

GEORGE, EARL AND WHATZIZNAME

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Though their names – George, Earl and Whatzizname don't trip as lightly off the tongue as say, Tom Dick and Harry, Manny Moe and Jack, or even Sally Irene and Mary, their combine influence tends to leave those other triads in the dust.

Just who are they – these gentlemen of yore who merit our attention ? Why should we care about them ?

Lest you begin to think this is going to be a guessing game, let me assure you that such is not my intention. When I reveal the name of the third party, the mystery man, so to speak, all will become clear, and you can relax back into the depths of your seats – at least you members who occupy the back row. So here we go: Earl...George...and Florenz. That's the key name: Florenz. Now you all know something about the topic: Show business. The trio consists of Earl Carroll, George White and Florenz Ziegfeld.

What did they have in common ? They were the Big Three of a type of stage presentation known as the revue, spelled with a "u", in the French manner. And they were to become ferocious competitors on Broadway.

Ziegfeld was somewhat older than his competitors, and helped set the pattern for this type of show in America. His early success was enough to spark imitation which developed into virtual war in an industry which was already notoriously cut-throat and had been for most of the country's history.

It might be helpful to briefly look at the kinds of entertainment which preceded the emergence of the revue. No one knows who first decided to put up a small stage in a saloon and present females who could passably sing, or dance, or advertise additional talents. But this primitive ancestor of the revue was obviously oriented toward male audiences, rowdy and coarse, no matter whether in the city or the wilderness.

Another form of entertainment was the music hall, which was a cut above the saloon shows in terms of propriety. Music halls also might allow liquor,

depending on local laws, and operated in actual halls as well as theaters. In the music hall, the accent was on music, with singers and small orchestras.

Comedy now entered the scene, and one place to enjoy it was at the minstrel show, a 19th century development which used blackface comics and so-call “interlocutors” or “straight men” along with well-rehearsed male choruses. Minstrel shows were family-oriented, as was the next development which, again, took a French name, vaudeville. Here we begin to see real variety of entertainment. Vaudeville, a robust and sassy branch of show business, held sway for a long time, and was often pronounced dead, but obviously, never quite went away. It was vaudeville which during its glory period endowed stardom on many individuals, but supported thousands more whose talents supplied acts to a number of theatrical bookers.

Vaudeville’s growth from mere storefront stages to huge and exotically appointed theatres was inevitable once railroads crisscrossed the nation, enabling entire troupes of performers to travel from city to city and maintain schedules at the chains of theaters built by risk-taking entrepreneurs. The routes were known as “circuits” and usually bore the name of the founder. For a while, the distances were so great, and the cost of building theaters so high that these entrepreneurs were satisfied to operate within a limited territory or sphere of influence. Some, more rapacious than others, emerged from the pack and began to swallow up operators in other territories, building their own empires. Some of the names remembered even today were Proctor, Shubert, Keith, Albee, Loew, Pantages Martin Beck and Hammerstein.

The variety of talents in vaudeville was considerable, with acts ranging from vocalists, song-and-dance teams, acrobats, magicians, comedians, and animal acts to short dramas, and sometimes tied together by a leggy chorus of female dancers, who provided a measure of sex appeal. However, vaudeville remained largely a family entertainment, with modest admission prices that working-class people could afford.

Unless one was an established star, the survival of an act in such troupes might depend on the reaction of an opening night audience. If it were unfavorable, or the local theater manager had negative feelings about it, he could, and often, did, remove the act’s photos from the lobby display, hand them back to the performers after the show, and dismiss them, leaving them stranded, often without money, in a strange town. If they were lucky, he might just switch their position on the bill to one of less importance.

Depending on the size of a city or town, the presence of a popular headliner on the bill could assure a week's engagement, including a day for travel between stops. But at some point, the practice of the "split week" was started, which practically eliminated the chance to rest in a proper bed for a full night's sleep. You would have to remove makeup, pack your bag, settle up any bills and make a train which often was sooty, noisy and subject to delays. It meant three days work, with anywhere from three to six shows a day, with the same deadly routine facing you for the balance of the week.

