failed there, too—cost me all I had, all I could borrow and plenty besides. I altered the show, had it conform with my own ideas, but the effort was useless. Folks outside New York had read about the new idea in theatricals, had read of its failure, and they very firmly decided that they weren't going to pay out good money to see a touring flop.

So I finally abandoned it.

But Flo Ziegfeld had seen that show. He pierced through the failure of it with his keen brain, found its faults and decided the idea was good. The very next year he came along with the first of his "Follies," a replica of my "Merry-Go-Round" idea and his annual "Follies" since then have grossed into millions—and more millions.

If Ziegfeld hadn't come out with his "Follies" when he did, I would have tried for new backing and put on a new show. But when he beat me to it, at a time when the whole revue thing was more of an experiment than anything else, and when New York at best wouldn't support more than one show of that



Ruby Norton, Sammy Lee, Bobby Watson and Louise Groody. Gus

kind, I knew I couldn't get the needed \$50,000 or \$75,000 backing.

So I left the field to Ziegfeld and a few years later I assisted him to a point where I wrote all the music for one of his "Follies"—music which embraced many songs that became popular hits.

It was along through those years that I put on a vaudeville act with grown-up girls—ages from 16 to 19—and called it "The Blond Typewriters."

Six girls made up the act. I combed New York to find the most beautiful blondes in the town. Having found them, I exhibited them to the eyes of the audiences. They packed every house where they played and forced theater owners to dust off the "S. R. O." sign and display it conspicuously.

Lillian Walker was one of the original "Blond Typewriters"—the same Lillian who afterward climbed to dizzy heights as a moving picture star. Ruby Norton also was an original. Afterward she went into pictures.

My difficulty with the act was to keep the sextette filled because of the raids made by love-lorn youths. Almost every week one or another of the girls would be serving notice and the next week she was off on a honeymoon. Lillian married Charlie Hansen. Eleanor Kershaw became the bride of Tom Ince, of moving picture fame, and Helen Barrett, seen one night by Harry Harrington, a millionaire automobile executive, became his bride a few weeks later.

The substitutes I got for those girls were quickly "stolen," either by men in love with them, by rival producers or by moving picture folks.

Although that act with grown-up

girls went over spectacularly, my pet idea was kid shows. So when "The Blond Typewriters" had played its full run, with some encores, I went back to the kid shows. I found a real happiness in picking up little tots, tutoring them, and watching them as they developed month after month, year after year, until they became starry stars.

So having put over "School Boys and Girls" and "School Days" and realizing that the public liked such shows, I created more of them through the years, with "Gus Edwards' Song Revue," along in 1910, as the outstanding success.

But the "Messenger Boys" act, the "Kid Kabaret," the "Country Kids," the "Bingville Cabaret" all went over well and, after proving "hits" in New York, were sent on tour and continued their triumphs.

A High-Priced Youngster

Most of the kids I hired for their first chance on the stage accepted the wages I offered. But there were exceptions. For instance:

Eighteen years ago a youngster walked into my office—a tall boy, with the skinniest arms and the skinniest legs I've ever seen outside a museum, and with a nose that has since then become almost as famous as his eccentric comedy and whirlwind dancing.

"I want a job," he said.

"What can you do?"

"You ask that of a great ekter?" countered the youth, with a great show of indignation.

"Oh, you are an actor?" I apologized.

"Sure—and great, too."

"Who said so?"



Johnny Hines, First National movie star, made his first public appearance in Edwards' "School Days" revues

Wide World



White

Edwards considered Louise Groody one of his greatest "finds"

"I'm saying it; try me out and see." So I tried him out and found that he could sing, that he danced splendidly and that his contortions of face, arms and legs were unique and laugh-provoking.

"I guess I can use you," I said. "How much salary do you want?"

"One thousand dollars a week," he replied without the flicker of an eyelash. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Ever do any professional stage work?"

"Not yet."

"And you want \$1,000 a week?"

"Sure—why not—I'm worth it."

"Why didn't you ask for a million?"

"Say, could a fellow ask for a million?" asked the kid, all eagerness now.

"Sure he could ask for a million."

"Well, then, listen here, mister," and the kid poked a finger at me. "I ain't working for you for no cheap thousand a week. I'm asking for a million—that's my price, \$1,000,000, and I ain't working for less."

"I'll hire you and give you \$30 to start," I said.

"Could you make it \$40?"

"No, \$30 is the price."

"In cash?"

"Yes."

"And you couldn't pay \$35?"

"Not at the start."

"Then," said the kid with a sigh, "I guess we've hired each other at \$30—but you got a swell bargain, mister."

It seems that I did, for this kid was Lew Brice, who long since has grown to manhood, and, by his inimitable drolleries, has achieved fame almost as great as his famous sister, Fanny Brice.

It was along about that same time that a chubby little Irish boy came to my office in New York.

"Say," he confided, "I hear you're looking for actors and I think maybe you're looking for me."

A "wise-cracking" kid in his first spoken words to me—that was Bert Wheeler, 14 years old then, 32 or so now, and through many years a star of Broadway, one of the sweetest characters in the profession, one of the best loved.

At the time I gave Bert his job, I was making up a boys' sextette. I put Bert into it and the sextette then was composed of Bert, the Irish youngster, and five Jewish boys, including Georgie Jessel.