But despite the privations, many former vaudevillians recalled those days with nostalgia. Anecdotes abound in the history of vaudeville. Here are several of them:

Because of the risk of fires, theatres forbade smoking backstage, except within a special closet made of tin, in which the smoker could practically asphyxiate himself. In the rougher theatres, though, the idea was not well-received. One veteran recalled: "Most of us smoked. If you didn't smoke, they'd put you in the tin closet, lock the door and throw the whole shebang into the East River!"

Then there was the act called The Three Keatons, Dad, Mother and little Buster Keaton, their son. The act specialized in rough and tumble, with Buster inevitably on the short end of things. One night, totally infuriated by an unruly group of college-age youths making a disturbance down front, the elder Keaton picked up Buster and threw him over the footlights into the demonstrators, breaking the nose of one of them. It is not hard to see why, in later life, Buster Keaton's image was unsmiling and stoical.

There were three generations of theatrical Hammersteins, Oscar, the first, who began the theatre-building and presentation business, his son William (or "Willie") and Oscar II, whom we all know because of his famous partnership with composer Richard Rodgers. Willie seems to have been the most colorful of them. He believed that celebrities, regardless of any visible stage talent, would attract lots of patrons to the grand theaters the family operated in New York, including the Olympia and the splendid Victoria. He presented such notables as Babe Ruth, prizefighter John L. Sullivan, and even a pair of cartoonists of the day, Bud Fisher and Rube Goldberg. A rather off-beat booking was that of the deaf and blind Helen Keller, who, with the assistance of a sign language expert, related stories of her life and career. Another unusual

act was that of an intellectual Asian-American named Sadakichi Hartmann, who presented what he called a “perfume concert.” It utilized a special machine which wafted the scent of lilacs and other artificial aromas over the audience. Needless to say, it was cancelled after a single performance. A wag backstage was heard to remark, “Too bad Helen Keller wasn’t here – of all people she would have enjoyed it.”

For a show in 1908, Hammerstein uncovered a stone-faced woman named “Sober Sue” and offered a cash prize to anyone who could make her laugh. It remained an impossible challenge for years until it emerged that the woman’s facial muscles were paralyzed, making laughter out of the question.

Finally, we can smile at Willie Hammerstein’s resourcefulness. During the hot summer, he advertised that the special roof garden theatre was many degrees cooler than the interior of the Victoria. But when people complained that the roof, with the sun beating down on them, was just as hot as the street, Hammerstein was undismayed. He instructed his engineers to install heaters in the elevators, so that upon emerging onto the roof, patrons would experience a sense of relief.

One other form of entertainment came onto the scene in the late 1800s, and existed beside vaudeville as an alternative, not for the family, but for those who sought more spice in their theater. It was called burlesque, and its formula was a degree rougher. It relied on low comedy, risqué songs and of course, pretty girls. It would be decades, however, before burlesque became identified with strip tease.

In Indianapolis, burlesque shows were presented at the Empire Theatre, located in an alley between Pennsylvania and Delaware Streets, half a block south of Ohio Street. It eventually was incorporated into the Denison parking garage. The Grand Opera House was around the corner on Pennsylvania Street, and later became Keith’s vaudeville theater. One can still see traces of the original Empire on a wall in this alley.

Now, let’s return to revues, and our three principal characters. First, Florenz Ziegfeld. He was born in Chicago in 1869. His father, also

named Florenz, was a musician and president of the Chicago Musical College, and as such, was socially well-connected. From an early age, the son attempted to make his mark in ways that often proved embarrassing to his father, but he was lured to the stage productions the elder Ziegfeld occasionally managed. In 1892, young Florenz was sent to Europe to sign up several classical music ensembles to perform at the Chicago World's Fair but, alas, the public failed to respond to them, and Florenz was sent back to Europe to secure talent with more promise. In England, he ran across a professional strong man named Eugene Sandow, whose act sparked his imagination, and he brought him back to Chicago. With good publicity, Sandow became a star performer, and some of the earlier losses were recouped.

An effective stunt which received excellent newspaper space was to invite a group of socially positioned matrons backstage and allow them to feel the impressive biceps of Sandow. Word of mouth did the rest.

Young Ziegfeld now had the basis of a regular show, the "Trocadero Vaudeville," which he took on the road, supplementing the strong man with a supporting cast including a comedian, aerialists and an impressionist. Claims worthy of P.T. Barnum himself were made about Sandow's prowess. He was said to be able to lift a man with one hand while lying on his back, lift 750 pounds with a single finger, or bear the weight of 3200 pounds on his body. Ziegfeld was now well into what would be his career as impresario.

On a subsequent trip abroad he met up with a music hall singer and dancer named Anna Held, a popular figure who purported to be French but was in reality a Hungarian in her early twenties, already married and divorced and the mother of a small daughter. Ziegfeld was taken with her potential and determined to build her into stardom. He signed her up for the unheard-of salary of one thousand dollars a week, and began the buildup as soon as they reached America. Meanwhile, she told him about Parisian night life, especially the *Folies Bergere*, with its cadre of saucy female dancers, saying that surely American girls could match the French for beauty and talent.

By 1897, Florenz and Anna were living together. Ziegfeld's first "Follies" opened in New York, backed by the theatrical firm of Klaw and Erlanger, who specialized in empire-building rather than the nurturing of talent. Though Anna Held appeared only in this initial Follies, her name and talent were well promoted by Florenz, who featured her in a number of other musical shows. In the early Follies,

the chorus was billed as “The Anna Held Girls.” The initial edition cost \$13,000 to produce and was an immediate success.

The Follies were to become an annual New York institution. Typically, the show would appear in the spring, and run through the summer. Then it would go on tour to selected cities, eventually returning to New York to finish the run there.

Ziegfeld’s keen appreciation for publicity is shown in the planted stories about Anna’s “milk baths” which were said to enhance her already lovely complexion. After a decent interval, he further “milked” the story (if you will excuse the expression) by having the milk supplier sue him for nonpayment of bills. Ziegfeld then made his response, also via the gossip columns of the day, saying that he had refused to pay because the milk was sour, and was detrimental to Miss Held’s skin. In coming years Ziegfeld and his competitors would raise tabloid publicity to high art, but more of that later. By 1913, he and Anna would divorce, though their marriage was of the common law variety. He soon married the beautiful actress Billie Burke. Anna Held died just five years later, only 45 years old.

Another trait was Ziegfeld’s keen appreciation for female pulchritude. He insisted on beautiful women in beautiful costumes, and paid for the dazzling stage settings in which they would move. He truly felt that no expense was too great in providing elegance in dress and accessories for these beauties, and believed that they would reflect that elegance in their movements on stage. They were on a par with the great headline personalities that eventually were starred in the Follies, and never lost their own unique status. Ziegfeld’s own subtitle, “Glorifying The American Girl” was always present, and was an accurate slogan.

Splendid though the costuming may have been, there were plenty of occasions when certain costumes validated the expression “less is more,” and skirted the local laws about nudity on stage. Writing in *Vanity Fair* about the 1921 Follies, Heywood Broun wrote: “The show purports to join its usual female pulchritude to social significance and patriotic solemnity. I feel a little like a Peeping Tom in the presence of Godiva and generally I cover my eyes in order that they may be preserved for the final processional in which one girl will personify Coal, another Aviation, and the third the Monroe Doctrine.”

A few words about some of the headliners who were starred in early Follies. Nearly all were lured to Ziegfeld and other revue producers by

higher salaries, prime time-only performances, and the elimination of constant travel. At least for many weeks, one could count on sleeping in one's own bed and be with one's family. However, many of these vaudevillians kept working between times by going on the road with one of the established circuits. Their names today are legendary: Nora Bayes and her partner Jack Norworth; Sophie Tucker, Mae Murray, the showgirl Lillian Lorraine, who for a time was Ziegfeld's mistress; Leon Errol; Fanny Brice, the comedienne, who had a famous backstage hair-pulling fight with Lillian Lorraine; Eva Tanguay, Will Rogers, W.C. Fields, dancer Ann Pennington and Eddie Cantor. About one hapless singer, a critic remarked that "her talent was so invisible that it seemed almost innovative."