Tough But Talented

Wheeler was raised in the "Dublin section" of Paterson where kids survived only by the power of their fists. Bert was the district champion at 14. Somewhere along through his kid years, Bert had picked up the idea that a Jew was the natural enemy of an Irishman and must be beaten up on sight, which was something I didn't know when I put Bert in that sextette.

Soon after that sextette was created, I began to note that four of my five Jewish boys usually reported for work looking as if they had tried conclusions with the Twentieth Century. Maybe one was limping, another had a suspicion of a "shiner"; there were cuts on their faces and hands, black and blue marks here and there—and the whole thing mystified and alarmed me.

I made repeated efforts to learn from the boys what was happening to them—

but never an explanation could I get.

All of which was due to the fact that Bert, after handing out a shellacking, threatened those kids with nine kinds of death if they "squealed" to me.

"Why didn't you beat up Jessel, too?" I asked Bert the day I had let him go to save my other kids from annihilation.

"Aw, he was too small—I was waiting for him to grow up," answered Bert.

When I let Bert out, I pleaded with the kid to forget his "pug" ways. But after that he quit trying to exterminate the Jewish actors, soon came along with cyclonic stride, and now is one of the shining stars in "Rio Rita."

Those who delve in theatrical statistics say that only one show of five tried out on the legitimate stage is successful. Yet the fact is established that Louise Groody never has been identified with a failure.

Bound for Stardom

Some persons attribute that to the fact that she is "lucky." But my views are different. I gave Louise Groody her first real chance in a little act that I called "The Sassy Stenographers." She was with me in other revues. Then, and in all the other years, I liked to watch her, study her—and I know that nothing could keep her from stardom.

Louise is one of the sweetest and most wonderful girls I have known in my lifetime. She was just a shy, sweet-mannered kid when I first saw her. And today she is the same—shy, sweet-mannered, thoughtful, kind and considerate.

I never knew her to be late for rehearsal in the days when she was getting her start with me. In the years since, her record has remained unsmudged.

If Louise Groody was given a bad play I think she still could make it a triumph. For she would play her own part in a superlative way, rally her supporters to their greatest endeavors and all that great acting in itself would overcome the lack of plot and make the play a success.

After Louise played in "The Sassy Stenographers" I put her in a revue at Henderson's in Coney Island. She did a dance in that show, appearing with Ruby Norton, Bobby Watson, Sammy Lee and others. After that she was with me at the Martinique Hotel Revue, but was forced to leave that show because of illness and was in a hospital for a long time.

When she recovered, she came to me and said:

"I have been offered a chance at \$250 a week to play in a musical comedy in New York. I have always wanted to do that. But if you need me I will stay with you, and pass up the other job."

I had started Louise at \$35 a week and was paying her \$125 at the time she was taken ill. And here she was, a loyal, wonderful girl, willing to pass up a glorious opportunity at double the salary if I needed her!

Is it any wonder, when a girl shows a spirit like that, that I never hesitated a moment in releasing her from her contract with me and that each year since then, as she has climbed higher and higher up the ladder of Fame, I feel a great gladness because success, so richly deserved by that beautiful little thoroughbred, is hers in great volume?

In the early days when I put on kid shows, it was necessary for me to scout around to recruit my cast. But as time went on, and it became known that I was really looking for child talent and that every gifted kid would get a chance, things became easier for me.

While I was putting on the Hotel Martinique Revue more than a dozen years ago, two sisters came looking for a job—each seeking her first stage chance. They had ability but I explained that I could not hire them without the written consent of their parents. They promised to bring them around on the morrow.

The next day they came with their parents. Both were deaf and dumb. Our negotiations were carried on partially in sign language, partially with notes written back and forth and the rest of it was done by the little girls, who translated the sign language to me.

Humble Beginnings

One of these girls was Grace Menken and the other was Helen Menken, who started then as a singer and dancer in a cabaret and soon became one of the most gifted stars in drama.

Betty Pierce, who rose to real fame when she got her chance in "White Cargo," was just a slip of a girl when she went to work for me in my "Song Revue."

Jessica Brown, who later married into the English nobility, got her theatrical start in the same show, and so did Irene Martin, afterward married to "Skeets" Gallagher. Joan Sawyer, later a dancer of international (Continued on page 40)



White

Edwards' famous Blond Typewriters were considered the cream of Broadway pulchritude and the best-dressed girls of their day

Twinkle, Twinkle

A few little stars, some of whom you'll recognize, all of whom you know. If they'd been photographed when they were any smaller they wouldn't have shown in the picture at all

Harold Lloyd before a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles was an essential part of his make-up



Above: Any movie fan who can get a passing mark ought to be able to spot Bebe Daniels, reduced in size and swathed in petticoats. Even at that age there was something of the born comedienne about her

Albert Davis Collection

Right: Here's an easy one. This solemn-faced youngster has grown considerably since the picture was taken but his expression hasn't changed. It's Buster Keaton



Her first animal picture—the star of “Ramona” and other successes, aged three. Dolores Del Rio

Well, the hair-cut is familiar. This is what you might term an early Colleen Moore



Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Right: Altogether too alert for a sandman pose was Gertrude Olmstead when this picture was made