Others, made of stronger stuff, had what it takes. The actress Ina Claire, who would enjoy a long career, was married early on to the handsome John Gilbert after only three weeks acquaintance. When a reporter asked her how it felt to be married to a famous star, she replied, "I really don't know. Why don't you ask Mr. Gilbert."

The Follies of 1910 was presented at a place called the Jardin de Paris, formerly the roof garden of the New York Theatre. In 1911, songs were commissioned by two up and coming writers named Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin in the first edition to bear the name Ziegfeld. The previous year, a show-stopper was a tall, dignified black ex-vaudevillian named Bert Williams, who had recently consented to work for Ziegfeld only because his long-time partner had died. The multi-talented Williams had the unique ability to deliver humor and song, not in a racial sense, but in a style that all people, regardless of color, could identify with. In the recent past, he had co-produced a couple of book musicals which were among the earliest successful black shows on Broadway. But most of the cast in the 1910 Follies threatened to walk out if a black man were put on stage with them. Ziegfeld's response was: "Go if you wish. I can replace every one of you except the man you want me to fire." At the request of Williams himself, his contract specified that he would not be on stage with a female, nor would he be required to appear in the South. He was a principal star in a number of the subsequent Follies.

No story about the Follies would be complete without mention of his famous set designer, Joseph Urban, a native Austrian and an architect who had a fine prior reputation in a number of fields, including *avant garde* buildings, exotic interiors and set designs for grand opera. When Ziegfeld hired Urban in 1914, almost his first move was to take the

designer to Indianapolis to catch up with the show on tour, presumably at English's Theatre on Monument Circle. Suffice it to say that Urban minced no words in his critique. He saw the show as little more than a series of disconnected sketches which he compared to "advertising posters." His influence was soon to be felt. It was he who introduced the famous stairway, down which legions of showgirls were to travel.

So much for the great Florenz. He was the dominant producer of revues, but others were to give him a run for his money and not a few fits. We should note, however, that like his contemporaries, he also produced so-called "book musicals" most notably the immortal "Show Boat."

We still have George White and Earl Carroll, whose stories need not be so detailed.

George White, born George Weitz in either 1890 or 1892, and in either New York City or Toronto, began professional life as a handsome hoofer, half of a dance team in burlesque. He later broke away and became a single, appearing in minor roles in musicals, including the 1910 Follies.

However, he was not satisfied with merely performing, though he did so intermittently for many years. His sights were set higher, and in 1919 produced and directed the first in a series of revues called George White's Scandals, which would vie with the mighty Ziegfeld Follies for eight consecutive years, utilizing White's show business savvy and a more acute sense of the music required. He used the songwriting skills of Jerome Kern, and even more particularly the young George Gershwin. The comedy was usually more snappy and the girls more energetic in contrast to the more formalized Follies. Songs from the Scandals which became standards include I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise, Somebody Loves Me, Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries, Black Bottom, and The Birth of the Blues.

White's success may have been helped along by keeping things simple, and avoiding some of Ziegfeld's extravagance, but when it came to costumes, he managed to hold an ace in his hand. It was in the person of a Russian-born designer known simply as "Erte", a name derived from the French pronunciation of his Russian initials. His full name was Romain de Tiroff. The son of a Czarist admiral, he decided against a

naval career and went to Paris to study design. His subsequent fashion creations and distinctive figure drawing are instantly recognizable and his long career was to end only with his death in 1990 at nearly ninety years of age. Only two years earlier he had designed a Broadway musical, "Stardust." Erte's career was divided between the fashion world and the stage, and he was involved in all of George White's Scandals once he came aboard in 1923.

White himself, apparently an engaging fellow, took stage roles in his first few productions, and is said to have taken delight in personally manning the box office on occasion, being highly amused when strangers approached the window and, seeking free admission, claimed to be personal friends of George White.

The Scandals drew on both established stars as well as promising young talent. Sometimes, as in the cases of dancer Ann Pennington and the comics Ed Wynn and W.C. Fields, he hired those who had previously served under Ziegfeld. Obviously, this did not sit well with the Great Lorenz. In essence, George White could be called a star maker. Among those whom he bought to Broadway (and film) fame were Helen Morgan, Ray Bolger, Ethel Merman, Harry Richman, Bert Lahr, Ann Miller, Rudy Vallee, Alice Faye and Eleanor Powell. After a year's hiatus in 1927, he resumed in 1928, and in the 1930s, despite the Depression, there were four more Scandals and three films bearing his name. But the economics of the time hampered what could be afforded in the revue format, and dwindling receipts caused him to be evicted from the Apollo Theatre in New York for nonpayment of rent. Declaring bankruptcy in 1942, he claimed to have less than two hundred dollars to his name, but still retained his trademark Rolls Royce car.

Further misfortune occurred in 1946, when he was involved in a hit-and-run accident resulting in the death ^{of} a young newlywed couple. For this he was sentenced to a year and a day in jail. Never to regain prominence, he would die of leukemia in 1968.

Now to the final member of our unlikely trio, the producer Earl Carroll. He was born in Pittsburgh in 1893, and by 1912 was a rather successful lyric writer at the Feist company in New York. He contributed several songs to forgettable musical shows before moving into theatrical management.

An early interest in aviation led to his enlistment in the U.S. army air corps during the first World War. Upon his return to civilian life he produced several trashy melodramas, then, unexpectedly, hit the jackpot with a racy hit called "White Cargo." With the resultant funds he built a theatre named after himself where he produced a series of revues beginning in 1923 and ending in 1932. Most were "Earl Carroll's Vanities" but some were called "Earl Carroll Sketchbooks."

The format was not notably different from that of Ziegfeld and White, but was more daring than either of the others by several degrees. The comedy was more raunchy and the girls more exposed at a time when nudity on stage was allowed only when the models were absolutely motionless, as in a tableau. Carroll contrived to get around this law by having his featured girl enter on a giant swing – moving , but not moving.

Like George White, Carroll went after Ziegfeld's established headliners, and in 1929 succeeded in luring Leon Errol and Fanny Brice to his show, a "Sketchbook" production. Though critics thought Carroll's shows tasteless, the series was almost always popular, and Carroll kept the ball rolling by stretching the legal limits, but on occasion he would trip himself up.

One notorious episode occurred when the producer advertised that his lovely show girl Joyce Hawley would take a champagne bath on stage. The public flocked in, and after the show, Carroll invited a number of favored gentlemen backstage to witness the bath close up, conveniently providing cups for the men to dip in the champagne, which in the event turned out to be mostly ginger ale. Of course, the story hit the papers, and soon the theatre was visited by the prohibition police, who arrested Earl Carroll and he was charged with the illegal serving of alcohol. Despite his denial, he was found guilty of perjury, and given a year's sentence in jail. He was out in a little more than four months, only to continue his questionable conduct in connection with aspiring young showgirls, some of whom were said to be under age. For example. he insisted that a girl auditioning for his chorus line take off her clothes. He claimed he would hire them only if they possessed the proper "sway of their hips."

Nevertheless, Carroll was an astute business man, and either produced or directed more than sixty Broadway productions over the years, even after the 1929 crash being able to finance the construction of a second

Earl Carroll theater in New York in 1931, where more editions of the “Vanities” were presented.

In 1938, he moved his base to California, and built a splendid theater-restaurant in Hollywood which saw the production of twelve more of his patented “girlie” shows. The string held until his untimely death in 1948 when a plane, on which he and his long time showgirl friend, Beryl Wallace, were passengers, crashed, killing all aboard.

Carroll, too, understood the role of morale among his showgirls. At the stage doors of his theatres was a sign: “Through these portals pass the most beautiful girls in the world.” True or not, many, if not most of them, believed it.

So, while revues, like vaudeville, have never quite disappeared, the Big Three - Ziegfeld, White and Carroll - are today little more than names. Perhaps this essay will help us remember them as opportunists and rivals, but above all, creative members of another kind of show worthy of being called a “great American pastime”...the Revue.

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